EARLY & MULTIPLE GCSE ENTRY: PATTERNS OVER TIME

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This Data Insight examines patterns of early entry for various subjects over time, detailing high levels of multiple entry for mathematics subjects. It outlines analysis of General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) data, extracted from the Welsh Examinations Database and conducted by the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data (WISERD) Education Data Lab, working in collaboration with ADR Wales.

What we did

We used administrative data covering 2006 – 2019, which details all formal examinations sat by pupils in Wales. This was used to identify: full-course GCSE examinations; which stage of academic career each GCSE was entered; and final grade awarded for each GCSE.

We identified all GCSEs examinations taken prior to the end of Year 11, for pupils who finished Year 11 between 2006 and 2018, inclusive. We distinguished between pupils who were entered for a subject once and on-time, once and early, and those who were entered multiple times. Exams were considered to have been sat early if a grade was awarded prior to the last two terms of Year 11. We used this data to track patterns of early and multiple GCSE entry over time.

Background

Prior to recent changes, GCSE entry practices in Wales have meant that many pupils may have sat their GCSE examinations, and thereby certified, before the traditional end-of-Year-11 point of their academic career. Not only will some pupils have experienced early entry, some will have been entered multiple times in an attempt to maximise the final grade awarded. Influences on the practice of early and multiple entry have been shown to fall under two main categories: those concerned with individual pupil achievement and progression, and those concerned with overall school performance[1]. Concerns have been raised that such practices may disadvantage some pupils, in a number of ways[2]. Coupled with the financial burden that early entry places on secondary schools in Wales (estimated to be £3.3m in 2016/17)[3], recent reforms have seen changes to school performance reporting to discourage the practice[4].

What we found

When we consider all subjects, we see a relatively steady increase in the proportion of early entries, increasing from less than 10% to over 60%. Subjects which see the highest rates of early entry are Mathematics, Mathematics – Numeracy, English Language, English Literature, and Science. Patterns of early entry over time for these courses are shown in the figure. As well as early entry patterns differing between these subjects, multiple entry patterns also differ. It was far more common for pupils to be entered multiple times for Mathematics and Mathematics – Numeracy than for the other subjects. Of the subjects which saw the highest proportion of early entry, Mathematics GCSE and Mathematics - Numeracy GCSE were the subjects which were most commonly sat multiple times; notably rising to over half of all pupils who completed Year 11 in 2017 and 2018[5].

Entry practices
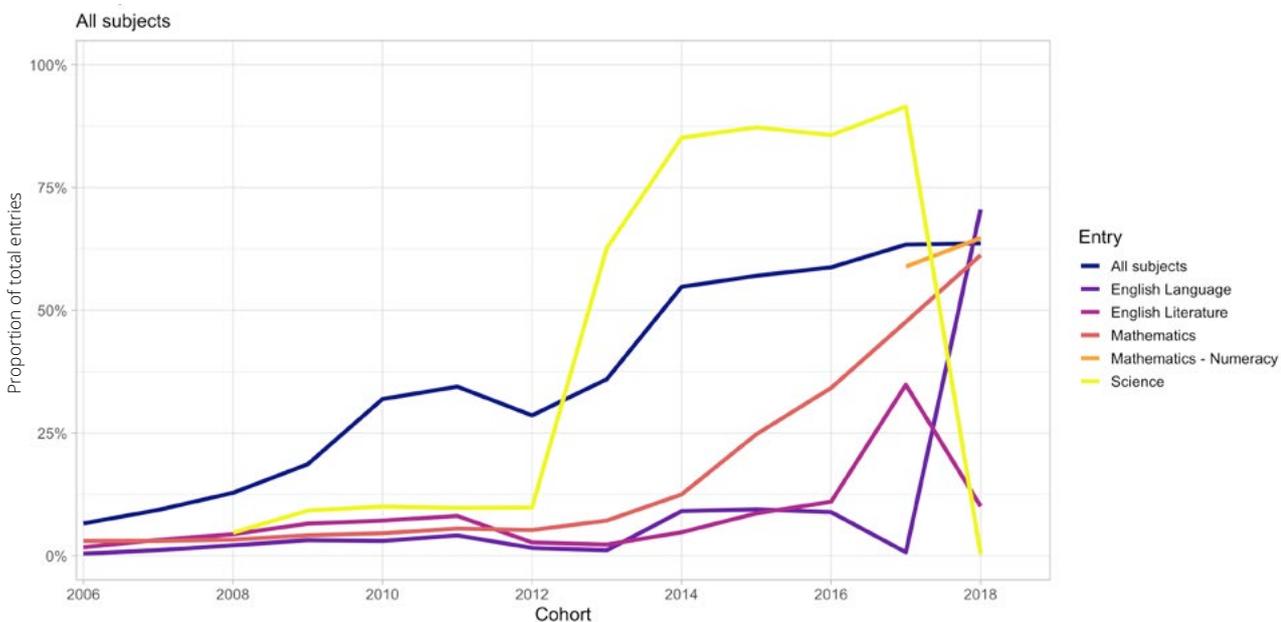
Why it matters

Early entry appears to be used in one of two ways. Pupils that are entered early but only once appear to be 'banking' grades; getting a GCSE out of the way early so that they can concentrate on their other GCSEs in Year 11. For others that are entered early, this early entry is a first attempt so that they can enter again (and again) in order to try and get the best grade possible. This latter practice is likely to be particularly important for those who are performing around the Grade C threshold; multiple entry may be an important opportunity to improve from a D to a C grade. It's important to better understand the patterns of practice and effects of these, so that informed decisions can be made as to their implementation.
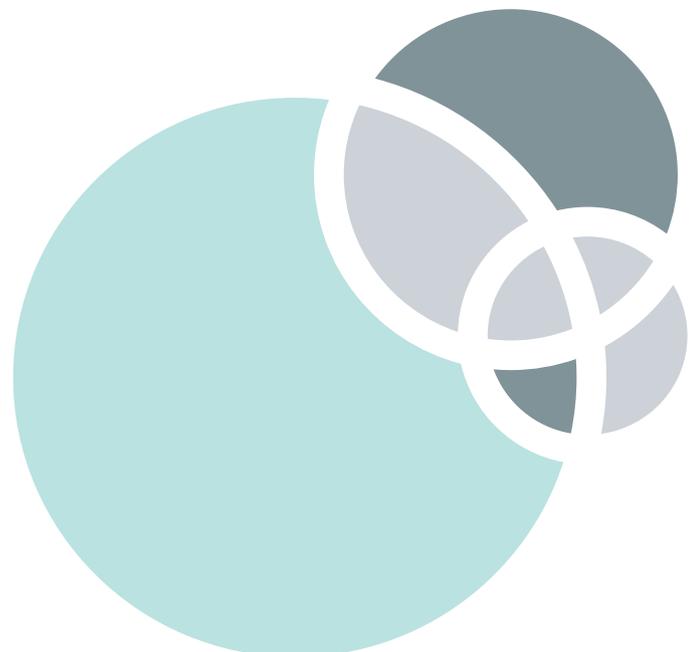
What next?

Although not shown in the data presented here, examination of the Year 10 entry data for the 2019 cohort suggests that changes to school performance reporting – where only the first entry counts – may have had the desired effect of discouraging early entry. Most of the GCSEs for which early entry has been common practice appear to have much lower proportions of early entry, apart from English Literature. The data appears to suggest a decrease in the proportion of early entries overall, which we will be able to confirm once we have access to the Year 11 data for 2019 pupils.

Acknowledgements

References

[1] Sperring, R., Davey, J., Jones, K., & Anderson, T. (2017). Approaches to early and multiple entry for GCSE examinations in Wales (October 2017). Qualifications Wales.
http://www.qualificationswales.org/media/2825/approaches-to-early-and-multiple-entry-2017-e.pdf

[2] Welsh Government (2012). Review of qualifications for 14 to 19-year-olds in Wales: Final report and recommendations (November 2012). Caerphilly, Wales: Department for Education and Skills, Welsh Government.
http://qualificationswales.org/media/1234/121127reviewofqualificationsen.pdf

[3] http://www.qualificationswales.org/media/2808/early-entry-qw-position-final-e.pdf

[4] http://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-04/180129-school-performance-reporting-faq-en.pdf

[5] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqvOI3ETR_g&feature=youtu.be

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