What is the impact of resitting at A-level?

Summary

- Based on AQA data, more than half of A-level candidates resit at least one of their units, with almost a quarter of all candidates resitting two or more units.
- The strongest candidates, achieving the best grades, tend to resit the fewest units.
- Generally only the first resit of a given unit will improve results; multiple resits of the same unit produce diminishing improvement.
- Candidates achieving the middle grades – B, C, and D – benefit most from resitting units.
- If resitting is ignored and just the first unit sittings considered, then the overall percentage of grade As would reduce by 4.90% from 24.47% to 19.57%. However, changes to the resit policy would change candidate and teacher behaviour, so it is impossible to model precisely the likely impact of changes with any certainty.

The rate of resitting at A-level

Presently, A-level candidates may sit each unit as many times as they wish and use their best result towards their final grade. This has led to concern that a 'resit culture' has developed in which students have become complacent about opportunities to resit and are wasting time, which could otherwise be spent broadening their learning, on resitting exams as many times as it takes to achieve their desired grade (Poon Scott, 2010). Our research, based on AQA data, shows that 43% of A-level candidates resit at least one of their units (an A-level typically consists of 4 or 6 units), with almost a quarter resitting two or more units. The strongest candidates, achieving the best grades, tend to resit the fewest units. We also know that, typically, only the first resit of a given unit will improve a candidate's results; multiple resits of the same unit are typically less successful in improving grades. While multiple resits are less common, there are examples of extreme resitting behaviour which undermine public confidence in A-level standards.

Figure 1 categorises entries to AQA's June 2011 A-levels from 18-year-olds according to the number of individual units the candidate resat and shows their grading outcomes as cumulative percentages. The relationship between resitting behaviour and performance is clear: the higher the achievement of a group of candidates, the fewer units they resat. The mean prior attainment at GCSE varied by less than 1/3 of a grade across all of the groups and did not relate consistently to the number of units resat, so the differences don't appear to be explained by general ability.

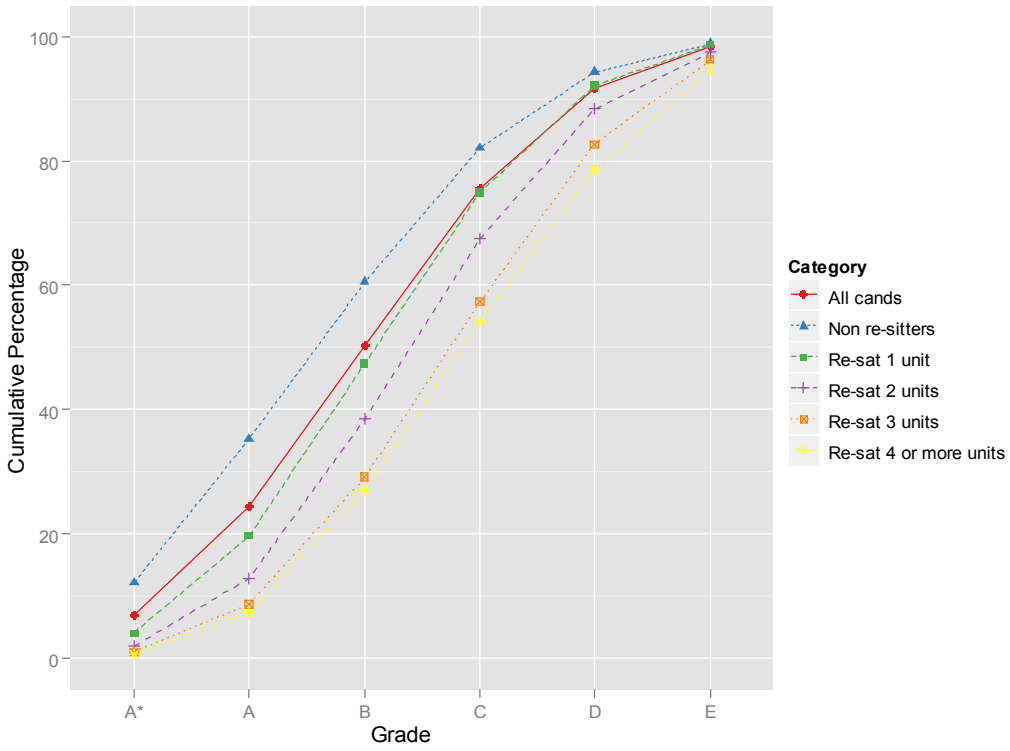

Figure 1: Grading outcomes for entries categorised according to the number of individual units resat (n = 299,038).

Figure 2 shows, for each category of resitter, the improvement made to grades based on first takes when their resits are included. It is worth noting that candidates may have entered for some units before they were ready, knowing that they would retake them at a later date; so in these cases, the resit outcome may genuinely better reflect the ability of candidates than the first take.

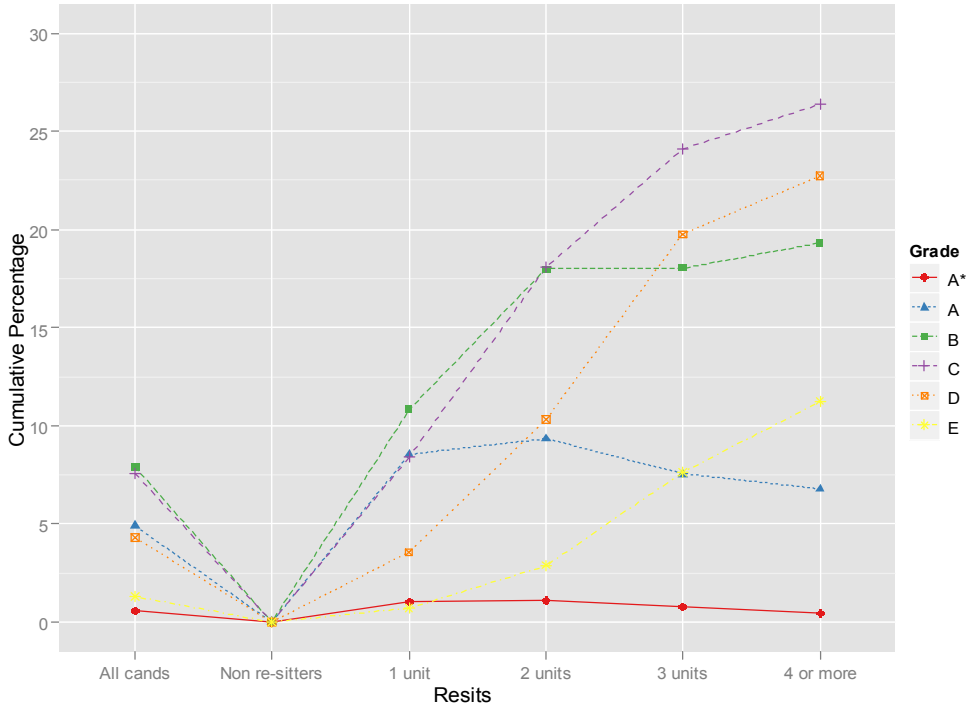

Figure 2. The improvement made to grades by resitting units categorised according to the number of individual units resat (n = 299,038).

Perhaps the most insightful way to look at this data is in terms of the lines representing grades. The challenge in obtaining an A* lies more in obtaining 90% of the maximum uniform marks across the A2 units than in obtaining 80% of the uniform marks overall (see *The A* at A-level* in the CERP A-level reform series). Most candidates will enter A2 units in the second year of a two-year course of study so there are fewer opportunities to resit A2 units than there are AS units – in some cases none. Hence, the number of candidates who achieved an A* by resitting is tiny and has little impact on the overall number of candidates achieving an A*.

The other grades behave differently, because both AS and A2 units contribute to them, but they do not all behave in the same way. The increase at grade A is around 8% for candidates resitting 1, 2, 3, and 4 or more units. For grades B, C, D, and E, the increase in candidates at each grade increases with the number of units resat, although there are diminishing returns. It is the candidates achieving the middle grades, B, C, and D, who benefit most from resitting units. This could be explained in two ways. It is possible that they are routinely sitting units early and then retaking them when they are better prepared. Alternatively, they could be targeting the units on which they have underperformed or were bordering on a higher grade the first time round.

The effect of removing the impact of resitting on the grade distribution is shown in the 'all candidates' plot in Figure 1 and below in Table 1. If resat units are ignored and just the first unit sittings are considered then the overall grade A rates would have been 19.57% and 97.14%, a decrease of 4.90% at grade A.

Table 1: The improvement made to grades by resitting units categorised according to the number of individual units resat

All candidate entry	A*	A	B	C	D	E
299,038	0.58	4.90	7.90	7.54	4.32	1.29

In summary, this analysis shows that resitting allows candidates to achieve higher grades and removing the ability to resit might have a significant effect on the proportion of candidates achieving particular grades, particularly at B and C. However, changes to the resit rule would naturally lead to changes in the behaviour of candidates and teachers, so it is impossible to model the likely impact with any certainty.

An analysis of the data only reveals so much. More insight into whether the current system is fair and the extent to which it corrupts the meaning of achievement at A-level requires a more theoretical approach (see *Should the best mark count when resitting at A-level?* in the CERP A-level reform series). Moreover, the wash back on teaching and learning of changes to the resit rule on learning is paramount; for example, reduced resits could lead to increased teaching time.

Bibliography

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