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EDUCATION POLICY INSTITUTE

English and Maths Resits

Drivers of Success

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July 2025

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Acknowledgements

This report has been kindly funded by Pearson and we would like to thank Meredith Reeve, Katy Lewis and Lucy Chowns for their input and support. We would also like to extend a huge thank you to all the participants of our EPI and Pearson joint roundtable on effective approaches to resits.

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Executive summary

Overview

Literacy and numeracy skills are incredibly important predictors of life outcomes and it is vital that all young people have the opportunity to develop these skills within the education system. In response to low levels of literacy and numeracy among young adults, in 2014, the Coalition government introduced the *resit policy*, more formally known as the condition of funding requirement. This policy requires students who do not achieve a good pass (a grade 4 or above) in English and maths by age 16 to resit these subjects during their 16-19 education. This is a wide-reaching policy, impacting almost a third of all students in England. However, it has not been without controversy, with some claiming the policy creates a negative cycle of failure and has been difficult to implement given staffing and funding constraints in the 16-19 sector.[1] On the other hand, others have pointed to the success the policy has had in raising attainment of English and maths by the age of 25.

Despite the importance of English and maths, and the widespread coverage of the resit policy, there has been relatively little research examining the drivers of success amongst the students affected by this policy. Filling this evidence gap is particularly important, with the ongoing Curriculum and Assessment Review focussing explicitly on post-16 English and maths. In this report, we present a mixed methods analysis of the individual and institutional factors governing resit success. We aim to provide insights into where and why the resit policy has worked well (and where it has not), and recommendations for the resit policy going forwards.

In the quantitative section of this report, we look at the individual and institutional factors that are correlated with resit success. Specifically, we consider the following questions:

- What is the distribution in resit performance at an institution level?
- What factors are associated with better resit performance?

In the qualitative section of this report, we draw on the discussion from an expert roundtable made up of representatives from high-performing institutions (where students make good progress in their resits), policymaking and industry bodies. To be clear, this is not an evaluation of the resit policy itself. Rather, it is an investigation of the factors driving success with resits.

Findings

Findings from both quantitative and qualitative research are as follows:

Students' resit attainment can be largely explained by their prior attainment and other characteristics

[1] See Maris, 'Time for a Resit Reset?' for a discussion of such criticisms.

We find that student characteristics (e.g. prior attainment) and institutional characteristics (such as institution type) explain much more of the variation in resit attainment than the performance of institutions (institution value-added). English resit grades are harder to predict based on student and institution characteristics, compared with maths. However, there is also a wider distribution of value-added for English than for maths, suggesting there is more variation in performance across institutions and there could be scope for more knowledge and best practice sharing between institutions.

Prior attainment in other subjects strongly predicts resit performance for English

We find that prior attainment in the subject being resat strongly predicts resit outcomes, but so does performance in other GCSE subjects. For English, prior attainment across all other subjects are actually more predictive of resit performance than prior attainment in English. Whilst in maths, prior attainment in maths is more predictive than prior performance in other subjects.

However, evidence from top-performing institutions suggests that streaming students by prior grade is logistically complicated and, in some cases, had negative impacts on student engagement relative to grouping students by their main subject area.

There are significant attainment gaps by disadvantaged status, gender and ethnicity

There is a significant disadvantage gap in resit attainment, even after accounting for prior attainment. Disadvantaged students fall behind by a fifth of a grade in English and one eighth of a grade in maths compared with their non-disadvantaged peers. In terms of gender, female students make slightly more progress in English, whilst male students make substantially better progress in maths, by almost a quarter of a grade. After controlling for prior attainment and other characteristics, students with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) make similar progress to other students.

White British students have some of the lowest progress levels, along with those from Gypsy/Roma backgrounds (in English) and White and Black Caribbean students (in maths). Black African students make the most progress in English resits whilst Indian students make the most progress in maths.

Resit students often have negative past experiences with English and maths

Our discussions with top-performing providers suggested that many students enter 16 to 19 education feeling demotivated and bring past negative experiences with English or maths or both. Staff are often dealing with anxiety, fear of failure and low levels of confidence and self-efficacy that stem from experiences in earlier schooling. There were suggestions that more needs to be done in schools to get these students into a more positive mindset for their 16 to 19 education.

Motivation, engagement and attendance are critical to resit outcomes

We find that unauthorised absences in year 11 have large negative associations with subsequent resit attainment, suggesting that the underlying drivers of absences pre-16 continue to be an issue post-16, with a continued impact on attainment. This reflects our discussion with providers, who suggested that student engagement and motivation is the pre-cursor to many attendance

problems that colleges frequently face. The discussion covered the importance of putting a strong focus on building positive relationships between students and staff at the beginning of the resit journey.

Students' broader programme of 16-19 study matters for resit performance

Overall, studying at a higher level (outside of resits) is associated with better progress on resits for both English and maths. However, the association is significantly stronger for English than it is for maths, suggesting higher level study has greater benefit to English resit attainment than maths.

Feedback from our roundtable discussion suggests that embedding English and maths within main subject departments helps to create a collective responsibility for English and maths attainment across the college. This can help to facilitate greater collaboration between English and maths teacher and main subject staff. Part of this approach includes making English and maths attendance and attainment a formal performance metric for main subject staff as well.

Enrolling on a GCSE after the transition to post-16 education results in better overall resit performance than enrolling on the alternatives

We find that students who initially enrol on a GCSE achieve better progress on average over their 16 to 19 study than students on level 2 Functional Skills Qualifications (FSQs) or stepping stone qualifications, by almost half a grade. Whilst this finding may be due to selection effects (those more likely to perform well are more likely to take the GCSE), this also reflects the experience of providers. Evidence from top-performing providers suggests that GCSEs were preferred for their ability to demonstrate progress to students, as opposed to the binary pass or fail nature of FSQs. GCSEs were also preferred over FSQs for their reputation in the sector and recognition by a wide range of stakeholders.

A selective approach to November resit delivers better overall attainment

Our findings show that while November resits can be beneficial for some individual students, there appears to be a negative effect when all students are entered. That is, a provider that enters a greater proportion of students onto November resits (given a set of student characteristics) ends up with a lower average progress score, of around a quarter of a GCSE grade.

This finding reflects our discussions with top-performing institutions, who were all selective in their use of November resits. A key challenge that was identified with November resits is the large drop in student engagement following the November resit cycle (among students that sat November resits).

Sixth form colleges deliver higher rates of progress on average

Sixth form colleges tend to achieve the best resit results, given a set of student characteristics. This is followed by school sixth forms, which perform narrowly better than FE colleges on average. This likely reflects differences in inputs and resources across the institution types. This also corresponds with the findings from our roundtable, where participants highlighted pay as one of the biggest challenges to staff recruitment and retention for English and maths teachers in colleges. Pay in FE colleges is significantly lower than pay in schools.

Our quantitative analyses also show that having more level 3 provision of maths (for example, A level maths) increases average maths resit progress by around a quarter of a grade, even after accounting for institution type.

The North West is the strongest performing region

There is a significant cluster of top-performing institutions in the North West of England. In maths, students in the North West make 0.10 more grades progress than the average, whilst in English they make 0.11 more grades. The lowest performing region in English is the South West (0.10 grades less than average), and in maths it is Yorkshire and the Humber (0.06 grades less progress).

Staff strongly value networks which allow for knowledge sharing, but need more CPD for English

Evidence from our discussion with top-performing providers suggested resit teachers are often highly motivated and have a strong desire to learn and support their students in making progress with English and maths. They also strongly value networks where they can share best practice, build relationships and share their experiences. However, they also argued that there should be more evidence-based CPD on how to support learners with negative past experiences of education (for instance, trauma-informed teaching approaches). There is also a need to increase the amount of CPD for English. While CPD for maths is very good and accessible, good CPD for English remains relatively scarce.

Recommendations

In light of our findings, we have devised a set of recommendations. These have been split into three categories: recommendations for policymakers and industry bodies, recommendations for research and recommendations for providers.

Recommendations for policymakers

1. The government needs to act to close the resit attainment gap faced by disadvantaged students. We reiterate our previous call for a 16 to 19 student premium to help address these educational inequalities and widening gaps between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students.[2] With disadvantaged students overrepresented in FE colleges, this funding would also provide greater resources to those institutions most likely to be struggling with resit teacher recruitment and retention.

2. If alternatives to GCSEs are to be developed (for example, a more modular and contextualised GCSE or a tailored GCSE stepping stone qualification)[3], the government should ensure grading structures allow students to show and see progress. Moreover, policy should focus on enabling students to show what they can do and demonstrate

[2] Hunt, 'Closing the Forgotten Gap: Implementing a 16-19 Student Premium'.
[3] Get Further, 'Curriculum and Assessment Review Interim Report - Our Response'; MEI, 'Proposal for a New Qualification to Tackle GCSE Maths Resit Failure'.

progress. These should be key considerations for the ongoing Curriculum and Assessment Review.

3. The government should consider reforming the 16 to 19 accountability measure for English and maths progress by incorporating wider key stage 4 attainment. Our results show that prior attainment in other key stage 4 subjects strongly predicts resit performance, particularly for English. Accounting for this prior attainment in the English and maths progress measure would improve the measure's ability to capture institutional effectiveness in delivering resits.

Recommendations for providers

1. When considering decisions regarding resit pathways and qualifications, providers should focus on students' broader key stage 4 attainment for English, and focus on their maths prior attainment for maths. Our results show that for English, average key stage 4 results across all subjects matters more than the actual prior GCSE English grade. We find the opposite for maths, where the prior GCSE grade matters the most.

2. Providers should consider the best approaches for embedding English and maths within subject departments. For example, having English and maths teachers sitting within subject departments rather than a separate English and maths department, or using students' main subject area to sort them into classes for resits. This should increase buy-in and accountability for all staff and put more of an institutional focus on resit outcomes.

3. Providers should adopt a selective approach to November resits, targeted only on the students most likely to secure a grade 4. Less selective approaches could lower overall results, and could have a negative impact on engagement and attendance.

4. Where possible, providers should spend the first part of term focussing on building positive relationships between students and staff. While this is already being done to an extent, it is worth emphasising the importance of doing this for resit students who may have had negative experiences with English or maths in the past.

5. Look to create and expand knowledge sharing opportunities for English and maths teachers. Our research has highlighted the benefits of college-run networks for English and maths teachers.

Recommendations for research

1. Further research should consider the key drivers of student motivation and engagement for resits and test potential interventions. This is one of the biggest challenges for institutions.

2. Look to create more evidence-based CPD opportunities, particularly for English where there are less opportunities currently. Consider evaluating a pilot of regional networks for English and maths teachers in the 16 to 19 phase.

3. Work with the North West to enhance our understanding of good practice for resit delivery. Our results show there are significant pockets of strong performance in the North West and there is suggestive evidence that this could be due to a strong network of English and maths practitioners.
4. More research is needed on the efficacy of the resit policy, including the impacts of taking resits on student progression, attainment and labour market outcomes.

Main report

Introduction and background

Literacy and numeracy skills are hugely important predictors of key life outcomes, including life satisfaction, financial security, physical health, mental health and civic engagement.[4] However, while the UK performs relatively well internationally in literacy and numeracy for 15-year-olds, the UK has historically performed poorly for literacy and numeracy in young adults.[5]

This issue has been borne out in recent post-16 policy changes and activity. In 2014 the government introduced the *resit policy*, known formally as the condition of funding requirement. The resit policy states that students not achieving a standard pass (at least a 4) in English or maths at the end of key stage 4 (KS4) must continue to study the subject during their 16 to 19 education, in order for their institution to receive it's full funding allocation. Recent statistics from the Department for Education (DfE) show that over a third of students currently resit English or maths.

Since its inception, the resit policy has been somewhat controversial. While most people agree with the idea of supporting students to improve their literacy and numeracy skills, there are ongoing debates as to whether the resit policy is the approach to achieve this. The relatively low pass rate has caused many to describe the policy as creating 'endless resit failure', a 'demoralising resit cycle' and a 'dispiriting cycle of resits'. In a recent EPI analysis blog, we showed that the resit policy is not increasing the literacy and numeracy of most students.[6]

It has become clear that resits will be a significant component of the upcoming Curriculum Review as set out in the interim report.[7] However, to date, there has been relatively little research on the effectiveness of the resit policy. This is despite the volume of students affected, the ongoing policy debates around the resit policy and the upcoming Curriculum Review.

In general, we know very little about where the resit policy works well, where it does not work well and whether there are scalable alternatives to the resit policy that will support students in attaining higher levels of literacy and numeracy. There is limited and patchy evidence as to which institutions (if any) consistently deliver good resit results and the characteristics of these institutions. Understanding this would help in determining whether changes could be made to improve the current policy settings or whether alternative approaches need to be considered.

This report

In light of these evidence gaps and the upcoming Curriculum Review, we carried out a mixed methods research project exploring the drivers of resit success at the institution and student level.

[4] Alma Economics, 'Numeracy Skills Interventions for Adults (19+): A Systematic Review of the Evidence'; Green and Riddell, 'Understanding Educational Impacts: The Role of Literacy and Numeracy Skills'; Morrisroe, 'Literacy Changes Lives 2014: A New Perspective on Health, Employment and Crime'.
[5] OECD, 'England & Northern Ireland (UK) – Country Note –Survey of Adult Skills First Results'; OECD, 'United Kingdom - Country Note - PISA 2018 Results'.
[6] Maris, 'Time for a Resit Reset?'
[7] Curriculum and Assessment Review, 'Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report'.

In the quantitative section of this report, we set out to answer the following questions:

1. What is the distribution in resit performance at an institution level?
    a. How much variation is there in performance across institutions?
    b. How much variation is there in performance over time?
    c. How important are institutions relative to students?
2. What factors are associated with better resit performance?
    a. Student characteristics (prior attainment, disadvantage, SEND, ethnicity)
    b. Institution characteristics (size, type, average prior attainment)
    c. Student and institution choices (GCSEs, FSQs, November resits)

We answer these questions using a multi-level progress model that allows to evaluate the influence of individual and institutional characteristics, and estimate institutional value-added for resits. This approach is described more fully in the methods section.

In the qualitative part of this research, we report on the findings from a roundtable discussion with college, industry body and policy representatives on effective resit approaches.

We combined the quantitative and qualitative findings at the end of this report and provide a series of recommendations for policymakers and institutions delivering resits.

Quantitative Findings

Methodology

Over three cohorts of resit students, we analyse the individual and institutional factors that are correlated with resit progress. Our main aim is to improve our understanding of the drivers of resit success and evaluate to what extent individual characteristics, institution characteristics and institution choices affect resit performance.

Data

We use education administrative records from the Department for Education (DfE) to evaluate the progress of three cohorts of resit students. We use data from the National Pupil Database (NPD) and Individualised Learner Record (ILR) to capture students' study aims, exams and characteristics and the characteristics of institutions. Our cohorts include students who start in 2015/16, 2016/17 and 2021/22 as these are the three most recent cohorts of students whose 16 to 19 education did not take place during the Covid-19 pandemic (see Table 1). We include all state-funded institutions that are required to either submit their data to the ILR or the NPD (in the case of school sixth forms). We distinguish between FE colleges, school sixth forms and sixth form colleges using the Get Information About Schools (GIAS) extract. Please see the Annex for more details.

The most recent cohort (2021/22) allows us to examine the individual and institutional factors that are associated with resit performance in a very recent context (these students finished in 2023 and 2024). However, it is worth acknowledging that the students in the 2021/22 cohort did their GCSEs during Covid-19, meaning they received teacher assessed grades (TAGs). As such, the cohort of students resitting is smaller (due to the increase in GCSE grades seen under TAGs) and is likely to be somewhat different compositionally to other cohorts.[8]

The two consecutive earlier cohorts (2015/16 and 2016/17 starters) allow us to see whether the drivers of resit performance are similar pre and post Covid and, importantly, allow us to look at the consistency in institutional resit performance from year to year (part of our first research question). We do not consider the 2014/15 cohort as this was the first cohort under the condition of funding and the rules changed slightly in 2015/16 (allowing students to be entered on to stepping stone qualifications).

Table 1. 16-19 cohorts affected by the pandemic

Cohort (1st Year)	2nd Year	3rd Year	Covid-19 impact
2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	No
2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	No
2017/18	2018/19	**2019/20**	3rd year

[8] Hunt et al., 'Covid-19 and Disadvantage Gaps in England 2021'.

2018/19	**2019/20**	**2020/21**	2nd and 3rd year
2019/20	**2020/21**	2021/22	1st and 2nd year
2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	1st year
2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	No

It is also worth noting that we exclude students and institutions based on the following criteria:

- The student moved institutions during their 16 to 19 education
- The student is formally exempt from the condition of funding (usually, by having an EHC plan)[9]
- The student is on an apprenticeship for most of their first year (and is therefore exempt from the condition of funding)[10]
- The institution opened, closed or changed hands during the study period
- We are missing data on the student's characteristics (i.e., their prior attainment, ethnicity, gender, disadvantage status)
- The institution has fewer than N = 10 eligible resit students in the relevant subject (English or maths)

We removed students who moved because we wanted to track and attribute progress over the entire 16 to 19 period to one institution and this becomes very challenging when students move. The final exclusion criteria (having fewer then N = 10 students) serves two purposes. Firstly, it ensures we remain compliant with statistical disclosure rules set out by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Secondly, it means we remove institutions who cater for very small numbers of resit students and are likely to be relatively unrepresentative of the wider resit cohort.

Modelling approach

We estimate a multi-level mixed effects model to evaluate the characteristics associated with better resit performance and to generate estimates of institutional effectiveness (or value-added). Our main outcome variable is the best grade a student receives in their resits by the time they finish their 16 to 19 study (converted to a point score by the DfE – see Annex).

The variables we will include are described in Table 2. We run several models, sequentially adding different sets of variables as per Table 2. We also run separate models for English and maths. The basic model is as follows:

$$Y_{ij} = \alpha + \beta X + \underbrace{\theta_j + \varepsilon_{ij}}_{Error\ term}$$

[9] Education and Skills Funding Agency and Department for Education, '16 to 19 Funding: Maths and English Condition of Funding'.
[10] Education and Skills Funding Agency and Department for Education.

$$where\ \theta_j \sim N(0, \sigma_\theta^2)$$

where Y_{ij} is individual resit performance (point score), α is a common intercept, X are the set of predictor variables from the table below (varying at the individual or institution level), ε_{ij} are the idiosyncratic errors and θ_j are the random intercepts for institutions j.

Table 2. Variable groups for modelling

Variable Groups	Included Variables
Individual characteristics X_{ij}	• Disadvantaged status • SEND status • GCSE attainment in English & maths • Total GCSE prior attainment • Gender • Ethnicity • Authorised and unauthorised absences (KS4)
Resit cohort characteristics $\overline{X_j}$	• Institution cohort averages of individual characteristics X_{ij} • Resit cohort size
Institutional characteristics Z_j	• Institution type • Institution size (number of incoming 16-year-olds) • Average prior attainment of all 16-year-olds • Balance of provision (level 3 v level 2) • Provision of level 3 English or maths • Average demographics (gender, ethnicity, SEND, disadvantage)
Individual choices C_{ij}	• Programme of study at start of post-16 • Entering November resits • Enrolling on GCSEs vs FSQs vs stepping stone
Institutional choices K_j	• Proportion of students entering November resits • Proportion of students enrolling on GCSEs vs FSQ vs stepping stone • Proportion of students non-compliant

Note: Stepping stone is any entry level or level 1 qualification. In practice, most of these are lower level (below level 2) Functional Skills Qualifications (FSQs). Non-compliant refers to cases where students are not entered for any eligible English or maths qualifications in their first year of 16-19 study. Disadvantaged status is measured using FSM eligibility in the previous six years (up to year 11).

We will run the following models (which vary in the variables from Table 2 that are include):

- **Model 1: Individual controls**
  - This model controls for all individual characteristics X_{ij} in Table 2
- **Model 2: Individual and institutional controls**
  - This model includes the characteristics of the resit cohort at institution j and the broader characteristics of the institution (i.e., institution size)
- **Models 3 and 4: Individual and institutional *choices***
  - These models account for the choices individuals and institutions make with respect to qualifications, November resits and exams.

Defining institutional value-added

The random intercepts, θ_j, are our measure of institutional effectiveness (value-added). As we add more variables to X, the interpretation of θ_j changes. θ_j captures the value-added after accounting for variation in resit performance arising from X. It reflects the residual average differences in resit performance between institutions after we account for the range of characteristics in X.

It is worth noting that our value-added estimates θ_j will be estimated with error and that error depends on the variance of the random intercepts σ_θ^2 and the size of the institution N_j. Likewise, θ_j is estimated using partial pooling which means the value for an individual institution θ_j will be drawn towards the average $\bar{\theta}$ if the group size is small. This is known as shrinkage and reduces the chances of generating extreme values of θ_j when institutions only have a handful of resit students.

Our main measure of institutional value-added is derived from **Model 2.** This model accounts for all individual and institutional characteristics that might affect resit performance that are more or less *outside the institution's control.* This tells use how effective an institution is at delivering resits after accounting for individual student and institutional constraints.

Summary statistics and sample

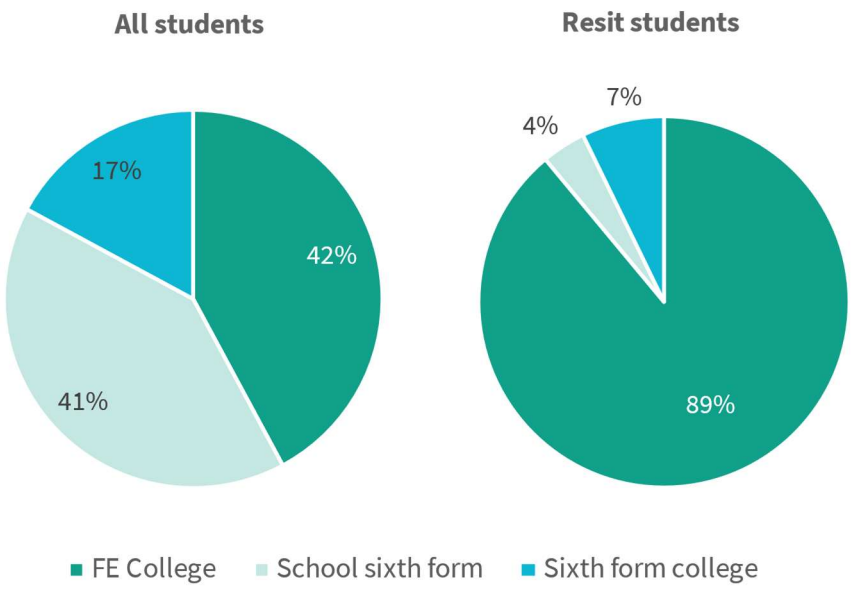
This section describes some of the broad trends among resit students and institutions delivering resits.

Where is the provision of resits happening?

In Figure 1, we show where students undertake their 16 to 19 education. The chart on the left shows where all state-funded students go for their 16 to 19 study. FE colleges and school sixth form colleges cater for around 40 per cent of the population each, while sixth form colleges cater for just under 20 per cent of the population.

In contrast, 89 per cent of resit students are studying at an FE college, followed by sixth form colleges (7 per cent) and school sixth forms (4 per cent). For English resits, we found 92 per cent of delivery is at FE colleges. So despite catering for over 40 per cent of the wider student body, school sixth forms only cater for 4 per cent of resit students.

Figure 1. Distributuon of 16-year-olds by institution type in 2021/22



How much non-compliance is there?

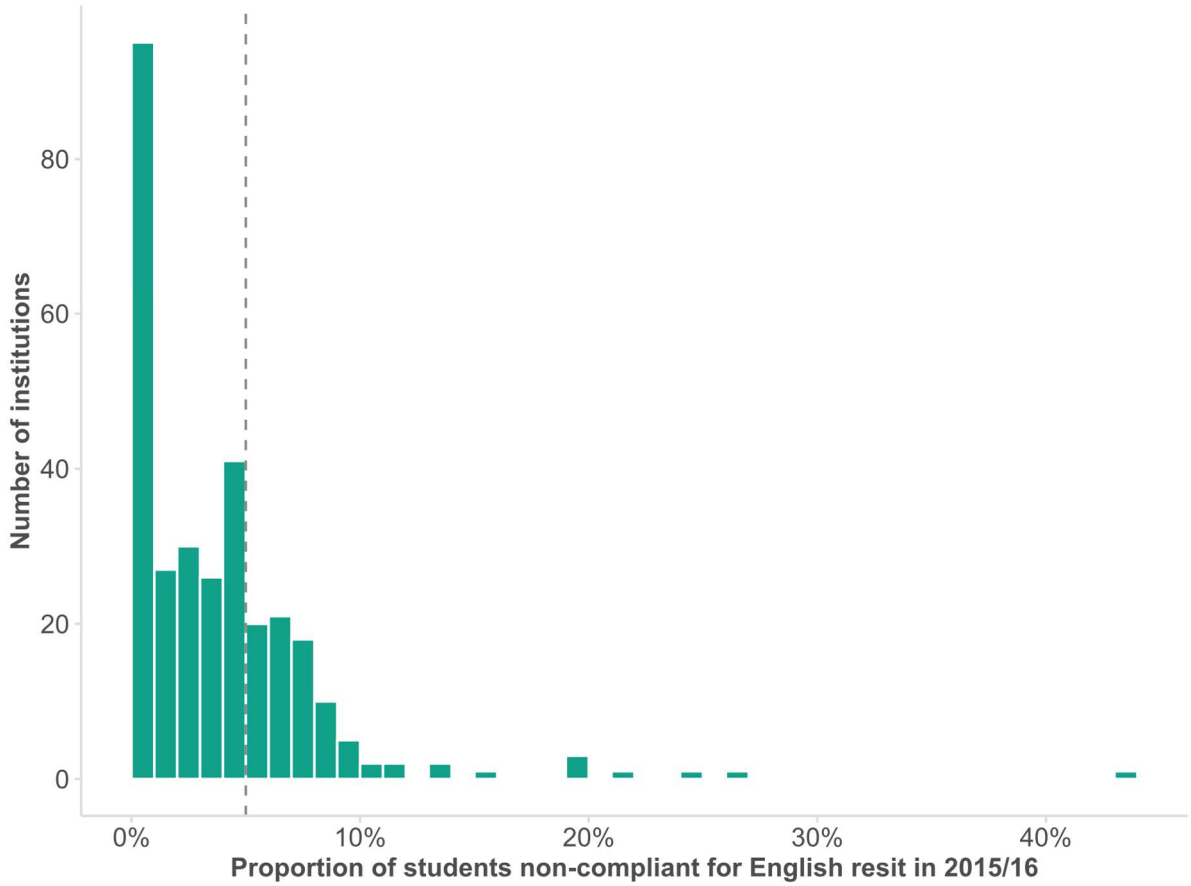
As part of the resit policy, institutions are allowed to have up to 5 per cent of their 16 to 19 cohort non-compliant with the condition of funding (not studying towards a resit qualification when they should be based on their prior attainment). This tolerance level is being reduced to 2.5 per cent in the 2025/26 academic year.[11]

[11] Education and Skills Funding Agency and Department for Education.

In Figure 2, we show the average institutional rate of non-compliance with the resit policy in 2015/16 for English. Non-compliance is when a student is eligible for the condition of funding requirement but is not entered for any initial resit learning aims (courses). This captures non-compliance at the start of the student's 16 to 19 education. The distribution of non-compliance looks similar in other years and for maths. We should note that this figure shows the percentage of resit students who are non-compliant. The resit policy allows institutions to have up to 5 per cent of their entire 16 to 19 cohort be non-compliant.

The Figure demonstrates that there is variation in the use of the non-compliance threshold but most institutions delivering resits allow very few students to be non-compliant (on average, 3 per cent of students were non-compliant in the 2015/16 and 2016/17 cohorts while 5 per cent were non-compliant in the 2021/22 cohort).

Figure 2. Proportion of students that are non-compliant at each institution (2021/22 cohort)

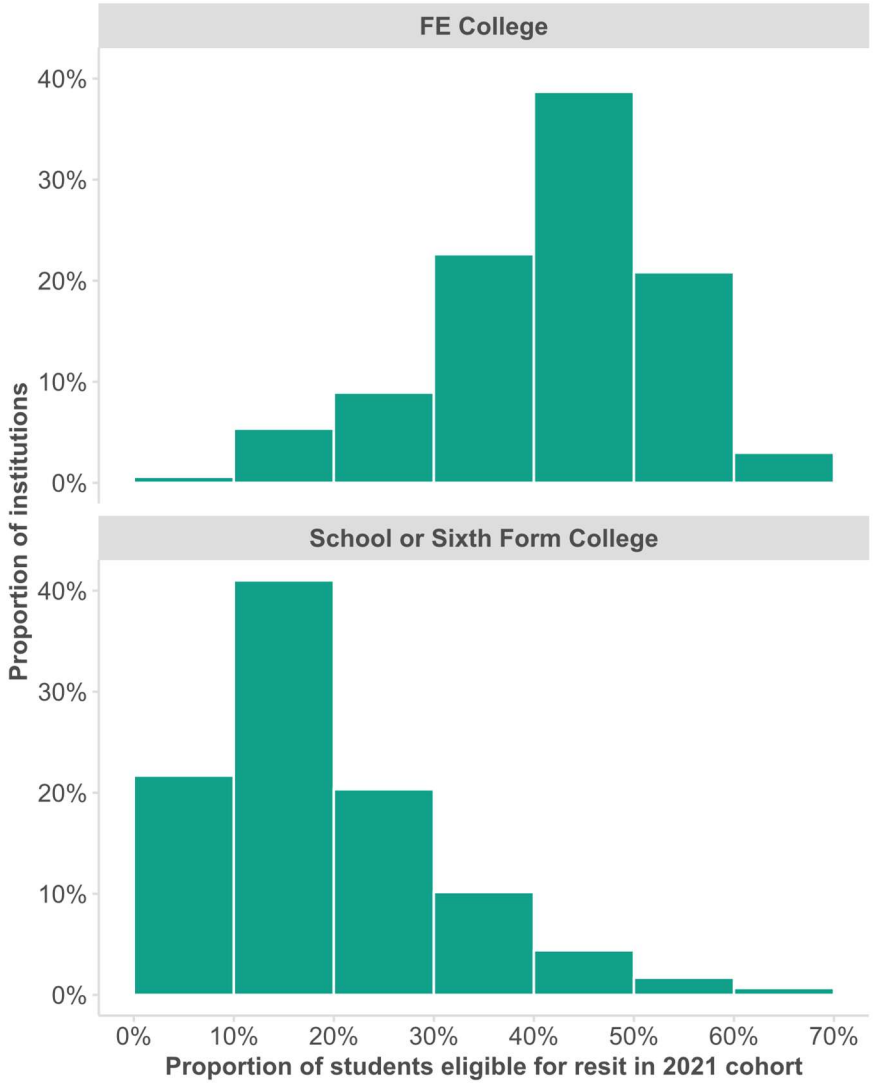


How many students are resitting in each institution?

In Figure 3, we show the proportion of students at each institution that are eligible for either an English resit, a maths resit or both in 2021/22. This only includes institutions with at least ten resit students. We can see that there is considerable variation in the proportion of the student body that are resitting English or maths. Many institutions have close to half of their students resitting English or maths, which has implications for the logistics of organising resits and for how much of a focus resits are to the institution. This is particularly the case at FE colleges. In contrast, school

sixth forms and sixth form colleges tend to have much lower volumes of resit students (as a proportion of the student body).

Figure 3. Proportion of students eligible for resits in 2021/22 by institution type. This figure only includes institutions with at least ten eligible resit students in our sample.



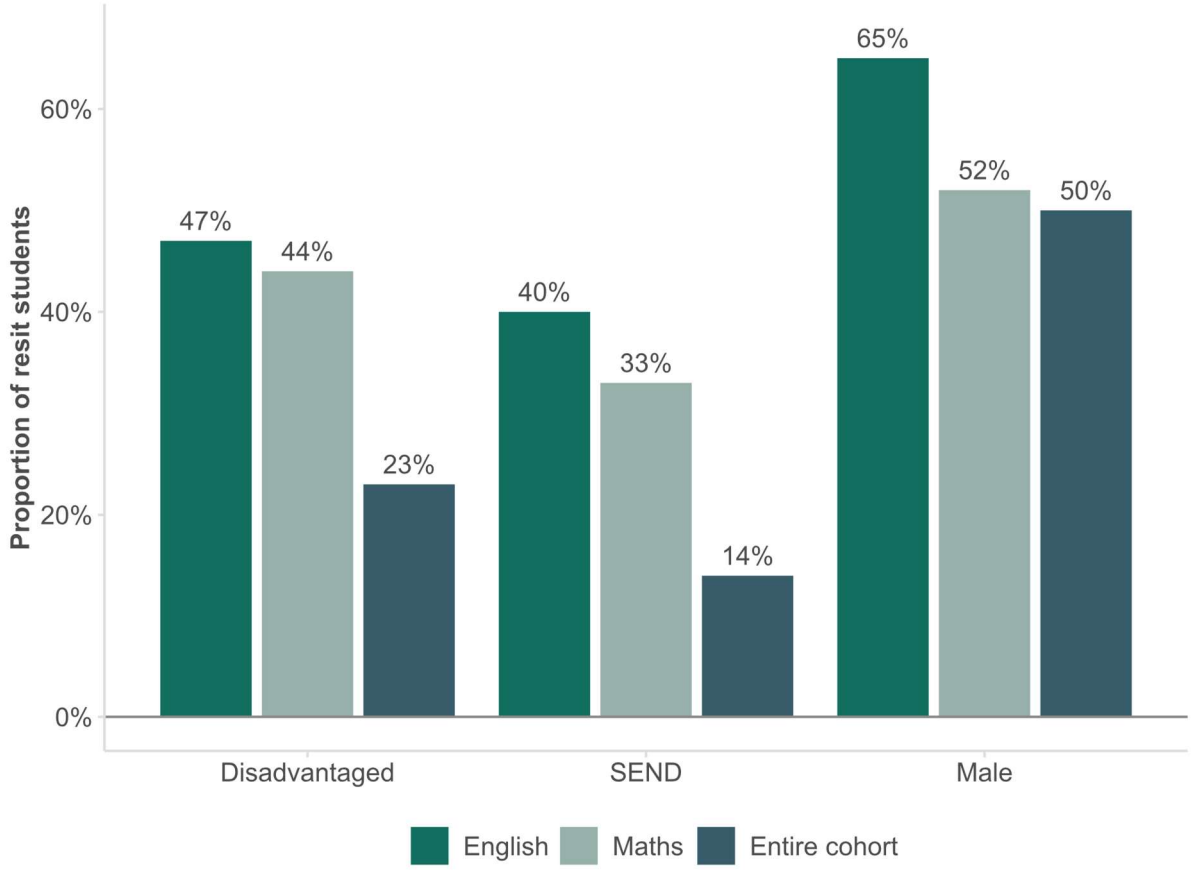
Demographics of students doing resits

Below we show the demographics of students undertaking resits in the 2021/22 cohort. On average, around 45 per cent of the resit cohort are disadvantaged, 40 per cent of English resit students and 33 per cent of maths resit students have SEND and there are significantly more male students undertaking English resits (they make up 65 per cent of this cohort). There are over double the rates of disadvantage and SEND among resit students when compared with the wider cohort of incoming 16-year-olds.

When we compare to earlier cohorts (the 2015/16 and 2016/17 cohorts), the 2021/22 cohort has a greater proportion of disadvantaged students and students with SEND. So while the cohort is smaller due to grade inflation during the pandemic, there are greater levels of disadvantage and

SEND (this is consistent with grade inflation affecting these students less, as reported in an earlier EPI report).[12]

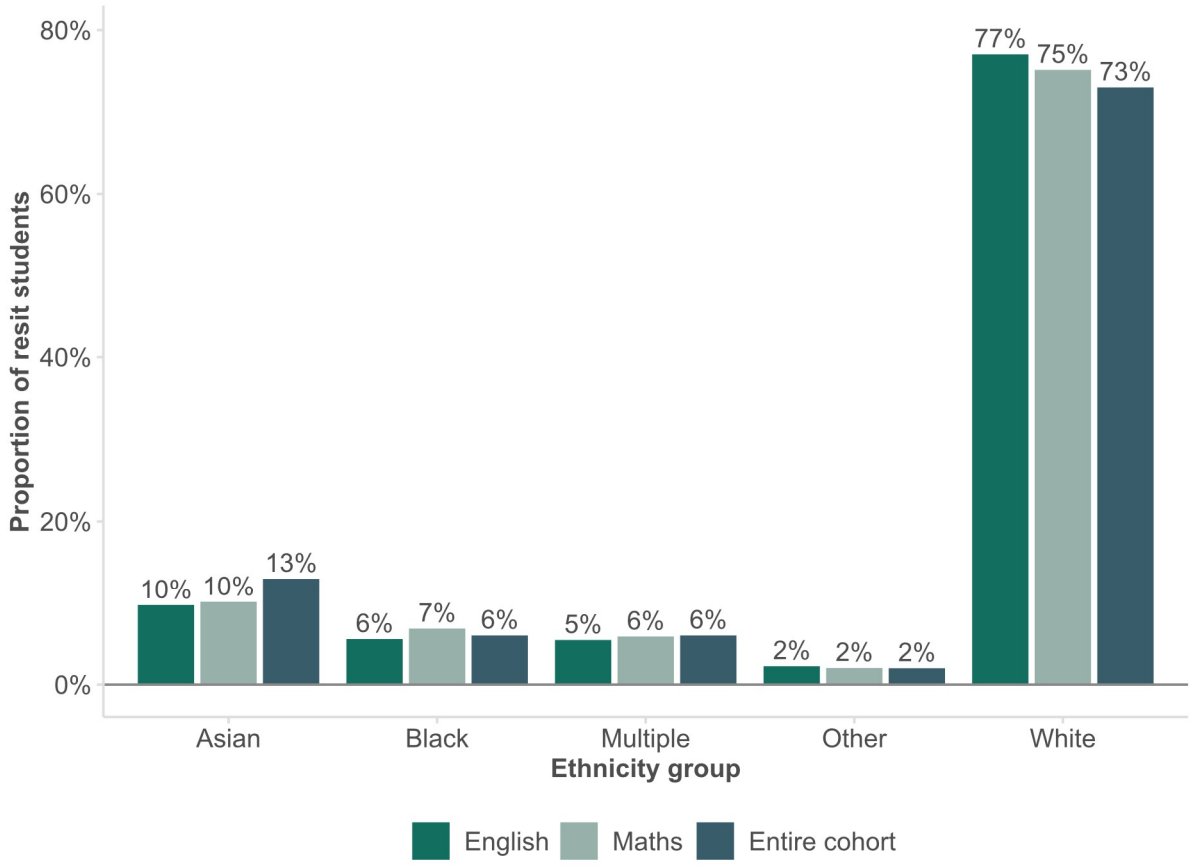
Figure 4. Demographics of resit students



In the following Figure, we show the ethnicities of resit students. We can see that around 77 per cent of English and 75 per cent of maths resit students are White, above the average for the overall cohort. We can also see that Asian students are relatively under-represented, making up 10 per cent of resit students and 13 per cent of the overall cohort.

Figure 5. Ethnicity group of 2021/22 resit students

[12] Hunt et al., 'Covid-19 and Disadvantage Gaps in England 2021'.



What qualifications do students enter for?

In the following Figures, we look at the resit qualifications that students are entered for at the start of their 16 to 19 education. We present the enrolments for the 2015/16 cohort and the 2021/22 cohort separately to demonstrate the evolution of qualification choice over time. These are initial enrolments and students may move between qualification types during their 16 to 19 education. For example, students may move to a GCSE or level 2 FSQ after passing a stepping stone qualification. It is also worth noting that students who achieve a grade 3 (or grade D under the old grading system) are required to continue studying towards a GCSE. Students with lower grades can study towards a level 2 FSQ qualification or a lower-level stepping stone qualification to the level 2 FSQ or GCSE.

In Figure 6, we can see that the majority of students were entered on to a GCSE or a stepping stone qualification (which, in practice, are usual entry level or level one FSQs). We see very low uptake of the level 2 FSQ, particularly in maths where the proportion on a level 2 FSQ is the same as the proportion who are non-compliant (3 per cent).

Looking forward to the 2021/22 cohort, Figure 7 shows that there has been a strong shift towards GCSEs and away from FSQ stepping stone qualifications. Over 70 per cent of all resit students were entered on to a GCSE at the start of their 16 to 19 education (despite only those students with a grade 3 being required to do so). This shift towards GCSEs was also pointed out in an earlier EPI

blog on resits.[13] This may partly reflect that GCSEs are more widely recognised by parents and employers, and it ties into a broader discussion about how qualifications should balance recognisability with the development of essential life skills. The popularity of level 2 FSQ has dropped even further and is less than half of what it was in 2021/22.

Figure 6. Enrolments for the 2015/16 resit cohort

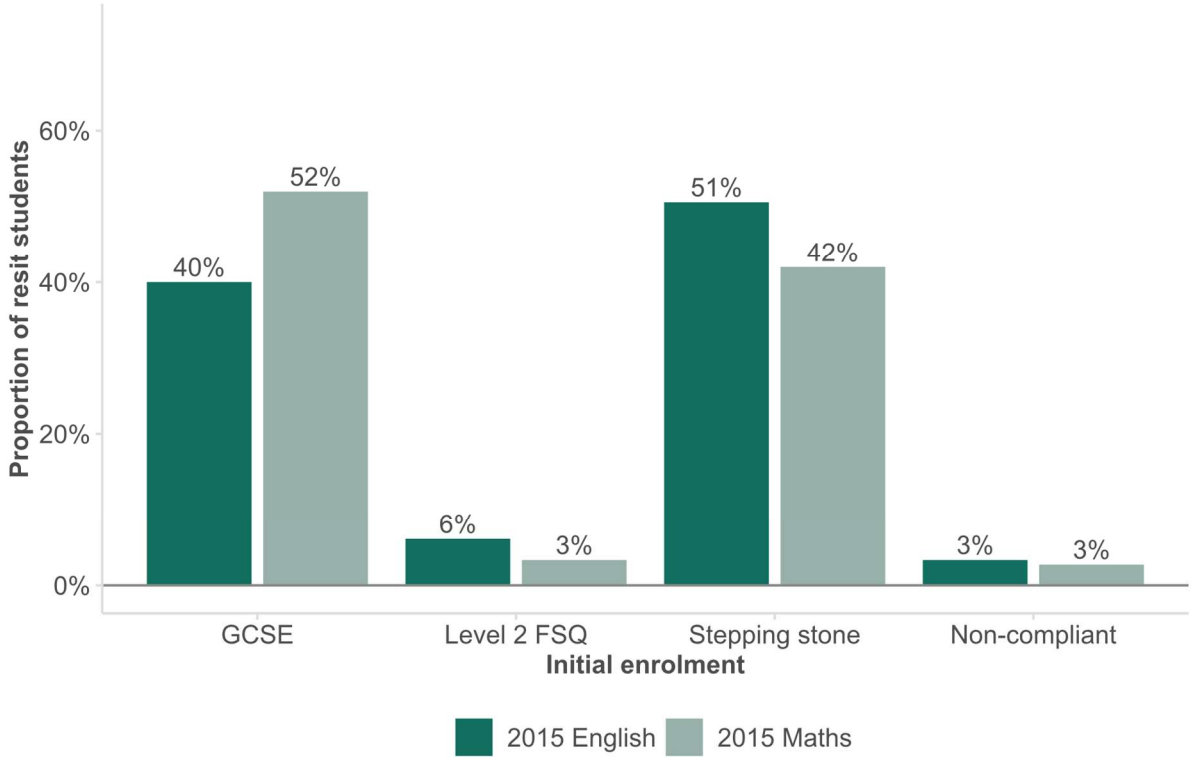
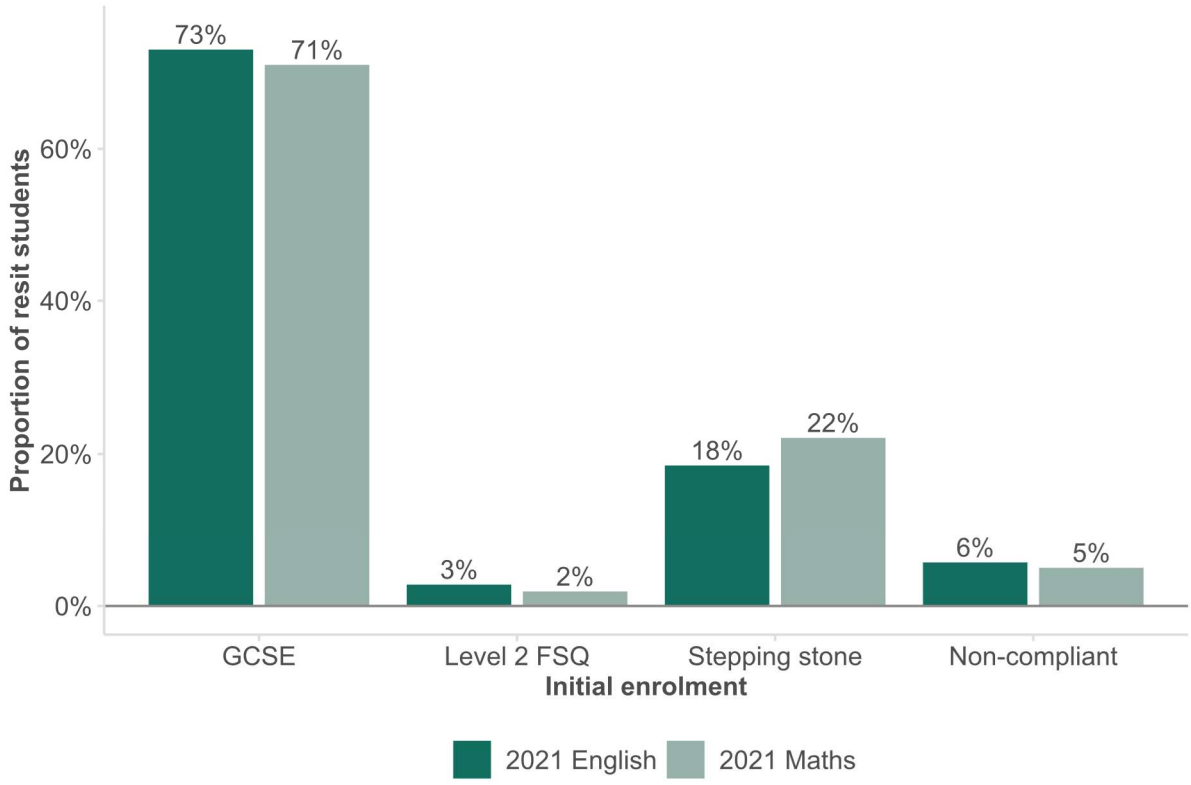


Figure 7. Enrolments for the 2021/22 resit cohort

[13] Maris, 'Time for a Resit Reset?'



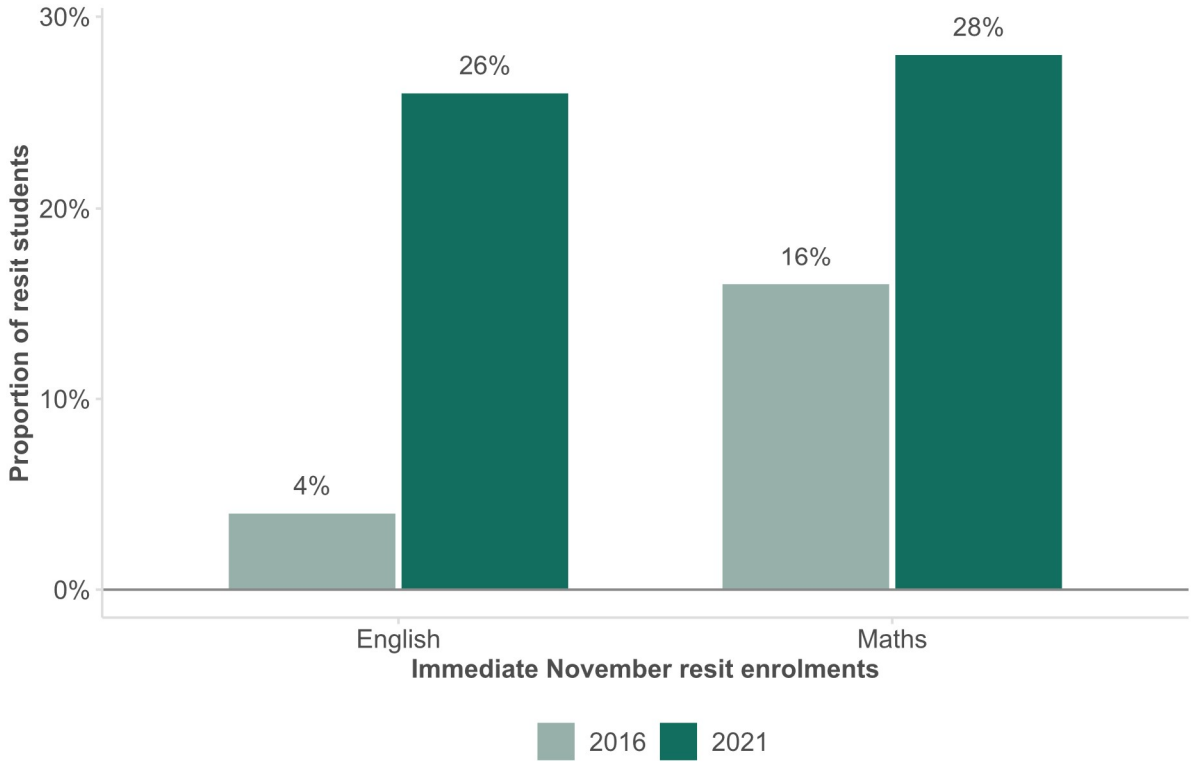
Use of November resits

Below we document the use of November resits for English and for maths. November resits are exams that are taken during the November exam cycle (rather than the typical summer exam cycle). These exams present another opportunity for students to enter and pass their resits (particularly for students that only just missed a pass in the summer cycle). However, they may also contribute to "failure" mindsets and disengagement among students who keep missing out on a pass.

We show the proportion of students undertaking November resits in the most recent cohort (2021/22) and the most recent pre-pandemic cohort (2016/17) in Figure 8.

There has been a clear increase in the use of November resits over time. In 2016, only 4 per cent of English and 16 per cent of maths resit students entered a November resit (immediately after starting their 16 to 19 education). In 2021, 26 per cent of English students did a November resit (an six-fold increase from 2016) and 28 per cent of maths students did a November resit.

Figure 8. November resits by subject and cohort



On average, most students do not do a November resit immediately (just over a quarter do). However, this masks differences by institution type. In the Table below, we show the average November resit strategies for different institution types. We also consider the proportion of grade 3 students that undertake November (these are the student who were closest to a pass in their original GCSEs). Table 3 shows that overall students who achieved a grade 3 at the end of secondary school were much more likely to be entered for a November resit, and Sixth form schools and colleges were generally more likely to enter students for a November resit.

These results indicate that there are different strategies taken by different types of institutions. As well as the needs of students, this may be due to differing financial and logistical constraints. For instance, FE colleges tend to have significantly larger resit cohorts, so it may be more challenging to enter a high proportion of students into November exams, both in terms of preparing students and securing sufficient space for exams to take place. For the 2021/22 cohort, the average FE college had 280 resit students for English and 375 students for maths. In contrast, the average sixth form college had 49 students for English and 74 for maths, while the average school sixth form had less than 20 students in both English and maths. This means, using maths as an example, FE colleges cater for over twenty times as many resit students as school sixth forms and over five times as many resit students as sixth form colleges.

Table 3. Proportion of resit students taking November resits, by institution type and prior attainment, for the 2021/22 cohort

Institution type	English		Maths	
	All	Grade 3 at 16	All	Grade 3 at 16
FE college	22%	35%	22%	40%
Sixth form college	55%	70%	57%	75%
School sixth form	75%	87%	73%	85%

Variation in the resit performance of institutions

In this section, we present results from our value-added modelling. We start by reporting on the distribution in resit performance across institutions and then look at the consistency in performance over time, across subjects and by geography.

Distributions of resit performance

We start by showing the distribution of resit value-added across institutions. Figure 9 shows the distributions across the 2015/16 cohort. Figure 10 shows the distributions for the 2021/22 cohort. Each figure shows the distribution in the institution-level average effects (we denote this as "value-added") with different numbers of control variables according to the methods section. The "base" model is a model with no control variables at all (and therefore can be seen as raw attainment rather than value-added), the "individual controls" model corresponds to model 1 in the methods section and the "institution controls" model corresponds to model 2 (our full, preferred value-added model).

The base model shows us that there is significant variation in raw resit results across institutions, before we account for any other characteristics of students and institutions. When we add individual characteristics to our models, the distributions narrow significantly, showing there is considerably less remaining variation between institutions. These distributions narrow even further after adding institution controls (like institution type, institution size and average level of prior attainment).

In the pre-covid cohorts (2015 and 2016), the distributions in value-added scores are much narrower for maths than they are for English. This means that our individual and control variables predict more of the variation in resit performance for maths and there are fewer residual differences between institutions. In 2021/22, the distributions for English and maths look more similar and there appears to be less variation in value-added in general in 2021/22 (although, the way points were calculated was adjusted for the 2021/22 cohort so this may be affecting the absolute size of the value-added estimates).

Figure 9. Distribution of institution value-added (institution effects) across the 2015/16 cohort.

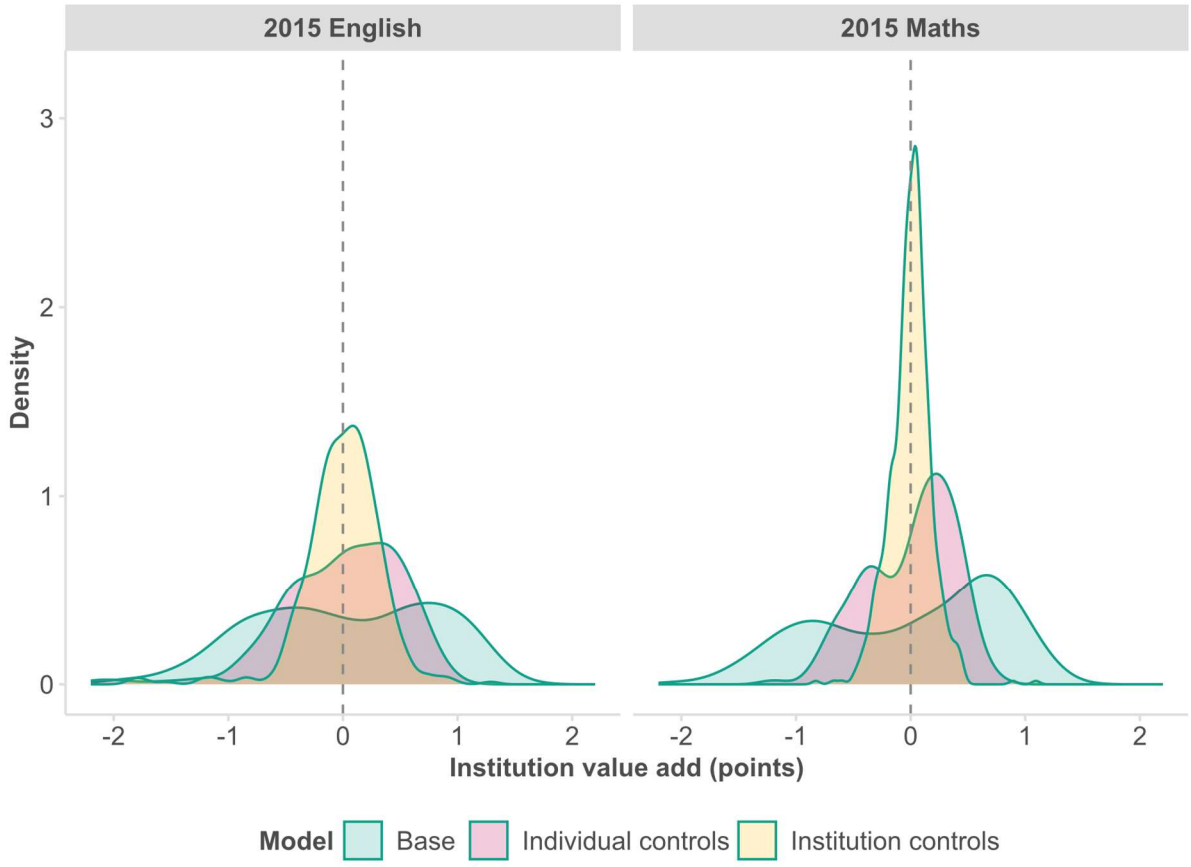


Figure 10. Distribution of institution value-added (institution effects) in the 2021/22 cohort.

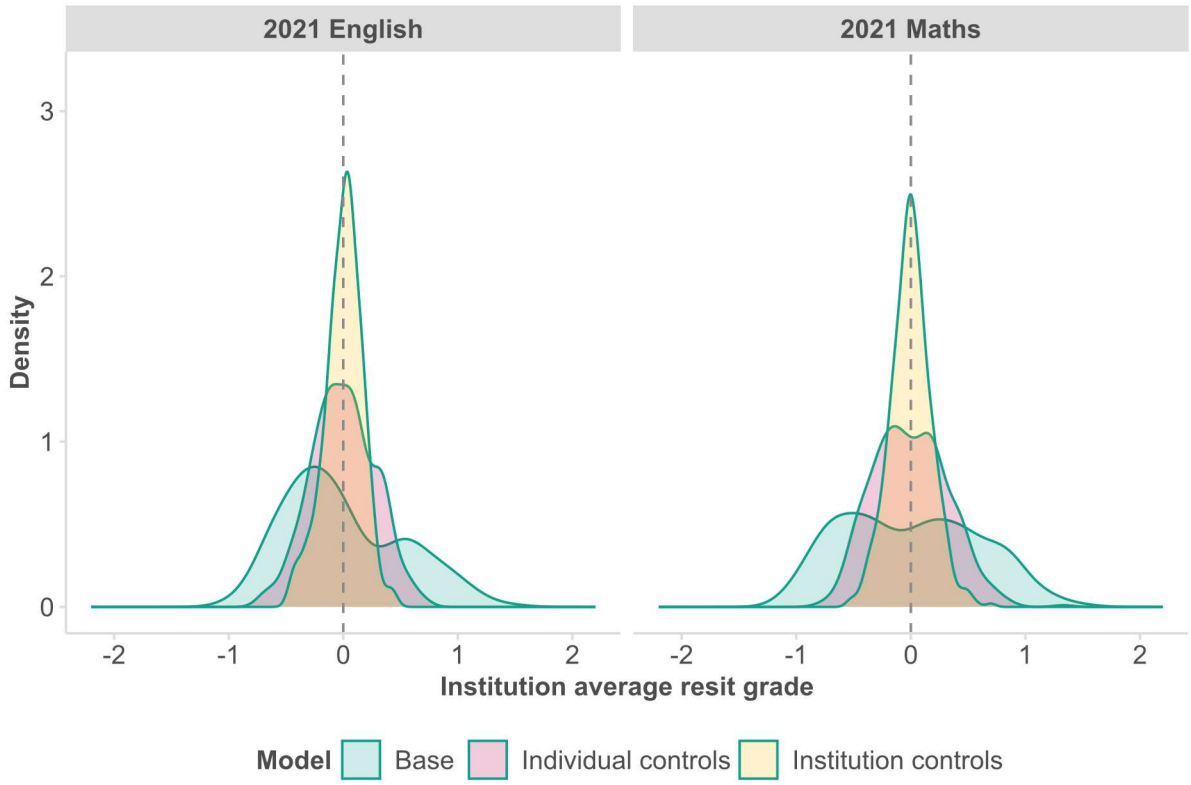


Table 4 reports the total amount of variation in resit performance that our models can explain. We also show the proportion of variation that is explained by institution effects (i.e., decisions and practices institutions are carrying out that we do not account for or observe).

One of the key takeaways is that our models are much better at predicting performance in maths resits than they are for English resits. On average, we can explain 34 per cent of the variation in resit performance for English in our main value-added model and 46 per cent for maths. This indicates that for both subjects, there is a lot of noise in resit performance and many unobservable factors that are influencing performance (for example, student engagement with the education system, personal circumstances and more). However, there is more noise for English than there is for maths.

Table 4 also demonstrates that despite being able to explain less variation overall, our institution value-added effects are more important for English than they are for maths on average. This was also evident in Figure 9 where the distributions of value-added were wider for English. On average, 9 per cent of the explained variation in English and 4 per cent of the explained variation in maths performance was due to institution value-added.

Overall, these results show that there is potential for greater best-practice sharing between institutions for English in particular. This is because there is more variation *between* institutions in English than in maths, indicating that institutions' practices have more of an influence on English attainment than maths. There is also a need for more research on the unobservable factors that are driving resit performance. Possible factors are highlighted later, in the qualitative section of this report.

Table 4. Total variation in resit progress explained by our main value-added model. Total explained variation is the R^2 for the overall model and institution explained variation is the R^2 of the institution value-added intercepts.

Cohort	Total explained (A)	Institution explained (B)	Prop institution (B/A)
English			
2015	36%	5%	13%
2016	37%	3%	7%
2021	28%	2%	7%
Average	34%	3%	9%
Maths			
2015	48%	2%	4%
2016	50%	2%	3%
2021	40%	3%	6%
Average	46%	2%	4%

Identifying top-performing institutions

The value-added estimates from our models are accompanied by confidence intervals, which vary largely according to value-added and the size of the institution. We use these confidence intervals to classify institutions into the following groups:

- Good performers: value-added estimate is positive and 90% confidence interval does not include zero
- Average performers: value-added estimate is positive or negative but 90% confidence interval includes zero
- Poor performers: value-added estimate is negative and 90% confidence interval does not include zero

In general, we find that institution effects explain little overall variation in resit performance once we account for individual and institutional characteristics. As such, many institutions end up being classified as average performers (Table 5). In English, 69 per cent of institutions are classified as "average" and in maths, 75 per cent of institutions are classified as average. As with our previous results, this suggests that there are a higher proportion of institutions in English that distinguish themselves as good and poor performers (indicating there may be more scope for knowledge sharing between institutions). It is also worth noting that there are 58% more institutions delivering maths resits across all three cohorts. This is almost entirely driven by the fact that there are more sixth form colleges and school sixth forms that offer maths resits rather than English.

Table 5. Allocation of institutions to good, average and poor based on their resit value-added. Averaged over all three cohorts.

Classification	Average for English	Average for maths
Poor	15%	13%
Average	69%	75%
Good	15%	12%
N	354	558

Consistency in performance over time

Now we look at the consistency in resit value-added over time. For this section, we use the consecutive 2015/16 and 2016/17 cohorts and only consider institutions that were observed delivering resits to at least ten students in both cohorts.

Figures 11 and 12 show that there is consistency in resit performance over time. The Pearson correlations we observe are 0.59 for English and 0.56 for maths. These indicate moderately strong positive relationships between resit value-added for the 2015/16 cohort and the 2016/17 cohort. There are some institutions that have a positive value-added in 2015/16 and a negative in 2016/17 and vice versa. However, it is very rare for institutions to go from being "poor" in one year to "good" in the next (according to the classification in the previous section) and vice versa.

Figure11. Correlation between institution value-added in 2015/16 and 2016/17 for English

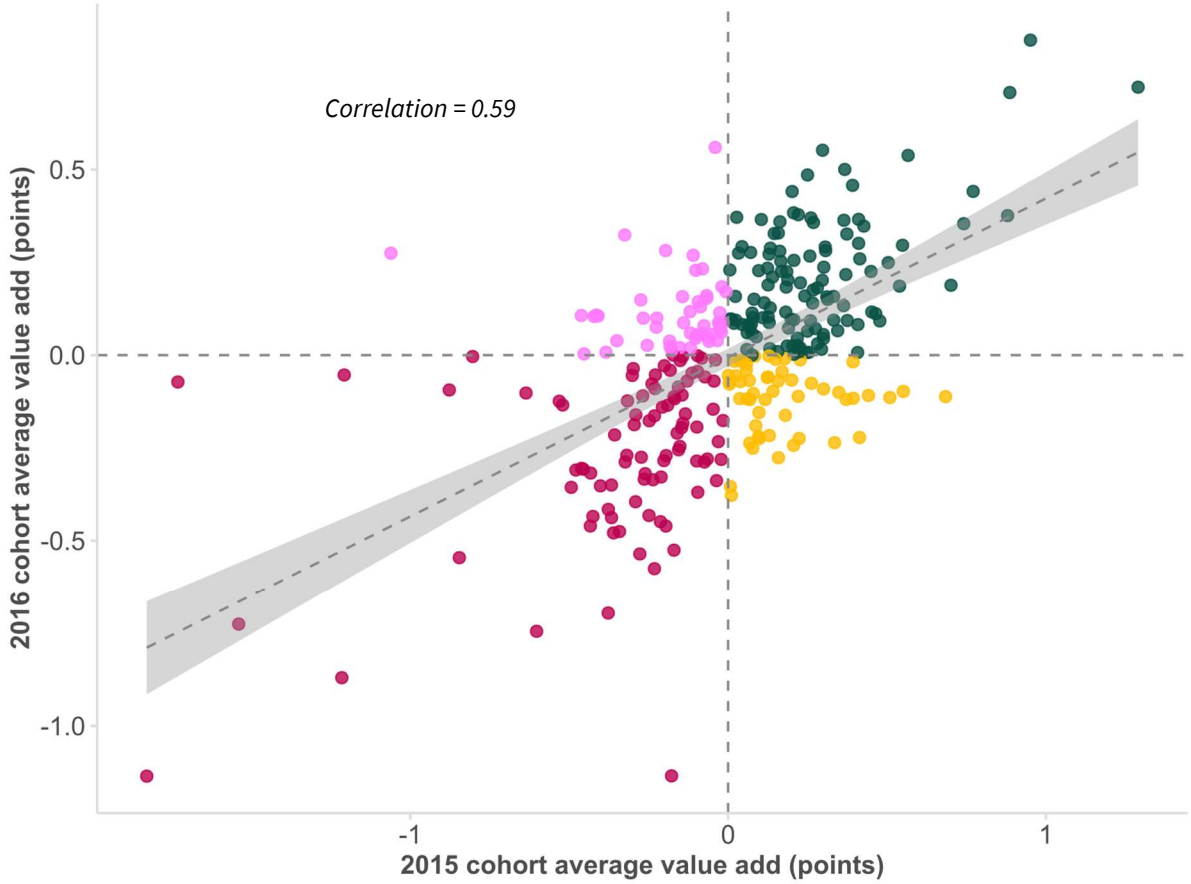
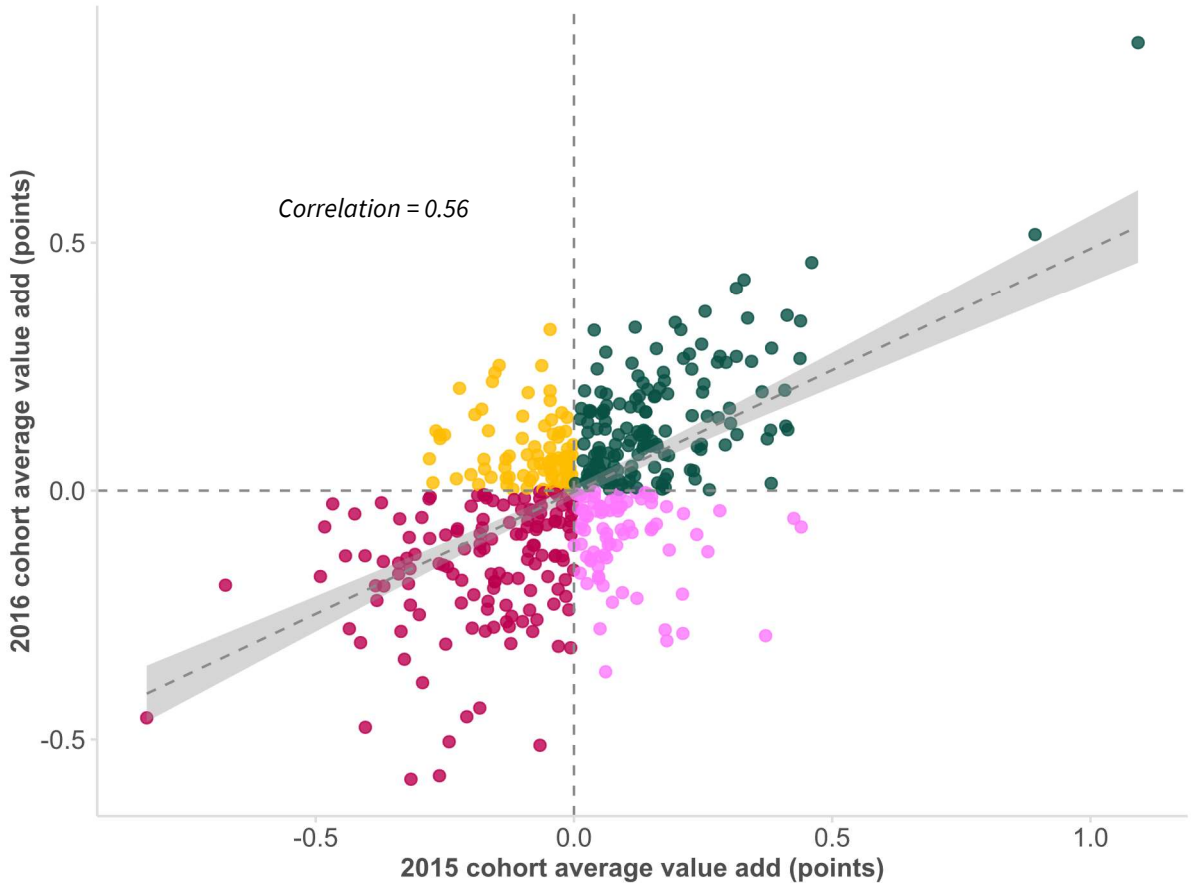


Figure 12. Correlation between institution value-added in 2015/16 and 2016/17 for maths



Consistency across subject

In this section, we show the consistency in resit value-added between subjects in a given year. This only includes institutions that deliver resits to at least ten students for both English and maths.

In general, these findings look very similar to the consistency between years in the previous section. The Pearson correlation in 2016/17 is 0.57 and it is 0.55 in 2021/22. Again, this indicates there is a moderately strong positive relationship between value-added in English and value-added in maths for a given cohort. Despite being different subjects and requiring different approaches to teaching, institutions are just as consistent across English and maths as they are in one of the subjects over time.

Figure 13. Correlations between institution value-added in English and maths for the 2016/17 cohort

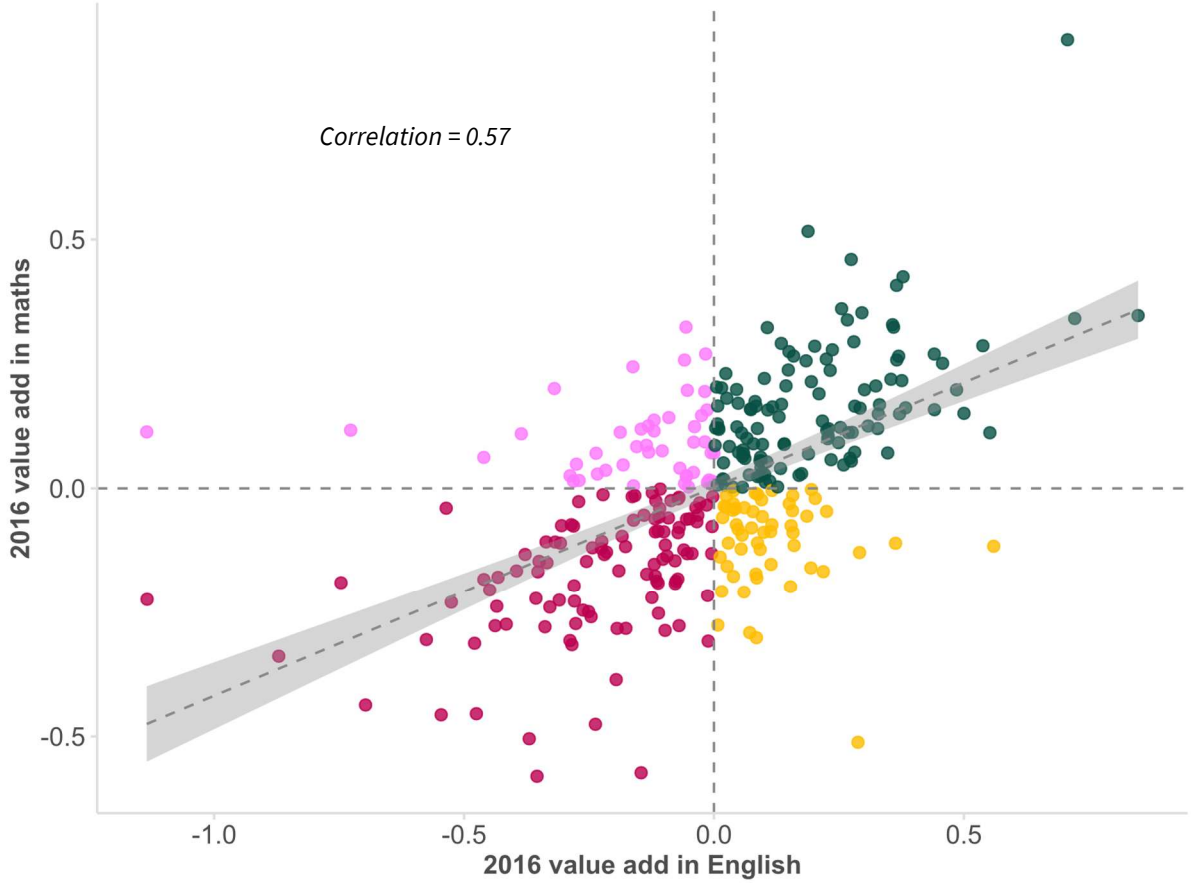
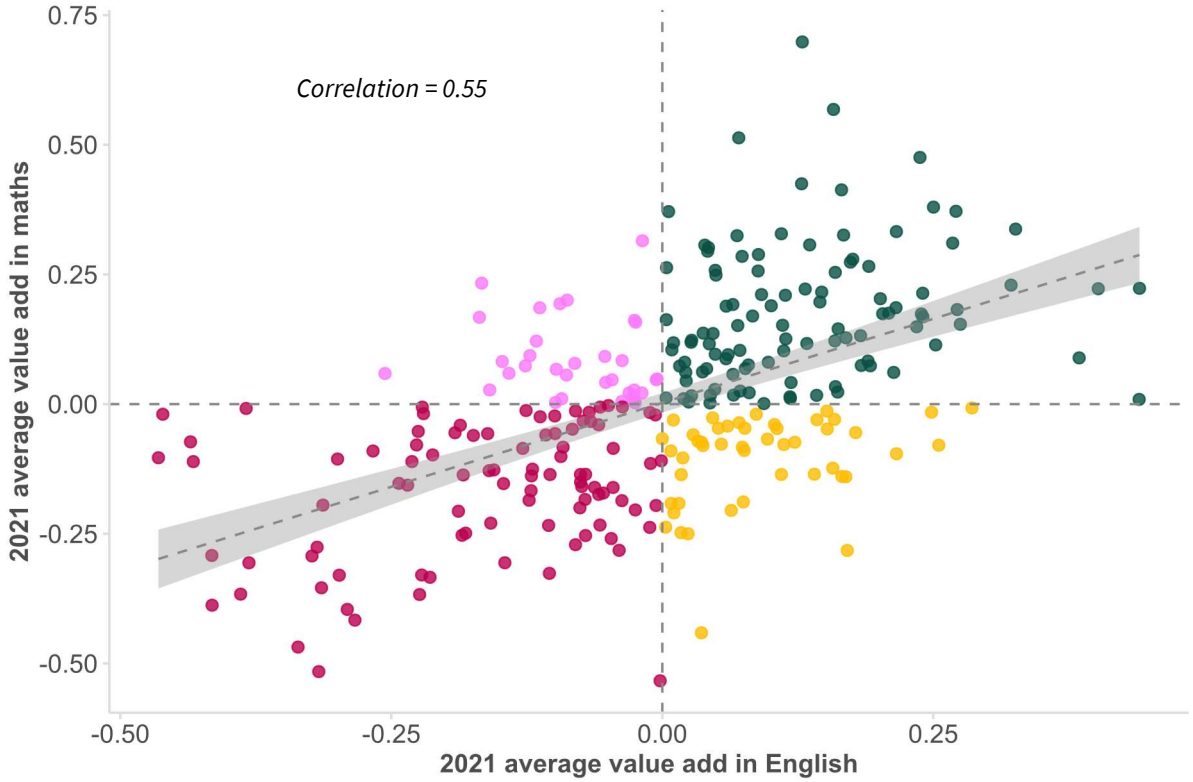


Figure 14. Correlations between institution value-added in English and maths for the 2021/22 cohort



Geography

This section looks at the distribution of good and poor performers across the country. Here, we present the average value-added for English and maths by region for 2021/22. These maps look similar when using earlier cohorts.

There are clear patterns that emerge from the maps in Figures 15 and 16. Firstly, in both English and maths, the North West is the best performing region. When we map individual institutions, there is a significant cluster of top-performing institutions in this region and very few poor-performing institutions. From the quantitative data alone, it is difficult to determine why this is. However, our roundtable discussion revealed that there is a large network of English and maths teachers in colleges in the North West that regularly meet to share their experiences and best practice. We discuss this more in the qualitative section of the report.

In terms of the other regions, the North East also does relatively well across both subjects and the South East does well in English particularly. The South West, West Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber do relatively worse across both English and maths. London tends to fall in the middle of the distribution, alongisde the East of England and the East Midlands.

Figure 15. Map of the average institution value-added across regions in 2021/22 for English resits

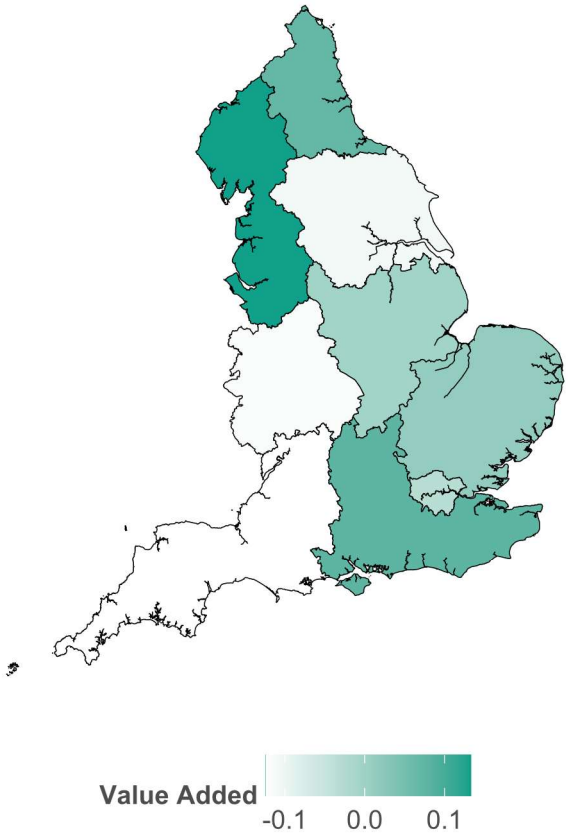
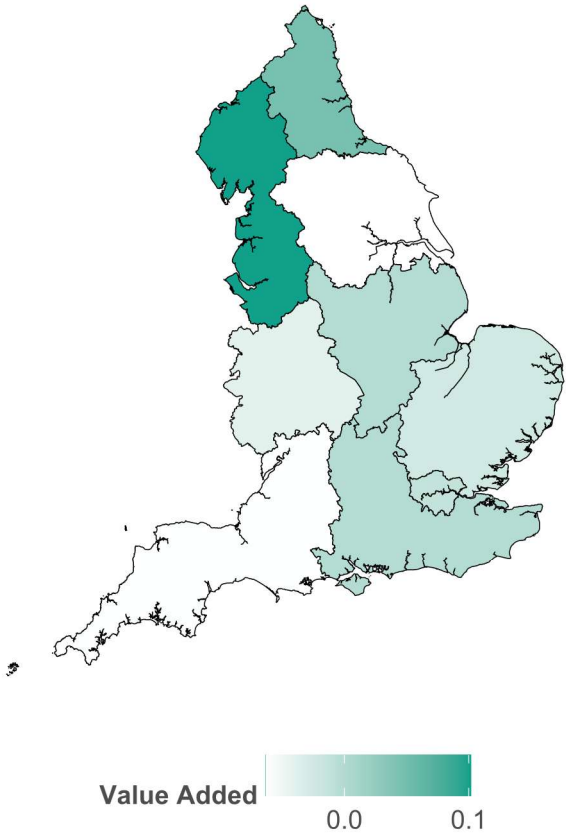


Figure 16. Map of the average institution value-added across regions in 2021/22 for maths resits



Summary – distribution of resit performance

We briefly summarise the key findings from our analysis of the distribution of resit performance. The key findings are:

- Individual and institutional characteristics explain much more of the variation in resit performance than institutions themselves (institution value-added)
- There is more noise in English resit grades and they are harder to predict based on student and institution characteristics.
- Institution value-added matters more in English than in maths. This suggests there is more scope for knowledge and best practice sharing between institutions for English.
- Institutions are relatively consistent in their value-added over time and across subjects.
- There is a pocket of good institutional performance in the North West for both English and maths.

Factors associated with students' performance in resits

In this section of the report, we answer our second main quantitative research question: *What factors are associated with better resit performance?*

We consider a wide range of individual characteristics, institution characteristics and individual and institution choices (see the methods section for more detail). All impacts are reported in terms of resit point score, which is approximately equivalent to grades. All coefficients are reported for the cohort starting in the 2021/22 academic year, to get the most up-to-date estimate of the impacts of these characteristics and choices.

Individual characteristics

Over the following sections, we present the impacts of individual characteristics after controlling for other characteristics, institution characteristics and institution value-added.

Demographic characteristics

Figure 17 shows the associations between disadvantaged status, SEND status and gender, and resit performance in English and maths for the 2021/22 cohort. All of these associations are after taking account of prior attainment and other characteristics, including institutional characteristics (like institution type and size).

We find there is a significant disadvantage gap in resit outcomes, even after accounting for students' prior attainment, their institution type and programme of study. On average, disadvantaged students receive 0.2 grades less than non-disadvantaged students in English and 0.13 grades less in maths.

Once we account for prior attainment and other characteristics, there is little association between having SEND and resit outcomes. There is a small negative association for maths, but this is very small considering the size of other gaps in attainment. Overall, this suggests that resit delivery caters just as well to students with SEND as it does to students without SEND, though noting that actual grades for students with SEND are likely to be lower than average, due to the lower than average prior attainment of this group.

In terms of gender, there are significant gaps in achievement in line with a wide body of evidence on differences in attainment between boys and girls. Interestingly, the gaps we observe are after accounting for any gaps in attainment in their original GCSEs, suggesting the gender gaps widen in resits. Notably, the gender gap in English (where females do better) is much smaller than the gender gap in maths (where males do better). The gender gap in maths is almost five times the gender gap in English, which raises significant concerns about female achievement in maths resits.

Our ethnicity results (Figure 18) show that across English and maths, White British students have some of the lowest progress levels, along with those from Gypsy/Roma backgrounds (in English) and White and Black Caribbean students (in maths). Black - African students make the most progress in English resits whilst Indian students make the most progress in maths.

Figure 17. Associations between demographic characteristics and resit performance in 2021/22

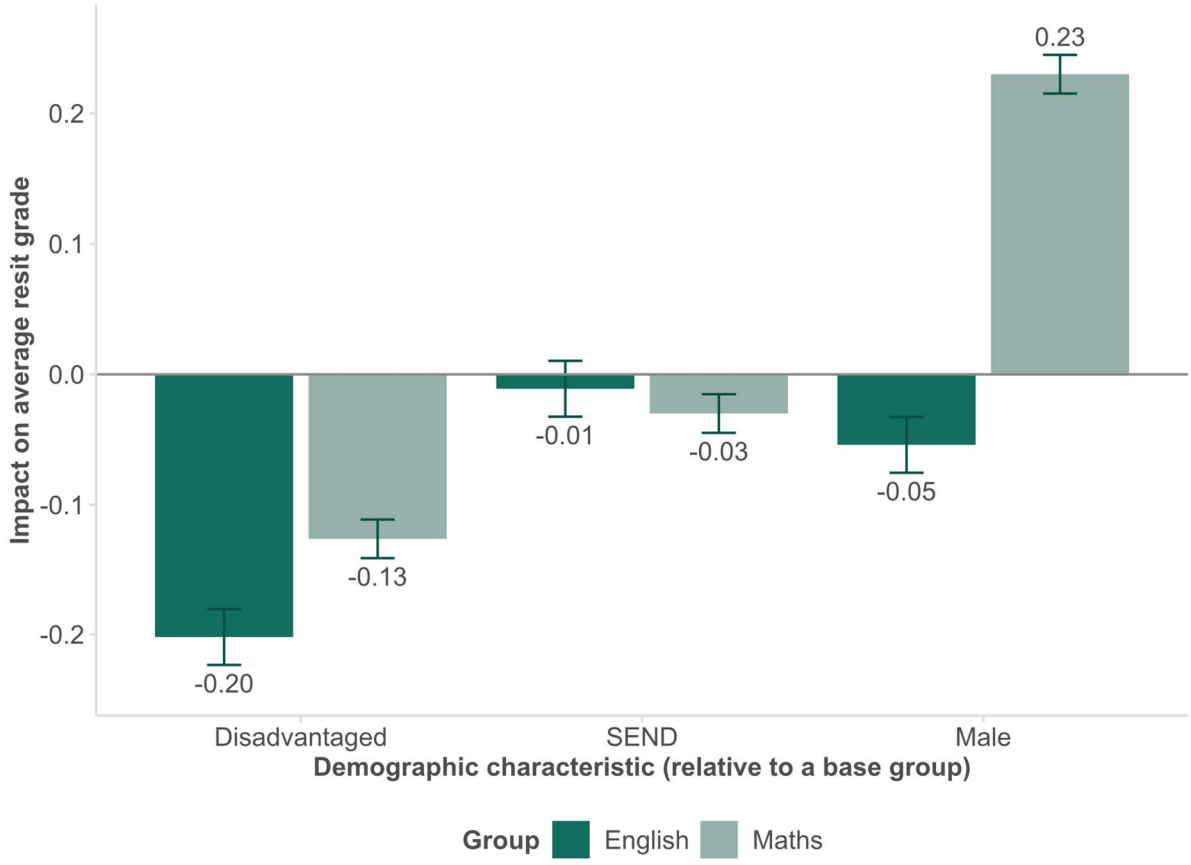
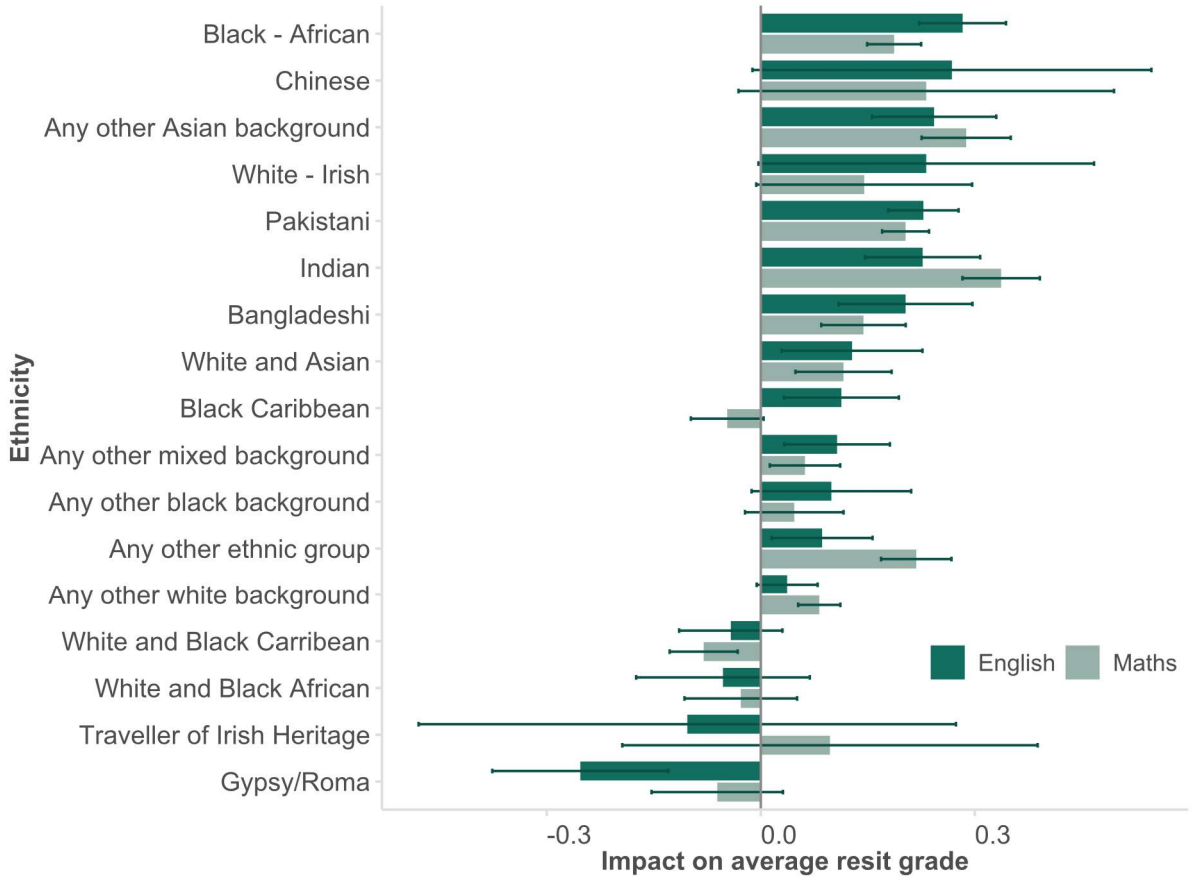


Figure 18. Associations between ethnicity and resit performance in 2021/22. White-British is the base group. Dark green bars are for English.



Impacts of prior attainment

Below, we present the impacts of prior attainment in English and maths and wider KS4 prior attainment (measured as a standardised KS4 point score). We present the results for English and maths separately.

Figure 19 shows that for English, prior attainment in GCSE English and broader KS4 attainment significantly predicts resit outcomes. On average, a one grade improvement in prior GCSE English grade increases average performance in resits by 0.26 grades. On the other hand, a one standard deviation improvement in KS4 attainment increases the average resit performance in English by 0.50 grades. These results suggest that broader KS4 attainment matters more for resit performance in English than the specific prior grade in GCSE English does.[14]

When we look at maths in Figure 20, we observe the opposite trend. While both types of prior attainment matter, the prior attainment in GCSE maths is far more predictive of resit performance than broader KS4 prior attainment. A one grade improvement in the prior GCSE maths grade

[14] When we also standardise the prior grade in GCSE maths and English (to put the two variables on the same scale), the results are almost identical.

increases the average resit score by 0.63 grades. On the other hand, a one standard deviation increase in KS4 attainment increases the average resit score by 0.28 grades.

Taken together, these results show that broader prior attainment is far more important for English than for maths. Likewise, prior subject-specific achievement is considerably more important for maths than it is for English.

Figure 19. Associations between subject-specific and broader KS4 prior attainment and English resit performance

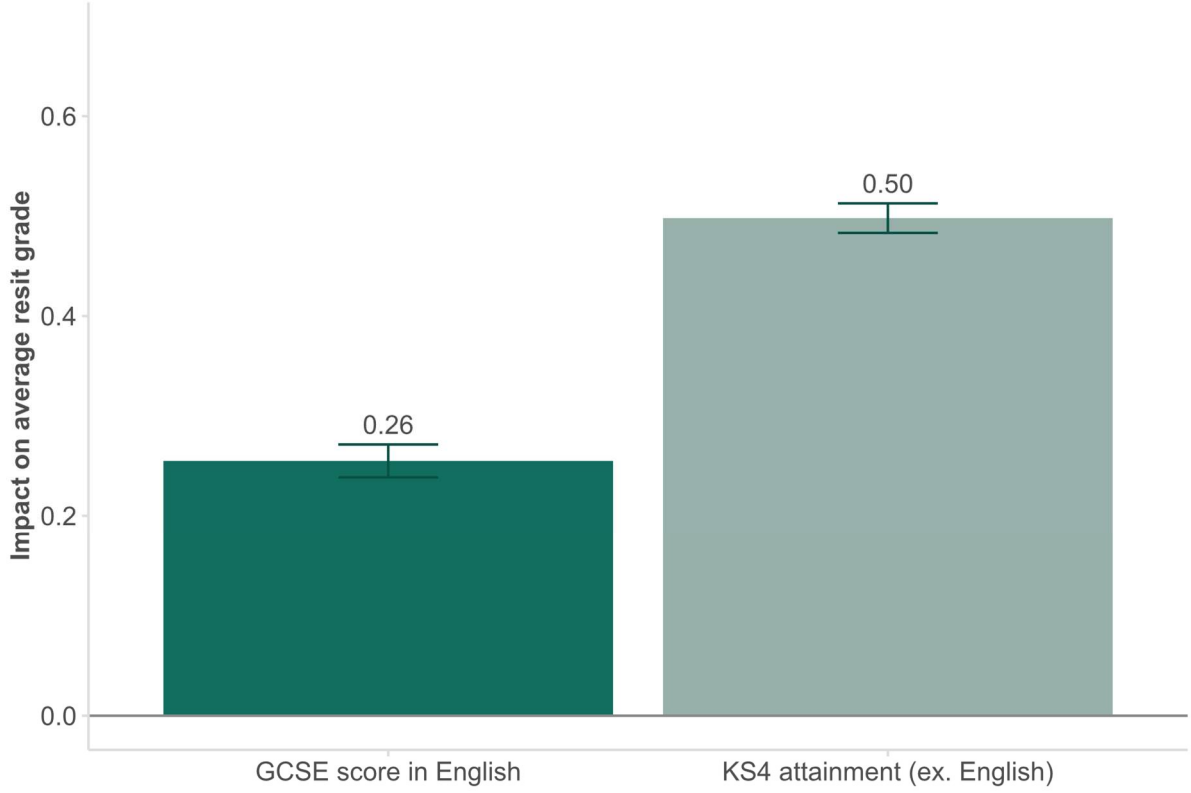
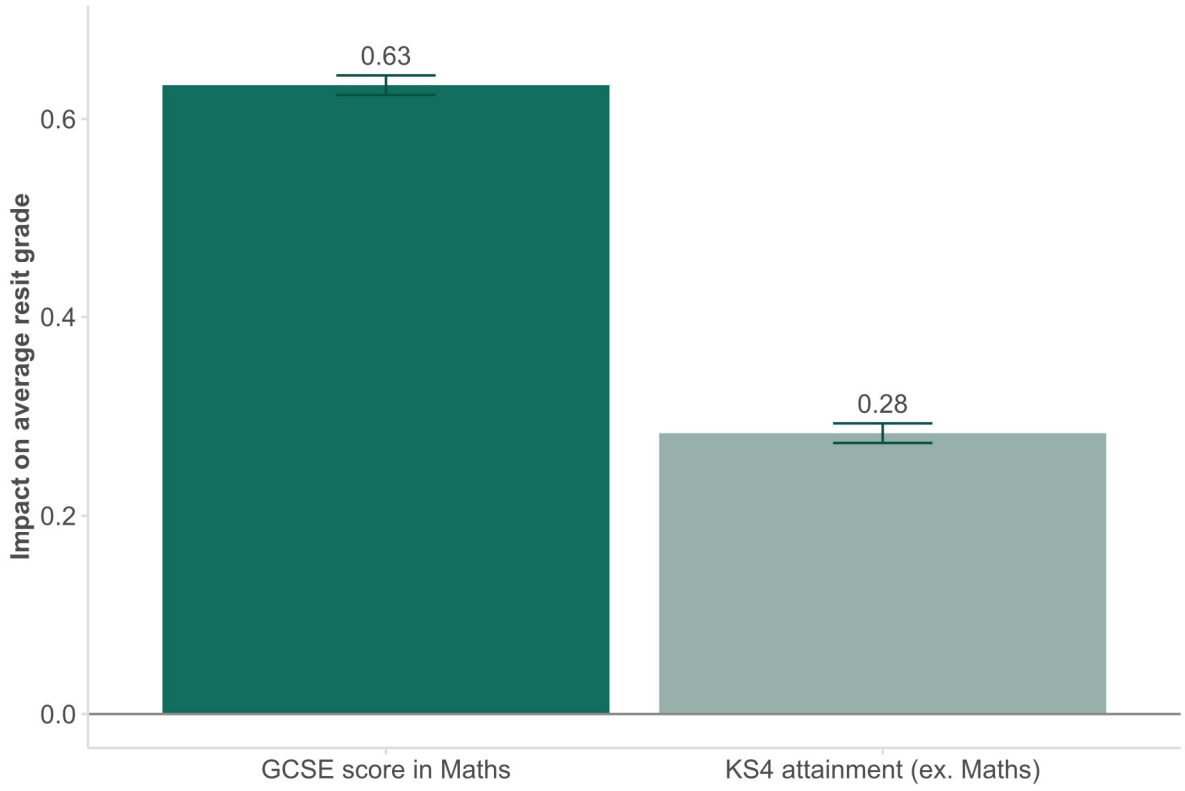


Figure 20. Associations between subject-specific and broader KS4 prior attainment and maths resit performance



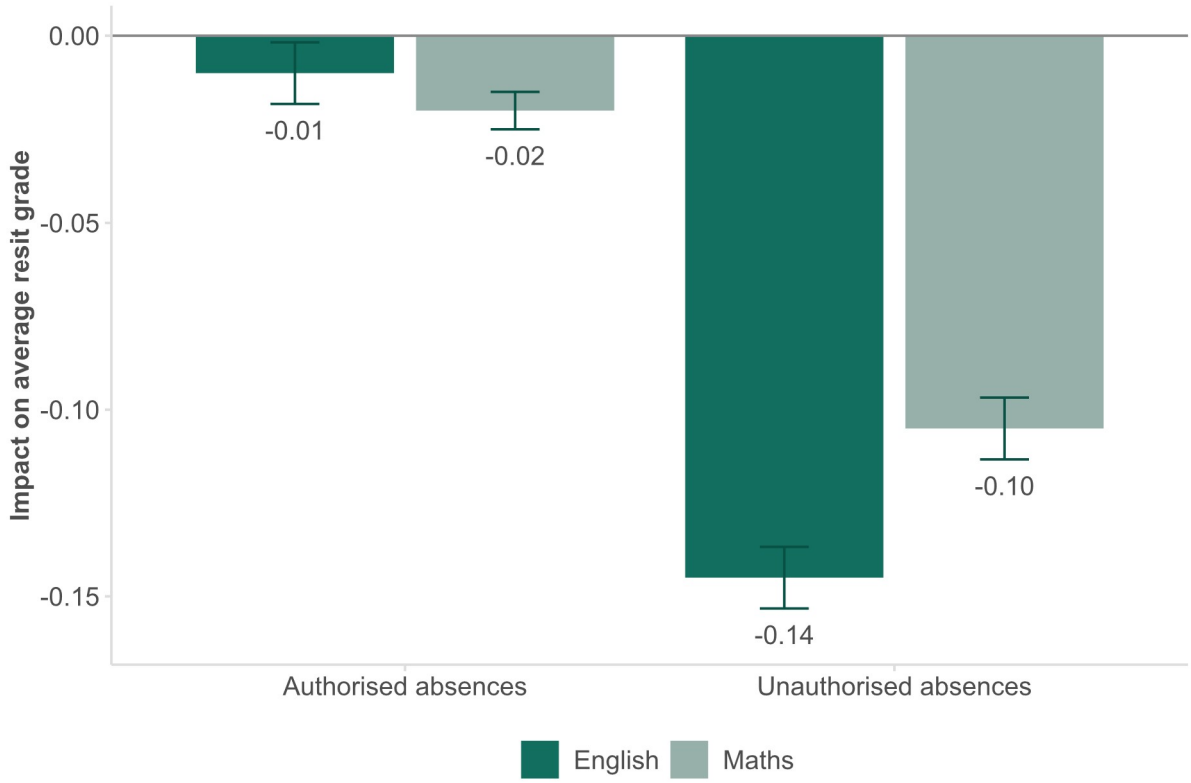
Impacts of prior absences

Given that attendance and engagement have been reported as key problems for the delivery of resits, we considered the relationship of prior absences (in year 11) on resit attainment. We use prior absences as a proxy for a student's engagement with the education system. However, it is worth noting that a student's engagement may drop-off after their GCSEs (which we would not capture using attendance data in year 11). We do not include absence for the 16-19 phase, as this data is not collected centrally.

With those caveats, Figure 21 shows the impacts of an additional five days (a standard school week) of unauthorized and authorized absence in year 11 on resit performance.

We see that authorised absences have a negative association with performance, but this is very weak for both English and maths. In contrast, an additional five days of unauthorized absence in year 11 has a significant association with resit performance. On average, five extra days of absence are associated with a 0.14 lower grade in English and 0.10 lower grade in maths. This is almost the size of the disadvantage gap (and two weeks of additional absence would exceed the disadvantage gap).

Figure 21. Association between five days of absences in year 11 and resit performance



Impacts of institution characteristics

In this section, we report on the impacts on institution characteristics on resit performance. In general, many of the institution characteristics we include (like provision of A levels, number of students, resit cohort size) are not statistically significant predictors of resit performance after we control for individual characteristics and institution type. The full set of coefficients can be found in the Annex. The fact that we control for institution type is important to note because all of our reported associations reflect changing a characteristic *within* an institution type. For instance, the effect of having more level 3 provision is the effect of moving from an FE college with less level 3 provision to one with more level 3 provision (or moving from a sixth form college with less to a sixth form college with more).

Below, we present the institution results that were consistently important across our English and maths models in all cohorts we studied. The two key characteristics are: institution type and level 3 provision of English and maths.

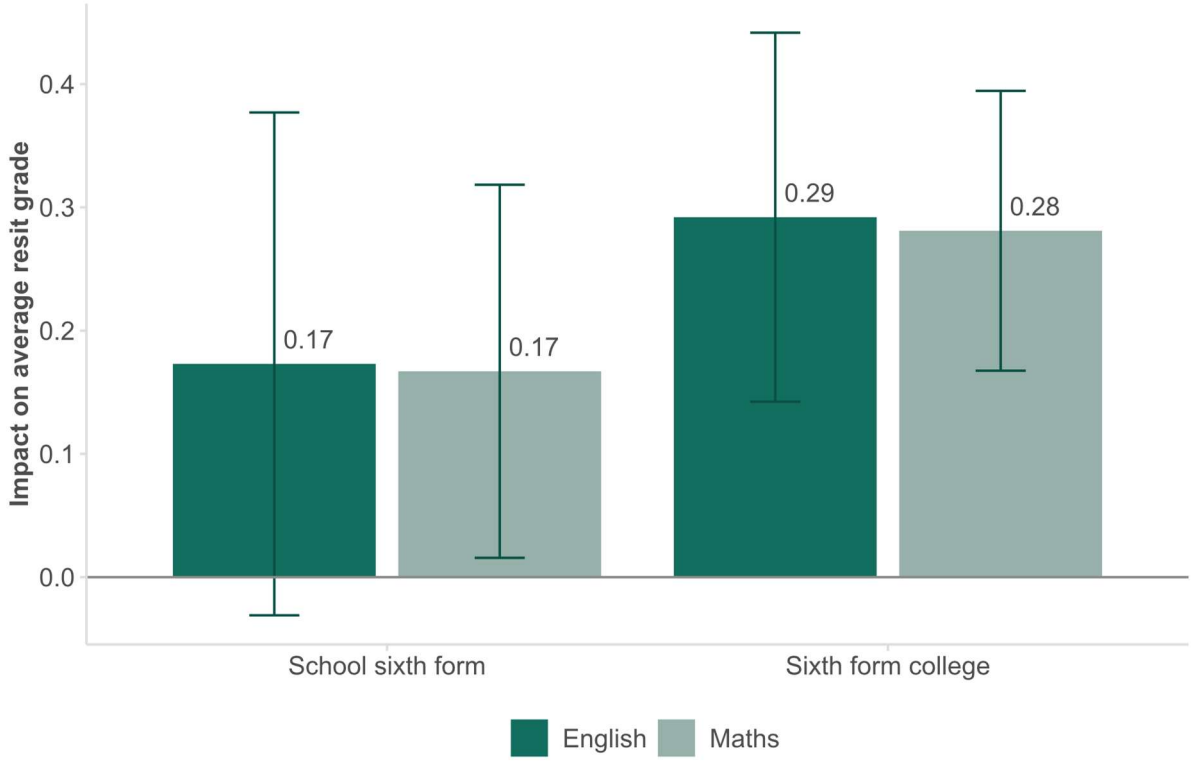
Institution type

Figure 22 shows the association between institution type and resit performance. The base category in Figure 22 is FE college and the error bars are relatively wide because sixth form colleges and school sixth forms deliver far fewer resits than FE colleges.

On average, we find that that sixth form colleges tend to deliver the best resit results after accounting for student prior attainment, and other characteristics including institution size. On average, students at sixth form colleges receive almost 0.3 higher grades in both English and

maths than students at FE colleges. School sixth forms also see higher average grades than FE colleges but these differences are only marginally significant for maths (at the 90% level) and not statistically significant for English. This suggests that school sixth forms may deliver slightly better results than FE colleges for a student with a given set of characteristics. Broadly speaking, many of these differences between institution types may reflect differences in inputs, resources, challenges and unobservable student characteristics.

Figure 22. Association between institution type and resit performance in 2021/22. The base category is FE college.

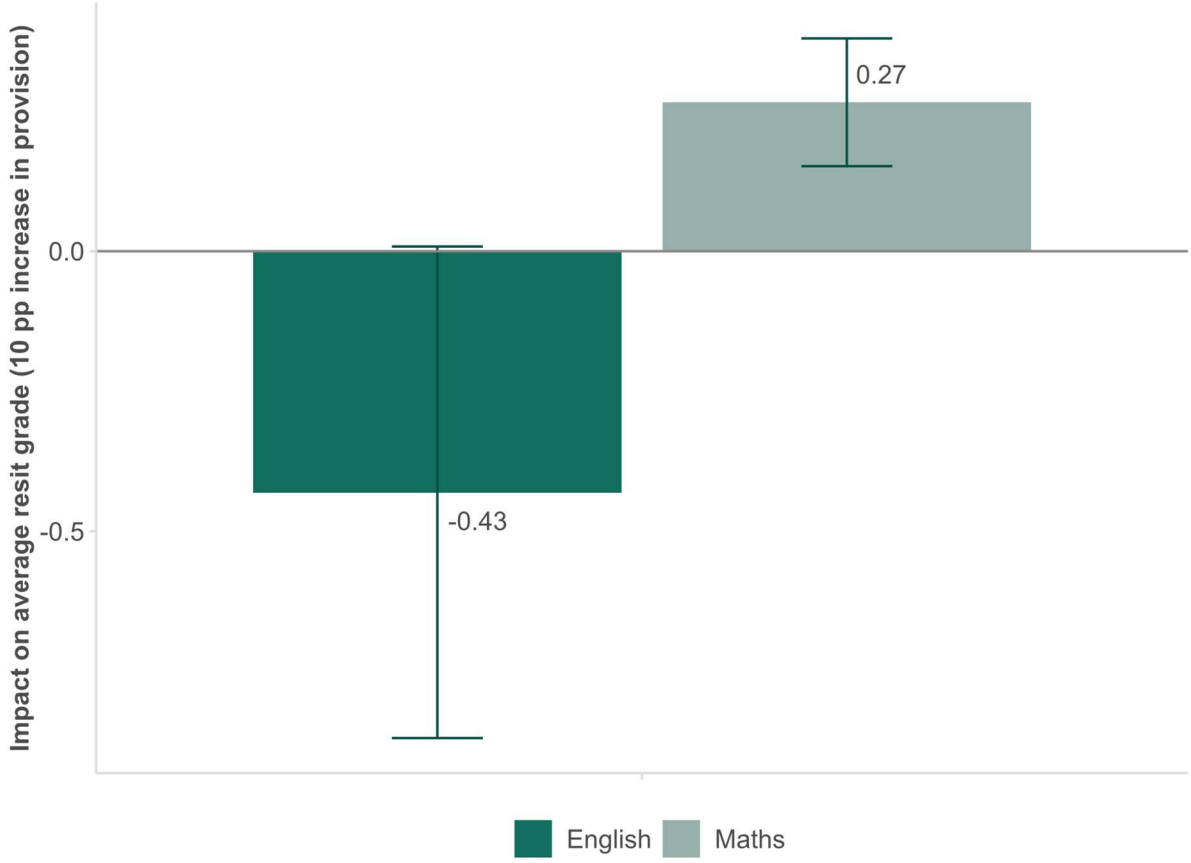


Provision of level 3 English and maths

Next, we look at the association between an institution having level 3 provision in English and maths and resit performance. This will be mainly A levels, but also, for example core maths (for English, there is no core maths equivalent).

Figure 23 shows the association between an institution having a higher proportion of learning aims in level 3 English or level 3 maths and resit progress, after controlling for institution type. For English, the effect is negative but not statistically significant. For maths, the effect is large, positive and significant, showing that having level 3 maths provision improves outcomes for resit students. This could be due to the sharing of resources (including teachers, and expertise) between level 2 and level 3 provision of maths or a greater exposure to maths within the institution. The effect size is 0.27 grades, which reflects the association between an institution having 10 per cent more delivery in level 3 maths and average maths resit scores. This is the same magnitude of having a 1 standard deviation higher KS4 attainment, suggesting that level 3 provision in maths may have a considerable impact on student achievement.

Figure 23. Association between proportion of English and maths provision that is at level 3 and resit performance



Student and institution choices

In the following sections, we look at the individual and institution choices regarding resit student and their study programmes.

Individual study choices

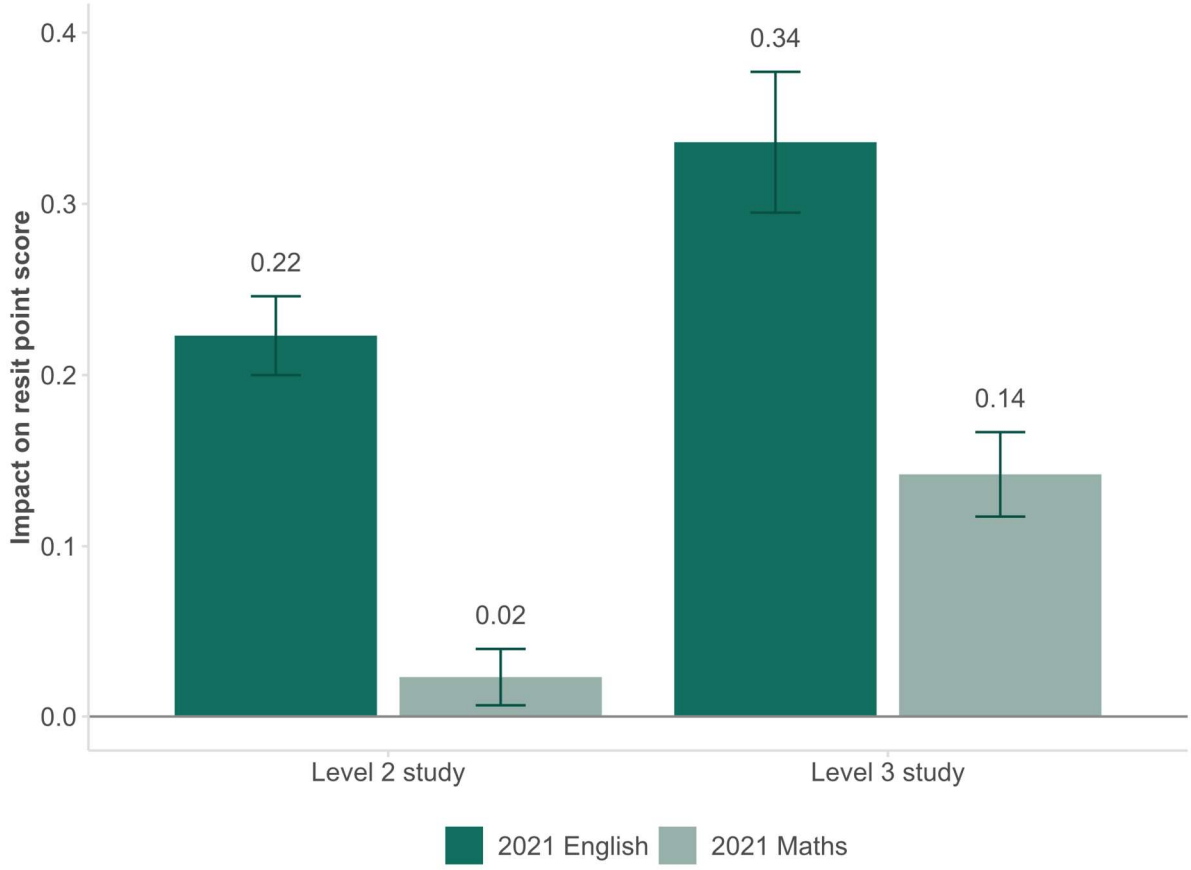
Here, we look at the relationship between an individual's main programme of study (not including their resits) and resit performance in 2021/22 (see Figure 24). We categorise students by the highest aim they are entered for at the start of their 16 to 19 education. The base category is level 1 study or lower. On average, 40 per cent of English and maths resit students are studying at level 2, 10 per cent of English and 21 per cent of maths students are studying at level 3 and 50 per cent of English and 38 per cent of maths students are studying at level 1 or below.

Figure 24 shows that students studying at level 3 perform significantly better on their resits than students studying at level 2 and at level 1 or below. It is worth noting that these results are after accounting for KS4 attainment, so we are comparing students with similar prior attainment who enter for different levels of study.

One interesting finding is that the level of study has a much stronger relationship with English that it does with maths. For instance, studying a level 2 versus a level 1 or lower qualification has ten

times the association for English than it does for maths. This aligns with our earlier results showing that broader attainment matters more for English than for maths. Figure 24 shows that for maths, once you account for prior attainment and other characteristics, the level a student is studying at has less of importance for their resit performance.

Figure 24. Association between the level of a student's main study aims (excluding resits) and resit performance



Resit enrolments

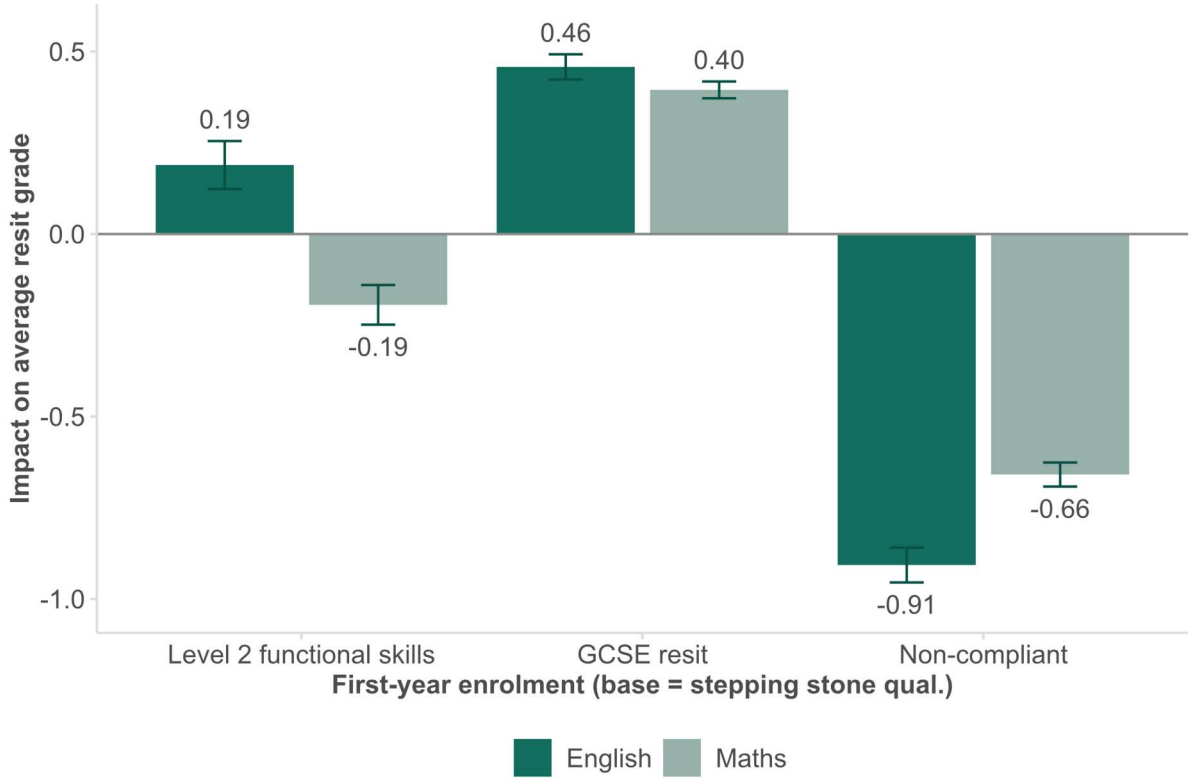
We now look at the qualification students are entered into to comply with the resit policy. We consider the qualifications taken for when they start their study programme. Students can be entered for GCSEs, level 2 Functional Skills Qualifications (FSQs), stepping-stone qualifications (usually entry-level or level 1 FSQs) or have no relevant entries (be non-compliant with the resit policy). The relationships reported here are while holding prior attainment constant. So, for instance, they reflect the relative impact of entering a student with a grade 2 on a GCSE versus a stepping stone qualification or level 2 FSQ.

Figure 25 shows that students who are non-compliant end up with significantly lower resit grades by the end of their 16 to 19 education (this is to be expected given they are not studying towards a resit qualification). We see that GCSEs are consistently better in terms of improving resit scores than stepping-stone qualifications and level 2 FSQs. For English, the level 2 FSQ delivers better results on average than starting students on a stepping-stone qualification. In contrast, for maths,

entering students on stepping-stone qualifications at the start delivers better outcomes than entering students for the level 2 FSQ.

The positive impacts of GCSEs are likely due to a combination of factors, including the way GCSE grades translate to points on DfE's points scale and the ability of GCSEs to track and recognise progress through graduations in grades. On the other hand, FSQs (at level 2 and as stepping-stone qualifications) have a binary pass/fail grading structure which will result in lower progress for those who do not pass. Finally, having an initial GCSE entry may lead to improved learning outcomes for students.

Figure 25. Association between resit enrolment decisions at the start of 16 to 19 and resit performance.



November resits

As we outlined previously, there has been a rise in the use of November resits and institutions take varied approaches and strategies to the November resits.

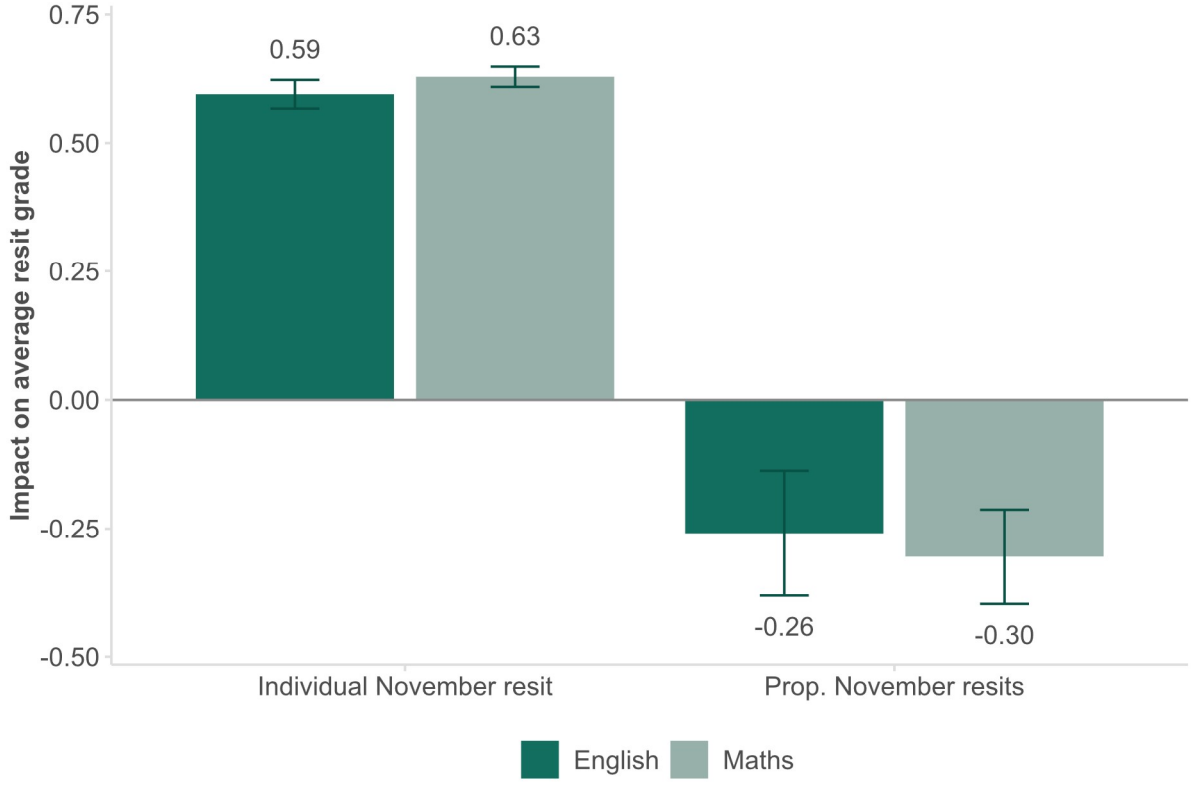
Below, we show the association between a) entering a November resit and individual resit performance, and b) studying at an institution that enters more students onto a November resit (given a specified level of prior attainment and other student characteristics) and average resit performance. This second association allows us to look at the potential impact of institutions' strategies towards November resits. Specifically, if institutions elect to enter more students into November resits, does this increase or decrease average resit attainment for the cohort? Here, we are only considering *immediate* November resits (the first round of November exams after

students' GCSE exams). Students who do not pass this first November resit will continue to study for and sit resit exams throughout their 16 to 19 education.

Figure 26 clearly demonstrates a positive relationship between November resits and resit performance on an individual level. On average, students that enter for a November resit achieve 0.60 grades higher in both maths and English. However, a significant component of this is likely down to selection. As we outlined earlier (Table 3), FE colleges tend to take a more selective approach to resits, entering only around a third of grade 3 students for November resits. This means these colleges are probably selecting those most likely to pass amongst grade 3 students using characteristics of students we cannot observe and account for.

The second set of bars in Figure 26 shows that institutions who enter more students onto November resits see worse results over the entirety of their 16-19 study. Entering every student onto a November resit (compared with no students) lowers the average individual resit outcomes by 0.26 to 0.30 grades. This suggests that taking a blanket approach to November may harm students' overall attainment – a finding echoed in the qualitative section of this research.

Figure 26. Association between individual November resit entries and institutional approaches to November resits and resit performance.



Summary – factors associated with better resit performance

Here, we provide a brief summary of the key findings in relation to the individual- and institution-level drivers of resit performance. The key findings are:

- There is a significant disadvantage gap in resit attainment, even after accounting for prior attainment. This is more pronounced for English than for maths.

- SEND has little impact on resit attainment after controlling for prior attainment and other characteristics.
- There are gender gaps in resit attainment. Male students do worse in English but better in maths. The gender gap is much larger for maths than for English.
- White British, Gypsy/Roma and White and Black Caribbean students made least progress with their resits.
- Asian students make the most progress in English, whilst Indian students make the most progress in maths.
- Broader KS4 prior attainment matters a lot of English but less so for maths. In contrast, subject-specific prior attainment is very important for maths but less so for English.
- Unauthorised absences in year 11 have strong negative associations with subsequent resit attainment.
- Sixth form colleges tend to achieve the best resit results, for a given set of student characteristics.
- Institutions delivering more level 3 maths (core maths and A levels) achieve better results in maths resits.
- Students' study choices (level of study) have a strong association with English resit attainment and less of an association with maths attainment.
- GCSEs (relative to level 2 FSQs or stepping-stone qualifications) help students achieve higher progress scores on average.
- November resits are beneficial at the individual level but appear to harm overall resit attainment when used more liberally.

In the following section, we will present the qualitative findings from our roundtable on the drivers of resit success. The final section of this report will synthesize the quantitative and qualitative findings and present a set of recommendations for policymakers and providers delivering resits.

Qualitative Findings

Qualitative Findings

Overview and methodology

In the previous sections, we described our quantitative analysis of institutional value-added in resits and the key individual and institutional drivers of resit success. While these results give us a good broad overview of the factors associated with resit success across the country, we are limited by the data that are available in the administrative records. We cannot, for instance, explore the institutional choices, management structures and on the ground practices in any (or not in much) detail.

To address this, we convened a roundtable discussion on the key drivers of success in English and maths resits. The discussion included representatives from top-performing institutions, awarding organisations, industry bodies and policymakers. We invited a small subset of providers who performed significantly well in either English resits, maths resits or both, according to both our modelling and DfE's average progress measures in the 16 to 19 performance tables. In total, we had 13 participants in the roundtable, 11 of whom were external to the Education Policy Institute.

The roundtable included a short presentation on our emerging quantitative results, followed by a semi-structured roundtable discussion that covered topics including teaching strategies, qualification choices, November resits, workforce considerations, and college-wide integration. A full summary of the points that were used to guide the discussion can be found below. These discussion points were informed by our contextual knowledge of the sector and previous discussions with a range of stakeholders, including college and industry body representatives.

Discussion points

Our discussion will be focused around three broad themes:

- Student Engagement and Teaching
- Qualifications and Exams
- Workforce and Integration

Below are some guiding discussion points within each of these themes.

1) Student Engagement and Teaching

This section focuses on discussing the ways in which resit teaching and student engagement can be improved and enhanced.

Examples of topics and discussion points include:

- Approaches for improving attendance and motivation
- Teaching styles and use of assessments
- Timetabling strategies
- Streaming and sorting of students into classes

2) Qualifications and Exams

This section focuses on the qualifications students retake, the exams they are entered for and how these impact resit delivery and progress.

Examples of topics and discussion points include:

- Use of GCSEs vs FSQs vs other stepping stone qualifications
- Use of November resits and approach to entering students
- Approaches to exams more broadly (i.e., exam prep)
- Non-compliance with the condition of funding (i.e., which students are allowed to be non-compliant and why)

3) Workforce and Integration

This section focuses on the 16 to 18 English and maths workforce and the integration of resits within institutions.

Examples of topics and discussion points include:

- Staff training, skills and CPD
- Staff engagement and support with resit delivery
- Teamwork between English and maths staff and main vocational qualification staff
- Institutional focus on resits and support from leadership

Analytical method

The roundtable discussion was conducted under Chatham House rule, meaning participants provided their informed consent for their comments and discussion to be anonymised and used for our analysis. We conducted a basic thematic analysis, identifying key trends and themes that emerged from the participants' contributions to the roundtable. These themes were drawn out through careful review of the roundtable transcript, alongside written notes that we made during the discussion. In the following section, we report on the key themes that emerged from our discussion.

Results

Overview

In Figure 27, we have summarised the themes and sub-themes that emerged from our analysis. The four key overarching themes were the importance of:

- Organisational structures (the way in which institutions organise their resits and resit strategy)
- Staff engagement (broad staff engagement with resits)
- Student engagement (broad student engagement with resits)
- Qualifications and exams

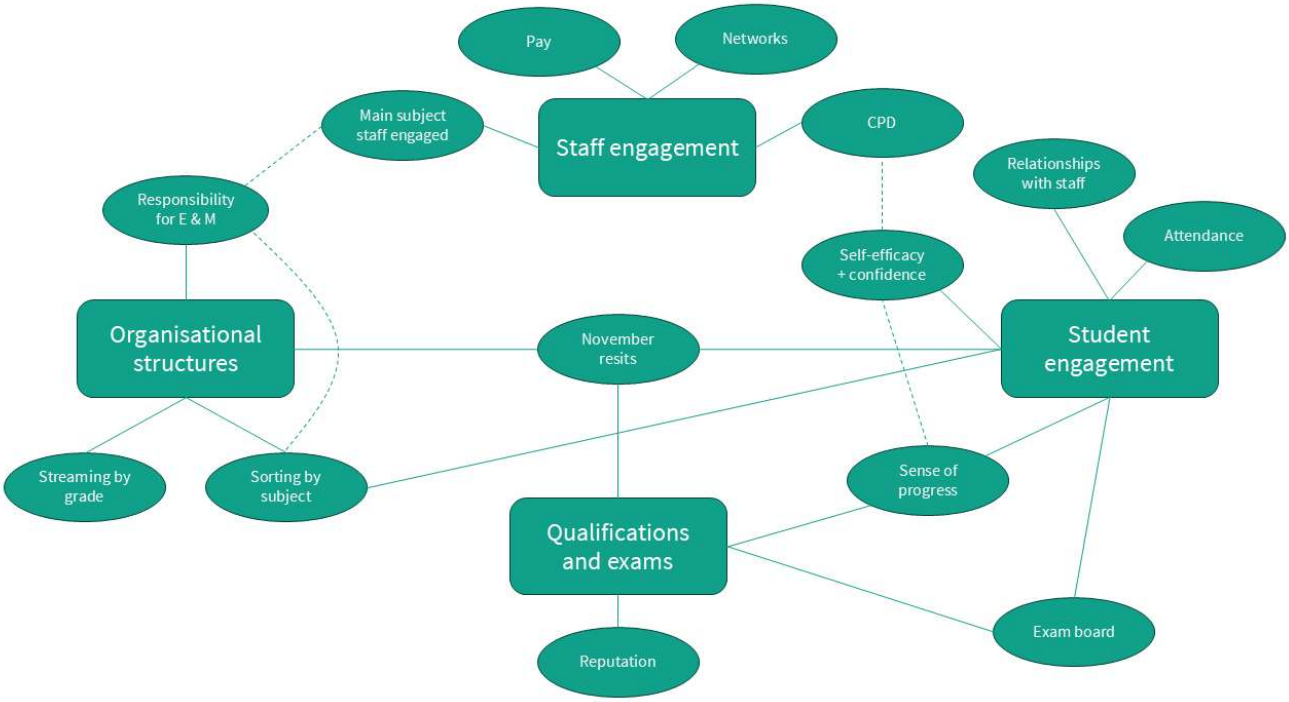
Figure 27 shows the relationships between these four key themes and a range of sub-themes including:

- Responsibility for English and maths

- Streaming by grade
- Sorting by subject
- November resits
- Qualification reputation
- Students' sense of progress
- Exam boards
- Self-efficacy[15] and confidence
- Relationships with staff
- Attendance
- Staff CPD
- Staff networks
- Staff pay
- Engagement of main subject staff

Over the following sections, we will discuss each theme in-depth along with their related sub-themes. Interestingly, while the themes and sub-themes that emerged were consistent with the discussion points raised, some sub-themes emerged more naturally reflecting the semi-structured nature of the roundtable (for instance, the sub-themes on teacher pay, student self-efficacy, student sense of progress and exam boards).

Figure 27. Thematic map of resits roundtable discussion (solid lines are linkages between themes and sub-themes while dashed lines are links between sub-themes)



[15] Self-efficacy is the belief students have that they are capable of achieving success in a given area. It has been strongly linked to achievement in and engagement with the education system.

Student engagement theme

We start with the student engagement theme because this is the theme with the greatest number of linkages to other themes and sub-themes. When we refer to student engagement, we are referring to students' underlying motivation for engagement with resits.

The link between attendance and engagement

Interestingly, while attendance came up a number of times in the discussion and was referred to as one of the toughest challenges for colleges, it was widely accepted that attendance challenges were a function of underlying student engagement and motivation issues. This is highlighted nicely in the following quote:

> *"It seems to me, relatively easy to crack the attendance problem, but much harder to crack the engagement problem. You can have students sat in a class, but if they still don't want to engage with the content, they're not going to make progress."*
>
> - Christine (Industry Body or Policy Representative)

The importance of early relationship-building

Across the roundtable participants, it was clear that good-performing institutions put a strong focus on building student engagement and motivation early on in the year.

> *"One common feature [of good performing providers] was very early work in the academic year on motivation and engagement."*
>
> - James (Industry Body or Policy Representative)

Indeed, another industry body representative highlighted that many of the practices undertaken by high-performing providers are focused on building strong relationships with students which helps to foster a positive learning environment.

> *"They're [the students] coming into these, you know, often large institutions and feeling quite isolated. And I think a lot of the things that people have described are effective because they support students to build effective relationships with their teachers, within their departments, with groups of other students, and all of those help to give them a sense of belonging that then supports their achievement."*
>
> - Amy (Industry Body or Policy Representative)

However, it was also acknowledged that spending time at the start of the academic year on relationship-building activities comes at a cost in the sense that the teacher could have been spending that time on important subject matter content. This concern is exacerbated by the fact

that the 16 to 19 academic year is often shorter that the academic year in secondary school (with a shorter summer term) so teachers already feel they do not have enough time to cover all of the content. Nonetheless, as was made clear in the discussion and across previous research, relationships and engagement are fundamental pre-cursors to learning.[16]

Students' sense of progress

A key sub-theme revolved around helping foster a culture of progress within resit classrooms. This was seen as particularly important for keeping students motivated and engaged and for avoiding negative "failure" rhetoric and culture.

Tracey, a college representative, talked about the considerable effort that their college puts in to celebrating progress and trying to shift students into a progress mindset. However, Tracey argued that this is made challenging by the educational beliefs students have developed through school.

> *"We really value and try to celebrate progress, but a lot of the challenge is the language that comes from school… they come to us with the belief that that nothing except a Grade 4 is acceptable."*
>
> *"I just feel like I'm banging my head against a bit of a brick wall with that because it's built into their educational beliefs, so they believe they are consistently failing, even though we're banging the drum of progress."*
>
> - Tracey (Provider Representative)

Relatedly, institutions also actively enter students into qualifications with grading structures that demonstrate progress. Ben, a college representative, talked about how much students value being able to see measurable progress which is something that a multi-graded GCSE qualification offers that a pass/fail FSQ qualification does not.

> *"Actually, one of the things that surprised me, talking to our teachers, is the extent to which students do recognise and value progressing from a one to a two or a two to a three."*
>
> *"For students, they do value the progress so enabling them to see they're progressing towards the GCSE in an easy and transparent way is actually really, really helpful."*
>
> - Ben (Provider Representative)

This was reinforced by industry body representative James who stated that many providers choose to enter students onto a GCSE (regardless of whether they achieved a grade 3 or lower) as part of their strategy to *"value progress and boost students' confidence"*. The pass or fail nature of FSQs was also brought up as a key barrier to adopting FSQs by several other members of the roundtable. For instance, Jane - a college representative – said:

[16] Wentzel, 'Students' Relationships with Teachers as Motivational Contexts'.

"We've not seen enough evidence that success rates on functional school skills is worth it for the fact that we then have to have a whole different teaching style and experience. And it's, it's that pass or fail ethos that really doesn't sit well with our learners."

- Jane (Provider Representative)

Students' self-efficacy and confidence

Another key sub-theme, closely related to students' sense of progress, is students' self-efficacy and confidence. This was a topic that was raised several times and participants discussed the inextricable links between student self-efficacy, confidence and student engagement.

Several participants talked about how students often enter college with major self-image and self-efficacy problems, stemming from their previous experiences with the education system. Adam, a college and policy representative, argued that enhancing student self-efficacy is one of the key benefits of the resit policy and of the general FE college approach to 16 to 19 education.

"But one of the reasons… why this particular policy [the resit policy] is really strong, it's to do with their self-efficacy. When they come to us, many of them haven't done well at school and have other reasons why life is difficult."

"So I think that thing about self-efficacy is really, really important. It's about them learning. They come with a kind of learned helplessness about English and maths. If we could change that in terms of English and maths, it changes it in terms of lots of other things in their lives, and that is the power that FE's got that's quite unique."

- Adam (Provider and Industry Body or Policy Representative)

Jane talked about the fear of failure, maths anxiety and generally low levels of confidence that resitting students leave schools with. Jane argued that more work could be done at the school-level to better prepare students for resits and to mitigate these confidence and anxiety issues.

"Because they set up the maths anxiety that comes to us, they set up the worry of failing, all of that sort of stuff, and I think I'm trying to start at a point where, yes, we have to cancel all of that. But you know, there could be far more done with them [schools] as well."

- Jane (Provider Representative)

When discussing these confidence issues, some participants suggested that more could be done within teacher CPD to provide teachers with evidence-based strategies for supporting the learning of students who have had negative experiences with education in the past. For instance, Ian – a college representative – talked about how their college supports staff in learning about trauma-informed approaches to teaching and knowledge of SEND. This was seen as a positive move by other participants.

"What we've done… is focused our CPD less around the subject with the English and maths teams and more about trauma-informed teaching and knowledge of SEND."

- Ian (Provider Representative)

Qualifications and exams theme

Next, we turn to the qualification and exams theme, which focuses on the choices institutions make as to the qualifications students enter for and the exams they sit. This theme has close links with student engagement through the exam board, students' sense of progress and November resits sub-themes.

GCSEs vs FSQs – Progress and reputation

As we discussed earlier, the ability to demonstrate progress was one of the primary drivers of institutions' decisions to overwhelmingly use GCSEs over FSQs.

Additionally, institutions also tend to select GCSEs because they are better recognised and have greater perceived value to a range of stakeholders. This is something that has been brought up many times in the past[17] and was evident in our quantitative analysis. Ben – a college representative – argues this is the overarching reason his college uses GCSEs.

"We're pretty much all GCSEs for a number of reasons. Overall, it is the qualification that carries the most weight with students, with employers, with universities."

- Ben (Provider Representative)

Exam boards

Exam boards are another key area in the qualifications and exam decision-making at colleges. There are several different exam boards for both GCSE English language and GCSE maths and different colleges tend to use different exam boards. As these exam boards vary in the content and structure of their GCSEs, students on different exam boards will have different experiences.

In the roundtable, participants discussed the idea of entering students with the *same* exam board they sat their original GCSE with to try and boost student engagement and results. Ben describes how his college allows students to do this for the November resits:

"One thing particularly we found works … is that they're [students] given the opportunity to enter with the awarding body, the exam board, that they sat with in their school. So we don't do that for the Summer entry point, but for November, we do. And I think we found that to be quite impactful."

- Ben (Provider Representative)

[17] Davies et al., 'A New Mathematics GCSE Curriculum for Post-16 Resit Students: Final Report'; Association of Colleges, 'AoC English and Maths Survey January 2022'.

Tracey, another college representative, spoke about how her college had also successfully trialled such an approach but warned others about the additional administrative and logistical burdens this places on the college:

> *"We also tried the sticking with the same exam board for our learners last year and it was very successful. But again, in terms of staffing, it's proved quite challenging. So it's just become a little bit of a logistical nightmare. But really, the students seem to get on much better with that much more quickly."*
>
> - Tracey (Provider Representative)

November resits

Another key decision colleges' make is whether to enter a student for the November resits. Interestingly, participants had quite varied approaches to November resits. Some participants' colleges enter all their grade 3's while others enter no or very few students.

One key message that came through was around student engagement post-November resits. Participants shared how students often "switch off" and stop engaging with resit classes if they have sat a November resit and are awaiting the results. For instance, Tracey described the "attendance headache" her college experiences following the November resits:

> *"We also find attendance is such a challenge after November resit… it's almost that belief of, Oh well, I've sat the exam, I've passed it. I don't need to come anymore, you know? And you're like, Oh my God. So that that's another really big headache to attendance."*
>
> - Tracey (Provider Representative)

Similarly, Jane described this motivational and attendance issue as the primary reason her college will be putting no students on November resits next year:

> *"For the first time this coming year, I'm not doing any November resits in house."*
>
> *"We have actually lower results in the summer following failure at November resits because they switch off, they think they've done, we lose all of that teaching time, which is the bulk of our teaching time, and it's just caused too many problems."*
>
> - Jane (Provider Representative)

These themes align well with our quantitative findings that a selective approach to November resits is more supportive of long-run achievement and progress.

Organisational structures theme

Our third theme focuses on institutions' organisational structure and approach to resits. A significant component of this theme revolves around the logistical challenges that resits impose.

For instance, colleges' are often constrained in their ability to provide November resits because of the proportion of their students affected and the subsequent logistical challenges with organising a November resit (see the quote from Tracey below).

> *"GCSE resit numbers now are so high that we're really struggling logistically to fit a November resit in and to afford a November resit."*
>
> - Tracey (Provider Representative)

Streaming by grade

One approach that was discussed was streaming students by their prior grade in English or maths. Across education research more broadly, there is mixed evidence on the efficacy of streaming by ability. Some proponents argue streaming is beneficial because it groups students with similar levels of ability and better enables teachers to target teaching at the right level and on the right topics.[18] On the other hand, research has shown that streaming disproportionately benefits higher attaining learners, widening educational inequalities.[19]

In the context of English and maths resits, several roundtable participants were less than optimistic and pointed to the considerable logistical challenges associated with streaming. On streaming, Jane said:

> *"Streaming – it was an absolute palaver. And actually, we didn't get any improved outcomes from that."*
>
> *"It [streaming] just didn't make enough of a difference for all of the rest of the palaver it caused us with attitudes, behaviours, attendance and all that sort of thing"*
>
> - Jane (Provider Representative)

Jane summarised that it works better to keep students within their subject area rather than streaming them on targeted grades.

The logistical challenges associated with streaming were reinforced by Ben who stated:

> *"We don't stream, largely for timetabling reasons. It would be another element of complexity we probably just couldn't do."*
>
> - Ben (Provider Representative)

Sorting by subject

[18] The following paper provides a good summary of the arguments for and against streaming. Sukhnandan and Lee, 'Streaming, Setting and Grouping by Ability: A Review of the Literature'.
[19] EEF, 'EEF Blog: Setting and Streaming in Schools - What Does the Evidence Say?'

Instead of sorting students by grade, a very popular approach amongst college participants was to sort students by their main (vocational) subject area (i.e., engineering or health). This approach was described as efficient logistically but also as beneficial for student engagement and contextualised teaching.

The logistical benefits of sorting students by subject area was summarised nicely by Ben whose college embeds their English and maths staff within the vocational departments themselves:

> *"So, we're organised by faculties, so by subject areas, and the English and maths teachers sit within those faculties"*
>
> *"One [of the benefits] is around timetabling. So, when faculties are building up their timetable, they start with English and maths and build the main study programme around that. So that, you know, maths doesn't end up at 3:30 on a Friday afternoon as a sort of standalone thing. It's [English and maths] not an add on - you build a curriculum out from that."*
>
> - Ben (Provider Representative)

Having students sorted by subject area also helps teachers provide more contextualised content and lessons which Ian believes improves students' knowledge and engagement.

> *"When I talk about contextualization, I think it increases people's knowledge of the subject, it increases the engagement in the subject going into the lessons and that trust in the teacher to then get onto the more hard-hitting topics."*
>
> - Ian (Provider Representative)

Responsibility for English and maths

The responsibility within a college for English and maths attainment is closely connected to the sorting by subject area sub-theme. Roundtable participants highlighted the benefits of ensuring that wider groups of staff within the college were responsible for English and maths attainment.

Ben argues that the approach of embedding English and maths within vocational departments leads to greater responsibility and buy in from the vocational departments.

> *"I think the second thing is in order that you get the buy in from the study programme owner (so that the educator who is primarily responsible for the students) who looks at their English and maths attendance, talk to them about it, reiterate the importance of it. It's one of the things they would be* ***measured on*** *rather than having a kind of separate team of English and maths teachers that sit across the one side. You know, it's reinforcing the point - this [English and maths] is one of the most important things they can learn with us."*
>
> - Ben (Provider Representative)

This is a sentiment echoed by Jane whose college embeds English and maths attendance as a key performance metric for the vocational departments.

"They're targeted on English and maths attendance within their own areas. So it's on the personal development reviews for all staff, basically."

"And I think it's the only way we've managed to get buy in from everyone."

- Jane (Provider Representative)

Staff engagement theme

Our final theme focuses on staff engagement. This is an important area to consider, given some of the significant challenges around English and maths staff recruitment and retention in the FE sector particularly.[20]

Engagement of main subject staff

One key component of the staff engagement theme is the engagement of vocational (or main subject) staff with English and maths resits. This is an important area because students spend most of their time with these teachers and if they are not engaged with English or maths, there are likely to be spillovers to the students.

As we have discussed in the previous section, sorting resit students by vocational department and embedding English and maths staff within these departments raises the collective sense of responsibility for English and maths results. It also helps in engaging vocational staff, as earlier quotes have shown.

Jane shared that her college spends a lot of time working with the vocational departments and emphasising the importance of English and maths to vocational staff. Jane's college specifically asks vocational staff to highlight to students when English and maths are being used within their main subject lessons.

"We engage with the vocational department and we talk about when do they use maths or English in their subject area and ask them to call it "maths" and "English"."

"Hardest thing obviously is why do I [the students] need to do this, especially with maths. And we'd be like you do it all the time in all of your subjects but they don't call it maths. And so we work really closely with department areas saying –'please call it the maths in this lesson is'."

- Jane (Provider Representative)

In previous sections, we included quotes from Ben who also stated that their college really emphasises the importance of English and maths to main programme staff.

Teacher pay challenges

[20] Association of Colleges, '2021/22 Staff Vacancies: AoC Survey'.

Teacher pay in the FE sector was brought up on several occasions and was signposted as one of the biggest (if not the biggest) challenge when it comes to staffing for English and maths resits.

For instance, college and policy representative Adam describes the recruitment challenges in the FE sector and argues that teaching English and maths resits is one of the hardest jobs in the education system (because of all the self-efficacy problems students bring with them from school).

> *"My own view is it's a pay issue."*
>
> *"But it's not just the pay, it's the fact that you know, very few teachers are qualified English or maths teachers. They have very often had to learn those things as they've gone along. Recruitment is really, really difficult. It's very unpredictable."*
>
> *"I honestly think it's the hardest job in education [teaching resits]... I can't think of anything more difficult."*
>
> - Adam (Provider and Industry Body or Policy Representative)

All participants echoed the concerns around low teacher pay in the FE sector, including Ian who shared that good teachers often got poached by schools who could pay higher salaries.

> *"I have to concur... about the salary element. The reality is the best English and maths teachers get poached by the secondary schools."*
>
> - Ian (Provider Representative)

Industry body representative James also shared that many colleges are seeing English and maths staff leave the FE sector primarily on the grounds of pay.

> *"And it's just made more challenging by the massive pay differential, which is just getting worse, isn't it? And you know, the stories, we've heard about people leaving, not desperately wanted to leave FE, but leaving simply because of the pay differential. We hear those stories far too often."*
>
> - James (Industry Body or Policy Representative)

Adam stated that in order to solve the English and maths recruitment issues in the FE sector we need to start paying teachers appropriately.

> *"But I just think until we start to say this is the hardest job in education and we need to pay people the right professional rate to do the job well and reward those professional skills and build the expertise to do it really, really well."*
>
> - Adam (Provider and Industry Body or Policy Representative)

It is also worth noting that colleges have also found it difficult to find staff suitably qualified to teach English and maths. In a survey of college staff, DfE found that around a quarter of the staff delivering basic literacy and numeracy qualifications were not qualified to teach in the subjects at

level 2 or above.[21] In comparison, most staff (usually around 90 per cent) teaching vocational qualifications are qualified to teach that subject at level 3 or above.

Staff networks and CPD

One area that could positively impact staff engagement and was discussed at the roundtable was the creation of and interaction with networks. Participants spoke about the strong desire and motivation from English and maths practitioners to learn and deliver the best possible outcomes for their students. Participants spoke about how networks are really important tools to facilitate this learning and improve staff motivation and engagement.

Industry body representative James argued for the importance of small investments in networks and highlighted the value networks for maths have had in the past (including the Centres for Excellence in Mathematics).

> *"Something important in a difficult context actually is very powerful and quite small investments in networks and, you know, partnership building, collaborative work, etcetera, sharing resources, sharing ideas, supporting each other have paid off enormously. Certainly the centres for excellence in maths showed that."*
>
> - James (Industry Body or Policy Representative)

Tracey described her college's efforts to create a network and shared the large volume of positive feedback they have had from staff, teachers and managers. She described participating in network meetings as the "best CPD" for staff.

> *"In ... we've built a network. We're probably about 15 colleges strong now where we regularly, and it really is quite regularly now, meet and it has been the best CPD for myself with other managers, but also for the staff too. There's so much engagement in that, and there's such a buzz in it."*
>
> - Tracey (Provider Representative)

It was evident from the discussion that engaging with these networks was seen as being both useful CPD and a valuable way to keep and increase staff motivation.

Jane described how important CPD is in general to her college and her English and maths staff. However, she shared that while her college found excellent CPD opportunities for maths, they struggled to find good CPD for English. This further highlights the potential for more knowledge sharing amongst English teachers.

[21] Thornton et al., 'College Staff Survey 2018'.

"[CPD is a] big deal for me. Just trying to get my staff engaged in wanting to learn more, do more and progress more, and therefore, be a bit more, you know, motivated for the learners in the first place."

"I'm finding fabulous opportunities for CPD for maths through all the NCETM, maths hubs and all that sort of stuff... but there is very limited support for staff CPD for English that I've been able to find."

- Jane (Provider Representative)

At this point, it is worth reiterating the link between staff CPD and student self-efficacy and confidence. As we mentioned earlier, there was considerable discussion on the low levels of self-efficacy and confidence with which students enter 16 to 19 education. Participants argued that we should be better supporting staff with training and knowledge on teaching students who have had negative experiences with education in the past.

Finally, Adam shared that FE teachers are passionate about learning and improving their teaching through CPD. However, he believes we need more nationally-benchmarked, evidence-based CPD to ensure staff are being put on the right track.

"One of the major things about FE tutors is they are hungry for knowledge. They're desperate to talk to each other and find out better ways of doing things"

"I think what would help is really strong steer from the centre around what does work... Colleagues respond really well to that. They engage really strongly with it and it also means that we're kind of steering them towards things that have got some credibility because the other issue is that obviously we have an awful lot of snake oil."

"Everything from behaviour management systems through to teaching different subjects and I just think that that sense of really strong evidence based verified research is really important."

- Adam (Provider and Industry Body or Policy Representative)

Summary of qualitative findings

We presented a thematic map (Figure 27) that summarise the key themes that emerged from our roundtable discussion on effective approaches to resits. The four major themes revolved around

- Student engagement and motivation
- Staff engagement and motivation
- Qualifications and exams
- Organisational structures

There are many links between these themes and we captured these in our analysis. For instance, decisions around qualifications (entering students for GCSEs or FSQs) and organisational structures (how classes are sorted and streamed) have significant impacts on student engagement and motivation. Below, we summarise our key findings.

Findings

Organisational structures

- Streaming students by grade was found to be logistically complicated and, in some cases, had negative impacts on student engagement.
- In contrast, colleges described the benefits in terms of student engagement, motivation and logistics from sorting resit students by their main subject area.
- Embedding English and maths within main subject departments was seen to create a collective responsibility for English and maths attainment across the college. This led to greater collaboration between English and maths teacher and main subject staff.
    - Part of this approach includes making English and maths attendance and attainment a formal performance metric for main subject staff as well.

Qualifications and exams

- GCSEs were preferred over FSQs for their reputation in the sector and recognition by a wide range of stakeholders.
- GCSEs were also preferred for their ability to demonstrate progress to students and many had an aversion to the binary pass/fail nature of FSQs.
- A range of strategies for November resits were used. All approaches were selective in some capacity or involved no students entering November resits.
- A key challenge with November resits is the large drop in student engagement following the November resit cycle.
- Resitting with the same exam board was seen to help students with their resits.

Student engagement and motivation

- Student engagement and motivation is the pre-cursor to many attendance problems that colleges frequently face.
- Many students enter 16 to 19 education feeling demotivated and bring past negative experiences with English or maths or both.
    - Staff in colleges are often dealing with anxiety, fear of failure and low levels of confidence and self-efficacy that stem from experiences in school.
    - It was suggested that more needs to be done in schools to get these students into a more positive mindset for their 16 to 19 education.
- It is important to put a strong focus on building positive relationships between students and staff at the beginning of the resit journey.
- Students value being able to see their progress and achieving a sense of progress helps build student confidence and engagement.

Staff engagement and motivation

- Pay is one of the biggest challenges to staff recruitment and retention for English and maths teachers in colleges.
- Staff are often highly motivated and have a strong desire to learn and support their students in making progress with English and maths.

- Staff strongly value networks where they can share best practice, build relationships and share their experiences.
- There should be more evidence-based CPD on how to support learners with negative past experiences of education (for instance, trauma-informed teaching approaches).
- CPD for maths is high-quality and accessible while good CPD for English remains relatively scarce.
- Fostering engagement with main subject staff is critical for ensuring students consistently see and hear about the value of English and maths.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

In this report, we have examined the drivers of resit success in England. The resit policy has been in place since 2014 and was designed to raise the literacy and numeracy skills of young people to ensure they are well equipped to succeed in life. It is a wide-reaching policy, impacting almost a third of all students in England. Despite the importance of literacy and numeracy for life outcomes, and the widespread nature of the resit policy, there has been relatively little work examining the drivers of success in resits across the country. Filling this evidence gap is important now more than ever, with the ongoing Curriculum and Assessment Review focussing explicitly on post-16 English and maths.

In this report, we aimed to provide insights into where and why the resit policy has worked well (and where it has not), and to provide recommendations for government and the sector more widely. In the quantitative section of this report, we looked at the individual and institutional factors that are correlated with resit success. In the qualitative section, we drew insights from a roundtable discussion made up of representatives from top-performing institutions, industry bodies and policy-making.

Many findings emerged and these have been summarised in full at the end of each section in this report. We summarise the key findings here and present recommendations in the following section.

We found that individual student demographics strongly predict resit performance and we uncovered significant attainment gaps across gender, ethnicity and disadvantaged status. Male students perform significantly better on maths resits and female students perform better on English resits. However, the gender gap is considerably larger in English than in maths. Likewise, disadvantaged students make significantly less progress than their non-disadvantaged peers, even after controlling for prior attainment and institutional characteristics. This disadvantage gap is also larger in English than in maths. In terms of ethnicity, White British students are the lowest achieving group in both English and maths. When we considered SEND, we found no gaps in attainment for students with SEND once we have accounted for prior attainment.

Prior attainment, both in the resit subject and more broadly, was one of the strongest predictors of resit performance. However, broader KS4 prior attainment was more predictive of performance in English than in maths while prior attainment in the resit subject was significantly more important for maths than English. In addition, students taking higher level qualifications (outside their resits) perform significantly better on their resits, particularly in English. These results imply a stronger connection between broader attainment and English performance than broader attainment and maths performance.

One of the key challenges with delivering resits is getting (and keeping) students motivated and engaged with the learning. This was a key theme throughout the roundtable discussion and participants shared strategies that included; spending more time relationship-building at the start of the year, sorting students into classes based on their main subject area (i.e., engineering or health) and having a strong institutional focus on resits. Our quantitative analysis also showed

that attendance issues in school at the age of 15 have negative spillovers on to attainment in resits.

When considering performance by institution, we found that institution value-added explained relatively little of the overall variation in resit progress. There was, however, more variability across institutions for English, suggesting there is more scope here for knowledge-sharing between institutions. We also found that institutions were generally consistent in their resit performance over time and across subjects. Geographically, there was a cluster of top-performing institutions in the North West for both English and maths. Through the roundtable discussion, we discovered that there is a large network of English and maths leaders and staff in the North West and this was network was praised for being some of the best CPD for English and maths teachers.

On staffing issues more generally, our qualitative findings suggest that teacher pay, teacher qualification levels and teacher retention continue to be huge challenges for many colleges. College representatives also expressed a desire for more best-practice- and knowledge-sharing networks, particularly for English where less currently exist.

Finally, we made some important findings with respect to two of the more significant operational decisions institutions make – what qualifications to enter students for (i.e., GCSEs or FSQs) and whether to enter students onto November resits.

On qualifications, we found that GCSEs were strongly preferred over a level 2 FSQ or stepping stone qualifications. This preference for GCSEs has strengthened over time and the use of level 2 FSQ was less than 5 per cent. Our quantitative results showed students who were entered into GCSEs initially (regardless of their prior attainment) achieved more progress throughout their 16-19 study. Our qualitative results highlighted that both staff and students prefer GCSEs over FSQs because they are multi-graded (rather than a pass or fail) and allow students to better observe progress. In addition, college representatives also argued that GCSEs were favoured because they were more widely known and understood among parents, employers and students.

On November resits, we found mixed results. On the one hand, being entered for a November resit significantly improves a student's progress on average. This is likely due, in-part, to students who are closest to the margin being put on November resits more often than other students. In contrast, institutions that enter a larger proportion of students onto November resits (after accounting for prior attainment) have lower resit progress on average. This aligns with the roundtable discussion where college representatives shared that entering students onto November resits often resulted in declines in motivation and attendance following the November exams. All together, these results suggest that adopting a selective approach to November resits could be beneficial for resit students and institution-wide progress.

In summary, it is unsurprising that the resit policy is so often debated. The benefits of securing fundamental numeracy and literacy skills are clear, but so is the damage to motivation for students who feel they are stuck on the resit treadmill. Whilst there is still a need for more research on the overall impact of the resit policy, our analysis shows that that there is plenty of room for improvement within the current policy.

In light of our findings, we have devised a set of recommendations. These have been split into three categories: recommendations for policymakers and industry bodies, recommendations for providers and recommendations for research.

Recommendations for policymakers

1. The government needs to act to close the resit attainment gap faced by disadvantaged students. We reiterate our previous call for a 16 to 19 student premium to help address these educational inequalities and widening gaps between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students.[22] With disadvantaged students overrepresented in FE colleges, this funding would also provide greater resources to those institutions most likely to be struggling with resit teacher recruitment and retention.

2. If alternatives to GCSEs are to be developed (for example, a more modular and contextualised GCSE or a tailored GCSE stepping stone qualification)[23], the government should ensure grading structures allow students to show and see progress. Moreover, more widely, policy should focus on enabling students to show what they can do and demonstrate progress.

3. The government should consider reforming the 16 to 19 accountability measure for English and maths progress by incorporating wider key stage 4 attainment. Our results show that prior attainment in other key stage 4 subjects strongly predicts resit performance, particularly for English. Accounting for this prior attainment in the English and maths progress measure would improve the measure's ability to capture institutional effectiveness in delivering resits.

Recommendations for providers

1. When considering decisions regarding resit pathways and qualifications, providers should focus on student's broader key stage 4 attainment for English, and focus on their maths prior attainment for maths. Our results show that for English, average key stage 4 results across all subjects matters more than the actual prior GCSE English grade. We find the opposite for maths, where the prior GCSE grade matters the most.

2. Providers should consider the best approaches for embedding English and maths within subject departments. For example, having English and maths teachers sitting within subject departments rather than a separate English and maths department, or using students' main subject area to sort them into classes for resits. This should increase buy-in and accountability for all staff and put more of an institutional focus on resit outcomes.

[22] Hunt, 'Closing the Forgotten Gap: Implementing a 16-19 Student Premium'.
[23] Get Further, 'Curriculum and Assessment Review Interim Report - Our Response'; MEI, 'Proposal for a New Qualification to Tackle GCSE Maths Resit Failure'.

3. Providers should adopt a selective approach to November resits, targeted only at the students most likely to secure a grade 4. Less selective approaches could lower overall results, and could have a negative impact on engagement and attendance.

4. Where possible, providers should spend the first part of term focussing on building positive relationships between students and staff. While this is already being done to an extent, it is worth emphasising the importance of doing this for resit students who may have had negative experiences with English or maths in the past.

5. Look to create and expand knowledge sharing opportunities for English and maths teachers. Our research has highlighted the benefits of college-run networks for English and maths teachers.

Recommendations for research

1. Further research should consider the key drivers of student motivation and engagement for resits and test potential interventions. This is one of the biggest challenges for institutions.

2. Look to create more evidence-based CPD opportunities, particularly for English where there are less opportunities currently. Consider evaluating a pilot of regional networks for English and maths teachers in the 16 to 19 phase.

3. Work with the North West to enhance our understanding of good practice for resit delivery. Our results show there are significant pockets of strong performance in the North West and there is suggestive evidence that this could be due to a strong network of English and maths practitioners.

4. More research is needed on the efficacy of the resit policy, including the impacts of taking resits on student progression, attainment and labour market outcomes.

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Annex

Table A1. Full regression results for multilevel value-added modelling

Variable	English			Maths		
	Ind	Inst	choices	Ind2	Inst3	choices4
Intercept	2.086***	2.157***	1.974***	0.790***	0.959***	1.076***
	(0.036)	(0.550)	(0.526)	(0.025)	(0.367)	(0.353)
Base points in resit subject	0.254***	0.255***	0.049***	0.634***	0.634***	0.441***
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.007)
KS4 pts std.	0.504***	0.498***	0.373***	0.290***	0.283***	0.204***
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Disadvantaged	-0.203***	-0.202***	-0.176***	-0.127***	-0.126***	-0.109***
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.012)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.008)
SEND	-0.012	-0.011	0.028**	-0.030***	-0.030***	-0.009
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Male	-0.058***	-0.054***	-0.034***	0.227***	0.230***	0.226***
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.012)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Asian or Asian British	0.248***	0.226***	0.205***	0.235***	0.220***	0.204***
	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.022)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.015)
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African	0.218***	0.199***	0.180***	0.094***	0.084***	0.064***
	(0.028)	(0.029)	(0.027)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.017)
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	0.044	0.038	0.027	0.005	-0.000	-0.005
	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.026)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.017)
Other ethnic group	0.101**	0.084**	0.080**	0.217***	0.206***	0.207***
	(0.042)	(0.042)	(0.040)	(0.030)	(0.030)	(0.029)
Unauthorised absence (5 days)	-0.029***	-0.029***	-0.025***	-0.021***	-0.021***	-0.018***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Authorised absence (5 days)	-0.002***	-0.002***	-0.002***	-0.004***	-0.004***	-0.003***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Resit cohort characteristics						
Average base points resit subject		0.133	0.231		0.000	-0.002
		(0.182)	(0.175)		(0.068)	(0.064)
Average KS4 pts (std)		-0.051	-0.061		0.129	0.161
		(0.125)	(0.120)		(0.107)	(0.103)
Average disadvantaged		-0.513*	-0.411		0.148	0.270
		(0.302)	(0.290)		(0.219)	(0.211)
Average SEND		0.012	0.027		0.259	0.147

	(0.269)	(0.255)	(0.203)	(0.192)
Average male	-0.628**	-0.480*	-0.343*	-0.215
	(0.272)	(0.261)	(0.186)	(0.176)
Average Asian	0.271**	0.222*	0.210**	0.177**
	(0.122)	(0.119)	(0.089)	(0.084)
Average Black	0.091	0.058	-0.025	-0.054
	(0.210)	(0.202)	(0.130)	(0.123)
Average other ethnicity	-0.010	-0.058	0.530	0.480
	(0.441)	(0.421)	(0.351)	(0.331)
Average mixed	0.026	-0.098	0.130	0.148
	(0.462)	(0.440)	(0.289)	(0.273)
Average unauthorised absence	-0.008	-0.008	-0.005	-0.013
	(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.011)	(0.011)
Average authorised absence	0.009	0.004	-0.006	-0.007
	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.004)
Log (resit cohort size)	-0.139***	-0.127***	-0.079**	-0.062*
	(0.046)	(0.044)	(0.038)	(0.035)
Institution characteristics				
School sixth form	0.173	-0.026	0.167*	0.006
	(0.124)	(0.124)	(0.092)	(0.089)
Sixth form college	0.292***	0.211**	0.281***	0.215***
	(0.091)	(0.089)	(0.069)	(0.066)
Log (institution size)	0.100**	0.103**	0.051	0.038
	(0.045)	(0.043)	(0.038)	(0.036)
Average KS4 pts (std)	-0.178	-0.167	-0.292*	-0.319**
	(0.241)	(0.231)	(0.159)	(0.150)
Proportion level 3 aims	0.143	0.068	-0.213	-0.205
	(0.192)	(0.184)	(0.145)	(0.139)
Proportion level 3 resit subject aims	-4.312	-4.591*	2.658***	2.846***
	(2.672)	(2.556)	(0.693)	(0.658)
Proportion A level aims	0.087	0.181	0.106	0.055
	(0.300)	(0.286)	(0.155)	(0.147)
Proportion male	-0.048	-0.029	0.099	-0.010
	(0.334)	(0.318)	(0.222)	(0.210)
Proportion disadvantaged	0.443	0.424	-0.825***	-0.869***
	(0.378)	(0.361)	(0.285)	(0.270)

Proportion SEND		-0.691	-0.554		-1.171***	-0.852**
		(0.521)	(0.496)		(0.403)	(0.382)
Proportion resit eligible		-0.438	-0.398		0.143	0.018
		(0.519)	(0.496)		(0.358)	(0.339)
Individual choices						
Level 3 study			0.337***			0.141***
			(0.025)			(0.015)
Level 2 study			0.223***			0.023**
			(0.014)			(0.010)
GCSE entered			0.465***			0.396***
			(0.021)			(0.014)
Level 2 FSQ entered			0.200***			-0.197***
			(0.040)			(0.034)
Non-compliant			-0.904***			-0.658***
			(0.029)			(0.020)
November resit			0.595***			0.629***
			(0.017)			(0.012)
Institution-wide choices						
Proportion non-compliant			0.024			0.224
			(0.410)			(0.276)
Proportion November resit			-0.259***			-0.305***
			(0.074)			(0.056)
Proportion GCSE			-0.397***			-0.117
			(0.131)			(0.087)
Proportion level 2 FSQ			-0.612**			0.032
			(0.267)			(0.174)
Num Obs.	49451	49451	49451	72661	72661	72661
R2 Marg.	0.239	0.260	0.328	0.335	0.377	0.436
R2 Cond.	0.280	0.279	0.345	0.401	0.403	0.459

DfE point score measures for English and maths progress

The point score measure for the 2021/22 cohort was under a slightly different accounting system than the 2015/16 and 2016/17 cohorts. In particular, DfE made changes to the points awarded to FSQs and increased the number of spine points at the bottom of the distribution. The tables below show the two systems.

Table A2. Point conversions for the 2015/16 and 2016/17 cohorts. (Source = 16-18 Accountability Measures: Technical Guide)

Points awarded	Grade achieved					
	Reformed GCSEs (9-1)	Legacy GCSEs (A*-G)	Functional skills	Free standing maths	ESOL	AQA use of maths
8	9	A*				
7.7	8					
7	7	A				
6.3	6					
6		B				
5.7	5					
5	4	C				
4	3	D	L2	L2 (all grades)	L2 (all grades)	A*/A/B/C
3	2	E				
2.5			L1	L1 (A-C)	L1 (D/M)	D/E
2		F				
1.7				L1 (D)		
1.5					L1 (pass)	
1	1	G				G
0.8				L1 (E)		
0.4			Entry Level	Entry Level	Entry Level	
0	Fail	Fail	Fail	Fail	Fail	Fail

Table A3. Point conversions for the 2021/22 cohort. (Source = [16-18 accountability measures technical guidance - Feb 2025])

Points awarded	9-1 GCSEs	Legacy GCSEs	Functional Skills	Free Standing maths	ESOL	AQA use of maths
9	9					
8.5		A*				
8	8					
7	7	A				
6	6					
5.5		B				
5	5					
4	4	C				
3.5			L2			
3	3	D		L2 (all grades)	L2 (all grades)	A*/A/B/C
2	2	E	L1			
1.75				L1 (A-C)	L1 (D/M)	D/E
1.5		F				F
1.25				L1 (D)	L1 (pass)	
1	1	G				G
0.8				L1 (E)		
0.75			EL 3		EL 3	
0.5			EL 2		EL 2	
0.25			EL 1		EL 1	