

Natasha Porter | August 2015

# CROSSING THE LINE

Improving success rates among students  
retaking English and maths GCSEs

---

A Policy Exchange Policy Bite

*“Post-16, English and Mathematics should be a required component of study programmes for those without good GCSEs in these subjects. Programmes will vary in how they organise this, depending on the students concerned. For some, intensive remedial reading will be required; for others, alternative qualifications such as the free-standing Mathematics qualifications will be appropriate; for others, immediate GCSE re-sits. Every other country in the developed world concentrates on improving the language and mathematics skills of its post-16 vocational students, and so, belatedly, should England.”*

The Wolf Report, 2011

The Education and Skills Act 2008 required all young people to continue in education or training to the age of 17 from 2013 and to 18 from 2015. Following the Wolf Report in 2011, the government also legislated that from September 2013, all of those young people who do not achieve a C in maths and English GCSE have to continue studying those subjects post-16 until they achieve that grade. The purpose of the policy was to increase the proportion of adults who have functional English and maths skills, and to address skills-based employment gaps. There continues to be evidence which shows that the most common shared characteristic between young people who are not in education, employment or training is that they have failed English and maths GCSE.<sup>1</sup>

This policy, despite being little commented on in mainstream policy debate, affects large numbers of young people. In summer 2014, 27% of the cohort who took English GCSE did not achieve a C grade or above (126,700 pupils) and 31% of the cohort who took maths GCSE did not achieve a C grade or above (178,600).<sup>2</sup> Students who are retaking GCSEs will be studying a variety of different courses. Some will be going on to study academic A-level courses, some will be starting apprenticeships, or following vocational courses, and some will have dropped out of education altogether.

The first cohort to be affected by this new policy – i.e. those who received their GCSE scores in 2013 – will have had their retakes counted either within the 2014 GCSE data (if they retook the exam very swiftly) or, more commonly, in this summer’s results. The institution level data for the whole cohort will therefore only be available from January 2016.<sup>3</sup> However, the government has published

data for those who took GCSEs in 2011, and who retook through to 2013, which we can use as something of an indicator for how effective the policy might be.<sup>4</sup> Even before it was compulsory, large numbers of 17 and 18 year olds who did not receive a C retook their qualifications – around 125,000 students in English and close to 150,000 students in maths.

This data shows that in 2013, **only 14% of all students who retook an English qualification having not achieved a C, then achieved a C or above at GCSE (or an equivalent Level 2 qualification) in that retake, and 13% in maths.** However, this is in large part explained by the fact that only around 1 in 4 of the cohort were entered for another GCSE or Level 2 qualification, with the remainder entered for lower level qualifications. **The ‘pass rate’ of just those who did take another GCSE was 38% in English and 39% in maths,** and was broadly similar between schools and FE colleges. FE colleges, however, were much less likely to enter students for GCSEs or Level 2 qualifications, even when such students entered on a D grade. This has now been changed via legislation and will affect a large number of students.<sup>5</sup>

This data suggests two issues for policymakers:

- How to improve the numbers of students being entered for a GCSE or Level 2 qualification (as opposed to a lower level qualification)
- How to improve overall pass rates

Both of these challenges will become more acute now that some form of post-16 retaking of qualifications is compulsory – and will particularly affect FE colleges, who have a higher raw number of students entering who will be required to resit, and who enter far lower proportions of their students onto Level 2 qualifications.

In addition, it is likely that only students who were particularly keen or seen as more likely to achieve a higher level qualification the second time round would retake a qualification in a voluntary system. Under the compulsory system, all students, including the 40-50% who did not voluntarily retake anything previously, will be required to do so, who we might expect to have greater difficulties in achieving the threshold of a C or equivalent.

Based on a series of conversations with institutions that perform well in this area, this report lays out some best practice conclusions, principally for FE colleges. The major challenge in this area is that all solutions require funding. FE colleges are not funded additionally to deliver any form of teaching for retaken

qualifications (other than £480 premium allocated for disadvantaged learners who do not have a C grade maths or English GCSE, although this is intended as additional support generally rather than funding for a retaken qualification). FE funding itself is under considerable pressure. It is therefore likely that absent any form of change, colleges will continue to struggle to ensure that large numbers of students not achieving sufficient grades at 16 will do so by 18.

Given that colleges are undertaking a large burden that is, in part, caused by the failure of some elements of the school system to have adequately ensured that 16 year old school leavers have achieved an appropriate baseline of qualifications, there is a case for a remedy. **To address this, this report recommends that Government should introduce a per pupil levy in certain circumstances on secondary schools to cover the costs of some or all of their students who then transfer from that school to continue to study in FE and need to retake their GCSEs.**

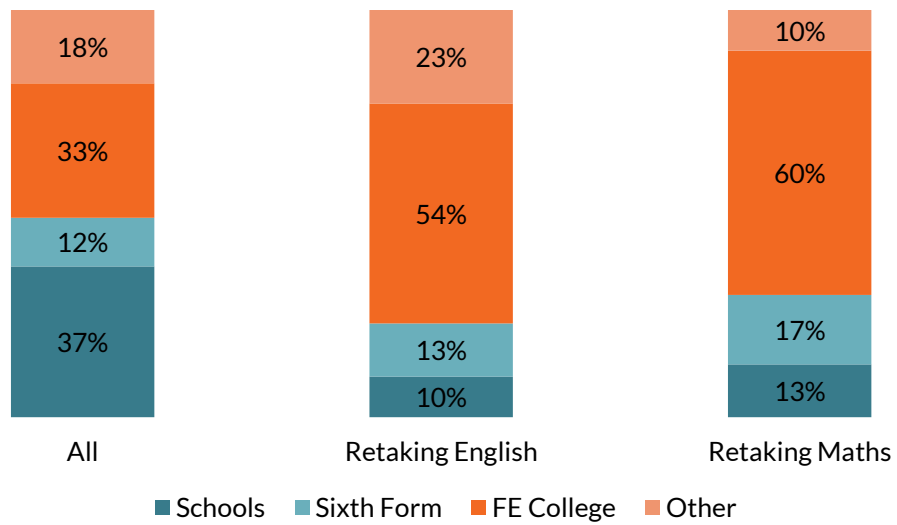
## Where are students retaking English and maths GCSEs studying?

When looking at destination data for all students between the age of 16 and 18 who completed their GCSEs in 2011, a school was the most popular educational setting, with 37% continuing their post-16 education there, 33% studying at an FE college and 12% a sixth form college.

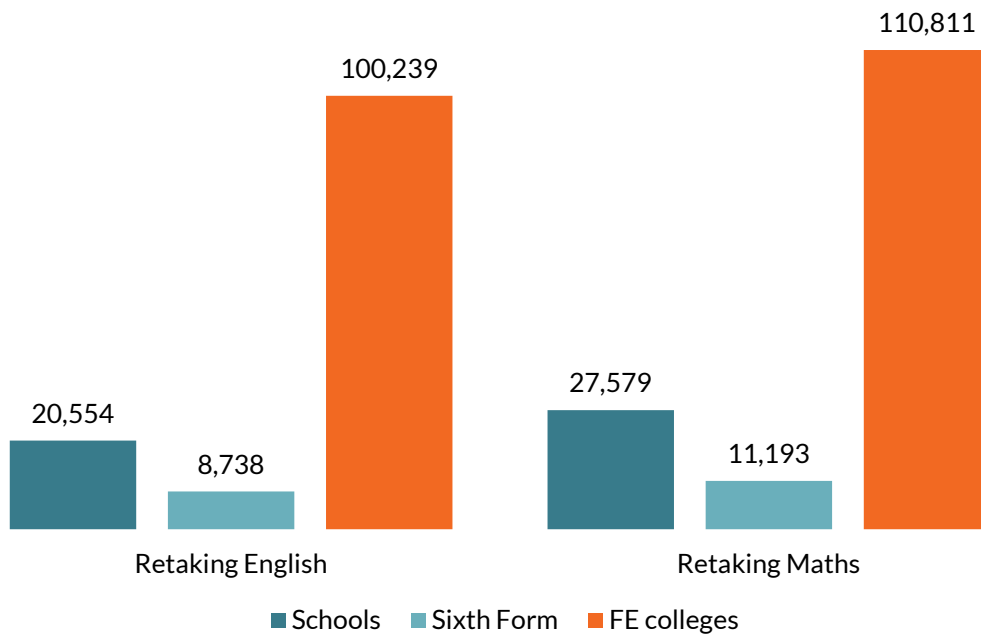
For the subset of students who didn't get a C in GCSE English or maths however, they were much more likely to choose to attend a FE college or even a sixth form college (see Figure 1).

This means that although schools educated a higher number of post-16 students overall than any other setting, FE colleges had much higher numbers of students who decided to retake maths or English GCSE, both because some students who did not get particularly good exam results will be disengaged from school and keen to switch institution, and also because schools and sixth form colleges will have higher entrance criteria for entering post-16 education, meaning that students with lower grades at GCSE will often move into FE.

**Figure 1: Student destinations at the end of Key Stage 4**



**Figure 2: Number of students retaking English/maths**

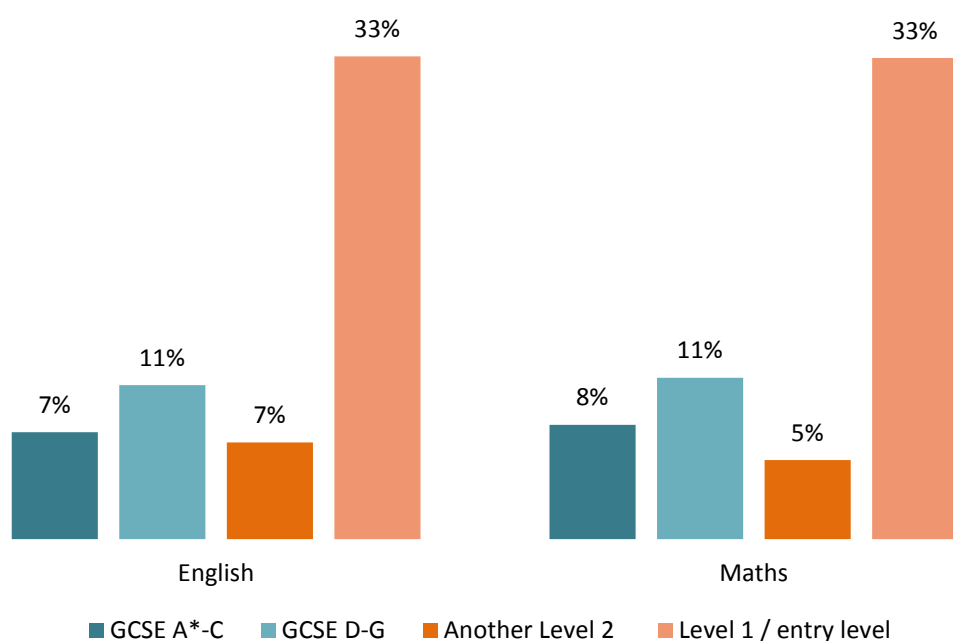


Assuming these patterns repeat in future years, the sheer volume of students being required to retake qualifications in FE colleges makes this a much bigger challenge for them than for other institutions. Indeed, early evidence suggests that this is precisely what is happening – with external venues needing to be hired, other classes cancelled to make room for exams, and temporary staff drafted in to invigilate exams.<sup>6</sup>

## What are the success rates for retake students?

The overall success rates for all students who did not achieve a C in 2011 and subsequently retook any examination are shown below. **Overall, 14% of the entire cohort who did not achieve a C grade originally, subsequently achieved a C grade or above in GCSE English (or an equivalent Level 2 qualification). 13% subsequently achieved it in maths** (with around half of that group achieving the qualification via a GCSE A\*-C, and around half via an equivalent Level 2 qualification at the same level).

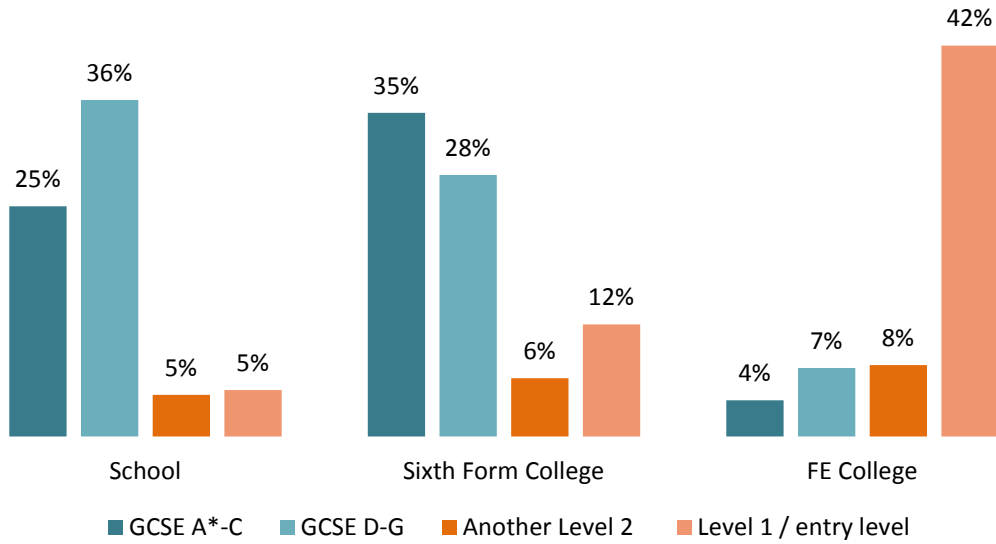
**Figure 3: Qualifications subsequently entered for by all those who did not achieve a GCSE A\*-C**



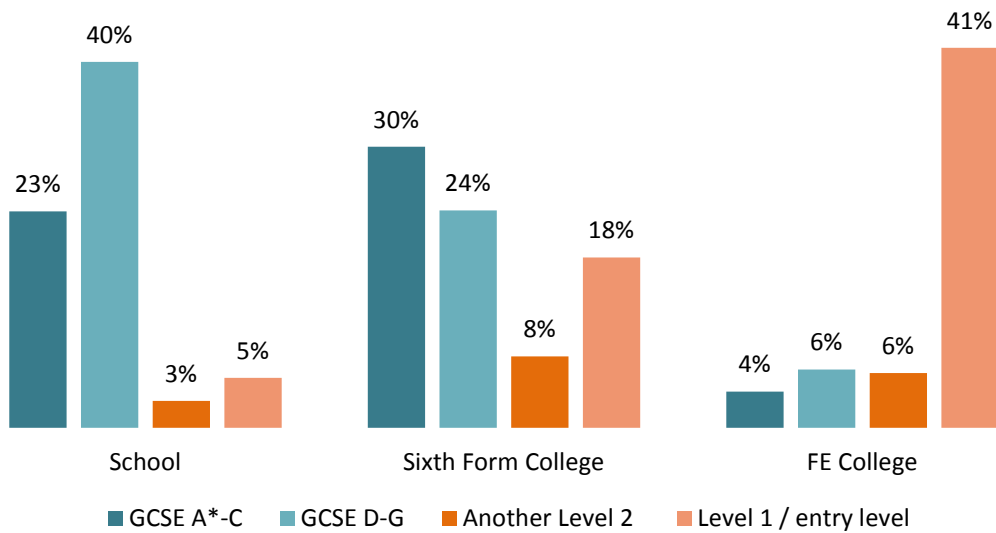
When breaking out success rates by institutions, schools and sixth form colleges achieved higher success rates than FE colleges (see Figures 4 & 5).

**Figures 4 & 5: Percentage of all students who did not achieve a grade A\*-C in English/maths who subsequently achieved a qualification, by institution**

**English**



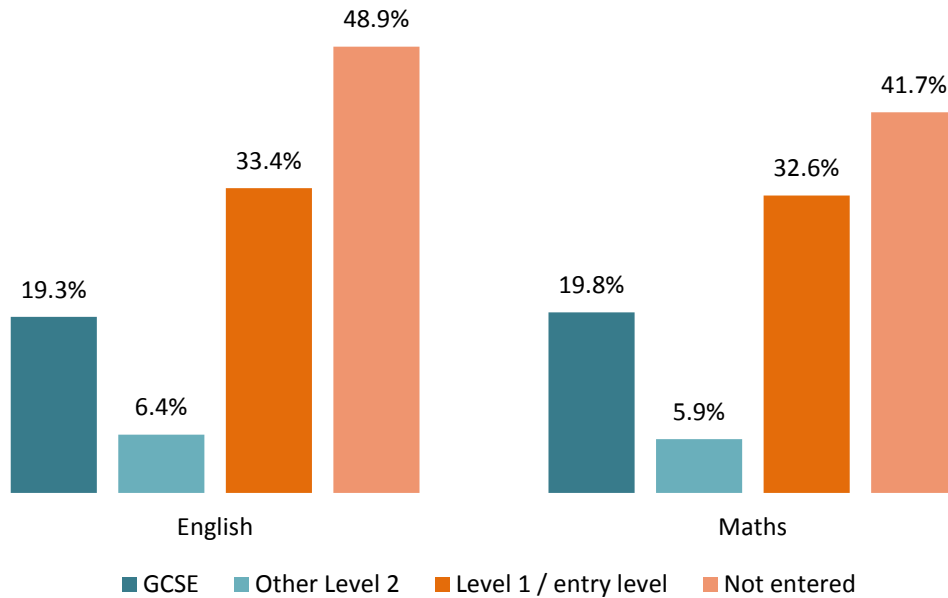
**Maths**



However, this overall ‘achievement rate’ of 14% for English and 13% for maths, masks the fact that a very large proportion of the cohort were not entered to retake a GCSE or another Level 2 qualification in the first place. As the Figure 6

shows, only just under 20% were re-entered for a GCSE, and roughly a further 6% for another Level 2 qualification.

**Figure 6: Percentage of all students who did not achieve a grade A\*-C in English and maths who subsequently achieved a qualification**



If we therefore look at the proportion of those entered for a GCSE who subsequently achieved an A\*-C, the pass rates rise,<sup>7</sup> and is broadly similar between schools and FE colleges, with sixth form colleges doing better (see Figure 7).

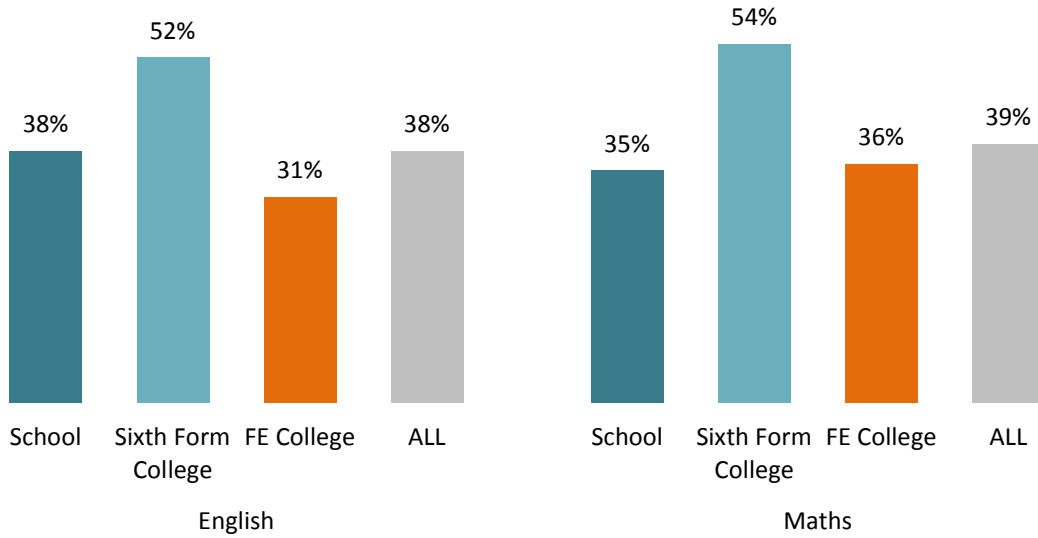
## Differential entry rates for GCSE retakes

As noted above, the difference between the headline figures of 14% of all retaking students achieving a C in English and 13% in maths, and a GCSE pass rate of 38% / 39%, is because a large proportion of the retaking cohort are never entered for another GCSE in the first place.

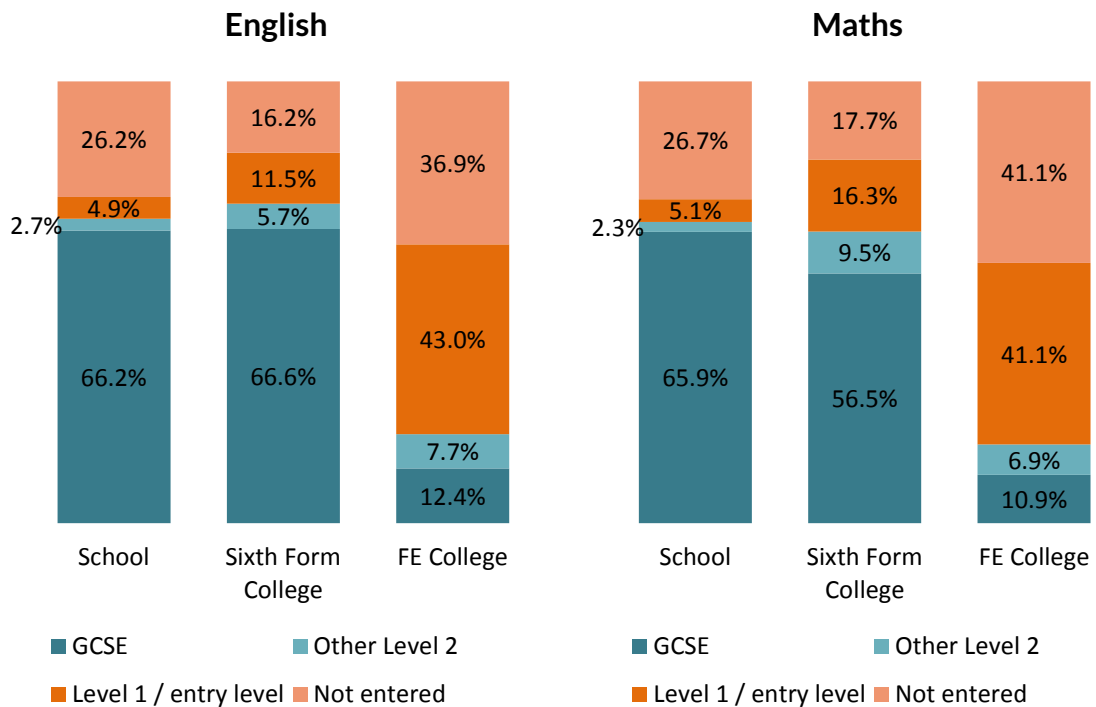
When broken down by institution, this differential entry is very largely driven by FE Colleges (who as shown above educate the vast majority of students who did not originally achieve a GCSE A\*-C) not entering their students for a GCSE or other Level 2 qualification.



**Figure 7: Percentage of students subsequently entered for an English/maths GCSE who achieved an A\*-C, by institution**

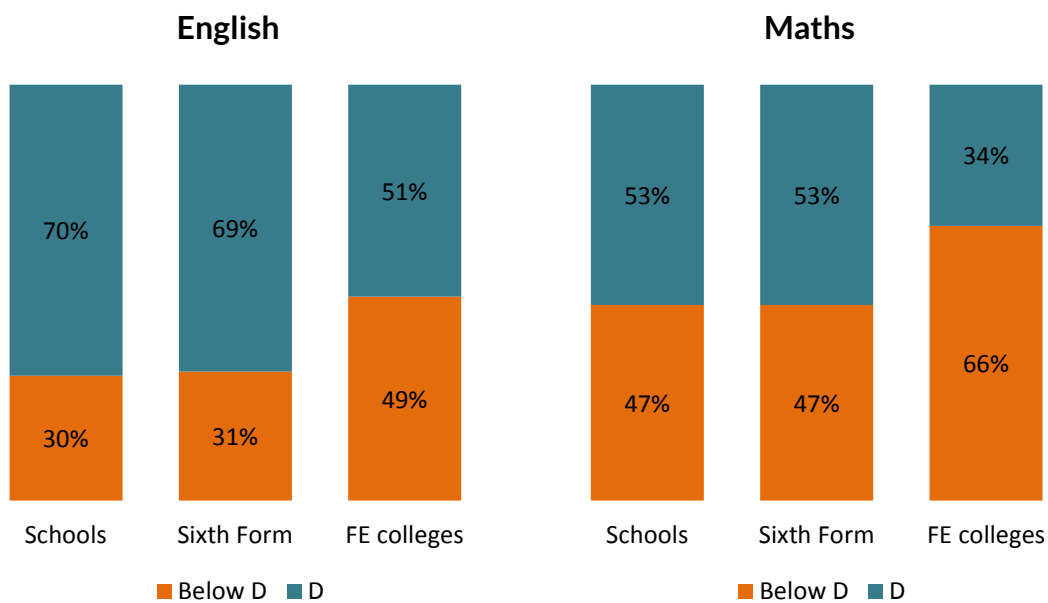


**Figure 8: Qualifications subsequently entered by all students who did not achieve a GCSE A\*-C in English/maths, by institution**



This differential is partly accounted for by the proportion of students arriving with a D grade into schools and sixth form colleges, as opposed to FE colleges. The latter are much more likely to have students with an E or below. For these students it is much more challenging to move them to a C grade than those starting from only one grade behind and as such may not be entered (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Grades on entry for English/maths GCSE retake students**

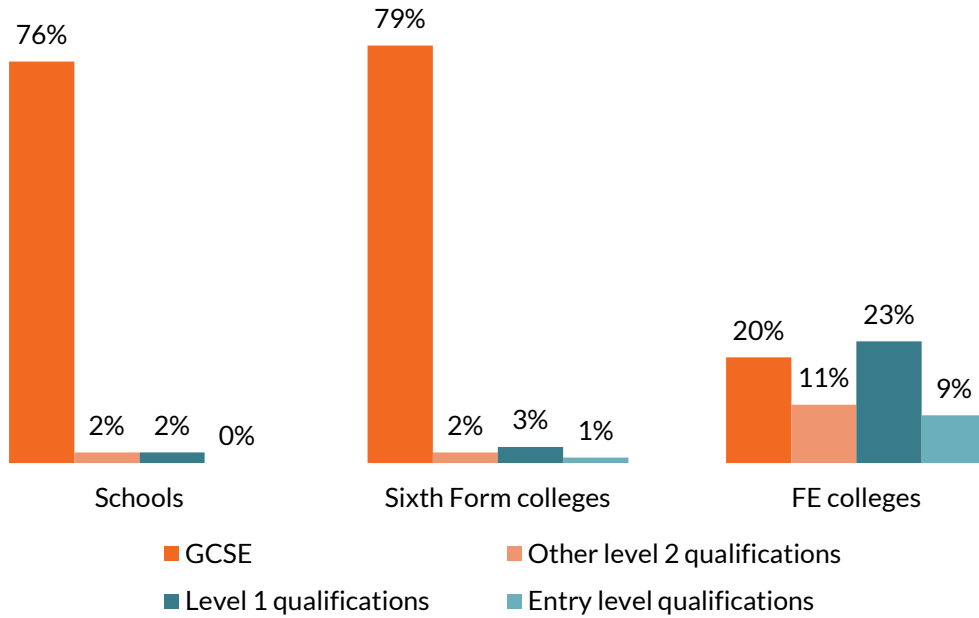


However, when comparing the students who do enter each type of institution with a D, we can see that FE colleges were still much less likely to enter such students for a GCSE (see Figures 10 & 11).

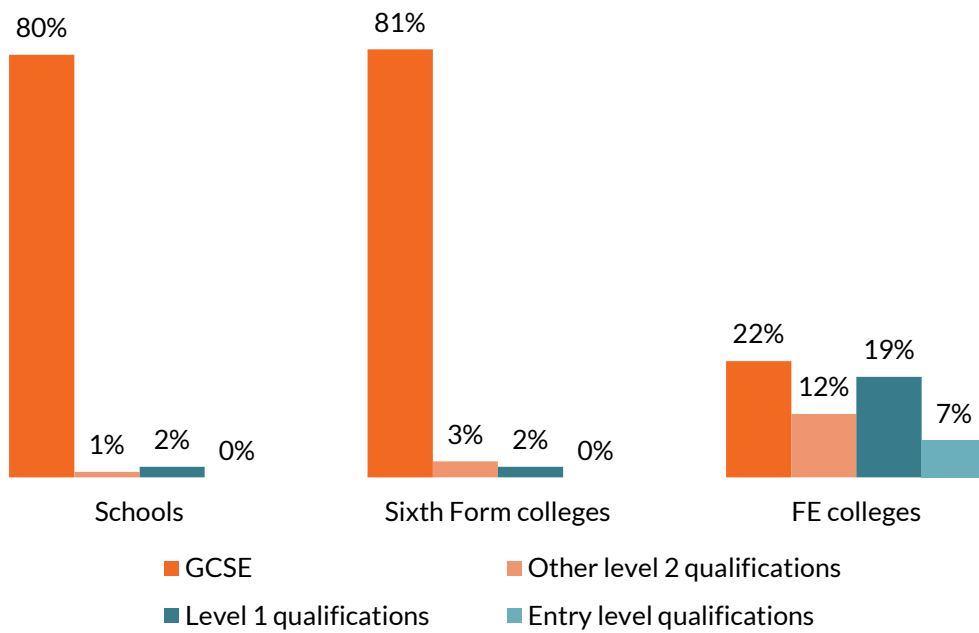
From September 2015 however, the policy has changed. All D grade students will have to be entered for GCSE qualifications rather than any lower level or equivalent (students who achieved below a D will still be able to be entered for lower level qualifications).<sup>8</sup> This is a very welcome change – GCSEs have higher labour market value with employers than other equivalent Level 2 qualifications (and certainly more than Level 1 or below) and there is no reason why FE colleges should enter far fewer of their D grade students into this valuable qualification than other institutions. Despite some push back from some in the FE sector and Apprenticeship providers, the government should resolutely keep to this approach.

**Figures 10 & 11: Qualifications retaking students who arrived on a D grade were subsequently entered for in English/maths**

**English**



**Maths**



## Policy implications

This data suggests two issues for policymakers:

- How to improve the numbers of students being entered for a GCSE (as opposed to another qualification)
- How to improve overall pass rates

Both of these challenges will become more acute now that some form of post-16 resitting is compulsory – and will particularly affect FE colleges, who have a higher raw number of students entering who will be required to resit, and who enter far lower proportions of their students onto GCSEs as opposed to other qualifications (even with the legislative change requiring them to now to do so for D grade students).

In addition, it is likely that only students who were particularly keen or seen as more likely to achieve a higher level qualification the second time round would retake a qualification in a voluntary system. Under the compulsory system, all students, including the 40%-50% who did not voluntarily retake anything previously, will be required to do so, who we might expect to be more difficult to achieve.

## What do more successful institutions ascribe their greater success rates to?

In conversations with a number of institutions, the following points were made as important for achieving a higher level of students achieving at least a GCSE C grade in resits, particularly for those students who did not have great progress to make, i.e. those who achieved a D or high E grade in their first attempt. These ought to be considered by all institutions now compelled to enrol all students onto some form of repeat qualification from this September onwards, following the GCSE results announced this week.

Obviously the circumstances of each institution are different but there is an element of transferability in these proposals. However, many of them would require additional expenditure, and the ability – in the case of FE colleges – to scale interventions over a larger cohort:

- Students should be divided between those who are borderline passing (all D and some E grades) and those who are further behind (F and below). Different interventions should be used for the two groups – including use of smaller groups with high staff ratios. These can be useful for short periods for those further behind, or to offer targeted teaching which is focused on mastering very specific areas of difficulty.
- Institutions should complete a detailed initial diagnostic baseline assessment on individuals to identify their strengths and weaknesses before the start of the retake course. This should then correspond with particular areas of the curriculum that institutions focus on re-teaching.
- For borderline students, an intensive course should be introduced with a focus on motivating students to complete quickly (and therefore able to move solely onto their main post-16 area of study more quickly). The course should start as early as possible after results day and focus on moving students to a C grade by November of Year 12 (or equivalent).
- FE colleges should continue encouraging staff to take up government funding to attend the maths and English enhancement programmes. They should also be encouraging graduate teachers into the post-16 initial teacher training bursary scheme, which specifically focuses on developing teachers of English and maths. Many schools and sixth form colleges already have maths and English expertise. FE colleges need to ensure their workforce also have this.
- Employing specialist staff who just deliver English and maths GCSE retakes, as well as requiring all A-level maths and English teachers to deliver some GCSE retakes will build a group of staff with experience who can develop and share resources and expertise.
- Institutions should consider creating dedicated space and resources for GCSE retakes.
- Institutions which are struggling to deliver retake classes should also be encouraged to cluster and pool their resources in order to create specialist shared provision for maths and English retakes across a number of institutions. This could be particularly effective for institutions which only have small numbers of post-16 students requiring retakes.
- High performing institutions could pair with other institutions to support them with GCSE retake courses through a sharing of expertise and staff. This could just be the development of networking opportunities between institutions for practitioners to share and co-develop resources, or could

even be a more formal pairing with co-teaching and shared delivery. Some institutions may even choose to integrate adult GCSE classes with 16-18 ones as older students will often be more motivated to achieve, which could have positive effects on younger students. This is easier to do if the institutions are in some sort of shared partnership arrangements (which can be a loose partnership and does not require for example formal federations).

As noted above, the resits issue comes within a wider context whereby FE colleges have large numbers of students entering without a C grade, and a very tight funding environment within which to address this. The sector is starting from a low base in terms of its capacity to manage this. Moreover, FE colleges receive little additional funding for discharging this new responsibility, because funding is based on the learner rather than the qualification and the additional disadvantage funding is to support additional academic needs rather than provide GCSE catch up curriculum.<sup>9</sup> So an FE college will receive £4,000 for a 16-17 year old (and £3,300 for an 18 year old) to teach a full time (unweighted) qualification, and is now required to fund the remedial maths and/or English teaching and examination fees from within this sum (as well as delivering the main qualification which the learner has enrolled for).

Policy Exchange is undertaking wider work around how to ensure financial sustainability of the FE sector. But separately and additionally to this, there is a case for compensating colleges for what is becoming a large burden that is, in part, caused by the failure of some elements of the school system to have adequately ensured that 16 year old school leavers have achieved an appropriate baseline of qualifications. **To address this, this report recommends that Government should introduce a per pupil levy on a 'home' secondary school to cover the costs of some or all students who then transfer from the school to continue to study in FE and need to retake their GCSEs.**

The argument for such a levy from schools to FE is that the compulsory re-sit policy places a significant burden on FE colleges in particular who unlike other post-16 institutions are faced with a unique set of challenges around this area: larger volumes of re-sitting students (both in raw terms and as a proportion of their cohort) and, crucially, a lower proportion of students with a D grade (who require less intensive teaching) as opposed to those with an E or below. It is unfair to penalise FE colleges by requiring them to fix what in some cases is largely a

failure of that secondary school to have not satisfactorily educated the 16 year old to at least a C grade, and therefore the school should pay some or all of the costs of the remedy via a transfer of funds to the FE college charged with getting that student a C.

We suggest that the levy would only apply in the following instances:

- **where the pupil has both failed to get a C and achieved a negative score below a certain level on the new Progress 8 benchmark** – this would act as a practical safeguard to not penalise schools who may not have achieved good headline results but have made good progress with the pupil they have been responsible for.
- **when the pupil has been on the roll of the secondary school for a certain length of time** – this would allow for an exemption in circumstances in which the secondary school themselves have had insufficient time to teach the pupil (this would also deal with difficulties in setting an accurate baseline for determining Progress 8 scores for that pupil).
- **with exceptions for pupils with particular special educational needs and/or disabilities** – in the same way as such students are exempted by the EFA funding regulations from being required to resit a qualification post-16.<sup>10</sup>
- **a cap on the levy on any one particular school** to provide some surety in financial planning from the school's perspective.

This paper does not attempt to design such a levy in detail, but rather puts forward the importance of considering it as a principle for reform and for increasing the success rates for 16-18 year olds achieving a C grade GCSE. Such an approach could be implemented or piloted as part of the Spending Review.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Impetus, “Out of Sight”, 2014

<sup>2</sup> It can be assumed that there is quite a bit of overlap between these students

<sup>3</sup> Although JCQ have released figures for students taking GCSEs at 17 and over which captures much of this information, it isn’t possible to separate out those who are retaking at 17 or 18 from older adult learners.

<sup>4</sup> DfE, “Level 1 and 2 English and maths: 16 to 18 students – 2012 to 2013”

<sup>5</sup> From September 2015 institutions will be required to enter D grade students for GCSE courses rather than lower level qualifications ones which lack the labour market value of a GCSE. In 2014, 59% of all students who achieved a English GCSE grade below a C got a D grade, and 39% of all students who failed to achieve a C in maths.

<sup>6</sup> FE Week, “DfE resit policy leads to GCSE campus chaos”, June 8 2015

<sup>7</sup> Note that the DfE data does not allow us to calculate the pass rates of those who entered for or achieved any other qualification than a GCSE A\*-C. This is because the data records only the highest qualification entered for and achieved on a hierarchy of: A\* to C in GCSE, other qualifications at level 2, D to G in GCSE, other qualifications at level 1, at entry level. Therefore, if Student X is entered for both a GCSE and another Level 2 qualification, and does not achieve a GCSE grade A\*-C but does achieve a pass rate in another Level 2 qualification, he or she will be counted as entering the GCSE, but achieving the Level 2. For lower level qualifications, therefore, achievement rates will calculate as in excess of 100% of those entered (because a proportion of those who entered but also entered a higher qualification will be recorded within the entry data of those who entered the higher qualification)

<sup>8</sup> Education Funding Agency, “16 to 19 funding: maths and English condition of funding”, 9 July 2015

<sup>9</sup> The official position is that learners who are required to retake English or maths GCSE should take a commensurately smaller qualification alongside it to free up time (and funding) to cover the costs of the resits; however, such an option is not always feasible depending on the4 course taken by the learner and/or the options available at that institution



<sup>10</sup> Education Funding Agency, “16 to 19 funding: maths and English condition of funding”: *“An institution may decide that a student with learning difficulties cannot study maths or English at GCSE or stepping stone level. In this case, in addition to the student’s statement of Special Educational Need, a Learning Difficulty Assessment or an Education Health and Care Plan, the institution must hold an evidenced assessment that the student is not able to study these subjects. This assessment needs to be authorised by an appropriate professional in the institution, such as the head of SEN or Student Support”*