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**What has been the impact of re-sitting
AS-Level examinations in Economics and
Business Studies on students at a boys'
independent school in the West Midlands?**

by

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**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of
Doctorate of Education (EdD)**

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Declaration

During the first year of the doctorate programme, I completed two Masters Modules in the Strategic Leadership and Management in Education (SLAMIE) option. This reflected a continuation of some of the interests I have developed in recent years, not least in my role as chairperson of the *Strategy Committee* at the school where I am presently employed. It also complemented my teaching pursuits to date in business education subjects, at sixth form and higher education level, in both the private and public sectors.

The first of these SLAMIE assignments considered the 'strategic choices' which are available to the independent school where I work in the West Midlands, given the context of, in particular, external pressure for such institutions to justify their charitable status and consider alternatives to a purely academic curriculum. Unlike the first, my second assignment was not sector-specific and involved an examination of how educational managers might strive to ensure that their school's key functional areas in both the internal and external environment are coordinated so that pupils achieve the highest possible standards.

Sandwiched between the SLAMIE projects was my Advanced Research Methods assignment. For this I revitalised a long-standing interest in observational approaches to research (stemming from my time as an MA student at the University of Nottingham in the early 1990s) and examined some of the theoretical assumptions which underpin it. During the second and third years on the EdD programme, my specialist study drew upon the

fifteen years of experience I have had in various examining roles. It consisted of a study of the implications of electronic 'on-line' (as opposed to 'hard-copy') marking for Assistant Examiners and how the introduction of this technology has transformed their work.

On the few occasions that I have referred to my previous work as a student at the University of Warwick, it is clearly stated as such and included in the bibliography. This dissertation is my own work and has not been submitted elsewhere.

Abstract of content and method employed

This dissertation examines the impact that AS-level re-sits have had on a selective independent boys' school in the West Midlands, which in the interest of anonymity is referred to throughout as 'School X'. Significantly, and as reflected in the title for this dissertation, unlike the vast majority of secondary schools, A2-level examinations at School X are not sat by students until the final summer of the two year course; therefore, re-sits at this level are not possible. The opening chapter provides an outline of how the introduction of unlimited re-sits can be perceived as being a logical progression as one of a number of developments in the A-level qualification, especially over the past two decades or so, which have invariably contributed to higher pass rates and levels of attainment, as measured by its six point ('A' to 'U') grading system.

In the next chapter, secondary research has been divided into two sections. The first considers the robustness of the qualification, which has existed for well over half a century and the extent to which its survival has reflected the interests of the key stakeholders who have benefited from its reputation as the nation's educational 'gold standard'. On one hand, the introduction of re-sits itself can be understood as one in a relatively long line of incremental changes in the structure of A-level, which have helped to prolong its shelf-life by making it a more accessible and quantifiably successful qualification. On the other, this can be contrasted against the extent to which the opportunity for students to re-sit might have contributed to, arguably, the implosion of the qualification in its Curriculum 2000 form, as pass rates nudge towards 100 per

cent, and the subsequent need for either its fundamental restructuring or abandonment altogether.

The second section examines literature which is relevant to supporting a challenge against the popular notion that a modular course such as A-level contains few, if any, characteristics which are embodied in the 'elements' of a formative approach to teaching and learning as outlined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2005, p.15). A case is subsequently made for how a course which allows unlimited re-sits and where candidates have access to their marked scripts, still provides opportunities for interaction between teachers and students which are not normally associated with summative forms of assessment in the learning process.

Chapter three explains how primary data were gathered through various techniques, including an approach that involved a mixture of a structured group interview and self-completion questionnaire, which two broad categories of students at School X participated in over a two year period. One of these consisted of students studying either A-level Business Studies or Economics (and in a few cases, both subjects). The other consisted of 'pre-A-level' students, back in school at the end of the summer term after sitting their GCSEs, for a few 'taster lessons' in their chosen subjects for A-level. A combination of questions which elicited both quantitative and qualitative responses was used in this instrument of research which represented something of an unconventional approach to methodology, but it proved to be an appropriate technique for efficiently amassing data from scores of students each year, at various stages in their post-16 studies.

Interviews were also conducted with numerous members of the teaching profession, mainly, but not exclusively, at School X and for the purpose of comparison with similar institutions, three discussions took place on an annual basis with staff from other independent schools, guided by me on a 'focus group' basis. Supplemented by information from examination performance documents produced by senior management at School X, commercial publications, the examination boards themselves and a variety of governmental and quasi-governmental sources, this allowed me to adhere to a 'data triangulation' approach, as classified by Denzin (1988) and summarised by Robson (2002, p.175), which "help[ed] to counter...the threats to validity." The one-to-one interviews on the other hand became more tightly structured with each round, to reflect the sharper objectives for the dissertation which emerged over time and were thus orientated towards a 'within-method triangulation' approach (Denzin, 1988).

Turning more specifically, in chapter four, to the main objectives of the study, the analysis of results and findings from my empirical research attempts to establish the main motives for re-sitting A-level Economics and Business Studies, as well as the costs and benefits of so doing. The latter objective primarily concerns students, but other factors, such as the impact on the teaching process, are also examined. Chapter five considers the future role of A-level re-sits in the context of the restructuring of the qualification from September 2008 and the alternatives in the post-16 curriculum that exist. The study concludes with a brief, reflective chapter, on how re-sits can contribute to teaching and learning.

1. Introduction

1.1 Scope of the study

I arrived at School X in 2002 as the Head of Business Studies and Economics. In contrast to my previous employment as head of department in a secondary school in the maintained sector, my teaching and managerial responsibilities became entirely focussed on just two sixth form subjects, instead of a wide range of 14-18 academic and vocational qualifications. Regardless of sector, public or private, I have always encouraged business education students to re-sit relatively 'easy' first year modules. By the end of my first year at School X, however, I was aware of my influence on a department which had become perceived by a few fellow staff as one which encouraged a 'have a go' re-sit culture amongst students. Fortunately, I have been able to find some solace in the views of colleagues teaching Business Studies and Economics in similar schools, whose departments also enter a disproportionately high number of students for re-sits, compared to most other subjects. They have tended to agree with my motives and logic for encouraging re-sits, which are discussed in some detail in this study. Even so, for as long as Curriculum 2000 has allowed unlimited re-sits without penalty, I have pondered over a number of related questions, but two in particular stand out: Are they worth it? What is the impact on teaching?

The idea for this dissertation took shape during the spring of 2006 when the QCA announced plans for the restructuring of A-level (Smithers, 2006). The most significant of these changes have proved to be the introduction of an A*

grade and a reduction in the number of modules for most subjects from six to four, but at the time of this initial announcement by the QCA, many aspects of the new system were apparently not finalised, such as: would re-sits still be allowed? Were there plans to 'decouple' AS- and A2-level so that the former would not contribute to the final A-level grade, or at least increase the weighting of the second year? What, if any noticeable difference, would expanding the grading system make to when and what students re-sat? The future of both the A-level qualification and the role played by re-sits, therefore, became important themes in my research and both are explored in this study, particularly its penultimate chapter. More significantly, however, in order to assess the costs and benefits of re-sits to students in the form of, most obviously, their final results and less so in the form of other factors, such as approaches to assessment employed by teachers, I had to analyse historical data of both a quantitative and qualitative nature. From the outset, I believed that the rapport I had with my students and colleagues, both within the school and teaching elsewhere would help me to investigate numerous avenues for collecting primary research, as well as providing a broad framework for the triangulation of data.

Embarking on such a study also gave me the opportunity to wrestle with and in turn mount something of a challenge to, another issue which has pre-occupied my thoughts for virtually my entire teaching career. This is the commonly perceived notion, often perpetuated by fellow teaching staff, that Business Studies is 'soft' and Economics is 'hard'; that the former is irretrievably a poor relation to the latter, irrespective of whatever incremental changes are made to A-level, or whatever post-16 initiatives may surface to

compete with it. In pursuance of this issue I have briefly considered the impact that has been made, on either or both of the subjects (in terms of, for example, the kudos they hold with universities and ability to appeal to the independent sector), by alternatives to A-level, including the 'applied' versions of the qualification, the International Baccalaureate and the recently launched Diploma. As this study argues, however, the status of A-level as the nation's educational 'gold standard' has remained largely intact. It may even be enhanced by its restructuring on the one hand and by the uncertain impact made by recent 14-19 reforms on the other.

More pertinently, my challenge to the rather simplistic, yet widely held 'hard/soft' views of the two subjects is based on the analysis of quantitative data of AS-level re-sits at School X (in the context of student performance over the entire two year course), and the informed opinions of colleagues in similar establishments who hold the same position as myself. The study also attempts to show how the structure and content of the two subjects influence 'when' and 'what' students re-sit in their efforts to realise their post-18 ambitions. This is in light of another popular misconception, that the content of Economics and Business Studies at A-level is 'more or less the same', which is again often held, most irritatingly, by practitioners of different subjects in secondary schools. The title of this dissertation suggests a rather narrow focus, particularly because it covers just two subjects. It is my belief, however, that the distinctive qualities of Economics and Business Studies at A-level as well as, to an extent, the candidates who took either, combined with the access to data sources I enjoyed, provided ample scope for research without the need to examine a wider range of subjects.

1.2 Key developments and debates which are relevant to the emergence, impact and continuing influence of re-sit exams at A-level

The arrival of Curriculum 2000, which introduced the AS and A2 format for A-level courses, combined with a modular system for examinations (Ofsted, 2001), produced a qualification which has become widely perceived as one that 'you can't fail' (Lightfoot, 2007). For the past two decades or so, when results are published in the summer, the media has revived the ongoing debate on educational 'dumbing down' at A-level. Extensive research into the construction and prioritisation of education news issues by Murphy and Warmington (2004), consisting of data collected from hundreds of printed and broadcasted items, shows how *particularly* intense the level of debate on the issue of falling A-level standards became during the 2002-2003 academic year. The media devoted a considerable amount of column space and air time during this twelve month period, to the notion that Curriculum 2000's restructuring of the qualification was directly responsible for inflating grades over and above what had already become a firmly established year-on-year upward trend. It was strongly critical of:

- Exam papers of a shorter duration (typically down from ninety to sixty minutes at AS-level) with less focus on questions which required students to show 'judgement' in an extended response.
- A system which allowed students to focus their revision on individual 'bite-size' units of work, rather than being assessed on the content of a whole

subject, as with the pre-modular linear approach when *all* external examinations could not be sat until the end of the two year course.

- Highly prescriptive mark schemes which provided limited scope for intuitive answers - a trend which Williams (2006) argues, has been further established by the introduction and expansion of both electronic marking processes and on-line standardisation) and that were too narrowly focused on the use of key words or phrases.
- Retention of a coursework component in the vast majority of subjects, which was seen as becoming increasingly exposed to all kinds of abuse, by students, teachers and external moderators alike (see Mansell, 2007, for coverage on the extent of malpractice in coursework during recent years).

Research undertaken for this study indicates that nationwide, most students still drop the subject they score the lowest in at AS-level and focus on their three strongest at A2-level (see for example, Clark and Harris, 2008). I find it reasonable to argue, therefore, that the majority of potential failures at A-level are filtered out at the end of their first year, which must make a further contribution to pushing up both the pass rate and average grade. This study discovered a growing trend in recent years, however, particularly in the independent sector, for an increasing number of students to persevere with subjects they find 'tough', irrespective of their performance in them at AS-level. More privately educated students are deciding to continue with subjects which are perceived as being traditionally more 'difficult', even when they struggle in them. This is often

because they feel, or are lead to believe by the media and other sources (often their parents, as they have indicated to me through my interaction with them at various events), that they offer better preparation for higher education and strengthen their application for university. Ambrose (2007) reported that this attraction to 'hard subjects' was the main reason offered by a number of prominent educationalists for the increase in numbers studying A-level Mathematics each year since 2004, and for Further Mathematics being the 'fastest growing subject' during 2005-06. In 2007, these two subjects were, respectively, fifth and second in the Daily Telegraph's table of 'top ten subject increases' (Daily Telegraph, 2007). Certain changes, however, that were made to Mathematics syllabuses in the aftermath of poor results from the first post-Curriculum 2000 examinations in the subject and apparently in reaction to falling numbers opting for it, as reported by Cassidy (2003), arguably constituted a 'dumbing down' and made it accessible to far more students.

Furthermore, examination boards have come under attack for removing challenging concepts from syllabuses and producing assessment formats which encourage teachers to deliver 'student-friendly' topics, at the expense of a more balanced programme of study which would be conducive to promoting a higher level of intellectual curiosity. Williams (2006), for example, examines the rationale behind an increasing number of history departments in secondary schools, opting for modules covering the 'modern' period. This trend has been supported by the proliferation of examination board-endorsed text books and revision aids which are almost invariably written by senior examiners. Their content is tightly honed to syllabus detail and supported by model answers which include 'expert tips' on examination technique. Given the availability of these

resources, combined with the increasing tendency for teachers to produce 'revision packs' which focus on popular themes and topics from past papers, it is understandable why more students might choose to ignore their more expansive class notes, even preferring to revise at home rather than attend lessons in the lead up to examinations.

Over the past few years, at least in my experience, students more commonly *expect* departments to distribute these 'all-you-need' revision packs and have even come to depend on them, sometimes to the virtual exclusion of all other resources (including set texts), in the run-up to examinations. The pressure for teachers to succumb to results-driven approaches is considered by Harlen (2008, p.145) who identifies a dilemma: "many...recognize the values of formative assessment but feel unable to make the change in their teaching style that it requires, when struggling to improve test scores." One of the main purposes advanced by Mathews (1985, p.34) of examinations is "to motivate students and teachers". The idea of making revision as productive and manageable as possible in the interest of both parties, for example in the form of revision packs, could be interpreted as one of the more extreme ways of fulfilling this particular purpose.

It therefore seems ironic that whilst the ambition to meet university entrance requirements, as this study argues, is by far the most important source of motivation for sixth formers in independent schools to do well at A-level, at the same time it seems they are increasingly studying in environments which do little to inculcate the kind of research skills that help them to make the transition to higher education and flourish at this level. The present Director of the Higher

Education Policy Institute, Bahram Bekhradnia (2003) suggests, but without arriving at a firm conclusion, that the performance of privately educated students, compared to those from the maintained sector, is more likely to decline at university. His view appears to stem from the straightforward premise that the advantage of “a higher quality of education and the degree of preparation for examinations they benefit from...both of which serve to inflate A-level scores”, simply ‘disappears’ when they commence their undergraduate studies.

An aspect which has received *less* coverage in the debate on A-level standards, is the contribution which examination re-sits have had to the phenomenon of ‘grade inflation’ and reducing failure rates even more. A comparative analysis by Coe (2006) of the results of some 200,000 A-level students since 1988 concluded that awards of up to a ‘C’ grade in 2006 were equivalent to a level of academic attainment which would not have even registered the lowest pass grade of ‘E’ twenty years ago. Mathematics, for example, showed an increase of 3.2 grades. The rapid growth of university places over the same period, however, still ensured that virtually everyone with two bare passes at A-level (sometimes even less), was able to matriculate and secure a place on a degree course. This compares to the time when less than one in twenty school-leavers progressed to higher education when A-levels were first introduced in the 1950s (Henry, 2003). Many of the ‘new’ universities which were established in the early 1990s continue to accept ‘D’ and ‘E’ grades, as they did when they were polytechnics in the 1980s; the main difference being the perception that twenty years ago, the academic rigour contained within A-level examinations gave this level of attainment rather more credibility than it would today.

Parallels can be drawn here with pre-GCSE 'lower-level terminal examinations' such as the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE), where "the value of lower grades..." [especially when combined with grade inflation] "...approaches zero" (Mathews, 1985, p.208-209). Grades below GCE 'O' Level grade 'C' and CSE grade 1 were poorly regarded, not least because they fell below the standard of pass which contributed towards qualifying for A-level study. Certainly in a selective independent school such as the one which features in this study, 'D' and 'E' grades at A-level are now considered to be virtually worthless by students, parents and teachers alike, especially as currency for entry into reputable universities. Indeed, even a grade 'C' represents 'failure' in the institution where I work, in the minds of the vast majority of students and teachers alike, the latter being preoccupied by their department's A/B pass rate.

Table 1 overleaf shows how few grades below 'C' at A-level there have been in the school as a whole across all subjects in recent years. A strong influence on this relatively concentrated spread of results between the top three grades is the criterion, strictly enforced by the school, that students who achieve less than four grade 'Ds' at AS-level are not permitted to enter the second year of the course. In fact, several departmental heads actively deter students from continuing with their subject if they achieve less than a 'C' in it. Given the opportunities that exist to re-sit and especially in subjects that are only offered in the sixth form at School X, such as Economics, where students may need the first year to develop their knowledge and examination techniques, it is little surprise that this entrance policy has more than a few dissenting voices amongst staff and scholars alike. A QCA (2007c, p.5) study of re-sit performance referred to the 'maturation benefits' that students may not enjoy until they are in the last stages of the course.

Re-sits inevitably help students to meet their university offers, which makes Tony Blair's target of 50 per cent of 'young people' (aged between 18 and 30) securing a place in a higher education establishment by 2010 more plausible than when he first announced it at the Labour Party Conference in 1999 (Southampton Solent University, 2007). Gipps (1994, p.35) suggests that the fondness of policymakers for 'high-stakes testing programmes' is related to their belief that they "offer the appearance of a solution, and...as test scores rise over time, because of teaching to the test, [politicians] can point to the wisdom of their action." Curriculum 2000 is commonly perceived to be of such an orientation and its introduction into schools, only a year after Blair's target was set, is likely to have brought a wry smile to the face of Gipps and others like her who believe that a string of governments have cultivated an education system which is driven by political sound bites, based on results at every level and at all cost.

In a report entitled 'Testing to Destruction' published by the NASUWT in the spring of 2003, which criticised the increased emphasis on modularisation at A-level for 'overloading' sixth formers with too many examinations, the teachers' union maintained the view that Blair's target:

...fundamentally change[d] the demands we make of our examination system at 16+. Previous principles, that A Levels are, in effect, an entrance exam for Higher Education, to be passed by an elite few, no longer apply. A Levels are becoming a recognition of learning in their own right (NASUWT, 2003).

This line of reasoning had probably developed momentum years earlier, with the introduction of a criterion-referenced examinations system for A-levels in 1987, when grade boundaries became determined by the partition of a mark scale, rather than by the quota-based norm-referencing system which existed beforehand. Those who doubt the rigour of the former approach are likely to maintain that it instils in students the 'fail-safe' guarantee that a given standard of performance can *eventually* be achieved, if not at the first time of asking. Frequent reference is made in assessment-based literature to the malleable analogy of the 'learner-driver', who requires more than one attempt to pass their driving test, by supporters and critics of re-sits alike. Irrespective of which side is taken on this debate, it is of some significance that during the two decades preceding the change to the criterion-referenced system in 1987, the A-level pass rate was remarkably stable at only around 70 per cent, with roughly the top 10 per cent of candidates being awarded an 'A' grade (Coe, 2007).

The NASUWT's (2003) warning that even the post-curriculum 2000 system as it stood was not able to accommodate the aforementioned shift in student expectations in the light of Blair's target, may have contributed to remedial action by the QCA to make A-levels even more accessible. In the autumn of 2003, it removed the limit on the number of times that students could re-sit AS and A2 modules without jeopardising their highest score in each (QCA, 2003). Prior to this change, candidates were only allowed to carry forward their highest mark towards a final A-level grade, from the last *two* sittings of any module. It is unlikely that the 'one re-sit constraint' which existed before 2003 did little anyway, to appease those who equated modular examinations with a 'softer' qualification (Harris and Clark, 2006).

According to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the move to unlimited re-sits without any penalty was welcomed by examination officers, apparently because it relieved them of much of the bureaucratic complexity involved in their work (BBC News website, 2003). Intrigued as to what these 'benefits' might be, I sought the opinion of two experienced A-level examination officers from different schools, one from each sector, both of whom were somewhat perplexed by the idea that their administrative burden had been considerably reduced. One of them reflected: "There was no saving as the exam board did the calculations" (that is, the electronic accumulation of individual unit marks, together with the identification of the highest from each to be carried forward towards the total A-level score, presented in spreadsheet form for each candidate). He relaxed this view slightly, when he continued "...but I suppose I *did* have to spend some time before the change explaining the re-sit rules to candidates who were thinking of taking an exam for a *third* time to improve their mark." But this admission hardly reflects the kind of impact on examination officers' work that the DfES had supposedly anticipated. A sceptical interpretation of the move to unlimited re-sits might arrive at a more target-driven motive which is akin to the Government's university entrance ambitions, rather than one which is geared towards making assessment processes less bureaucratic.

Moreover, the premise upon which the DfES attempted to downplay the significance of the change in policy in relation to its likely impact on student uptake and consequently their overall performance at A-level, seems to have been rather fragile. A spokesperson for the department was quoted by the BBC as saying that as, apparently, less than one per cent of students re-sat their A-

levels in 2003 (a figure arrived at by the QCA from data it collected from forty AS-level units delivered by the three major awarding bodies in five different subjects), the decision to permit unlimited re-sits was “not a question of making passing any easier” (BBC News website, 2003). This finding is misleading, firstly by virtue of it consisting of data analysis based on a different system of re-sits when constraints were still applied. Secondly, it fails to acknowledge even the remotest chance of the emergence on a mass scale of an implicit dependence on re-sitting amongst a large proportion of sixth formers. This was a prospect which the QCA were in fact prepared to consider a few years later when it was, arguably, already firmly established as a trend. At the fifty fourth meeting of the Board of the QCA in February 2007, its Regulation and Standards Director, Isabel Nisbet, introduced a preliminary discussion which “focussed on the perception by some that having no limit on the number of re-sits of units could lead to a re-sitting culture which may reduce confidence in A-levels” (QCA website, 2007). The discussion still concluded, however, that unlimited re-sits should remain, but the published minutes from the meeting did not, surprisingly, offer any justification for their decision.

An abundance of data can be easily sought to make a persuasive case for those who argue, like Mansell (2007), that re-sits have been important in helping to ensure that virtually all students who take A-levels, pass them. Statistics which can be accessed from the QCA website for A-levels taken between 1992 to 2002, whilst obviously not proving conclusive as regards the *specific* impact that the restructuring of the A-level system in 2000 has had on results, still make interesting reading (QCA, 2002). Table 2 overleaf shows the national percentage grade breakdowns for A-level candidates over this period. Over this decade, the

overall pass rate went from 79 per cent in 1992, to 90.2 per cent in 2001, increasing at varying rates between 0.5 and 1.9 percentage points from one year to the next. It then rose to 94.3 per cent in 2002, an increase of over four percentage points for the first cohort of students to complete courses which had been restructured by the introduction of Curriculum 2000.

Virtually overnight, then, with the publication of results in August 2002, the prospect of a zero failure rate at A-level became a reality on a not too distant horizon. In addition, the increase in 'A' grades, up from 19.1 per cent in 2001 to 20.7 per cent in 2002, represented a more than two-fold percentage point increase on the yearly average for the previous nine years. As Bright *et. al.* (2003) reported, this rise may have been even higher if grades had not been artificially *kept down* (commonly referred to as the 'A-level fiasco') through some harsh marking and revision of marks by at least one major examination board in its attempt to avoid excessive 'grade inflation' in the summer of 2002. Only 2.8 per cent of A-levels in the summer of 2008 were ungraded, compared to the 30 per cent rate referred to earlier, which was maintained during the 1970s and much of the 1980s (Clark and Harris, 2008).

Re-sitting of modules has also helped to ensure that over a quarter of all candidates are now awarded an 'A' grade, which prompted further calls (as Frean, 2006) reports from various academic quarters (especially universities) and politicians alike for the creation of an A* to differentiate between the brightest students. In the independent sector, around a half of all A-level candidates achieve a grade 'A' (Smith, 2006). This further brings into question the integrity of A-levels themselves, frequently lauded by prominent educationalists as both

the 'gold standard' of the British education system and as qualifications of high international repute. Since the move to unlimited re-sits in 2003, in most schools, students have been presented with the opportunity to sit the same AS-level units up to four times and A2-level units twice. This adds further weight to those who argue, including the NASUWT in their aforementioned report in 2002, that Curriculum 2000 has produced an intensely 'high stakes' and overloaded examination system, with little time allowed for formative evaluation of the learning process by the teacher. Others may counter this claim by suggesting, for example, that for the payment of a relatively small fee, the modular system now allows students to request copies of their scripts from examination boards and then together with their teachers, analyse their answers with a view to re-sitting. In this way, some scope is provided for formative assessment based on the outcomes of external examinations, but probably on a more time-consuming one-to-one basis between teacher and student. Such opportunities were not offered by the pre-2000 linear model. The extent to which re-sits provide scope for formative assessment is examined in greater detail in this study's literature review and final, concluding chapter.

Brooks (2002, p.161) takes the same line as the NASUWT report. She points to the "unprecedented number of examination clashes" that students and examination officers alike are faced with, together with 'soaring examination costs', as two of the "practical difficulties (which) confirmed that sandwiching a new award between the GCSE and A2 years had resulted in an examinations overload." The media also reported on an increasing incidence of stress amongst sixth formers in the first cohort to complete the restructured two year course (BBC News website, 2002). Writing over a decade earlier, Riding (1990,

p.234), however, notes the value of an approach to assessment whereby "...if the opportunity to retake the tests, without penalty, is available...the level of anxiety associated with traditional testing could be reduced for many learners." Most of the former students of School X who participated in a group discussion in the preliminary stages of research for this study would concur with the view of Riding here. The consensus that they formed was that periodic exposure to the school assembly hall for the purpose of sitting external examinations probably had the effect of making them less nervous, than a system which relied more on testing to gauge their progress in a familiar classroom environment, with 'all or nothing' examinations at the end of a two year course.

Amidst its proposals for far-reaching reforms in the post-14 qualifications structure, the Secondary Heads' Association (2003) drew attention to the fact that "no other country has so many examinations, taking place so frequently in the life of a young person. " There is increasing pressure on sixth form teachers to devote more classroom time to revision for re-sits, even when only a minority of students in a set have been entered for them. This inevitably leaves fewer lessons for proper coverage of the syllabus, especially at the more taxing A2-level. Subsequently, a preoccupation with preparation for external examinations is likely to take a stronger hold given the immediacy of them, rather than the teaching and learning of more advanced concepts.

Further disruption to the delivery of lessons is inevitable during the re-sit period itself when poor attendance levels are likely, irrespective of whether or not a school allows 'official leave' for revision. It is, of course, those students who have not felt the necessity to re-sit AS-level modules and therefore eager to

progress with their courses at A2-level, who are penalised in particular. In the most demanding parts of the course, any potential that might exist for differentiation initiatives aimed at realising the full potential of a school's top 10 per cent or so 'gifted and talented' students might therefore be compromised by a reversion to 'teaching to the test' for the benefit of those with less academic prowess, sitting modules for the second or third time. Writing at around the time of the introduction of Curriculum 2000, Lambert and Lines (2000, p.86), however, were unable to see the potential for disruption which derived largely from preparation for re-sits, when they reflected that modules could "be re-done...with relatively little disturbance to other study". Chapter four contains further discussion on the issues associated with teaching during the time that re-sits take place.

Taking all this into account, there remain some persuasive arguments in favour of the small minority of schools, found almost invariably in the independent sector, whose students take *all* of their AS and A2-level modules at the end of the two year course, without the possibility of re-sits. From a conversation that I had with three university students who had experience of such a system, it was interesting, indeed refreshing, to see how their school had convinced them (and moreover their parents) of the advantages of an approach to public examinations which allowed greater continuity in teaching. These included the scope it allowed for deeper and broader coverage of topics (which particularly helped with synoptic elements in A2 modules), and that the prospect of examinations without re-sits helped to ensure they prepared thoroughly for them and 'got it right first time'.

In the new system of two AS-level plus two A2-level modules, introduced from September 2008, as opposed to the 'three plus three' format which it replaces, candidates are still able to re-sit a unit any number of times within the shelf-life of a subject's specification. However, in my experience, few re-sit after they leave school. The highest mark from each sitting is still counted towards the final qualification and the 50:50 weighting for the AS and A2 units is also retained. A course comprising of fewer units naturally means fewer re-sits and as the syllabus content for each will take longer to cover, the prospect of students being ready for AS-level exams in the January of year 12, and then A2-level exams in the January of year 13, is likely to be considered unrealistic by many teachers. This may be even more the case with those subjects which are not usually taught until the sixth form in independent schools, such as Business Studies and Economics. Whether or not this dilemma deters teachers from 'working the system' and rushing students into examinations is of course a different matter. Generally speaking, however, the changes to A-level reduce the examination load for sixth formers in a new structure which appears to represent a partial return to the pre-Curriculum 2000 system, complete with a pledge by QCA to reintroduce longer exams with tougher questions (QCA website 2007a).

The QCA could in fact have gone much further if it had acted upon a discussion during its aforementioned fifty fourth Board Meeting, and 'decoupled' AS-level from A2-level (QCA website, 2007). Such a model would involve AS-level and A2-level grades being generated separately, without the crucial benefit of the former being able to affect the latter. At a stroke, this would have removed virtually all of the incentive to re-sit AS-level units. Decoupling the levels would undoubtedly have found many supporters, including Lloyd (1999, p.125) who

pointed to a fundamental flaw' in the Curriculum 2000 arrangement of having "awards...based on two standards, one lower than the other." He qualifies this view by suggesting that "one would not contemplate allowing candidates to carry GCSE marks forward to contribute to A-level assessment..." adding (which could be construed as a swipe at re-sits themselves) "...let alone take GCSE papers in their A-level year and use marks gained in them in that way." Clearly, Lloyd had more confidence in the system which preceded Curriculum 2000, when AS-levels still counted as half of the full award, but their syllabuses, followed over two years instead of one, were written to full A-level standard.

A number of schools in the independent sector have still expressed concern that the 2008 changes do not go far enough in meeting their demands for a sufficiently rigorous qualification which also provides adequate preparation for the transition to higher education. Frean (2007), for example, draws attention to the "growing number of private schools", which were considering the Pre-U; this is despite the options that existed for their brightest students to sit more challenging examinations alongside their A-levels, such as the Advanced Extension Award (AEA). These examinations have around only a 50 per cent pass rate (JCQ, 2007) and are awarded on a three point basis: distinction, merit and ungraded. They have shown some growth in popularity with the Russell Group of elite universities, and Cambridge in particular has included success in them as part of their conditional offer of a place to some students. Research for this study, however, enabled me to conclude that failure to sit AEAs in schools where they are offered, alongside A-levels, is unlikely to jeopardise, or impose limits on, a student's application for university.

Paton (2007) estimated that around 300 schools in the UK, mainly in the independent sector, were preparing to offer either the International Baccalaureate or Pre-U Diploma in September 2008. Whilst this has proved to be an overestimate, the appeal of the Pre-U Diploma certainly increased hugely through the 2006-07 academic year, especially to some of the country's most privileged schools, Eton and Harrow amongst them (Frean, 2006). They argue that it goes much further than the new 'two plus two' unit system in restoring the traditional content of A-levels and, significantly, it does not include the option of re-sits (Frean, 2006). The linearity of the Pre-U Diploma, with assessment at the end of the course, particularly appeals to them, in that it should allow more time for innovative teaching and deeper learning, rather than preparing more narrowly for modular examinations. There is also more emphasis, compared to the re-structured A-level, on essay-based assessment. More specifically as regards the focus of this dissertation, the Pre-U syllabus for Economics (but less so for Business Management) contains an examination structure (multiple choice, essays and data) which is similar to the pre-Curriculum 2000 formats for the three main examination boards (CIE, 2008).

To add even more fragmentation to the nation's examination system, September 2008 also saw the introduction of the first five 14 to 19 Diplomas in Engineering; Construction and the Built Environment; Information Technology; Creative and Media, and Society, Health and Development (Attwood, 2007). This is a vocational alternative, fashioned on some of the proposals (but without explicitly being acknowledged as such by the Labour Government of the day) made in the 2004 Tomlinson Report's on the 14 to 19 curriculum (Mansell, 2007, pp 145-46). In what may seem to be a distinct case of déjà vu with vocational qualifications in

general over the past two decades, Lipsett (2007) feared that there was a danger that the Diploma may have “failed before it ha[d] even begun” given the distinct lack of interest which was shown in it by the commercial world (including the Confederation of British Industry) after it was unveiled by the Government. Paton (2007) was equally as pessimistic about the Diploma’s ability to rise above ‘third division’ status, in relation to academic alternatives and this view is reflected in Woolcock’s (2008) report which found that “fewer than four in ten university admissions officers saw them as ‘good alternatives’ to A levels.”

Marley (2008) also reports that “universities have voiced concern whether [the diplomas] will give pupils the knowledge and skills needed by undergraduates.” Even more damning, writing a decade earlier, Young and Spours (1998, p.342) opined that the 1980s and 1990s “is littered with attempts to establish a credible system of vocational qualifications...none of [which] has shown any signs of offering routes to genuine vocational specialisation of the kind found...in continental Europe.” Attwood (2007) notes that Diplomas “encompassing traditionally academic subjects [such as]...languages, science and humanities” are not being introduced until 2011. With this in mind, it is my argument that they should have come on stream in 2008 in place of areas of study such as ‘media’, commonly perceived as a ‘soft option’ at A-level (and thereafter studied in the ‘new generation’ of universities which emerged in the 1990s, considered second rate at best by most students in independent schools), in order to give the new qualification a more assured start. Supporters of this second wave of subjects include senior personnel from the Russell Group of universities and the Association of Colleges (Lipsett, 2007a).

In an attempt to counter fears about the stature of the Diploma, in the autumn of 2007 the Schools Secretary, Ed Balls, announced that its expansion to include more academic subjects could see it become the “qualification of choice” and the “jewel in the crown of the education system” (cited, Garner, 2007c). Whether or not this means, ultimately, the first distant soundings of the death knell for A-level, with Balls confirming that a final decision on its future will not be made until 2013 (Garner, 2007c), remains to be seen. One of the arguments made by this study in the literature review is that the new A-level is likely to remain popular over the next few years with the vast majority of independent senior schools, despite widespread threats made by the sector to seek alternatives to it.

1.3 Dissertation aims

Amongst the numerous issues that have triggered debate over the past few years, which can be considered to be relevant to the increasing significance of re-sits in the examination programme, they include:

1. Stakeholder interests – who benefits the most from the re-sits: the school and its staff on one hand for example, or students and their parents on the other?
2. An even more fragmented relationship between post-16 education and universities, with ‘bite-size’ learning preventing students from developing the independent research skills expected of undergraduates.

3. The cost of re-sits and the extent to which this could be disenfranchising less affluent students and/or schools. James (2000, p.351) drew attention to England achieving “the dubious distinction of subjecting its school students to more external tests than any other country in the world and spending more money on doing so.” The scale of expenditure which is required to support this system is put into perspective by Garner (2007a), who reported that the Association of School and College Leaders concluded from its research that schools typically spend more on examination fees than on learning resources, and that the former expense had increased by over 50 per cent between 2004 and 2007.
4. The extent to which universities are revising their admissions policies, for example, by making offers of places to students which have to be met without the need for re-sits.
5. Disillusionment with A-levels and a move towards qualifications which may command better national and international recognition (such as the International Baccalaureate programme and the University of Cambridge International Examinations board’s more recently devised Pre-U Diploma).

The primary aim of this dissertation, however, is to consider the impact which AS-level re-sits have had on students who took either Business Studies or Economics at A-level between 2005 and 2008, at an independent, selective boys’ school in the West Midlands, which is also a member of the Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference (HMC). It attempts to throw light on the rationale which students at School X employed when deciding what and when to re-sit,

and the extent to which the time and effort they expended in preparing for these exams was reflected by an improvement in their overall performance at A-level. In pursuit of this aim, it compares and contrasts the fortunes of Economics and Business Studies students, as two groups with some distinctive qualities. A month after the QCA's decision to remove its 'one re-sit only' (without penalty) constraint in the autumn of 2003, Guy (2003) was already offering advice to students on 'how to work the system'. He stressed the importance of taking advantage of AS-level re-sits, given their equal overall weighting with second year A2-level units and the fact that there is only one opportunity at the most (none in the case of School X), to re-sit the latter at the end of the course. Guy also impresses on students the importance of balancing the benefits of improving their marks against the drawbacks of preparation time and how this in itself might have an adverse impact on their progress in other modules and subjects.

In order to assess the extent to which the impact that AS-level re-sits have had at School X is typical of developments in the independent sector, comparisons are made in this study with business education departments in a number of similar schools in the Midlands. Parents who pay to send their children to a selective school are not only interested in its position in examination league tables, but also in its ability to produce superior results in comparison to local alternatives in the maintained sector. An independent school's stance on re-sits is likely to be sensitive to the demands of this key stakeholder group and the pressure it is able to exert, even though this may lie rather uneasily alongside its publicly declared ambition to provide a 'rounded education', rather than an environment which can be likened to an 'examination factory'.

In the immediate aftermath of the publication of the summer 2007 results, newspapers reported extensively on the apparent 'grade gap' which continues to widen between the two sectors. However, figures quoted on the Guardian's education website (2007) amongst other places, which refer to the proportion of 'A' grades achieved by students in the independent sector increasing by 6.5 per cent between 2002 and 2007, compared to just 3 per cent over the same period in the maintained sector, seem to give a false impression. The fact that the independent sector's figures show an increase from a much higher base of 41.3 per cent, compared to 16.5 per cent in the maintained sector, makes the improvement in the former look more impressive than it really is. In making such comparisons, it would also be more accurate for such reports to refer to 'percentage point' increases, rather than their tendency to cite changes in 'per cent' terms. In the latter, the increase in grade 'As' in the maintained sector was actually 18.1 per cent over this period, compared to 15.7 per cent in the independent sector.

1.4 Scenario for place and time of research

The specifications which are followed by candidates who opt for these subjects at School X are OCR for Economics and AQA for Business Studies. Both are not offered at GCSE so cannot be taken by students until the sixth form (which is a typical arrangement in the vast majority of independent schools), in an A-level curriculum without any alternative paths of study, such as the IB, or the various vocational courses that exist at post-16 level. The three year period (2005-08)

over which research was conducted for this study is of interest for numerous reasons, including:

1.4.1 The revision of the AS-level examinations policy at School X

For the first time since the introduction of modular examinations in 2000, at the start of the 2005-06 academic year, the Head Master gave departments the authority, if they so wished, to enter lower sixth (year 12) candidates for a January AS-level paper. Most departments took this opportunity, but some decided that students would be insufficiently prepared for an external examination in their subject after just a few months into the course and declined. The Head Master did, however, maintain a school-wide policy (which is much against the grain of the vast majority of schools, in both the independent and maintained sectors, but especially the latter), which prevented any A2-level examinations being taken until the summer of the upper sixth (year 13). Therefore, students are still only allowed a single attempt - just 'one bite at the cherry', as far as second year A2 units are concerned.

1.4.2 Changes to the A-level options policy at School X (Economics and Business Studies)

From September 2005 the school's A-level options policy was also changed to allow sixth formers to opt for *both* Economics and Business Studies, rather than

just one or the other as previously was the case. Unlike most independent schools, students at School X also became permitted to continue with both subjects through to A2-level if they so wished, but given the *perception* that this is frowned upon by many universities, they are encouraged by the school (and also the department) to terminate their study of one of them at the end of the lower sixth. As anticipated, during the first three years that this policy has operated, only a handful of students in total have opted to study both subjects at AS-level and all of them have only continued with one at A2-level. Colleagues that I have who teach both subjects at other schools where the same policy is applied, in both the public and private sector, report similar patterns. Contrary to a common belief, there is also a consensus amongst them of experiencing little discrimination from universities against students who take both. My trawl of admission policies on a dozen or so university websites also seemed to confirm this, except where candidates were intending to apply for a business education subject (such as at the University of York), where there was *some* tendency to prefer that only one of either Business Studies or Economics was studied at A-level. Where discrimination by universities *does* exist in respect of the two subjects, however, is discussed in the next section.

1.4.3 The distinction between ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ subjects

In the summer of 2006, the University of Cambridge published a list on its website (University of Cambridge, 2006) of what it called ‘non-traditional’ A-level

subjects, which it considered as being “less effective preparation” for its courses.

The full list of twenty subjects is:

Accounting
Art and Design
Business Studies
Communication Studies
Dance
Design and Technology
Drama/Theatre Studies
Film Studies
Health and Social Care
Home Economics
Information and Communication Technology
Leisure Studies
Media Studies
Music Technology
Performance Studies
Performing Arts
Photography
Physical Education
Sports Studies
Travel and Tourism

Publication of this list added more weight to detail previously confined to the prospectuses of a handful of ‘elite’ universities, such as the London School of Economics, which had effectively been dividing A-level subjects into first and second class groups for a number of years, in its advice to prospective applicants. The University of Cambridge might well have been influenced by the findings of Tymms and Coe’s research at Durham University between 2000 and 2004 (cited in Halpin, 2004), which looked at the A-level grades of students who had achieved a grade ‘B’ at GCSE in the same subject. They concluded that the subjects where students went on to score a ‘C’ grade at A-level (which, incidentally, included both Business Studies *and* Economics), were ‘easy’, and

those where they only managed a 'D' grade (including German and Computing), were 'hard'.

Only A-level Business Studies out of the two subjects which are of particular interest to this study, however, was not deemed worthy as being of 'traditional' status by Cambridge, perceived as it seemingly is by the majority of educationalists at all levels in the industry as a quasi-vocational and inferior alternative to the apparently more academically-oriented Economics. These views are likely to have been reinforced by numerous studies which have investigated influences on curriculum choice at A-level, such as that by Bachan (2004) who used average differentials in GCSE performance data, particularly Mathematics, to conclude that "Economics candidates appear better qualified than their Business Studies counterparts". A few years earlier, analysis undertaken by Skinner (cited in Reilly and Bachan, p.5, 2002) during the latter half of the 1990s ranked Economics the 9th most difficult subject – eighteen places above Business Studies, out of a total of 35 A-levels. It also worth pondering, however, whether or not the Cambridge list is supposed to be exhaustive and contain every A-level subject which is deemed to be 'inappropriate'. Where, for example, is Sociology? Frequently considered by educationalists as the 'softest of the lot' and recently singled out (along with Drama and Media Studies) by Coe's team at Durham University as being at least a grade easier than Physics, Chemistry and Biology (Attwood, 2008).

The advice given to prospective applicants by Cambridge is that the study of any *two* non-traditional subjects on its list, out of the three taken (typically) at A2-level, would render applications to study at any of its colleges too weak for

consideration. Conversations that I had with sixth formers making applications to higher education the year after the Cambridge list was published revealed, on the whole, that they actually *welcomed* such transparency in admission policies ('they knew where they stood – better than wondering why they had been rejected'). This was at a time of much speculation about independent schools being discriminated against by certain universities. Some students even reflected that earlier publication of the list would have in fact helped them in their final GCSE year to make more informed A-level choices. The lack of "awareness of where education is taking them" amongst students in the middle of their GCSEs was typical of comments voiced by a group of university lecturers which gave their opinions on the subject of 'information and guidance' for young people in their last two years of compulsory schooling (Wilde *et. al.* 2006, p.22). Many students, however, are still likely to see 'hidden agenda' in information which is supposedly intended to 'guide', such as Cambridge's list and avoid 'inappropriate' subjects altogether, even though its covering note implies that study of just *one* of them will not jeopardise an application to any of its colleges.

Some of the more common questions which I have to field at school 'open days' from parents of prospective sixth formers concern the status, perceived or otherwise, of the two subjects offered by my department, particularly as regards the kudos which universities attach to them. More often than not, their opinions about the two subjects have already been firmly established by what they have gleaned from various sources, such as university prospectuses and the media. Almost invariably, probing of this nature comes from parents who have already concluded that Economics is the 'superior' choice of the two. As Head of Department, it has become increasingly difficult over the past two or three years

to deliver wholly transparent speeches to groups of parents and prospective students about the virtues of both subjects and at the same time give equal weight to their merits (as is in my interest).

Unsurprisingly, there has been a significant sea-change at School X in the popularity of Economics and Business Studies, with student numbers entering the lower sixth in September 2007 increasing by around 40 per cent in the former, compared to a drop of about a third in the latter (data showing the extent of this turnaround between the two subjects is provided in Appendix 1). The figures for September 2008 (Appendix 1) show an even greater shift in student numbers between Economics and Business Studies in favour of the former, which indicates that the turnaround in popularity, certainly at School X, seems set to stay. As discussed in more detail later, the overlap of knowledge and analytical content between modules, both within and between AS- and A2-level in Economics, makes it a fertile subject for re-sitting, which arguably makes it an even more attractive proposition for sixth form study. In response to my request for his views on the impact of the current widespread perception of the two subjects, a former, senior examiner in A-level Business Studies (who like myself is not convinced by the 'hard' and 'soft' distinction that is made between them), e-mailed me the following:

“...there's no doubt that the Cambridge list of 'less desirable' A Levels is hitting us hard – especially as it is so unjust. In effect, if Media Studies is easy, then even if people are a bit sniffy about it, the reward comes from the bonus grade. With us, a switch to Economics will not cost anyone a grade because it isn't harder – so why stay

with a subject for which you get inadequate credit for the tough struggles involved? And in the independent sector parents are pretty quick to twig. I don't think there's much more to be done other than to grin and bear it – the more one raises issues like this the more it spreads the word.”

Findings from primary research which are considered in chapter four show similar movements away from Business Studies and towards Economics in several of the other independent schools which have made contributions to the research for this study, referred to anonymously as Group Y. This group consists of eight member schools in the Midlands which meet annually on a departmental basis to discuss various topics such as teaching strategies and resources. The increased popularity in Economics, perhaps to a large extent at the expense of Business Studies, seems to be mirroring a more general drift back towards traditionally 'harder' subjects such as Mathematics and single sciences over the past two to three years amongst brighter students, particularly those who attend independent schools, and selective schools in the maintained sector (Lightfoot, 2007). It could be the case that many more students are now choosing their subjects with a view to improving their employment prospects in lucrative professions after they graduate from university. Wilde *et. al.* (2006, p.25) for example, found lecturers who were critical of “the instrumentalist approach of some students, who were open about using HE as a passport to employment [and]...adopting a *strategic* approach to their learning.”

Undergraduates who are motivated by financial gain might be taking heed of advice offered by organisations such as the Institute of Physics (IOP). On its

website in 2005, it referred to a Pricewaterhouse Coopers report which estimated that physics and chemistry graduates earn nearly £200,000 more on average during their working lives than students graduating in traditional, but non-scientific subjects such as History and English (IOP website, 2005). Other 'rate of return' studies by Dolton and Vignoles in 2000 (cited, Bachan, 2004, p.2), conclude that 'wage premiums' of up to 10 per cent can be expected by workers who have A-level Mathematics, compared to those without it. These are hardly shocking revelations, but it gives rise to the idea that students might *themselves* prefer the relative objectivity of equating the study of certain subjects with potential salaries later in life, as a more meaningful premise for categorising the value of A-levels, than the rather more, arguably, subjectively determined 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' groupings used by the University of Cambridge and other institutions.

Simple logic dictates that if the 'list' is helping to divert bright students into 'tough' subjects such as science and mathematics (Paton, 2008), they are also the subjects which generate the highest proportion of 'A' and 'B' grades, even when allowing for the notion that they are more difficult. The summer 2007 A-level results at the national level showed that there were three to four times more grade 'As' in such 'harder' subjects, compared to 'modern' subjects like Media Studies and Information and Communication Technology, which are typically perceived as being 'soft' (Education Guardian website, 2007). For Economics and Business Studies specifically, the difference between them was less marked, but still highly significant, with nearly twice the proportion of candidates (32 per cent) in the former 'traditional' subject achieving 'A' grades, than the latter 'non-traditional' subject (18 per cent). Table 3 overleaf shows how the proportionate

difference in grade 'As' between the two subjects at the national level has remained stable, at around 100 per cent in favour of Economics, over the last sixteen years. The difference has certainly not been as dramatic (only marginally favouring Economics) or as consistent at School X since the introduction of Curriculum 2000 (see Appendix 2) for a number of reasons, amongst them being:

- The tendency for the coursework component in Business Studies, which the department enters all candidates for, to generate each year at the national level (as I was informed by an ex-chief examiner in the subject) roughly twice the proportion of grade 'As' that are achieved in the written alternative, which in turn is sat under examination conditions.
- Most obviously, the selective nature of the school, including a minimum of four grade 'Ds' at AS-level to be able to proceed to the upper sixth, means that few candidates fail to score top grades in either subject in the department.
- Combined with the previous point, the generous mark range (as discussed later) which exists for the top grade of 'A', compared to the range for grades 'B' to 'D' (see Appendix 3 for how AS and A-level grades are determined by a unified mark scale).

Figures for all UK A-level candidates (Joint Council for Qualifications website, 2006 and 2007) appear to confirm a downward trend nationally in the relative popularity of Business Studies in recent years, if not to anything like the extent

which seems to be occurring in School X, as referred to earlier. In 2005 for example, 3.9 per cent of all A-level candidates took this subject, dropping to 3.8 per cent in 2006 and then 3.7 per cent in 2007. This was still enough, however, to nudge it into the Daily Telegraph's 'top ten subject decreases' (Daily Telegraph, 2007). Over the same period, the number of entries for Economics has remained stable at 2.2 per cent for each of these years.

It is likely, however, if the logic of Lightfoot's (2007) arguments are followed, that the apparent resurgence of Economics in the independent sector has been counterbalanced by a continuing trend in the non-selective maintained sector to opt for supposedly 'softer' alternatives such as Business Studies. The fact that sixth forms in private schools have always tended to attract healthy candidate numbers for Economics (Reilly and Bachan, 2002) also needs to be taken into account. In the case of all-boys' schools in particular, such as School X, so too do the findings of Bachan (2004) which suggest that males are more likely to study Economics than Business Studies, especially if they are from the Far East. School X has in fact just a single boarding house containing fifty, mainly sixth form students, of whom around ninety percent are from China. A significant proportion of them opt for Economics each year, whereas Business Studies is unlikely to attract any at all (see Appendix 1). It is my belief, having spent six years as a tutor in the boarding house, that this reflects the highly instrumental approach that many Far Eastern students take towards making 'strong choices'; for subjects at A-level, in relation to universities and afterwards, as regards their career. This kind of reasoning is evident in a report by Shepherd (2008), particularly when she summarises "Chinese students wanted to know that their studies would enhance their short- and long-term career prospects."

Even so, the recent change in fortune in general terms for the two subjects has been fairly dramatic when, for example, the national statistics for *all* examination entries referred to by Bachan (2004, p.3) are considered. These show that between 1992 and 2000, Economics suffered a decline in student numbers of over 50 per cent of the total number of entries, compared to an increase of 80 per cent in Business Studies. Clearly, as the Daily Telegraph's 2007 figures show, Business Studies at A-level still attracts roughly 40 per cent more students at A-level than Economics, but, writing three years before the publication of Cambridge's 'list', Abbott's (2003, p.4) belief that "it is extremely unlikely that Economics will regain its former popularity with students" now looks to be a less certain prediction. More perplexing, however, is the BBC article (BBC News website, 2008) which reports the University of Buckingham's Professor Smithers' fears that Economics may 'die out' as a school subject. This is contrary to the Daily Telegraph's figures and certainly against an apparent trend towards the subject, as shown in this study, in the independent sector (especially in those schools where numbers are buoyed up by Far Eastern demand). Significantly, Smithers' claim was based on falling student numbers in Economics between 1996 and 2006, before its resurgence over the last two years or so, but his concerns for the subject were also triggered by the fact that it attracts few graduates on to teacher-training courses, which may still threaten its revival over the long term.

1.4.4 The relaxation of School X's AS-level re-sit policy

The 2005 to 2008 period also saw an apparent relaxation of School X's AS-level re-sit policy, which had previously restricted upper sixth students to re-sitting a maximum of four units (that is, an average of one unit per AS-level subject studied in the lower sixth), in the January of their A2 year. The rationale which was understood to be employed by senior management at the school in placing restrictions on re-sits, was that too many would overload students with exams. Subsequently, both their ability to perform at their optimum in each re-sit *and* make adequate progress in the more academically challenging A2-level units, with all the inevitable disruption to revision, would thus be compromised. The school's management may also be worried about the possibility of a trend developing amongst leading universities, especially in highly competitive courses such as Law and Medicine, where places may be offered on the strength of grades obtained at first sittings only. The British Medical Association (2006), for example, reports on the "discordance with regard to the acceptability of A level re-sits" which has apparently emerged amongst most universities offering medicine. Research undertaken for this study involving School X's Economics and Business Studies students, however, indicates that few of them, if *any* in a given year, have been faced with fulfilling a 'no re-sits' proviso as part of their offer of a place.

1.4.5 Universities and re-sits

The A/B pass rate and average A-level points tally for a school (most measures used by newspapers exclude General Studies grades, *The Independent* being one of the few exceptions), remain the key statistics which are used by the quality press for compiling performance league tables. For selective schools such as School X, the number of successful Oxbridge applicants which they can boast each year is also important for proving its academic worth. There have been a number of reasons why some students of this calibre in the school have avoided re-sits. Unsurprisingly, as I discovered through my research, most were simply satisfied with their results first time around. Others were wary about the prospect of providing their chosen universities with performance data which showed that they could only meet the conditions of their offer of a place with the aid of re-sits. Over the past year or so, however, more Oxbridge candidates at the school, both before and after receiving conditional offers of a place at one of the two universities, have taken the opportunity to re-sit. The fact I have found little evidence at School X to suggest that re-sits jeopardise their application, as examined in chapter four, may be a contributory factor.

Like School X, there has been a general tendency for Group Y schools to both offer their sixth form students more opportunities to re-sit their examinations, and relax their own limits on the number they can take in each series. The understanding amongst colleagues that Oxbridge colleges tend *not* to consult the re-sit data they now have access to, may also be a factor which has influenced independent schools to impose few constraints on the number of modules which are re-sat. In their quest to differentiate between candidates who have the same

overall subject grades, *all* universities entered an arrangement with UCAS and the examination boards to access, from summer 2007, the grades which have been achieved by students in each A-level module, including re-sits (Garner, 2006). Some universities appear particularly keen to siphon off the 'very best' from merely the 'best' candidates, but argue (Robertson, 2005), and it is hard to say otherwise, that the outgoing grading system does not allow this kind of selectivity. Candidates are awarded an 'A' grade for a total uniform mark scale (UMS) score of 480 and above, from a maximum of 600. In other words, an outstanding student can record a UMS up to 120 points higher than needed to achieve the top grade. In contrast, each grade between 'A' to 'E' is separated by only 60 UMS points (Appendix 3 shows how UMS scales convert into AS and A-level grade boundaries).

Universities are being further helped by the QCA in their efforts to scrutinise the quality of A-level candidates. From 2008, the revamped A-level structure, down from the present six unit format to just four, involves harder questions and longer exams of a more traditional essay orientation. A number of subjects, including Business Studies, have also lost their coursework component. On the other hand, it is reasonable to think that the introduction of an A* grade from 2010 as part of a new seven point 'stretch and challenge' scale for candidates scoring more than an average UMS of 90 per cent in their A2-level units (combined with a grade 'A' in the full A-level qualification), as opposed to 80 per cent *overall* in the outgoing system, *should* result in universities being less eager to see scores for individual modules. The prospect of this happening, along with the future role of other methods of selection that are used by universities, such as entrance examinations, is discussed in more detail in chapter five.

Furthermore, as reported by Garner (2006a), findings from a survey by *The Independent on Sunday* indicated that the eagerness of universities to be more selective may have been counterbalanced to an extent by the introduction of top-up fees of £3000 a year, starting in 2006 and along with it the prospect of disenfranchising less affluent students who otherwise would aspire towards a career in higher education. The same survey revealed that numerous universities, including members of the elite Russell Group such as Nottingham and Exeter, were unable to fill places on science and engineering courses in that year, and as a result were forced to make offers of lower grades. If such a trend took hold it might actually suit the independent sector, not only because it has been less inclined than the maintained sector to steer students away from traditionally 'tougher' subjects such as Mathematics and Physics (Johnson, 2006), but also because of the ability of relatively wealthy parents to provide them with financial support through university. After the downwards blip of 2006, however, UCAS reported in the summer of 2007 that the number of applicants having their places confirmed on results day exceeded 300,000 for the first time – an increase of 6 per cent on the previous year (UCAS website, 2007). Government ministers were quick to claim that this increase was largely due to their introduction of grants worth nearly £3000 for applicants from deprived backgrounds, although more university bursaries of up to £5000 may be helping to reduce the financial divide which exists between students from the two sectors (Garner, 2007).

2. A search and critical review of relevant literature

2.1 Why has the A-level qualification survived for so long?

This chapter consists of a search and critical review of relevant literature. It is split into three sections. In order to provide background information for the more academic objectives of sections two and three, it firstly summarises the development of the A-level qualification and offers some explanation for why changes to it have tended to be 'gradual' rather than 'dramatic'. The second section examines how these incremental changes to the A-level qualification over the past two decades or so have helped it to retain the support of those parties with an interest in its survival and in turn contribute to its longevity. First introduced in the middle of the last century, it was intended "...to cater for the top 20 per cent of the ability range in preparation for university study or entry to the professions" (Brooks, 2002, p.171). Today, over 300,000 places in higher education institutions are offered each year to A-level students (BBC News website, 2007a)

The final section considers how over the same period of time, since the late 1980s, the nature of the qualification, whilst remaining essentially 'summative' as a form of assessment, measuring what students have learnt through testing and examination, has evolved to contain some important characteristics of a more

formative approach to the post-16 education process. I believe that it could be reasonably argued, for example, that the process of re-sitting and access to examination scripts (either by candidates or ordered by schools in their original form after all re-marking has been undertaken) allows the kind of "...frequent, interactive assessments of student progress and understanding" that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development considers important in summative approaches to teaching and learning (OECD, 2005, p.13).

2.1.1 An outline of key developments

General Certificate of Education Advanced Levels have now been in existence for well over half a century. They were first introduced in 1951 as a replacement for the Higher School Certificate (Kingdom, 1991, p.46) initially on a pass or fail basis, and then after two years on a grading system consisting of a two level scale: pass and distinction, achieved, respectively, by obtaining 40 per cent and 75 per cent of the final marks (Robinson, 2001). Students who narrowly failed to meet the A-level pass standard were awarded an O-level pass for reaching a level of attainment, which was equivalent to a pass at Ordinary Level. This system remained until 1963 when, in its penultimate year as the institution overseeing the development of the A-level qualification, the Secondary School Examination Council introduced a seven scale grading system (House of Commons, 2003). This ranged from grade 'A' as the highest pass grade, through to grade 'E' as the lowest. The O-level pass was retained, with grade 'F' indicating an outright fail. A norm-referencing approach based on 'approximate thirds' was used, whereby the

top 35 per cent of candidates were awarded 'good A-level passes' of 'A' to 'C', followed by another 35 per cent who achieved the 'bare pass' grades of 'D' and 'E' (Kingdom, pp 74-75). In effect, therefore, 30 per cent of candidates were expected to fail each year, irrespective of the quality of their answers.

This system of grading remained in place until 1987, when it was slightly modified to include a new grade 'N' instead of the 'allowed ordinary' grade, which became redundant with the introduction of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (Kingdom, p.84). Grade 'F' was also replaced by grade 'U', to indicate where a candidate failed to achieve a pass grade. The same year, 1987, in fact proved to be a busy time on the 16-19 educational landscape...

Firstly, there was the switch to a criterion referencing system, whereby grades became awarded against pre-determined performance criteria. It is difficult not to resist arriving at the conclusion that this change triggered the start of a rising pass rate at A-level as within just two years of it being introduced, the pass rate had increased to 75 per cent (BBC News website, 2001). Secondly, in response to widespread criticism that an "overly narrow curriculum" at post-16 was "forcing students to become specialised prematurely" (School Examinations and Assessment Council, 1990, p.21), Advanced Supplementary levels were introduced in 1987 to encourage them to broaden their knowledge.

The original form of this qualification, studied to the same depth as the full A-level but consisting of fewer topics, was logically worth half the number of

UCAS points. It lasted until the introduction of Curriculum 2000 and from then onwards, modular A-level courses have consisted of AS-level study in the first year, before progression to the academically more challenging A2-level in the second. Both parts are equally weighted, but university offers are invariably conditional on the successful completion of the full two year course (although occasionally a 'points offer' may include subjects which have been taken to AS-level only, in addition to those taken through to A2-level). The introduction of new A-level specifications from September 2008 leaves the weighting of the two parts, AS and A2, unchanged, but the inclusion of an A* for outstanding candidates extends the grading system back to a seven point scale. In addition, the number of modules which are examined is reduced from six to four in the vast majority of subjects.

The survival of the A-level from the era of post-war austerity to at least 2013, the year which has been set by the present Labour Government for a review of its future, has meant that the qualification has developed a 'pedigree' as the country's 'academic gold standard' which Brooks (2002, p.171) believes has helped to explain its longevity. Whilst Brooks (p.171) plays down the impact which the incremental changes detailed briefly above have had on maintaining its dominance as the flag-bearer of the post-16 curriculum, others, such as William (2000, p.1), are more concerned by their contribution to 'divorcing' educational assessment from the process of learning. Despite an ever-extending list of wide-ranging concerns about the qualification, including the belief that it has become 'too academic', or 'too easy', or 'too specialised' - arguments which in various guises have been voiced from a number of quarters for decades, its survival may have simply been assured by the

continued support it has received from its key stakeholders. *They* may have refrained from being *too* critical about its longevity and how it has been changed on the grounds that more significant reforms, or even its abandonment altogether – possibly for a quasi-vocational/academic qualification imposed by the Government on *all* post-16 students, might well have made matters much worse for them.

Their restraint is likely to come as little surprise to Eggleston (1990). From a sociological perspective, he sums up in his consideration of “who and what should be examined” in schools, that “to achieve...desired changes, an attractive route would appear to be to take the examination system apart...yet in doing so the very process where...many such...critics found their own route to power may be cut off” (p.66). An interpretation of Eggleston’s (p.66) conclusion could be that “the gradual rather than the dramatic model of social change” which he considers to be ‘inescapable’ for ‘social behaviour’ in the context of terminating a long-established examination system, is applicable to the A-level qualification. This is in light of the legitimacy which can be afforded to it after being in existence for nearly sixty years.

Using the evidence of Dore and Berg, Eggleston (1990, cited, p.65) makes an observation that may also be relevant to the future support of A-level from its key stakeholders, especially in light of post-16 alternatives, when he suggests that “employers, colleges and universities and the students themselves – are remarkably conservative and are unwilling to devote time or effort to ‘unproven’ qualifications. In the all-important context of higher education, Wilde *et. al.* (2006, p.25) found that “A-levels remain the key entry

requirement even if institutions identify problems with them...UCAS tariff points are awarded for [other] qualifications...but they may not be viewed as equivalent by some [universities] for admissions purposes in practice.” In a discussion that I had with the senior examiner in Business Studies referred to earlier, he was “absolutely convinced” that the association of ‘business’ with ‘vocational’ qualifications did “more harm to the reputation of the subject and its perception by universities”, than both the Cambridge list and the aforementioned research by Coe, as to what constitutes a ‘hard’ and ‘easy’ A-level. In a broader sense at post-16 level, its reputation is also likely to suffer by its further inclusion in Cambridge’s additional list of five subjects (also published in 2006), which the university considers to be “less effective at the higher level of the International Baccalaureate” (BBC News website, 2006).

Implicit in Wilde’s remark above is the understanding that he is referring to ‘academic’ A-levels as opposed to the ten ‘applied’ A-levels (including ‘Business’) that can also be studied. Research conducted by Bailey and Bekhradnia, 2008) concluded that students taking vocational A-levels are much less likely to attend prestigious universities, which is likely to reduce their chances of securing graduate-type employment. Therefore, the Government’s admission (BBC News website, 2007b) that these courses “will no longer be needed as part of the qualification offer in England”, when the first cohort from the expanded 14-19 Diploma programme qualifies in 2013, is hardly surprising.

2.1.2 Stakeholder interests

This part of the chapter considers how the development of the A-level qualification, together with the incremental changes made to it over the years, has been influenced and supported by those parties which have arguably had the strongest vested interest in its retention: the government, universities, independent schools, parents, and the students themselves. In accordance with the overall aims of this dissertation, special attention will be given to the context of the independent sector at sixth form level (as well as the study of Economics and Business Studies at A-level). An underlying theme which should be apparent to the reader is the contention that the introduction of Curriculum 2000, along with the policy of unlimited re-sits therein, drove the qualification into something of a cul-de-sac, from which it was unable to survive without being restructured. With an admirable degree of foresight, Lambert and Lines (2000) were quick to see the shortcomings of the changes to the qualification, well before the first cohort of students following the Curriculum 2000 specifications finished their A-level courses. They warned (p.87) “that the costs to individuals, schools, the awarding bodies and society are too high and will not be sustained for any length of time. It is hard to escape the conclusion that A-levels are in need of – yet another – radical review”.

The specifications in place from September 2008 represent a significant contrast to the reforms of the past twenty years or so, which instead *increased* the number of examinations taken over the two years, *cut* the duration of each and *reduced* the importance of extended writing. The new specifications do

the opposite on all three counts. Collectively, the reforms to A-level which spanned the Thatcher, Major and Blair administrations contributed to an era when, as former education secretary Keith Joseph reflected in the late 1980s, “all shall have prizes” (cited, Times Educational Supplement, 2006). In addition, it is unlikely that the redesigned structure of the A-level will cause *too* much unrest amongst its supporters, because it still appears to have ‘something for everybody’, as argued in the following sections, where each of the key stakeholders in its survival are considered individually.

The Government

In 1976, soon after becoming Prime Minister, James Callaghan made a speech at Oxford University’s Ruskin College which Mansell (2007, p.19) refers to as “probably the most significant [on education]...since the [1944] Butler Act.” Callaghan alerted his audience to his belief that the nation’s education system had become a ‘secret garden’ which was littered with ‘informal’ teaching practices that required external control (cited, Mansell, 2007, pp19-20). Torrance (2002, p.2) appears in agreement with Callaghan’s claim when he refers to the UK’s system as “one of the most decentralised and voluntaristic...in the world” until the end of the 1980s. Callaghan’s speech became a springboard for the ‘Great Debate’ on educational standards during the mid-1970s which gradually shaped policy guidelines for numerous reforms in the following two decades. These included the introduction of Ofsted and the publication of results (initially to parents only before they took the form of national league tables) which, to quote Mansell

(2007, p.20) again, were driven by “the push towards hyper-accountability” in the form of increasing governmental micro-management of the curriculum at all its key stages, right through to the sixth form. The former Conservative Party spokesperson for education, Damian Green (2002), saw ‘over-examination’ as a ‘symptom’ of successive governments’ desire “to control every aspect of school life along centrally dictated lines”. This is a view of similar sentiment to that of Wiliam (2000, p.1) when he concluded that half a century of striving for a ‘robust’ system of assessment “started...with the aim of making the important measurable, and ended up making only the measurable important.”

In this vein and in the context of A-level standards, the independent ‘think tank’ *Reform* (2005, p.2), points to the impact of the Department for Education taking over the control of regulating examinations in 1988, and from the early 1990s, “tak[ing] responsibility for increasing the number of students passing public examinations.” The extent of this change on pass rates and grade inflation, however, compared to the influence exerted by the change from norm-referencing to a criterion-based format of assessment at around the same time, is open to perpetual discussion. What is perhaps more certain is that taken together, they contributed to a system which Hyland (2004, p.2) sees as conducive to the culture of ‘popular capitalism’ which emerged under Thatcher in the mid 1980s, in which “the most deserving would find no arbitrary obstacles in their path to success.”

Turning more specifically to the *development* of the A-level qualification, as noted by Kingdom (1991, p.66) the governmental push towards greater

accountability became increasingly realised in the early 1980s. Fifteen years before Blair's university target speech at the Bournemouth conference in 1999, this came in the form of the Government's drive to achieve higher participation rates amongst young people in higher education, spurred on by the nation's mediocre standing in the international context. Increasing awareness of poor participation rates in EEC terms, combined with a lack of breadth of subjects studied at post-16 level compared to Western Europe in general, provided the momentum for the publication of the Department of Education and Science's (DES, 1984) *AS Levels* consultation document. The Higginson Committee, established by the Government to review the A-level system a few months before AS-levels were introduced in 1987, fundamentally arrived at the same conclusion as the DES document, for greater breadth of study beyond the typical three subject commitment. Prominent amongst the criticism directed at the Higginson Committee's report, however, was that of the General Studies Association, which, as Kingdom (p.68) summarises, "disapprove[d] of the emphasis, inherent [in its] proposals that only those things that lead directly to examinations were to be valued." These 'things' were likely to include its proposals to reduce drop-out rates (and thus increase sixth form numbers) by introducing more 'relevant' syllabuses with less content, with the intention that it would make A-level study more attractive to prospective students (DES, 1988).

Overall pass rates are unlikely to decline with the new specifications in September 2008 (given the retention of re-sits, but bearing in mind that fewer modules will mean fewer opportunities to improve grades), and combined with the gradual introduction of the 14 to 19 Diploma are unlikely to jeopardise the

Government's 50 per cent target for participation in higher education by 2010. Indeed, the necessity of credible vocational routes into higher education was highlighted by Dearing (cited, Coffield and Vignoles, 1997, p.2), when he reacted to the fact that a third of all sixteen to eighteen year olds were studying A-levels by the mid 1990s, by suggesting that "this may be approaching the ceiling of academically-minded young people for whom [the qualification was] designed." Lecturers taking part in research conducted by Wilde *et. al.* (2006, p.25) only a few months before the publication of the Cambridge 'list' concur with this view and believe that governmental ambitions for university entrance have resulted in there being "two sets of students, traditional academic students and the others. The 50% target forces differentiation."

In the view of Lambert and Lines (2000, p.86), however, "modular A-levels are easier to align with vocational...qualifications, which have traditionally used modular structures to credit achievement." The retention of modules in the new specifications, albeit to a lesser extent, should in theory at least, make it easier for students to pursue A-levels as part of specialist elements in the Diploma programme. This is likely to help the DfES to realise its ambition for the qualification to be received as a "highly valued mixed theoretical and practical route for young people which genuinely meets the needs of employers and provides a sound basis for progression into higher education" (cited, House of Commons, 2007).

As already discussed, the combination of modular A-levels and unlimited re-sits introduced by Curriculum 2000 have managed to inject more flexibility into

the 'ceiling' pondered by Dearing and only time will tell if the changes from September 2008 have helped it to find some kind of resting place in the Government's quest to achieve higher levels of university participation. What seems more certain is that despite such incremental changes to A-level, which were part of what Ball (2008, p.87) refers to as "the flurry of policy activity in and around education under Labour", the survival of the qualification is symbolic of "the significance of continuity" shown by the Thatcher, Major and Blair governments over the past three decades. It is not difficult to see how the 'Third Way' politics of 'New Labour' which Newman (cited, Ball, p.88) explains as drawing "selectively on fragments and components of the old" has contributed to the longevity of the qualification and the preservation of the A-level 'gold standard'.

Independent schools, students and parents

With regard to the 2008 restructuring, some of the country's leading independent schools, such as *The Perse* in Cambridge, should also warm to certain changes embedded in the new qualification which, in the view of its Headmaster, "make it easier for universities to discriminate" (Richardson, quoted in Griffiths, 2006). They may have consequently reconsidered their intention to offer the Cambridge Pre-U, which was accredited by the QCA in the spring of 2008 (Curtis, 2008). Closer to home, School X itself was fairly positive about Pre-U when it first emerged as a possibility for sixth formers, but it now has no plans to introduce an alternative to A-level. I was able to further glean from my Head Master that this is also the case with six of the

other seven Group Y schools in the Midlands which have contributed to this study (see Appendix 4).

The one Group Y school that *is* abandoning A-levels is moving to the International Baccalaureate in 2010, although a number of my colleagues, perhaps somewhat cynically, have suggested that this particular school's recent slide down examination league tables has been a contributing factor to this change in their post-16 curriculum. Baker (2006) reported that schools moving to IB "shot up the tables" with high performing students achieving up to the equivalent of six grade 'As' at A-level. Ironically, this could be an, or *the*, ulterior reason for the Group Y school making the change, but publicly at least it prefers to declare its disillusionment with schools who play a 'points game' by submitting candidates for more subjects, including General Studies (the logic being that, for example, four 'B' grades scores higher, in UCAS terms, than three 'A' grades). Generally speaking, however, the tendency to stick with A-levels, as demonstrated by Group Y, would come as no surprise to a senior 'educational source' quoted by Griffiths (2006), who believed that the independent sector "seized" on the idea of adopting Pre-U "as a way to make the Government bring in an A*...but the truth is they will fall back to what they know and sort of love."

Interestingly, my own attempts to establish the *actual* take-up of Pre-U in September 2008 appear to add weight to this line of reasoning and are in fairly stark contrast to the much higher numbers predicted in press reports, as referred to earlier. In reply to a request for information via the University of Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) website, a member of the

organisation's management estimated that only around 30-40 schools were introducing the course, and perhaps even more pertinently "...all of which will continue to offer A-levels as part of their [Pre-U] programme" (CIE, 2008a). Although beyond the scope of this dissertation, the two most obvious conclusions to reach for such a relatively low figure (especially as far as the independent sector is concerned), is a preference instead for the IB as an alternative to A-level, or, of course, a renewal of faith in the 'gold standard' following the publication of the 2008 specifications.

Nearly thirty years earlier, the 'love affair' between the independent sector and A-levels was likely to have been reinforced by the 1980 Education Act which created the means-tested Assisted Place Scheme for able children from low income families, who could not afford private school fees. The criteria which schools taking part in the scheme had to meet: "high pass rates in public examinations, high entry rates to universities, and a wide choice of academic subjects in the sixth form" (Edwards and Whitty, 1990, p.283) were perfectly suited to the pursuance of an A-level curriculum. The scheme was abolished by the newly formed Labour Government in 1997, but even just a year before it was, the Secretary of State for the previous Conservative Government asserted that all schools participating in it had to "achieve outstanding GCSE and A-level results and maintain strong sixth forms" (cited, Edwards and Whitty, 1990, p.284). This has arguably helped to create a stronger legacy for A-levels in independent schools, compared to the maintained sector, from which it may not be easy for many to unshackle itself. As Edwards and Whitty (1990, p.284) conclude, the Assisted Place Scheme encouraged independent schools to stick to a traditionally academic curriculum and "*not to change.*"

Students and parents are now likely to be encouraged by some of the potential implications of the changes to A-level which lie ahead. For students, reducing the assessment burden should provide greater scope for a less “instrumentalised” approach to learning and more classroom time to enable them to develop a “deeper understanding” of subjects (Wilde *et. al.* 2006, p.2). In addition, a qualification which is more conducive to formative, rather than summative assessment might help to foster in students, from the independent sector in particular, less reliance at university on the kind of ‘spoon feeding’, as implied by Bekhradnia (2003), that they received from their teachers at school. In a summary of its own research findings from A-level re-sits, the QCA (2007b, pp 4-5) concluded that despite the tendency for independent schools to give “unlimited support [for re-sits] to candidates...the mean change in uniform mark for candidates resitting units in state secondary... schools [where only past papers were made available] remains largely the same.” The same report also made the observation (p.4) that from the handful of subjects in the survey (which did not include Economics or Business Studies), “independent schools had the highest proportion of frequent resitting for every unit.”

It could be inferred, therefore, that by this time in their educational career, there is a tendency for students in the maintained sector to take more control over examination preparation than their independent sector counterparts. Again, with only four modules in the majority of the new specifications, fewer examinations and re-sits should mean more classroom time for independent sector students to focus on the more taxing demands of A2 study, rather than preparing for AS-level re-sits. There should be more scope for styles of

teaching that support the learning process, which would be a positive development in the view of Lambert and Lines (2000, p.86) who despaired of “the impact upon the curriculum and formative assessment, which may be curtailed or abandoned to be replaced by an unrelenting diet of ‘past papers’.”

Many of the parents of privately educated students, meanwhile, might feel that the retention of A-levels increases their chances of realising value for the money that they spend on fees in a national education system which, according to an editorial in the *Times Educational Supplement*, is in danger of becoming “the post-16 equivalent of the GCE and CSE” (TES, 2006).

“Without great care”, it warns, “A-levels will drift inexorably towards being a more elite exam, with the 14 to 19 Diplomas coming in for the more practically minded also-rans.” This warning is echoed by the General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (formerly the Secondary Heads Association), John Dunford. He stresses that the Diploma’s future and ability to “bridge the gap between academic and vocational qualifications” is being jeopardised by its current low take-up rate, and complicated twin-tier structure, with the addition of a more advanced ‘extended’ version from 2011 (BBC News website, 2008a).

Whilst the future for A-levels as a whole over the next few years still looks reasonably secure in the independent sector (as indicated, for example, by its resilience amongst Group Y schools, with only one changing to IB in 2010 - see Appendix 4), some of the changes made to the new specifications for Economics and Business Studies might contribute to the drift in student numbers away from the latter subject to the former, as discussed earlier. The

removal of virtually *all* of the 'economic' content from the new AQA Business Studies specification in the first year of the course (which I am reliably informed each year by senior examination personnel, attracts far more candidates than OCR and Edexcel, which between them only account for about a fifth of the market), combined with the withdrawal of coursework for all the boards, may be of some significance here.

In relation to the first of these changes, Bachan (2004) for example, tentatively concludes (and in support of this cites the findings of Hurd *et. al.*) that some students may have been substituting A-level Business for A-level Economics in the 1990s due to the micro and macroeconomic content in the former.

Many such students now have to wait until the second year of the course at A2-level for the impact of the economic environment to be considered, which may put off a few from opting for Business Studies, especially those who only intend to do it for a year, at AS-level. In contrast the specifications, both new and old, of the three major examination boards in England (OCR, Edexcel and AQA) for Economics contain little, if any, specific 'business' content and are thus relatively unattractive to those students wanting to sample something from both subjects.

As regards the second change, that is, coursework, students may perceive a reduction in 'comparative subject difficulty' which Bachan (2004) sees in the context of 'grade-maximisation' as an important influence on student choice between the two (even if, as the findings of this study indicate, perhaps less so in the independent sector). Statistics quoted by examination board personnel at Business Studies meetings that I have attended in recent years

have shown that the percentage of candidates achieving a grade 'A' for coursework is consistently around twice that for the written alternative, which is sat under examination conditions. This may therefore mean that those students who are prepared to study for subjects which have been tainted by the Cambridge list and the media in general as being 'soft' (including Business Studies), principally for the reward of a higher grade than 'harder' alternatives (such as Economics), may decrease in number. In other words, the reality could be that specification changes will make it tougher to get a top grade in Business Studies, but it is still likely to be labelled as a second class subject. Therefore, why should students bother to opt for it? Or as the former senior examiner in Business Studies, quoted at length in the first chapter concluded, "why stay with a subject for which you get inadequate credit?"

Responses from a focus group of representatives from universities to questions about the value of coursework also indicate that students in independent schools tend to benefit more, results-wise at least, than those in the state sector. These included the view that: "coursework should develop independent learning, but the aims have been subverted by middle-class families" (Wilde *et. al.* 2006, p.9). An implicit reference is seemingly being made here to the 'extra help', from parents or elsewhere (including extra tuition outside of school) that is given to independent sector students. Therefore the removal of coursework could persuade even more privately educated students to opt for Economics rather than Business Studies, especially as this change to the specification in the latter subject is still unlikely to increase its standing with prestigious universities, or prompt its removal from the Cambridge 'list'. Furthermore, the absence of coursework is

unlikely to make much impact on the “perennial question about whether business studies is an ‘academic’ or ‘vocational’ subject” (Davies and Brant, 2006, p.207). Given the focus group’s general cynicism towards coursework, their rather more positive support for the internally assessed Extended Project, which runs alongside the new specifications, is a little surprising. Intended by the QCA (2007b) as an initiative which “supports learner progression to higher education”, there seems to be little to prevent it being exposed to the same kinds of malpractice that coursework suffered from. In reality, this is likely to become more of an issue if the stakes are increased, in the form of universities recognising the value placed on it by the QCA (2007) as “about the size of half an A level”, in their offers of places to students.

Universities

Even a year before the QCA announced the accreditation of the new A-level structure, the president of Universities UK, Drummond Bone (Guardian website, 2006), admitted in August 2006 that the qualification remains “the best indicator we’ve got of a candidate’s potential to succeed.” He still conceded, however, that the role of admission tests would acquire greater significance in the future. This belief may seem surprising of course, because the new specifications should further enable universities to identify outstanding candidates (by virtue of them achieving an A* grade) without the same need for admission tests. Research by Wilde *et. al.* (2006, p.18), however, pointed to the tendency for some universities to still look “very closely at GCSE results as predictors of ability, partly because they were firm

rather than predicted results” and also because of “concern...that the current structure of AS-levels meant that a student could take an examination more than once”.

In addition, research that I undertook (by email correspondence with QCA and by telephone with admissions personnel at the University of Oxford) further confirmed the reluctance of top universities to include A* grades in their offers for places in 2010, when the first cohort of students from the new specification finish their A-levels. The admissions department at Oxford indicated to me that the ‘three As’ offer was likely to be the norm in 2010 and “certainly until staff have done some training, got their heads around Pre-U and the new specs’.” Furthermore, although not stated officially in prospectuses, I gleaned from a number of staff with specific interests in examination performance at School X and elsewhere in the independent sector, that a minimum of 270 UMS out of 300 at AS-level, and / or at least eight A* grades at GCSE, are two levels of attainment which are commonly used by the UK’s leading universities to identify outstanding students. I also discovered from a colleague at School X that a senior member of the admissions staff at Cambridge had informed him that analysis of AS-level results had become established at his particular college, as the most appropriate method for indicating potential at degree level. This was in preference to predictions and, indeed, full A-level results, subject as they are to re-sits, especially after offers of places have been made when students can take units again without fear of weakening their application for university.

Somewhere in the midst of the year-on-year grade inflation at A-level, therefore, universities appear to have put systems in place which allow them to discriminate within the expansive grade 'A' band which operates for the Curriculum 2000 specifications, thus rendering the main argument for the introduction of the A* grade somewhat questionable. At some universities, candidates who sit General Studies or an AEA (as well as those who take on a fourth A-level) may also be looked on favourably, but as Wilde *et. al.* (2006, p.19) found, many do not "because [these] qualifications [are] not available in all 14-19 institutions." The failure of most universities to recognise General Studies may have been one of the motives behind School X's decision to drop it from its A-level curriculum as a compulsorily examined subject, from September 2008 onwards. This was a move which was overwhelmingly approved by GCSE students, who had already formed the opinion that it was 'a waste of time'. It may also have been influenced by negative press coverage (see, for example, Dunford, 2008) directed at "schools and colleges entering 18-year-olds for extra A-levels...that require less teaching in order to add to the total points score of each student, and thus to the average points score of the institution."

On the downside, the decision to remove General Studies might therefore mean a significant slide down those league tables which still include it in their calculations. Superficial league table comparisons with local state schools will also look less favourable, bearing in mind the greater likelihood of students in the independent sector to opt for 'harder' subjects, as discussed earlier, combined with School X's avoidance of, arguably, 'softer' vocational alternatives to A-level. On the other hand, the General Studies programme at

School X was viewed as “a weakness in [its] provision” in a curriculum review by senior management, especially in relation to ‘value-added’ measures of performance, with a significant number of students failing it each year. The same report noted the “problem...with the enthusiasm for the course amongst staff and boys.”

Other aspects of a student’s application for university might be taken into account (presuming, most importantly, that he or she is predicted high enough grades for a standard offer) such as references and the ‘personal statement’ – if they can be trusted (see, for example, Baker’s report on the BBC News website, 2007c, which raises concerns about their authenticity). With all these options for information at the disposal of the country’s top universities, the A* grade may actually become an *efficient* piece of data for them to discriminate with. It could help to reduce certain aspects of their administrative burden and ease the sifting process for suitable candidates, which in itself might prove to be the best reason for its introduction. In the meantime, the JCQ’s statement that the AEA will be withdrawn after the summer 2009 series (to avoid the “duplication of provision” offered by a combination of ‘stretch and challenge’ and the A* grade for ‘exceptional performance’ in the new specifications) has hardly come as a surprise (JCQ, 2008). Furthermore, students who in particular are setting their sights on achieving the new grade are unlikely to take kindly to distractions such as General Studies.

The inclusion of A-level questions which encourage original thought might help more students, when they become undergraduates, to overcome their “lack [of] even the slightest spark of initiative or intellectual curiosity” (Conway,

2002). Moreover, greater emphasis on essay-writing should help to diminish concern about the lack of 'linguistic fluency' which university focus groups have reported is evident amongst eighteen year olds (Wilde, *et. al.* 2006) and enable them to achieve the 'high level skills' identified by Frith and Macintosh (1984). Cassidy still reports (Independent, 2008), however, on Imperial College's lack of faith in the ability of A-levels to distinguish between candidates and its subsequent move to introduce entrance tests in 2009. Perhaps even more worrying for the future status of the qualification in higher education circles is the comment made in the same article by Imperial's Rector, Sir Richard Sykes. In relation to the prospect of admission tests becoming more commonplace in selection processes, his belief that "a lot of universities are thinking the same as us", also implies a lack of faith in the ability of the new specifications to test 'intelligence' and 'problem-solving techniques' and subsequently, the necessity for universities to take responsibility for doing this themselves (Cassidy, 2008).

Similar concerns about the tendency for A-levels to "cover a lot of ground, but not to any depth" in the context of (inadequate) preparation for university are expressed by Mansell (2007, p.162). Whilst Mansell (2007) argues that this is the case with the development of modular A-levels in general, others have pointed to concerns with alternatives to the qualification which offer even *less* in the way of specialisation. In defence of A-levels (and the traditionally 'harder' subject choices in particular) against its main rival, the IB, Lord Adonis (House of Lords Hansard, 2008) expressed his belief:

“...that it is [not] right to deprive young people of the ability to choose to study A-levels... . There are many admissions tutors and teaching professors, including some in our top universities, who would not welcome any dilution of the concentration which sixth-form students are currently able to give to maths and science. That is part of the reason why there is at the moment no consensus about the move towards a more broadly based baccalaureate system post-16.”

Trowler (1998, p.7) provides an outline of the findings of the Higginson Report, a Government committee which in contrast found twenty years before the comments of Adonis that A-levels *were* “too narrow and specialised for the needs of a modern economy.” In the late 1980s, however, the fundamental changes recommended by the Higginson Report were considered too radical and were immediately rejected by the Conservative Government of the day. Lambert and Lines (2000, p.82) are blunt in suggesting its justification for doing this: “the A-level ‘Gold Standard’ ...meant that no change would be contemplated that threatened the fundamentals of this particular examination, which was seen to embody ‘quality’ for the system at large.”

Writing just before the introduction of Curriculum 2000, Lambert and Lines (2000, p.82) were impressed by the requirement of A-levels for “young people to become specialists at a relatively early stage in their education”. They were confident that the grounding the qualification gave them was part of a ‘system’ which enabled most to excel in their ‘chosen subject’ at university. That “despite what is by international comparison a relatively short...undergraduate course, the system turns out people who can compete with the very best in

the world” (p.82). Nearly a decade later, however, with modular A-levels still providing by far the most popular route for university entrance (QCA, 2008), four English Universities (Cambridge, Oxford, Imperial and UCL) still figured in the top ten of the *Times Higher Education* ‘Top 200 World Universities’ in 2007 (T.H.E. website, 2007). This is an increase from just two universities (unsurprisingly, Cambridge and Oxford) with top ten rankings in each of the previous three years (T.H.E. website, 2007); but some might argue, including university admission tutors (Cassidy, 2003a), that this has been helped by the growing stature of IB and not just the continuing resilience of A-levels as the country’s educational ‘gold standard’.

Irrespective of such conflicting views on the ‘breadth and depth’ of A-levels, an attempt has clearly been made by examination boards to deliver new specifications for Business Studies which encourage students to “demonstrate a proper grasp of fundamental aspects of their subject”, which Mansell (2007, p.162) believes is lacking in the modular format. As explained earlier, removal of the ‘economic’ content in the AQA specification in the first year, for example, together with less repetition of topics between the AS and A2 modules by all three examination boards in general, has allowed more time and scope in the classroom for the practical application of business concepts to real-world scenarios. The new Economics specifications, on the other hand, appear to be more orientated towards condensing the content from six modules into four, but are still updated to take account of developments in the European-wide and global economy. This has again generally meant some trimming down of the content, compared to the previous specifications.

The moves which examination boards have evidently made to achieving a more effective balance between depth and breadth of knowledge may have recaptured some of the 'A-level-ness' which makes a qualification more rigorous (Lambert and Lines, 2000, p.85). In addition, changes that have been made to syllabus content by the boards generally show what Mathews (1985, p.30) might have referred to as "aware[ness] of their wider social and educational responsibilities". This enables them to set examinations which "exercise some control over the curriculum", and in so doing satisfy one of Mathews' major reasons for their use (p.34). Efforts which have been made by the awarding bodies to reinvigorate specifications for business education subjects, are complemented by contributions made by higher education in the form of curriculum development projects and publications to assist teachers and examiners alike, as noted by Davies and Brant (2006, pp 78-79).

Conclusion

According to Lambert and Lines (2000, p.85), "the [government's] conundrum [of]...expanding numbers but retaining the 'Gold Standard' [had] been 'solved' in a subtle evolutionary way [by]...the growth of modular A-levels", following the introduction of Curriculum 2000. They assert, however (p.84), that key to this solution was the Government's acceptance of Lord Dearing's 1996 Report to make AS-levels a 'half-way house' in the study of a two year A-level and therefore *part* of the Gold Standard, rather than a poor alternative to it as a qualification offering 'the same depth, but with half the content'. As regards the interests of higher education and private schools, Lambert and Lines

(2000, p.82) offer a simple, overwhelming reason for their continuing faith in the qualification: “any proposed change to the system...has always run up against the universities’ power, supported in turn by the independent sector, both using the apparently irrefutable argument that the examinations are rigorous”.

2.2 To what extent has the development of the A-level qualification contributed to the learning process?

Many commentators on the development of the A-level qualification over the past twenty years or so have argued that it has made a significant contribution to a system of education in England where external examinations have become its master, rather than its servant. Davis (1999, p.14) uses the idiom of an “assessment tail [with] a strong tendency to wag the curriculum dog, to the detriment of the dog’s health”, to acknowledge the common belief that it has become a nation where many of its teachers obsessively ‘teach to the test’. Three changes in particular that have been made over this period can be singled out in respect of this view: firstly, the move from a norm-referenced to a criterion-referenced means of assessment, secondly, the switch from a linear format to the modularisation of courses and thirdly, the introduction of re-sits, initially with certain constraints attached as discussed in the opening chapter, but then on an unlimited basis, bound only in the extreme by the shelf-life of a specification.

Certain concerns that were expressed about an increasing reliance on 'high-stakes testing' (a label often attached to examinations where their role is perceived as being inherently summative) by a representative of Her Majesty's Inspectorate in the mid-Victorian period, make for an interesting comparison with those made by the Chief Inspector of Independent Schools (also an ex-HMI) well over a century later. In the *Report of the Committee of Council on Education, 1864-65*, Joshua Fitch (cited, Secondary Heads Association, p.1, 2003) described the impact of school examinations as "tending to formalize the work of elementary schools, and to render it in some degree lifeless, inelastic and mechanical." A similar tone was adopted by Tony Hubbard in the *Annual Report of the Independent Schools Inspectorate 2000-01* (cited, Secondary Heads Association, p.2, 2003) when he warned that "examination overload threatens to turn education from an intellectual and spiritual adventure into a treadmill." Wilde *et. al.* (2006, p.8) discovered from their higher education-based focus group that the very 'modularity' of the A-level qualification in the post-Curriculum 2000 period had left students with the instinct to simply "learn and forget, rather than learn and know", leaving them devoid of such qualities as critical thinking and the urge to develop an 'enquiring mind'.

As seen in the introductory chapter, pass rates increased significantly after the adoption of a largely criterion-reference based system in 1987 and top grades became much more commonplace. Previously, a norm-referencing approach had been used and whilst Black (1998, p.58) acknowledges the usefulness of such systems for competitive analysis and their potential to be 'informative' in this context, he is less complementary about their ability to reveal "how much

of what was taught...has [been] mastered". Or put another way (1998, p.60), although "they place the entry population in rank order, they tell you little about what that rank order means." Elements of Black's explanation of the 'meaning' of criterion-referencing (1998, p.62) are worth paraphrasing to see how it can be usefully applied to a modularised A-level course, which also offers the opportunities for students to re-sit:

"...a criterion-referenced result...gives explicit information about what has been learned...and could be used for formative purposes... .

The criterion emphasis will mean that questions are selected for their relevance to the teaching and learning programme. [Test results might also be useful] in identifying...pupils who need extra and immediate help to remove an obstacle to their progress. For normative purposes such a test would be useless, because it would not discriminate between the majority of the pupils."

Students are typically examined on their ability to meet four 'assessment objectives' in the course of A-level examinations at both AS and A2-level. In both Economics and Business Studies, for example, candidates are expected to demonstrate:

AO1 Knowledge and understanding

AO2 Relevant application of knowledge and critical understanding to problems and issues

AO3 Analysis of problems and issues

AO4 The ability to evaluate and make informed judgements

The prospect of students meeting the required standards in criterion-referenced forms of assessment is obviously enhanced in a modularised system with the option to re-sit. An Ofsted (1999, p.14) publication which analysed the impact of modular A-levels summed up the benefits associated with the improvement of examination technique:

“Sitting modules soon after they have been taught exposes starkly many shortcomings and misunderstandings, but at a point in the course when both students and their teachers can do something about correcting their failings... . Candidates following linear syllabuses must rely *entirely* (my italics) on their teachers and internal examinations to expose any serious weaknesses.”

‘Shortcomings and misunderstandings’ are now revealed by more than just grades and UMS scores. As Kingdom (1991, p.31) comments, before the arrival of modular syllabuses, “although advanced level results may contribute to a student’s educational achievement, they do not have a formative role *per se*... . Even formal assessments made by teachers are not revealed to the students...”. For several years now, for the payment of a fee, students can have access to their annotated scripts which indicate their ability to meet the four assessment objectives. Until recently, boards supplied a copy of the mark scheme with these scripts, but to save on costs now instead direct students to their websites, where copies from the latest series can be downloaded free of charge by anyone, within a few weeks after the examination. Unfortunately, annotation by examiners on those scripts which are now electronically marked is minimal or non-existent, due to a

combination of inadequate technology, the lack of interest apparently shown in it by examination boards and the desire of markers to get through scripts (or part thereof) in a piece-rate system of remuneration (see Williams, 2006). Thankfully, this method of marking has not been used, at the time of writing, by the OCR and AQA board, respectively, for A-level Economics and A-level Business Studies.

Mansell (2007, p.142-43) is highly critical of “very detailed mark schemes” and their tendency to encourage “an atomised learning experience for pupils” in preparation for examinations which he sees have been reduced to no more than a “painting by numbers” activity. He is equally damning of the role played by assessment objectives, such as the four referred to above and ridicules their contribution to ‘education’ as “a mechanistic exercise in following the exam board’s formula to maximise the chance of good grades” (p.143). Contrary to his reservations, in my experience, admittedly at a time when mark schemes can be prescriptive (especially in the lower levels of assessment objectives), examiners are still encouraged to give credit for the kind of “independent or creative thought” which Mansell believes “is crowded out”, as long as, of course, their answers are *relevant*. Unfortunately, increasing numbers of Assistant Examiners are arguably not experienced or knowledgeable enough to know when to award candidates ‘OMS’ (‘outside of the mark scheme’) for imaginative answers (Williams, 2006).

The mandatory requirement, however, for candidates to sit at least one synoptic paper at A2-level, is designed to support an understanding of the *whole* syllabus and hardly conducive to ‘atomised learning’. Both A2 modules

in the new OCR Economics specification are in fact synoptic, as is one of the two in AQA Business Studies. In addition, the introduction of the A* grade (dependent upon outstanding performance at A2-level), together with fewer examinations and re-sits in a 'two plus two' unit structure, is likely to encourage students to focus much more on their synoptic grasp of the entire course.

With past papers, mark schemes, assessment objectives and copies of their scripts to refer to, students are therefore able to 'rely' on rather more help in their quest to perfect examination techniques, than lessons, homework and 'mocks'. The potential that exists, albeit time-consuming, to go through scripts on a one-to-one basis with their teachers can be particularly beneficial. The use of scripts to see, for example, where a student has met assessment objectives with a view to "revisit[ing] and consolidat[ing] their learning", is similar in essence to Dudley and Swaffield's (2008, p.115) notion of the "formative use of summative data to support learning". By using an 'ipsative' form of referencing, teachers are thus enabled to make specific judgements about a student's performance, "individualize... [their] comments and plan appropriate next steps" (Dudley and Swaffield (2008, p.109).

This is all very much in contrast to examinations producing norm-referenced scores, where (considering that around 30 per cent of A-level candidates were destined to fail before 1987) "in many cases it is less important to know how well a student did relative to others, than it is to know what a student has or has not learned" (Sireci, 2005, p.115). The very fact that there is such "openness about goals and criteria for assessment...", in the view of Harlen

(2008, p.145) "...not only helps pupils to direct their effort appropriately but removes the secrecy from the process of summative assessment, enabling them to recognize their own role in their achievement instead of it being the result of someone else's decisions."

Writing in the mid 1980s when A-levels were still taken in a linear format, Mathews (1985, p.208) had numerous reservations about qualifications which consisted of "terminal, single-grade examinations". Moreover, a norm-referenced system without the possibility of re-sits, would result in the situation described by Mathews (p.208) where "not only [would] the single grade conceal actual performance, it allows no statement to be made about the qualities of students who reach a temporary limit of ability...before that terminal point." Lambert and Lines (2000, p.85) provide a number of reasons for the 'popularity' of modular A-levels which largely stem from the inability of linear formats to allow for any number of factors (such as illness and nerves) which may account for a candidate's poor performance on the day of the examination. They suggest that "'high stakes' terminal examinations...may test the ability to deliver under such circumstances more than it tests the subject itself" (p.85).

Critics of modular A-levels and re-sits such as Mansell (2007) are still likely to maintain that the opportunities that now exist for improving module scores are merely achieving *just that*: students are finely-tuning their examination techniques (especially at the less taxing, but equally weighted AS-level) at the expense of deepening their knowledge and developing their intellect. Davies (1986, p.21) on the other hand, cites a study by Bilodeau and Bilodeau which

arrived at the conclusion that knowledge of results is “the strongest, most important variable controlling performance and learning” and states himself (p.130) that “the ability to concentrate in the examination situation is a skill which has to be learned by practice.” Furthermore, Davies emphasises the importance of students having access to specific information about their progress. Therefore, that which can be gleaned from re-sits, for example in the form of the examiner’s annotation or advice from teachers about assessment objectives, represents an appropriate scenario for this view. Davies (p.21-22) stresses:

“Precise, objective information concerning the quality of his work means that a student is able to see for himself how his current performance differs from his previous results. He is able to monitor and assess his performance in the light of variations in study methods and technique, and additionally his learning is continually being reinforced... . Thus, the value for the student of objective knowledge of progress in terms of grades, marks, corrected scripts, etc. cannot be overestimated.”

In addition, teachers themselves are able to order original scripts from examination boards, after the period when all re-marks have been completed and appeals concluded. A cross-section of scripts, including examples of outstanding work, together with less impressive efforts which allow plenty of scope for critical analysis, can “act as...” (to quote Davies again, p.21) “...important motivational devices”. He justifies this by explaining that “the learner gets some idea of standards and is able to see with some clarity not

only his own progress and attainment but also the difference between his own progress and the performance levels of students of a higher standard.” Over twenty years after Davies had his thoughts put to print, the JCQ (2007a) published its own advice on how “marked examination scripts” (p.13) could be used “for teaching and learning purposes” (p.15). It suggested that: “Teachers may wish to use the scripts to identify characteristic strengths and weaknesses in candidates’ knowledge and understanding, or to find examples of real answers to use in teaching” (p.15). Such interaction between teacher and student is unlikely to be recorded (on either hard-copy or electronic format) and therefore irretrievable for submission in the event of, for example, external inspection; but as Lambert and Lines (2000, p.106) point out, “FA [formative assessment] may well be relatively invisible, in the teacher’s head rather than in some form of documentation.”

One of the “worthy reasons” for test-taking skills offered by McPhail (cited, Crocker, 2005, p.160) is “to provide equal educational...opportunity”. Crocker (p.160) herself suggests that the context for this could be “particularly for disadvantaged students who do not have access to additional educational resources enjoyed by their middle-class cohorts.” Jones (2003, p.113), for example, briefly analyses the ‘strong correlation’ between poverty and ‘education failure’ and a similar sentiment to that of Crocker’s is expressed by Horton (1990). Collectively, views such as these might be used to justify those incremental changes to A-level which have made it a more accessible qualification for students from less privileged backgrounds.

Horton, (p.66) makes the claim that “adjustment or adaptation rather than abolition of the examination system offers one of the more accessible ways of redistributing power in society.” To this extent, he is an exponent of one of the three principle reasons for examinations stated by Mathews (1985, p.34), that being, “equality of opportunity”. Likewise, Aaronovitch (2002) is critical of campaigners seeking a return to what they remember as the ‘glory years’ of education in the 1970s, implying that they are probably horrified at the prospect of a 100 per cent pass rate at A-level. This was a time, he says, when differentiation meant “4 per cent of youngsters going into any kind of higher education and 40 per cent of all 16-year-olds leaving school with no qualifications whatsoever”, in an economy which was awash with skill shortages and “substantial levels of adult illiteracy and innumeracy.”

A limited amount of primary research conducted for *this* study in the form of a questionnaire which was sent by email to a handful of colleagues working in Business Education departments in maintained schools (examined in more detail in chapter four), seemed to indicate that this sector tended to take full advantage of re-sits. In addition, by virtue of the departments where these colleagues work, commonly entering candidates for *two* modular examinations per subject at A2-level in the January of the upper sixth year, the possibilities for re-sits are obviously increased still further. According to aforementioned research by the QCA in 2007, however, the frequency of re-sits for the handful of subjects it studied was actually higher in the independent sector (although its research did not include Economics *or* Business Studies). Reasons for this could include the prohibitive influence of the cost of re-sitting for students (and their families) in the maintained sector,

especially if incurred by themselves rather than the schools, or the possible tendency for them to focus more on preparing for January A2 modules. On this point, it would be reasonable to assume that taking A-levels is set to become cheaper, with the reduction to just four modules in many subjects. Barton (2008), however, reported that the average cost of sitting each module was set to rise from £12.50 to £16.80, making overall expenditure per candidate similar to the six module format.

Schools increasingly play the 're-sit game' in the independent sector, as confirmed by responses from colleagues in Group Y for the purpose of this study (see Appendix 4 for a 'snapshot' of the extent of this), in addition to the research by QCA. Given the "maturation benefits" (QCA, 2007c, p.5) which students enjoy, due to the structure of Economics and Business Studies A-levels, it might take them several months to become confident in handling fundamental concepts in both subjects. It is therefore feasible to presume that departments in both sectors, subject to school-wide policies, are more likely than not to encourage candidates to re-sit where possible to improve their overall scores.

Unlike the maintained sector, the vast majority of independent schools which offer either, or both subjects at A-level (including School X) do not include them in their GCSE options. To all of the students who stay on into the sixth form, the subjects are therefore 'new' to them. There is much scope for them to 'mature' in these subjects (particularly in Economics where many students have difficulty coming to terms with the abstract nature of certain topics, especially those with a diagrammatic orientation). In addition, the fact that

they “revisit topics at a higher level at A2, [making] it easier to achieve high grades in resits of AS units” (QCA, 2007b, p.5) in the second year of the course, means that business education departments are more likely to have greater numbers of students re-sitting examinations. This is sometimes to the chagrin of colleagues elsewhere in the school who understandably resent the disruption it causes to progress in their own subjects, with students preoccupied with preparing for examinations in others. Ironically, it has become a dilemma that several departments in School X have tried to resolve by revising programmes of study at A2-level and entering the ‘re-sit game’ at AS-level themselves.

In contrast, a linear system “linked to a single terminal examination...requires a group of students of fairly uniform ability all capable of reaching the upper levels of terminal performance” (Mathews, 1985, p.208). Whilst Mathews suggests that such ‘uniformity’ is ‘rare’ in *any* school, it is probably even more unlikely to be evident in non-selective schools (and particularly in the absence of re-sits), where “either through a lack of ability or motivation some students fail to get a final grade of any value; to outward appearances they have learned little or nothing” (p.208). This point can again be considered in the context of 30 per cent failure rates at A-level under the norm-referenced system prior to the late 1980s. Broadfoot *et. al.* (1990, p.122) see that “such students have nothing to strive for” and that “it is a crime against mankind to deprive [them] of successful learning when it is possible for virtually all to learn to a high level” (p.120). Criterion referencing on the other hand requires the achievement of standards by *all* candidates and eliminates competition

between them, thus guaranteeing their “rights of access, fair assessment and equal opportunities” (Cotton, p.39, 1995).

From an international perspective, in a comprehensive study of education systems in eight of the world’s most industrialised economies, Eckstein and Noah (1993) even question the global reputation of A-levels, at a time when a significant minority of students still failed them and less than one in six, sixteen to eighteen year olds in England and Wales passed one or more. They remark that such “scarcity of success does not coexist with high prestige for the qualification” (p.187) and they suggest a number of reasons for this. Amongst them include the necessity to achieve ‘good’ grades for university (rather than just ‘passing’) and a multitude of factors on application forms for higher education which also influence selection, including ‘social class’. Perhaps most relevantly for the purpose of this section of the study, however, is their belief that “A level attests more to the holder’s depth of specialization than to the breadth of his or her education and culture” (p.187). The conclusion they draw that “these characteristics have probably harmed the prestige and perceived value of the A-level’s credentials more than its relative scarcity have helped” (p.187) is likely to surprise those who have fond memories of the norm-referenced, linear days of the qualification.

Indeed, the ongoing ‘breadth versus depth’ debate on the development and future of A-levels seems to be quite complex. It is difficult to know exactly where to enter it, but some analysis of the structure of examination papers, the type of questions which Principal Examiners write and the answers they anticipate to them, seems to be as good a place as any. Stobart and Gipps

(cited, Lambert and Lines, 2000, p.86), for example, reason that “modular A-level examinations are probably more accessible to a greater range of students than conventional A-levels, either because less information has to be learnt and recalled, or because they do not require such deep learning.” The mandatory synoptic content of syllabuses, set to increase with the new specifications, as already discussed, can be used as a line of argument against such reasoning. With six modules being reduced to just four over the two years, combined with the removal of coursework at A2-level from most subjects (including Business Studies), more students should also be deterred from trying “to hide low performance” (as suspected by Mansell, 2007, p.149) in the more taxing latter stages of courses, where they can “deepen...their knowledge”, rather than focus on re-sits.

The inclusion of “more demanding questions” of an evaluative nature in the new specifications, to help fulfil their “primary purpose [of]...introduc[ing] greater stretch and challenge for the brightest students” (Kelly, 2006) is being accommodated by the introduction of longer examination papers at A2-level. Longer papers are also set at AS-level. In OCR Economics, for example, there are two examinations of 90 minutes each, rather than three of 60 minutes each. This allows the inclusion of one question which requires an answer of standard essay length (rather than the ‘shorter’ variety as previously), taking up approximately a third of a candidate’s time in the examination and rewarded, in turn, by the same proportion of marks for the module. A glance at questions in specimen papers for the new specifications, reveals, unsurprisingly, essay-type questions which have virtually identical wording to questions which required an extended response in the Curriculum

2000 format. For AQA Business Studies, the two AS-level modules have increased to 75 and 90 minutes (again, from three of just one hour each) and between them contain a familiar mixture of question types, ranging from 'identification' to 'evaluation'.

The four assessment objectives remain the same, making it tempting to subscribe to Mathews' view that "it is difficult to maintain...that [the] characteristics of length or number of words, or time taken in answering, have much fundamental importance in meeting the purposes of examinations" (1985, p.102-03). Therefore, the rationale of incarcerating candidates for half an hour longer (at both AS- and A2-level), in order to "address the need for greater differentiation" (Kelly, 2006) does not seem a wholly convincing argument, especially when more efficient methods already exist (such as AEA exams, GCSE performance and modular results themselves) to achieve this objective. In relation to university applications, particularly for those institutions at the forefront of the A* debate, Hands (2005) makes the straightforward observation that "there remains no doubt that the interview has a particular importance as a final discriminator."

Furthermore, the idea of 'stretch and challenge' to enable A-level candidates to perform to their full potential has certain spillover effects on the role of examiners, who will *a/so*, in turn, be 'stretched and challenged', entrusted as they are to give credit to the creative input and independent reasoning of students which the new structure is supposedly trying to encourage. Apart from the popular perception of the deteriorating quality of examiners in recent years (see Williams, 2006), this development also seems at odds with the

introduction of electronic marking processes which are more suited to questions which require relatively short answers. As Williams (2006) discovered, without efficient annotation tools at their disposal, there is a tendency for examiners to 'hold marks in their heads', for longer answers that require candidates to meet all four assessment objectives, which could become even more difficult if they are working to less prescriptive mark schemes in the new structure.

The intention of the original AS-levels two decades ago was to enable students "to broaden their sixth form courses" by taking subjects which either 'complemented' their "specialist A level areas" or were a 'contrast' to them (Kingdom, 1989, p.12). Unfortunately, the idea of subject breadth with the same depth but only half the content in each course was doomed to failure, not least because of the lack of interest shown in these qualifications by universities. This seems evident in the pessimistic undertones of reports from the poorly attended conference, set up to consider their introduction from a higher education perspective, at the University of Kent in 1988 (Hughes, Ed., 1989). The changes from September 2008 keep the AS-levels as the 'half-way house' in the two year course, but in most syllabuses, the four module format has seen more topics removed than added, thus removing breadth, but providing the potential for greater depth of study *within* each module.

As regards the learning experience for the student, Mansell (2007) derides the 'predictability' which has crept into examinations. He uses the case of a sixth-former who achieved good grades at A-level "...by in-depth study, not of the subject, but of past exam questions to determine what type of answer is

actually deemed ‘correct’” (p.143). In the experience of this particular student, this approach to revision enabled his/her peers to ‘excel’ in chemistry and biology examinations, without knowing too much about the subjects. Admittedly, in my experience, the idiosyncratic demands of a few Principal Examiners has meant that only some peculiarly narrow interpretations, particularly of definition-type questions, are often allowed and this could be even more so the case in heavily knowledge-based science A-levels.

In principle, however, and certainly as far as Economics and Business Studies is concerned, the use of past papers to inculcate in students both a broader *and* deeper understanding of topics is not a contradictory concept. In the hands of a knowledgeable and imaginative practitioner, they can be an efficient means of integrating syllabus content and bringing life to a subject. The reality is that the ‘examination syllabus’ *does* dominate the ‘teaching syllabus’ (indeed, Mansell, p.139-40, uses an illustration, albeit from a GCSE subject, to suggest that they have become one and the same thing), but as Foden (1989, p.83) points out, this has always been the case since external examinations came to prominence in the mid-nineteenth century. Foden refers to the observation of James Booth, who he supports in his claim to be the founder of the nation’s public examination system. Foden (p.89) asserts that Booth would find it “foolish...for lecturers and students to spend their time on subjects that ‘will not tell upon their degree’.”

Conclusion

As far as Economics and Business Studies are concerned, it is not just the synoptic papers which soften the foundation of Mansell's (2007, p.150) claim that modular A-levels mean that "pupils can study a course, take an exam in it, and then move on, safe in the knowledge it will not be assessed again [unless they re-take]." In Economics, students get to grips with fundamental concepts in microeconomics and macroeconomics in the AS-level modules and then have to show maturity in their application at A2-level. In Business Studies, they learn about the functional areas of a business in the first year and in the second are challenged to show advanced understanding of them in a decision making context. Second year modules in both subjects contain new and often more difficult topics, but opportunities still exist for students to draw upon knowledge from the entire two year course.

In the independent sector, the vast majority of students are unable to study either subject at GCSE and for many, opting for them at A-level represents a 'fresh start'. In addition, they are usually provided with the opportunity to demonstrate their newly found generic skills in related extra-curricular activities such as the Young Enterprise Scheme, the Bank of England 2.0 competition and various student-investor initiatives. Another reason for the final cohort of Curriculum 2000 students to resist 'burning their notes' (or at least their revision packs) from AS modules is coursework and then from September 2008 onwards, as mentioned earlier, the more image-friendly 'extended project'.

Harvard professor Niall Ferguson's (cited, Marley, 2008a) enthusiasm for the new extended project is such that he believes it could represent the beginning of a "paradigm shift..." (particularly in the context of preparation for university) "...from an anachronistic preoccupation with a particular kind of examination that does not really work." With fewer modules and therefore re-sits, more 'space' should be created in the A-level curriculum for candidates to mature in their chosen subjects. Whilst the extended project requires more breadth of study, this is complemented by the greater potential for depth in the study of only four modules. Their progress is also likely to be less disrupted by 'low stakes' mock examinations in the lower and upper sixth - a minor obstacle which students typically stumbled over, often with minimal preparation, in a pre-modular linear course characterised by eighteen months of drifting through syllabuses, followed by two of intensive revision.

It will be interesting to see the extent to which the incorporation in the new specifications of questions which invite answers of a more open-ended orientation from bright candidates, will achieve just that and appease those who have criticised A-levels for encouraging instrumental approaches to teaching and learning. Two decades before the examining 'fiasco' during the early years of Curriculum 2000, however, Mathews (1985, p.106) advised caution over setting questions which allow candidates to answer with a high degree of freedom because they are "beset with many problems." He warned that "it is all very well to invite diverse answers...provided they show originality and imagination; but examining, at least as far as the general public is concerned, is supposed to be an exact science; and exactness declines greatly in these permissive circumstances" (p.106). Mathews' words of

caution came at a time when the examination system, in terms of both recruitment and marking was *not* perceived by many to be at 'breaking point' (as it has now been for several years), long before the electronic standardisation of papers and the subsequent separation of markers into 'clerical' and 'expert' bands (Williams, 2006).

As stated earlier, the new specifications represent a 'sea-change' in the development of A-levels (longer questions, fewer examinations, less prescriptive mark schemes and so on), and a move for the better in what is likely to be a final overhaul in the preservation of the qualification. In order for the changes to work properly, however and contribute to formative learning processes for the student, as discussed above, it would also help if a number of 'sea changes' were evident elsewhere, for example:

- Universities having faith in them as entry qualifications without the need for additional tests, and in their ability to discriminate.
- Marking processes where examiners' remuneration reflects 'quality and rigour' (including feedback to candidates via proper annotation of scripts – especially for questions which 'stretch and challenge') rather than 'quantity' and their capacity to mark unfeasibly high numbers of scripts in the rush to make grading deadlines.
- Teachers being less reliant on resources which encourage 'bite-size' learning, such as 'revision packs' and making use of the space in the new structure (perhaps aided in the independent sector, pressure-

wise, by their school opting out of league tables) to focus instead on integrative skills and synoptic elements in specifications.

3. Research Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with an evaluation of the approaches to research methodology which were adopted in the collection and analysis of primary data. These involved a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques, but were centred on interviews (conducted either on a one-to-one basis or via the use of a focus group), and an approach which consisted of a mixture of the more orthodox 'group interview' and 'self-completion questionnaire'.

Qualitative approaches to research reflected an 'exploratory purpose of enquiry' (Robson, 2002, p.59) and therefore allowed me to enter the phenomenological paradigm in that they enabled me to "find out what was happening", given that few similar studies appear to exist, especially when specific (A-level) subjects and type of (independent) school are considered in context. The subjectivity associated with the study's overall aims, particularly the impact of re-sits on teaching and assessment, made it appropriate to look for both consensus and differences of opinion in first person perspectives, rather than testing an initial hypotheses. Especially in the case of the interviews, this represented an ethnographic form of data gathering in that it involved "key informants who are experts on the social setting and have rich knowledge of it" (Holloway and Todres, 2003, p.348). Moreover, because I am trying to investigate 'what exists' in relation to knowledge of re-sits (and policy) in the school and how this is 'known and shared', the philosophical framework for my research is both, respectively, ontological and epistemological (Usher, 1996, p.11). A rather unconventional design for the questionnaire represents a rejection of what

Janesick (2000, p.390) refers to as “‘methodolatry’, a combination of *method* and *idolatry* to describe a preoccupation with selecting and defending methods...[rather than] understanding the actual experience of participants in the research project.” As a ‘descriptive’ and positivist form of enquiry, I believe that it served as an efficient means of “portray[ing] an accurate profile...” of the students who participated in the survey (Robson, 2002, p.59). This approach was suited to ascertaining the extent of the measurable benefits which are enjoyed by most students who re-sit.

3.1 Finding a direction

The one-to-one interviews mainly involved colleagues at School X and the use of a focus group consisted of colleagues running Business Education departments in Group Y schools. A mixture of A-level and pre-A-level students participated in the self-completion questionnaire/group interviews, all of which were conducted in a classroom environment. The students responded to a variety of questions which sought either a factual response or an opinion. For both the one-to-one and focus group interviews, an essentially qualitative methodology was adhered to, whilst the questionnaire format consisted of a combination of qualitative and quantitative items for the purpose of data collection and analysis. The rationale for employing these techniques is explained in the respective sections below.

A combination of the secondary research which is summarised in the preceding chapter and numerous conversations with members of the teaching

staff at School X (before more structured interviewing took place), was instrumental in identifying important areas for my primary research. Palmer (cited, Burgess, 1996, p.107) for example, stresses the potential importance of 'guiding and bending' "...controlled conversation[s] to the service of [the researcher's] interest", and this advice was important in developing my research objectives.

As outlined in the opening chapter, the objectives of this study are firstly to establish the motives which students at the school have for re-sitting AS-level examinations in Economics and Business Studies, and secondly, to examine the costs and benefits of so doing. Transcriptions from initial interviews helped to shape my research goals, which in turn provided a focus for my questionnaire. The importance of "linking survey questions to research questions" is emphasized by Robson (2002, p.242). In order to refine this process, the collective wisdom of my colleagues was useful in making my questions 'understandable' to a student population; a major prerequisite advanced by Robson (p.242) for the researcher's task to be fulfilled. This is similar, in essence, to the "earliest stages of pilot work" advised by Oppenheim (1966, pp 25-26), "...involv[ing]... talks with key informants" in order to gain a 'feel' for the issues involved and "help...devis[e] the actual working of questions."

In order to make the transition from research 'interests' to 'objectives', therefore, I felt that it was appropriate to interview a number of colleagues at school X whose roles were associated in some way with the examination process. These were the GCSE and A-level examination officers, the UCAS

co-ordinator, and from the senior management team, the Director of Studies, Deputy Head responsible for curriculum development and the Head of Sixth Form. This time, their selection was based more consciously on the premise of their qualities as 'key informants', described by Le Compte (cited, Wellington, 2000, p.74) as "individuals who possess special knowledge, status or communication skills and who are willing to share that knowledge with the researcher." The intention here was to become equipped with a broader understanding of some of the issues which have come to light since the introduction of re-sits at the school, including their administration and their impact on both university applications, and sixth form teaching. In particular, discussions with the Director of Studies gave me an insight into how certain patterns of examination performance which seem to have emerged amongst students, might have been related to a number of factors. These include the number of re-sits they took and when they sat them, the A-level subject itself and the influence of their university aspirations.

3.2 Interviews

With the one-to-one, face-to-face interviews that I conducted with colleagues at School X (all of whom had been at the school for considerably longer than myself and experienced practitioners in their managerial roles), I felt that it was important to use an approach that was appropriate for "develop[ing] an understanding of the respondent's world", as suggested by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (1991, p.74). This approach seemed to be all the more appropriate, having spent the previous four years of my teaching career in a

maintained school, as the head of a department which delivered a broad range of vocational and academic courses across key stages four and five, including several which were non-examined.

When I first started undertaking research for this dissertation around three years ago, my interest in exploring the impact of re-sits in the school stemmed mainly from the perspective of a Head of Department in a highly results-driven, selective school. Irrespective of the rather 'loose' school policy which existed at the time of one AS-level re-sit per subject in the January or June of the upper sixth, I was conscious that as a department we actively encouraged students to 'have another go' at modules. The rationale for this was not just based on the idea that they may have under-performed in their first (or even second attempt), nor was it motivated by the sole desire to improve results in the department at all costs. It also included the following factors:

- Every opportunity should be taken to extract as many marks as possible from AS-level units (unless students were already relatively close to the UMS ceiling for the unit), based on the simple logic that modules at this level are easier, yet still equally weighted with A2-level modules.
- The school's policy of not permitting A2-level modules to be taken until the end of the A-level course would mean that students would not be unduly 'overloaded' with examinations, at least not in the January series when they were in the upper sixth.

- University offers would not be jeopardised.
- Perhaps most importantly, the nature of A2-level teaching in both Economics and Business Studies frequently involved a return to AS-level concepts, in both synoptic and non-synoptic modules (the implication being that candidates would *not* be daunted by revisiting topics that bore no relevance to their current studies in the upper sixth, thus reducing the burden of revision).

In order, therefore, to develop alternative school-wide perspectives on the use (and possible abuse) of re-sits, I was drawn to the view of Burgess (1982, p.45) that an important reason for conducting qualitative interviews is to “understand how individuals construct the meaning and significance of their situations...from the complex personal framework of beliefs and values, which they have developed over their lives.” Adoption of such a view is perhaps even more appropriate when interviewing senior management, as three of the six colleagues at School X were. So too is some consideration of the school’s current vision statement: “to be acknowledged widely as one of the best all-round boys’ schools in the UK.”

Schools in the independent sector typically aim to create ‘rounded products’, or at least like to be perceived as doing as such. Aspirations like these have less of an elitist ‘feel’ about them than statements pertaining to academic prowess, especially in a climate of increasing governmental pressure for independent schools to more actively integrate in the community and justify their charitable status. The subjective nature of such aims in vision (or

mission) statements (specifically, words and phrases such as 'widely' and 'all-round'), help to shield a fee-paying school from higher profile, quantitative measures of its performance, the most obvious being examination results and its position in league tables. In a 'bad year for results', they can provide some manoeuvrability for schools to point to success outside of the classroom as well as in collaborative projects outside of the parameters of the school itself.

The combined advice of Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (1991), and Burgess (1982), therefore, is useful in the context of conducting interviews (especially with senior staff) on the subject of re-sitting examinations in an environment where a school is trying to effect a balance (certainly in the public eye) between extra-curricular achievements and academic success. After all, the staff of selective schools in the private sector may wish to remain relatively discreet about the magnitude of re-sits and avoid, if possible, any association with the notion of 'failure the first time round'. The fact that the school resisted entering candidates for an AS-level module in January until 2006 is arguably consistent with this stance. I felt that this reasoning, together with the use of a topic guide (or 'interview guide', as Patton, cited by Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p.83 prefers to call it) as a loose structure for questions, would work better than a completely informal style of interviewing. This allowed me to "modify the sequence of questions, change the wording, explain them or add to them" (Cohen and Manion, 1994, p.271) and avoid potential stumbling blocks, if, for example, interviewees felt that confidential information was being compromised.

I was also wary of possible conflicts of interest arising during interviews, due to the need to 'tow management lines' and be supportive of school policies, such as the 'one re-sit per module' constraint which existed in theory at the start of my research, but largely ignored by teachers and students alike. The advantage of interviewing a combination of management and non-management staff, however, meant that 'key informants' at different levels in the organisation "creat[e] some kind of 'in-house triangulation'" (Wellington, 2000, p.73) which helps to overcome the problem of 'image presentation' (p.129).

During this part of my research, a casual onlooker might not have always been able to easily distinguish, as Bell (1999 p.138) has observed, between a purposeful interview and something which is nothing "more than just an interesting conversation". In order to realise the former goal, I was aware of the danger of my interviews drifting into the latter category and tried to develop a style, with sufficient control, akin to that advanced by Powney and Watts (1987). This maintains that "...it is the explicit intentions and actions of the researcher, or interviewer, which converts 'a chat' between two or more people into a study of phenomena. Often the conversation is subtly presented by an interviewer, who is personally unobtrusive but still elicits the information relevant to the research" (pp 6-7).

The approach I adopted here, therefore, is phenomenological rather than positivist in that I am trying to focus on key features of the former, rather than the latter paradigm (shown in Figure 1 overleaf) as identified by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (1991, p.27). Aspects of this include 'meanings'

rather than ‘facts’ and involves the researcher attempting to “understand what is happening” as opposed to “look[ing] for causality and fundamental laws” (p.27). To a lesser extent, this was also true of the focus groups, but the largely quantitative orientation of the student questionnaire, considered in a later section, was more relevant to the positivist paradigm.

	<i>Positivist paradigm</i>	<i>Phenomenological paradigm</i>
<i>Basic beliefs:</i>	The world is external and objective	The world is socially constructed and subjective
	Observer is independent	Observer is part of what is observed
	Science is value-free	Science is driven by human interests
<i>Researcher should:</i>	Focus on facts	Focus on meanings
	Look for causality and fundamental laws	Try to understand what is happening
	Reduce phenomena to its simplest elements	Look at the totality of each situation
<i>Preferred methods include:</i>	Operationalising concepts so that they can be measured	Using multiple methods to establish different views of phenomena
	Taking large samples	Small samples investigated in depth or over time

Figure 1: Key features of positivist and phenomenological paradigms

(Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 1991, p.27)

In the earliest stages of my research, however, when my objectives for the study were still rather vague, a ‘non-directive’ form of interviewing, as

described by Cohen and Manion (1994, p.273) was occasionally present. This was particularly the case when I was trying to improve my understanding of areas (such as the school's examination policies and university applications procedures) where my colleagues' knowledge was far superior. Such 'blurring of roles' between the researcher and the informant, as Powney and Watts (1987, p.5) describe, can result in "ethnographic situations" developing, where "...interviewees inform the observer about things they think are important, rather than allow the interviewer to determine everything that should be discussed." My role here saw me acting more "as a kind of sponge, soaking up the interviewee's comments and responses [as] ...a kind of data collection device" (Wellington, 2000, p.72). On balance, however, the approach was an appropriate one for gaining an insight into different views on issues pertaining in some way to re-sits and examination performance, other than those developed from a departmental perspective.

The interviews I conducted varied in length, but lasted for an average of around fifty minutes and the transcription process, which took roughly twice as long, was nearly always undertaken on the same day to lessen the degree of inaccuracy. Certain 'preliminaries' which Wellington (2000, p.77) alerts the interviewer to, such as informing the interviewees about the purpose of the research and giving them assurances about their anonymity, were adhered to. All but two of the seven respondents (who were only interviewed once) participated on three occasions. Of the two who did not, one was the GCSE examinations officer for School X and the other was the Head of Business Studies at a neighbouring girls' school. Both interviews did not take place

until the last year of my research. In retrospect, it may have been useful to interview these colleagues on a longitudinal basis as well.

The main reasons for seeking their participation, however, meant that a single meeting was certainly better than none at all. These were firstly to strengthen my understanding of examination commitments at pre-16 level (given recent changes, such as the modularisation of some GCSE subjects, combined with more year 10 entries). Secondly, I felt it was useful to have more of an insight into re-sit strategies and teaching practices in an all-girls' school, particularly one which had a virtually identical examinations policy for sixth formers to my own. In line with what appears to be an independent sector trend, I was interested to discover that the girls' school had experienced a similar turnaround in popularity from Business Studies to Economics, to the point where low candidate numbers has brought the viability of teaching the former subject into question, in this particular institution. Contributions from both of the interviews were useful to shaping the penultimate chapter of this study on the future of the A-level and the part played in them by re-sits. In particular, interviewing a colleague at an independent girls' school helped to temper 'overgeneralizations' (Robson, 2002, p.75) about the prospects for the qualification in this sector, as did the composition of the focus group which involved heads of department from both boys' and co-educational schools.

One of the more important reasons for having three rounds of interviews with the other respondents, with roughly a year between each, was so that they corresponded to the number and frequency of my focus group interviews. It also enabled me to evaluate my approach between each round and make

informed changes as regards questions and technique. In this way, the results of interviews were a major source of information for shaping the content of the 'moderator guide' that I referred to in my role as facilitator of the three focus groups which took place during the course of my research. Generally speaking, whilst a topic guide was certainly used at first in order to allow me to "explore and probe" (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p.83), as my research aims became more specific, second and third interviews consisted of more detailed questions in the form of an 'interview schedule' (p.83). I believe, therefore, that the environment and the personnel within it were suitable for qualitative research by means of a series of interviews to be conducted. Together, they conform to King's (cited, Robson, 2002, p.271) 'appropriate circumstances' for such an undertaking, which include a situation "where individual perceptions of processes within a social unit – such as a work-group, department or whole organisation – are to be studied prospectively."

The main objectives that I had for interviews were to discover:

1. What constraints, if any, were *actually* imposed on candidates re-sitting modules at AS-level (irrespective of any policies which might have been in place) and to what extent were they consistently applied.
2. Any patterns which existed between performance in re-sits and individual subjects.

3. Views (based on data or otherwise) on the impact of examination 'overload' on performance.
4. If there was any evidence, at least as far as School X was concerned, to suggest that re-sits jeopardised university choice and / or applications.
5. What colleagues thought about the likely impact of the 2008 specifications on re-sits, particularly in relation to university entry and the influence of the new A* grade.
6. The collective 'gut-feeling' of colleagues towards re-sits, given (in relation to the maintained sector) the perceived conservatism towards them in the independent sector, even though this appeared to contradict surveys by the QCA on re-sits in private and state-run schools (QCA, 2007c, p.5).
7. A broader view of various motivational factors for students re-sitting, such as, most importantly, university offers (and to an extent, the specific university making the offer).
8. A clearer indication of how students based their decision to re-sit on their performance in previous attempts, measured quantitatively, for example by grade or UMS score.

3.3 Focus Groups

Three focus group sessions, involving the heads of business education departments of the eight Group Y schools were held in the summer terms between 2006 and 2008. I took assurance from Barbour and Kitzinger's (1999, pp 5-6) widely referred to definition that "any group discussion may be called a 'focus group' as long as the researcher is actively encouraging of, and attentive to, the group interaction." This was indeed the case with this part of my research, even though the three sessions took part within a broader annual meeting between the departmental heads in the group to discuss numerous aspects of our role.

The fact that eight participants took part meant that we were of 'full group' size, according to the classification used by Greenbaum (1998, p.2). In accordance with the basic advice offered by Kitzinger and Barbour (1999, p.11), as facilitator I "approach[ed] the...discussion with a basic outline of key questions", which were in effect my research objectives for the focus group and are listed at the end of this section. It took about sixty minutes to discuss the handful of questions about re-sits that I brought to the table in each of the three sessions, however, at around eight minutes average participation time per individual this was perhaps a little on the short side, based on Greenbaum's (p.3) implied recommendation of at least ten minutes each.

Considering our areas of responsibility and ongoing correspondence between meetings (mainly by e-mail) about teaching matters, I believe that the relatively high degree of homogeneity in the group was conducive to

productive discussion, so the 'time' issue did not bother me as a major concern. The nature of our roles in the 'league-table-sensitive-world' of the independent sector, combined with the added mysteries held by new specifications ahead (plus the good working relationship that is always evident between us), was conducive to a "permissive atmosphere" and cooperative environment which "foster[ed]...a more complete understanding of the issues" (Vaughn, Shay Schumm and Sinagub, 1996, p.4). Furthermore, the fact that we were all departmental heads meant that there was little likelihood of a 'power imbalance' as referred to by Barbour (2007, p.49) as often occurs in numerous 'committees' chaired, for example, by the Head him/herself where there could be a preponderance of "'textbook-like' responses".

Whilst I was aware of Vaughn, Shay Schumm and Sinagub's (1996, p.5) stipulation that "it is not an explicit goal in focus groups to reach a consensus", as the findings from this part of my research reveal in the next chapter, opinions were still commonly shared on most of the major issues being debated. This would come as little surprise to Robson (2002, p.286) who includes the tendency for interaction in homogeneous groups to "result in groupthink". A homogeneous group may therefore present the researcher with a trade off between "the fertile soil of a friendly [environment and]...the stony ground of a setting where there is probably a greater, though unacknowledged, need for something new" (Robson, 2002, p.67). I was also aware, scanning through a handful of research methodology books, of the apparent need for a "trained moderator" (Vaughn, Shay Schumm and Sinagub, 1996, p.5), who was preferably someone with "considerable skills and experience" (Robson, 2002, p.287) in order for focus groups to be run

effectively. It was a minor relief, therefore, to read the view of Kitzinger and Barbour (1999, p.12) who downplay the idea “that the group facilitator must be inordinately skilled...” especially where the topic being discussed is “...of obvious interest to the research participants.”

Nevertheless, I still followed Kitzinger and Barbour’s (1999, pp12-13) advice and made an effort to develop my ability in the role of a moderator by firstly conducting some group discussion on re-sits (albeit limited, both size and time-wise) with my two departmental colleagues. The limitations which may have been associated with my lack of experience in conducting the ‘full’ focus group interview were also overcome to an extent by two other qualities being evident in the interaction with Group Y colleagues, which Kitzinger and Barbour (1999) suggest help the novice researcher. Firstly, the topic was ‘straightforward’ (p.12) as all the participants were already knowledgeable about the main issues. Secondly the absence of any kind of power imbalance made discussion ‘safe’ (p.12) and highly relevant, particularly with the forthcoming change in specifications and the desire for colleagues to acquire a group consensus before cementing certain aspects of their own departmental policies.

Contrary to the tendency for authors of research methodology, such as Vaughn, Shay Schumm and Sinagub (1996) and Greenbaum (1998) to separate the roles of ‘researcher’ and ‘moderator’, often with the former employing the latter, in the case of my study, both of course were undertaken by myself. I was therefore conscious of the need, as asserted by Robson (2002, p.287), to generate “a balance between an active and a passive role”

in order to maintain the credibility of this approach. Sim (cited, Robson, p.287, 2002) elaborates on the meaning of this 'balance': "The moderator has to generate interest in and discussion about a particular topic, which is close to his or her professional academic interest, without at the same time leading the group to reinforce existing expectations or confirm a prior hypothesis." My dual role here, as researcher and practitioner, in that I am able to use what I observe to influence my "own professional practice" (Gray, cited, Taylor *et. al.* 2006, p.5) is essentially an example of action research.

In accordance with a simplified framework based around, and using some of the ideas of more detailed structures, such as those provided by Greenbaum (1998, pp 74-6) and Vaughn, Shay Schumm and Sinagub (1996, pp 76-85), my role as the moderator for the group can be broken down into the following stages:

Planning

The opportunity for each participant to submit items to the agenda of Group Y meetings exists from about six months prior to the actual meeting, when the Head of Department at the host school sends a group email to all of the other seven heads, inviting contributions. School X was not the host venue on any of the three occasions. Therefore, not only did the predetermined size and composition of the group relieve me of the need to consider many of the issues related to 'sample size and sampling strategies' (such as recruitment) which Kitzinger and Barbour (1999, pp 7-8) raise, the logistics checklist given

by Wellington (2000, p.126) with ideas for 'setting the scene' at the location was also of little relevance.

To take advantage of whatever small amount of control I may have had, therefore, I added my suggestion for discussion to the agenda soon after the invitation for items to be included was sent and this was confirmed by the host several months before the meeting took place. This gave me plenty of time to develop a 'moderator guide' of the main issues to be discussed, as contained within Greenbaum's (1998, p.74) 'preparation' section of the facilitator's 'responsibilities'. Ideas for this were developed from my secondary research and transcriptions of the three rounds of one-to-one interviews with colleagues at School X, and contributions from the pilot focus group sessions that I conducted with colleagues in my own department.

Before focus group interviews take place, Vaughn, Shay Schumm and Sinagub(1996, p.76) also stress the importance of the moderator being able to "discern...whether the immediate goal is to obtain information on the participants'...past...current [or]...future or ideal behaviours, thoughts or feelings." In my case, all three – indeed four, contexts were relevant to my objectives. Views about the 'past' were necessary, primarily (although amongst other things) to understand the extent to which business education departments in the group, used and/or encouraged re-sits. It was interesting to see how this may have changed over time, given influences *within* the school such as the re-sit policies of other departments and *externally*, including the examination policies of other schools in both the independent and maintained sectors. An examination of the 'current' and the 'future' was

also important in order to compare and contrast the various strategies of the participants. The outgoing six module A-level structure represents the pinnacle as far as the potential for maximising performance via re-sits is concerned and the future four module courses mean the consideration of new strategies for teaching ('what, when and how'), and policies for entering candidates for examinations.

Moreover, 'ideal behaviours' (Vaughn, Shay Schumm and Sinagub, 1996, p.76) were also important to consider. The criteria used by Robson (2002, p.286) for determining homogeneous groups can easily be applied to the characteristics of the participants in the focus group: 'common background' (careers largely spent teaching in independent schools), 'position' (heads of department) and 'experience' (Economics and Business Studies). Despite this, there *were* elements of heterogeneity, including the varying degrees of constraint imposed on departments by school-wide examination policies. Interaction between participants about potential conflict between departmental 'ideals' for the use of re-sits and the imposition of rules by the school's management, made for interesting discussion.

Perhaps less significantly (in terms of my objectives) there was also the fact that the department of one of the participants' taught Economics and Politics, as opposed to Economics and Business Studies in all the rest. It is unlikely that the degree of heterogeneity that did exist, however, did little to diminish the degree of 'generalizability' of the findings from the focus groups and the extent to which they could be applied to other contexts in the independent sector, "beyond the specific research subjects and setting involved" (Bogdan

and Biklen, 2007, p.36). Triangulation from secondary sources can be referred to in support of this belief. These include those elements of the research by the QCA (2007c) on examination patterns which is specific to the independent sector (where it discovered relatively high numbers of re-sits) and the work by Reilly and Bachan (2002) detailing, for example, the robustness of Economics numbers in private schools and the perceived academic rigour of the subject in comparison to Business Studies.

Implementation

Not being the host school again meant that certain aspects that are normally associated with the moderator's role as described by Vaughn, Shay Schumm and Sinagub (1996, pp 77-78), such as 'meeting and greeting' and 'making introductions' were not relevant to my circumstances. When the time for my item on the agenda arrived, however, the host allowed me to facilitate and run the proceedings. At the start of each session, I gave a brief explanation of the purpose of the forthcoming discussion, thanking the group in anticipation of their contributions and gave reassurances regarding their anonymity (Barbour, 2007, p.80). Although Kitzinger and Barbour (1999, p.14) state "there is no 'correct' persona for focus group facilitation", given the degree of "shared characteristics" between the participants, combined with a cordial atmosphere, I had a natural inclination to want to be perceived as 'one of them'. I believe I was successful in achieving this and was able to benefit from "the synergy of the group" which, as (Wellington, 2000, pp 124-5)

observed, when “brought together in a suitable, conducive environment, can stimulate or ‘spark each other off’.”

In heeding the advice of Wellington (p.126) I tried to ensure that “questions...flow(ed) in a logical sequence.” An interpretation of this advice to suit my research objectives was to start with questions about re-sits of a more quantitative orientation. The answers to these were recorded on to a pro-forma at the start of each meeting (revised only slightly between the three annual sessions to reflect some sharpening of my project’s objectives), the final completed version of which appears in Appendix 4. In less familiar company, this kind of opening might be understood in a similar vein to Barbour’s (2007, p.83) suggestion of “the use of unthreatening general questions...in order to ease one’s way into the topic of choice.” From the offset, I was aware of the need to avoid some of the more obvious ‘methodological mistakes’ that Greenbaum (1998, p.58) identifies (such as using focus groups “as an alternative to quantitative study”) as being frequently evident in this essentially qualitative research technique.

Whilst I was keen to ensure that this information only took a few minutes to collect, asking routine questions which required a systematic contribution from everyone, and scope for “each respondent to share a view or experience” (Barbour, 2007, p.83), meant that it took considerably longer. Therefore around a quarter, on average, of the hour-long sessions was consumed by filling the pro-forma in my role as moderator, before questions which were intended to elicit a more qualitative response (for example, concerning the

revision of departmental strategies by colleagues in the light of new specifications) were brought to the table.

An 'analytical mistake' (Greenbaum, 1998, p.68) in the form of a "preconceived bias" which was even harder to avoid, given my contribution to the interaction that took place, was exposure of some of my 'personal opinions' (Wellington, 2000, p.26) to the group. I did at all times, however, try to avoid vocal enthusiasm and other 'signals of approval' such as 'head-nodding', where colleagues shared the same views as my own. To this extent I was sensitive to the purpose of "focus groups [to] explore collective phenomena, not individual ones" (Robson, 2002, p.289), but the circumstances of my approach still prevented me from *fully* "cultivat[ing the] stance of 'passionate neutrality'" that Hedges (1985, p.82) demands as a prime quality in moderators.

Given the homogeneous nature of the group and the absence of a power imbalance, however, I believe that my contributions to debate were not any more influential than the other participants and did not unduly hinder my ability to "monitor...the conversation objectively" (p.82). That said, elements of the reporting for the focus groups were inevitably 'reflective', given "the presence of the researcher's voice" (Anderson, 1998, p.133). On a final note, despite advice to the contrary recommending a combination of audio-taping and note taking (offered, for example, by Robson, 2002, p.288 and Wellington, 2000, pp 125-6), I felt that the former would have been rather intrusive and not particularly conducive to the ambience of these meetings. All data was therefore recorded in a written hybrid form of short-hand and occasionally in

some detail when contributions were felt to be particularly pertinent to the study's objectives.

Data analysis

Notes taken during the sessions were not as extensive as the level of detail suggested by Vaughn, Shay Schumm and Sinagub (1996, p.101), who advise facilitators to incorporate, for instance, both “nonverbal and verbal responses...to key issues...and statement[s] with an emotional message [e.g., sarcasm or anger]”. Instead, within a few hours of each focus group I adopted one of Kruger's (cited Vaughn, Shay Schumm and Sinagub, 1996, p.102) approaches and identified the ‘big ideas’ which emerged in my notes, from “patterns of findings rather than counting the times something [was] said” (p.103). To accompany this approach, I used my topic guide as a simple and pragmatic form of coding frame for recording what was discussed. I believed that it was “flexible enough to incorporate themes introduced by focus group participants” (Barbour, 2007, p.117), which were relevant to achieving the overall objectives of my study.

As the three sessions only represented a fraction of my primary research, I did not think it was necessary to divide my topic guide into ‘broad themes’ and levels of ‘sub’ categories to provide the kind of “room for manoeuvre” (p.118) which grander theses using focus groups as its principle method might require. Conscious of the fact that I was not using a more sophisticated coding frame than what is to all intents and purposes, a simple ‘list’, I found

some solace in Cohen and Manion's (1994, p.286) comment that "[pre-coded]...classifications...may be developed during pilot studies", which in retrospect is what, to a large extent, mine were.

In conclusion, although the focus group sessions took up by far the least amount of my time out of the three main methodological approaches, as reflected in their relatively simple design, they were an efficient means of collecting specialist department-based data in pursuit of fulfilling the objectives of this study. Despite the A-level support seminars which are offered (expensively) by the main awarding bodies and a growing number of commercial interests on various aspects of teaching and assessment, including those of current interest in relation to the new specifications, there is a consensus amongst Group Y colleagues that the meetings which take place between us are much more beneficial than the 'professional' alternatives which exist. In terms of the delegates they attract, courses which are run by third party organisations are naturally more heterogeneous. Significantly, they include maintained sector schools and as Robson (2002, p.286) logically infers, groups containing different backgrounds might "stimulate and enrich the discussion."

Even so, whilst these courses are not specifically set up as focus groups (therefore limiting the usefulness of their comparison), the consensus which was evident amongst Group Y participants was that the large numbers they usually involve, together with their diverse composition, rendered them relatively unproductive. As Robson (2002, p.286) also warns, heterogeneous

groups increase the tendency for “power imbalances...a lack of respect for opinions [and]...a dominant participant destroying the group process.” The familiarity between the members of Group Y, however, also helped to create “compatibility...and the acceptance of each other” (Vaughn, Shay Schumm and Sinagub, 1996, p.62). It follows, as Sapolsky (cited Vaughn, Shay Schumm and Sinagub, 1996, p.62) remarks, that “compatible groups are more efficient because they spend less time on maintenance”, with Smelser (cited, Vaughn, Shay Schumm and Sinagub, 1996, p.62) adding that the reason is because they “enjoy working together more.”

Discussions in the group over the course of three sessions have involved many more topics (such as teaching resources, choice of examination board and the quality of external marking) than those included in my guide for the purpose of my research objectives. This does not really, however, detract from the ability of these meetings to offer a forum for focussed discussion on relevant issues which colleagues might wish to bring to the table. The homogeneous composition of the group obviously helped to make it “an attractive option for those...who crave the opportunity to talk to other people in the same situation as themselves” (Barbour, 2007, p.42).

The individual interviews that I conducted, as explained in the last section, were largely on subject areas which were external to my departmental expertise, where the interviewee was clearly more informed than I was. My transcription of them needed to be much more detailed than that for the focus groups and my non-directive approach at times meant that my respondents were virtually ‘doing all the talking’. In areas of a departmental orientation

where I was more knowledgeable, therefore, one-to-one interviews with fellow-specialists would not have produced the advantage of 'synergism' (Hess, cited: Vaughn, Shay Schumm and Sinagub, (1996, p.14), "when a wider bank of data emerges through the group interaction." Complementary to this line of reasoning, my topic guide was sufficiently broad enough to "potentially encompass far more ground than could be covered in a single interview" (Hedges, 1985, p.77).

The Topic Guide

The list below contains the major topics and recurring themes which emerged from the guides used at the three focus group sessions:

1. What is the school's / department's policy on re-sits (via pro-forma)?
2. Development of policies over the years: internal and external influences.
3. Examination overload.
4. Impact on results.
5. Impact on teaching.
6. University applications.

7. Business Studies and Economics candidate numbers - to see, for example, if they showed similar movement trends to that experienced in School X, wary as I was of factors which may be relevant to student choices in any particular institution, such as the breadth of the sixth form curriculum and the performance, perceived or otherwise, of individual teachers.
8. Impact of the "Cambridge List" and other influences on candidate numbers.
9. New specifications and future policies.
10. Alternatives to A-level.

3.4 Questionnaires

My initial idea was for the student questionnaires at School X to be conducted on a 'self-completion' basis, primarily for the sake of administrative convenience. Administering them during normal timetabled lessons would guarantee a high response rate (in fact, all the students agreed to participate in the survey and issues dealing with their 'consent' are discussed below). Unlike postal and other kinds of 'off-site' self-administered surveys where it may be impossible for the researcher to detect where questions are misunderstood, I believed that my presence would also help to solve any problems which threatened the internal validity of my approach. The various

forms of ambiguity which can exist in the phrasing of questions are identified by Anderson (1998, pp 184-5).

It then occurred to me, however, that I could combine the advantages of this technique with the benefits that a structured group interview offers, some of which overcome the pitfalls of self-completion questionnaires. By asking the questions myself and requesting the students to respond on file paper I was able to control the order in which they were answered. This subsequently gave me more confidence to develop a line of questioning which started by seeking to elicit data that was easily quantifiable, before covering issues that were slightly more complex (Robson, 2002, p.238). This approach does not conform to any of the 'three main ways' put forward by Robson (p.236) for administering a questionnaire. In addition to the 'telephone interview' (which only featured in my research to a limited extent), to qualify as a 'face-to-face interview', interviewers themselves complete the questionnaire and Robson's definition of 'self completion' implies the distribution of a formatted questionnaire to respondents. For the sake of convenience and to avoid cumbersome repetition, from this point onwards I will nevertheless refer to the combination of methods that I employed, as a 'questionnaire'.

Even though I was aware of the need to avoid 'leading' and 'presumptuous' questions and took heed of warnings offered by Bell (1999, pp 123-24), one or two could nevertheless be possibly viewed as falling into this category.

Although wary of the limited amount of time I permitted myself to conduct each survey session, together with the advantage of being able to explain questions if requested to do so by the respondents, I felt that a few questions

with such an orientation were still necessary in order to elicit responses to key issues, which more open-ended items might have failed to draw out. This included, for example, discovering opinions on topics that might not have even firmly registered in a student's psyche, such as the existence or prospect of 'examination overload' and the link, however tentative, between re-sits and university choice. I did, therefore, in compliance with de Vaus's 'checklist for question wording' (adapted and abridged by Robson, 2002, pp 244-45), assure respondents that a 'no opinion alternative' was permissible where their views were sought.

In contrast to the other research methods in this study, certain features of the questionnaire conform to aspects of the 'positivist' (rather than 'phenomenological') paradigm, which are identified by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (1991, p.27), and again shown earlier in Figure 1. These include the questionnaire's tendency to 'focus on facts', the involvement of a 'large sample' (which was actually the whole 'population' of Economics and Business Studies students at the school) and the degree of 'independence' I had as an 'observer' in the proceedings, compared to, for example, the focus groups, where I was instead 'part of what was observed' (p.27).

The two year period over which the questionnaire was administered, spanning from the closing months of the 2005-06 academic year to the corresponding period in the 2007-08 academic year, meant that data collection and analysis reflected a longitudinal approach to research, although some 'sample attrition' (the problems associated with which are addressed at length by Magnusson and Bergman, 1990), was inevitable. This was partly due to a few pre-A-level

students deciding *not* to commence AS-level Economics or Business Studies in September after a few ‘taster’ lessons in July, but more significantly because of a proportion of candidates in both subjects opting to terminate their study of either after AS-level. The table in Appendix 5 shows how it was possible from the five cohorts of Economics and Business students who participated in the questionnaire to follow the fortunes of one of them at points over three separate academic years (from pre-A-level through to A2-level, as shown in red text). Two cohorts (in blue text) participated at both AS and A2-level and for the remaining two (in green), only a cross-sectional ‘snap shot’ was possible, at pre-A-level for one (in July, 2008) and A2-level for the other (at the start of the period of questionnaire research in May, 2006). Whilst not exactly conforming to a simple “Point A-Point B (‘before and after’) longitudinal model”, this method is still much closer to a ‘from-to’ than a ‘from-through’ approach to analysing change over time, which Saldaña (2003, p.7) distinguishes as “generat[ing] a product of change”, rather than outlining “outlin[ing] the process of change.”

Whilst some of the questions were common to all three year groups in compliance with a longitudinal approach, out of necessity, some were not, in order to be relevant to the year groups of the students. The fact, however, that the same questionnaire was always administered to *each* of the year groups (as opposed to the same one to *all* of them), meant that observations could be made about different groups of students at the *same* stage in their academic career, over time. Each year group, then, responded to a list of standardized questions. However, because some of these were administered to students on a longitudinal basis (such as that regarding their ‘opinion of re-

sits'), the purpose being to explore how perceptions changed over the course of two years or so at post-16 level, as Robson (2002, p.234) accepts, it was not always the case that "questions mean[t] the same thing to different respondents". The value of asking the same question two or three times over a period of up to two years (especially to a young and relatively impressionable audience), arguably gave some of my findings more 'generalizability' and subsequently increased their 'external validity' by creating a firmer link between 'attitude and behaviour' (p.231). Appendix 6a and 6b show how the questionnaire was developed for each group. Text of matching colour (together with corresponding numbers for each question) is used to indicate items which are of a longitudinal nature and those which are specific to a year group.

Following the advice of Wellington (2000, p.104), it can also be seen in Appendix 6a and 6b how the questionnaire conforms to what he calls "it's most important point", in that it "begin[s] with straightforward, closed questions, leaving the open-ended, matter of opinion questions to the end." If the questionnaires were only designed for the collection of cross-sectional data, they would have been unable to capture some of the dynamic relationships that I was interested in detecting at the start of the research period in the spring of 2006. These included the relaxation of the school's re-sit policy and how it impacted on examination entries. Consideration of other influences, however, such as those associated with the publication of the 'Cambridge list' a few months later in 2006, were obviously not foreseen when the questionnaires were first administered. As Robson (2002, p.160) commented, amongst the uses of longitudinal studies, they "might either

precede or follow some intervention or other event and examine its effects over time.” It should also be noted, in Appendix 6b, the extended questionnaire for A2-level students who were in the last few weeks of their school career. Students at this stage in the course were better placed, having had more experience of external assessment, to answer questions on ‘examination overload’ and on other issues pertaining to their application to university, as well as their performance at sixth form level in general.

Having decided on my technique for eliciting responses on a group basis, I sought guidance to help ensure that I adopted a consensual approach to this part of my research. Initially, permission was sought to interview students (the importance of which is emphasised by Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995), in line with school policy, from the Head Master. After receiving a full explanation of the purpose and objectives of my research, he felt able to grant this. At that point, I briefly considered seeking the agreement of parents for their sons to participate in the group interviews by means of a ‘consent form’, which would have had to been specially designed for such a purpose. It quickly dawned on me, however, that this would have given rise to a number of problems which would have been difficult to resolve, given the scope and nature of this study. The design and distribution of the consent form itself would have needed management approval and its administration would have been overwhelmingly time-consuming. In addition, a poor response to it would have fragmented the process of conducting the questionnaire, and probably rendered the classroom setting (at least during the school day) an inappropriate environment, given the non-involvement of some of the students that this would have meant.

It was reassuring, therefore, to read the guideline offered by France *et. al.* (2000, p.155) in the context of 'informed consent' that "16 to 18 year olds [the age range of the students taking part in my survey] ...are seen as young adults and entitled to make decisions for themselves". In addition, Wellington (2000, p. 56) refers to a paragraph from the Ethical Guidelines published by the British Educational Research Association which stresses the importance of 'taking care' "when interviewing children and students up to school leaving age; permission should be obtained from the school and, *if they suggest*, [my italics] the parents." As with my other instruments of research discussed above, assurances were given that individuals *and* the school itself would be 'anonymized' and conscious of my 'powerful position' as an elicitor of information, the students were told that their participation was not compulsory (Masson, 2000, pp 40-41). The belief I had that I was not researching a particularly sensitive topic (which the students were also made aware of) further convinced me that parental consent or that of other 'gatekeepers' associated with the school (including the guardians of boarding students) was not crucial to protecting the welfare of the participants. I also tried to convey this belief to the students by the 'matter-of-fact' way I administered the questionnaire, doing my best to give the impression that there were no "covert penalties for non-participation" (Robson, 2002, p.67).

An 'ethical consideration' raised by Robson (2000) is the likelihood of disruption to the normal routines of participants. He asks: "Will the study involve them doing things they would otherwise not do" and suggests that the researcher should "take into account the degree of inconvenience" (p.68).

This is a pertinent issue, perhaps even more so in the independent sector

where students have been known to sarcastically remind teachers of the hourly cost of lessons when they deem them to be 'unproductive', including, quite feasibly, if they feel time is being wasted on someone's 'spurious research activities' instead of revising for the next modular examination. The efficiency of any method, of course, is best served by researchers' "clarifying in their own minds [its] precise nature and scope" (Cohen and Manion, 1994, p.355), and having appropriate designs and procedures in place. These aspects receive attention further on in this section.

A conscious effort was made, however, to administer the questionnaires at times that caused minimal disruption. These included during the 'breaks' which are customary after the completion of classroom-based tests, at the end of a double period (especially if towards the end of the school day when concentration spans begin to wane) and in lessons provisionally reserved for an activity where adolescent male students are notoriously unproductive: 'coursework'. The process of completing the questionnaire only took around fifteen minutes for the pre-AS-level and AS-level groups, but about twice this length of time for the A2-level students who responded to a much longer version. This is, admittedly, rather shorter than the "hour or so" which is recommended by Robson (albeit with little justification), as the amount of time which is needed for completing more conventional self-completion questionnaires in a group setting. The timing of the questionnaires during the academic year also helped to minimise disruption, but more importantly as regards this study's objectives, they took place to coincide with preparation for, or the aftermath of, external examinations, in order to fulfil certain requirements for data collection. To this end, they were administered towards

the close of the academic year when the expectations of both teachers and students are generally considered to be 'less intense'; therefore:

- Pre-A-level students took part after their GCSEs in early July.
- Lower sixth AS-level students towards the end of the summer term in June, after their examinations.
- Upper sixth A2-level students during the final few days of their school career in May, in the week before the summer half term break.

Before piloting the questionnaire, I referred to the guidance offered by Bell (1999, pp127-28) and in particular focussed my attention on determining:

- How long it would take to complete.
- The suitability of questions.
- Whether or not important topics had been omitted.

In testing a draft version on a small group of 'Old Boys' (consisting of former A-level Business Studies and Economics students) who agreed to take part in the pilot during a visit to the school on one of its 'open days', I therefore managed to select respondents who were similar to those in the 'population' (Bell, 1999, p.128). This in turn helped to give the questions 'face validity', which is achieved when they "look as if they are measuring what they claim to

measure” (Cohen and Manion, 1994, p.281). The Old Boys’ answers were of course somewhat ‘retrospective’ having had left the school at least a year earlier, but the fact that they could provide answers which were relevant to questions in all three year groups in the survey (including reflections on their *final* A-level results) made their participation useful.

The nature and wording of my questions was largely reaffirmed as result of the input from the pilot, although a few amendments to the draft were made. Whilst these were mainly changes in the phrasing of certain questions which did not usually alter the essence of their meaning, more importantly, the pilot was useful in encouraging me to replace a number of open-ended questions with closed alternatives, once I able to appreciate the amount of work involved in analysing hundreds of subjective responses. As Wellington (2000, p.106) warns, “will the questionnaire gather masses of information which cannot be categorized or presented in a final report?” The removal of a few open-ended questions obviously made it more manageable to record and categorize responses. Where appropriate, Robson’s (2002, p.258) suggestion for transferring responses to a large sheet of paper (in my case, of A1 flip-chart size) was adopted and this process was used for “turning the answers to open questions to a defined set of standard responses” (p.258). Examples of this included categorisation of negative and neutral answers to questions about examination overload and discrimination by universities towards candidates who re-sit.

The design of the questionnaire, as mentioned earlier, was also influenced by data collected from the first round of interviews, which Wellington (2000, p.15)

refers to as “an important feature of triangulation”. This helped to give the questionnaire ‘content validity’, the importance of which is stressed by Cohen *et. al.* (2000, p.131). Moreover, the collective insight of my colleagues, derived from their knowledge of internal and external examination systems, together with their considerable experience of working at the school, was useful in enabling me to shape a series of questions which were focussed on achieving the dissertation’s objectives.

One of the key benefits of questionnaires which appears in a list compiled by Anderson (1998, p.168) of their ‘strengths’, is their capacity to be “highly efficient for routine data collection with a large number of respondents.” This proved to be the case in that it was an effective means for amassing a large quantity of data from more than 300 students (and more than twice this number of questionnaires) over a two year period. The two main problems of ‘representativeness’ which are discussed by Wellington (2000, p.102) were largely overcome by firstly having good access to the whole student ‘population’ in my position as one of their teachers and secondly, as mentioned earlier, the willingness of all the respondents to participate in the survey. Some of the data that was collected *could* have been accessed from the school’s web-based administrative (iSAMS) system. Whilst this electronic source has the advantage of accuracy, however, the retrieval of the same amount of information for each student would have been excessively burdensome. In a similar vein to Anderson’s (1998) view on the strengths of questionnaires, administered in this way, Walker (cited, Wellington, 2000, p.102) sums up one of their key ‘pros’ as their ability to “provide...the investigator with a...relatively easy accumulation of data.”

Reference still had to be made, however, to documentation generated by examination boards and the school's Director of Studies, when precision regarding, for example, movements in grades and UMS scores following re-sits was required. There may also have been the possibility of a number of students, despite their anonymity, inflating their results or presenting themselves, subconsciously or otherwise in a "socially desirable and positive way" (Begley 2000, p.108). The absence of a scale or grid system in the questionnaire for grading responses, as recommended by Begley (2000, p.109) in the interest of controlling the tendency for these kind of responses, may have also increased the chance of this happening. Retrospectively, I now realise that there was some duplication of data collection between secondary sources and the questionnaire, but in the interest of precision, cross-referencing between the two sources obviously increased the validity of my findings. Furthermore, the use of information generated elsewhere was necessary in order to analyse data from *entire* A-level courses, given the fact that it was impossible to use the classroom setting for students who had already left the school by the time their final results were published.

In contrast to the one-to-one interviews and focus groups, my information needs from the questionnaire were more geared towards achieving 'breadth' rather than 'depth' (Anderson, 1998, p.169) and a combination of all three methods were necessary in order to provide sufficient data for both quantitative and qualitative aspects of my analysis in the next chapter. The open-ended questions in the latter stages of the questionnaire were still, however, able to elicit "individual comments and perspectives in the

respondent's own words" (p.168) which was vital to developing a broad understanding, for example, of the students' motives for re-sitting.

In general terms, the objectives that I set out to achieve for the questionnaire, together with data that I retrieved from cumulative records of unit results for Economics and Business Studies at School X, produced by the OCR and AQA awarding bodies, were even more closely tied to the study's overall objectives, than my other two main methods of research. It was necessary to use secondary information which contained *all* of a student's results, including those at A2-level, in order to try and establish, for example, the influence of re-sits in helping to meet university offers. In the context of Economics and Business Studies at A-level, the intention of combining these primary and secondary methods was to further deepen my insight into:

- The main motives for re-sitting AS-levels and how these may have been influenced by the nature of either subject, or a specific module and the stage which students were at in the A-level course (in relation to the three periods when re-sits were possible: towards the end of the first year, in the middle of the second year of the course or at the end of it).
- The extent to which scores changed after first, second and third attempts at re-sitting and how this may be related to the idea of 'maturing' in either subject.
- The extent to which AS-level re-sits influenced overall A-level grades and, for example, helped students to meet their university offers.

- The extent to which 'examination overload' may have been present and the impact, in turn, this may have had on performance.
- The 'instrumentality' of students in their approach to examinations as a means in themselves to advancing their educational career in the latter stages of their time at school.

3.5 Email

In addition to the three main methods of research discussed in this chapter, a limited amount of data was also collected electronically from a number of sources. This included a self-completion questionnaire (see Appendix 7) which I emailed to eight colleagues teaching business education subjects in the maintained sector (that is, to everybody who I could think of in such a position), only three of whom gave full replies to all the questions. There is every chance that this response rate might have been higher if I had initially sent an email requesting their participation, as recommended by Mehta and Sivadas (1995). Given the speed and immediacy of emails, it was an opportunistic attempt in the closing stages of my primary research, to gain a perspective on the future of A-levels and re-sits that was external to the independent sector.

To this extent, the main purpose of this questionnaire was firstly to collect information which I thought might be particularly useful for the fifth chapter of this study, which centres on the implications of the September 2008 changes to the qualification. Secondly, I was also interested to understand more about

the extent to which business education departments in the maintained sector were using re-sits, having been a little surprised by QCA's (2007c) discovery that state schools *in general* entered a lower proportion of their candidates for second and third attempts at AS-level. I still harboured the belief that this summary of research findings by QCA into A-level re-sitting was not necessarily representative of subjects it excluded, like Economics and Business Studies, where 'maturation' (as discussed earlier) at a relatively late stage in such courses meant more re-sits. It was also hoped that data from the emailed questionnaire could be used as a method of triangulation, together with information collected at the Group Y focus groups, where there was a clear indication, for example, that Business Education departments in the participating schools tended to make more use of re-sits than most other subjects.

It is possible, however, that the shortcomings in my attempt to exploit this electronic means of communication, meant that my emails were unlikely to rise much above 'spam' status in the inbox of some teachers, suffering like most in the profession from varying degrees of 'information overload'. Well over a decade ago in the mid 1990s, Berge and Collins (1995) firmly predicted the likelihood of poor response rates for researchers who sent unsolicited emails requesting information which is of little or no consequence in the recipient's daily, office-bound routine. Although my survey consisted of only nine questions (written in 12-point Arial font to aid 'readability', as advised by Bernard and Mills, 2000), a few of these were either open-ended or of a 'multi-part' variety. This may have contributed to one respondent 'rolling-off' (that is, exiting the questionnaire before completing it) and another who clearly gave

the briefest of superficial answers to the point where they sometimes bore little relation to the question. Both responses therefore had to be ignored to prevent an even further reduction in the “utility of the survey” which Best, Brian and Krueger (2008, p.223) warn is common in electronic surveys which are overlong and feature too many questions seeking an opinion.

Email was also used as a research tool to request information for its potential contribution to the fourth and fifth chapters, from the following institutions:

- Oxford and Cambridge universities – more specifically their admissions personnel, principally to gain viewpoints on the likely impact of the restructuring of A-level (together with the introduction of the A* grade) and the various qualifications at post-16 level, both new and old, which compete for candidates alongside it.
- The three major awarding bodies (OCR, Edexcel and AQA), mainly for information about the new modular structure (including the timetabling of examinations), and the rationale for certain changes to Economics and Business Studies specifications.
- The QCA, largely in vain, for re-sit statistics more specifically related to Economics and Business Studies (in addition to its published research on selected subjects, available on its website), but also, more fruitfully, for information on course restructuring which supplemented that obtained through interviews, and confirmation of UMS grade boundaries when new specifications were only available in ‘draft’ form.

- UCAS, with little success, for information about movements in recent years on proportions of applicants (both deferred and direct entry) who are A-level candidates, as opposed to following various other post-16 courses. In particular, I was interested here in its potential role in future post qualification systems (and how these might influence a student's decision to re-sit), including limited forms of PQA such as 'upgrade week' (to be introduced in 2009), discussed in some detail in the penultimate chapter.
- The CIE, chiefly to determine if the uptake of its new Pre-U was anything like that indicated by the media and by, apparently, a significant number of supporters in the independent schools' sector.

Unlike the data collected from the three main methods of interviews, focus groups and questionnaires used in this study, which receive extended analysis in separate sections in the next chapter, responses to emailed questionnaires are incorporated less intensively to support the findings from these approaches, where appropriate.

4. Results and findings: analysis and evaluation

Given the aims outlined in the introduction for this study, the objectives of this chapter are to combine an analysis of the results and findings from my primary research with:

1. An evaluation of the main motives that students studying Economics and Business Studies at School X have for re-sitting, and how these have been shaped by a number of influences. These range, most crucially, from the principle objective of meeting conditional offers of places at university, to other less obvious motives they might have, such as satisfying their own self-esteem and responding to pressure which can be exerted by various stakeholders who have an interest in their level of attainment.
2. An examination of the evidence that helps the reader to consider the extent to which the obvious, measurable benefits which are enjoyed by the vast majority of students of these two subjects, principally in the form of improved scores in the retaken module, outweigh more qualitative factors which may actually be detrimental to their overall performance at A-level. These include the possibility of 'examination overload' and disruption to teaching, especially in the upper sixth when more advanced A2 topics are covered, but when the focus of many

students, during the first term at least, is directed towards re-sitting AS-levels.

It is important to remind the reader here that the bulk of the data analysis in this chapter is based on the outgoing A-level specifications, but any reference to the influence of the 2008 changes to the qualification is clearly noted.

4.1 Interviews

As I attempted to justify in the previous chapter, in pursuit of my objectives I was able to interview six staff at School X and one from a neighbouring girls' school, also in the independent sector. In order to avoid cumbersome repetition of the titles they hold, throughout this chapter, the interviewees will be referred to in the following abbreviated form:

Director of Studies (DOS)

Deputy Head (Curriculum) (DHC)

A-level Examinations Officer (AEO)

GCSE Examinations Officer (GEO)

Head of Sixth Form (HOS)

Co-ordinator of University Admissions (CUA)

Head of Business (girls school) (HOBG)

After some deliberation, I decided that perhaps the most effective way to analyse the findings from my interviews was to structure them roughly in accordance with the areas covered by the 'topic guide' that I used in this part of my research, as outlined in the methodology chapter. These are condensed into the three following areas:

4.1.1 Views on the 'optimal' number of re-sits and the prospect of 'examination overload'

Although it has been considerably relaxed in recent years and certainly not applied with any kind of consistency by staff, the 'official' school policy of limiting students to one AS-level re-sit per subject on average (widely understood as being four in total during any single examination series), was considered by most interviewees to represent a threshold. They generally believed that a student's examination performance would probably suffer if he re-sat more than four modules. The DOS referred to the economic concept of 'diminishing returns' to describe the impact on examination performance from re-sitting an excessive number of papers. His own analysis of re-sit results over the 2005-08 period has led him to broadly conclude, for example, that candidates entering for between one and four modules in January during the upper sixth, increase the UMS score they achieved in the subject at AS-level in the previous summer "by roughly half a grade on average" (or around 30 marks). "Many of those taking more than four", he continued, "fail to make the same gains, but then again they are some of our weakest boys so this makes the idea of 'overload' less straightforward."

Assuming the presence of the restriction, therefore, re-sits could have involved any permutation of modules, ranging from three in one subject and one in another, to one in each of the four subjects that are taken by students at the school, at AS-level. In the former combination, the half-grade improvement could, for example, be achieved as a result of improved scores spread more or less evenly across all three modules (meaning a modest return of only an additional 10 UMS or so in each). In the latter, students may have focussed on the one module in each subject where they produced a poor result in the lower sixth and increased their score by 30 marks in a single hour-long paper - which would represent a particularly successful return from the examination series. This scenario is therefore much more conducive to re-sitting than, for example, one where a student who is aiming for an 'A' grade at A-level, has performed consistently well in all AS-level modules (even achieving low grade 'As' in each), but is still some way below the 270 UMS benchmark, which is widely considered to be the target for ultimately achieving the top grade in the two year course.

Even so, the DOS concluded that there was a limit to the extent of improvement for most students aspiring to achieve the top grade when he added that "students who achieve a 'middle B' at the end of the first year rarely get an 'A' at A2-level because it is conceptually harder, even where they have gone up to an 'A' at AS-level after January re-sits. Unless coursework is involved and then a few more will make it." The DOS's views here are supported to an extent by Appendix 8 which shows how students in both subjects (but especially Business Studies, despite the 'cushion of

coursework' as he referred to it) who re-sit all three of their AS-level modules in January of the upper sixth, struggle to achieve the top grade at A-Level. The notion of 'examination overload' itself is considered to be so 'subjective' in its meaning by the HOS, to be of little value in *general* discussions of candidate performance. This is not to say that his view is in direct contrast to that of the DOS and the other interviewees in general (he said that he "would be happy for boys to do up to *five*" modules and that anymore would "perhaps be excessive"). He suggested, however, that the nature of the subject and the specific modules being taken again should be taken into account, as well as "not least, the motivation of the student himself." The HOS felt that:

"whilst the exams last for just an hour each...and not three, they are 'snappy' and if done in ones or twos do not necessarily constitute 'overload'; even less so if there is significant overlap between modules, as there is in units one and three in my subject at AS-level [Politics]. Besides, much knowledge is committed to students' long-term memories, which they can easily access...and then apply with more confidence as they grow into the course. We've abandoned mock exams which took place just before Christmas so they might as well revise for something that *means* something."

In making these comments, the HOS acknowledges the 'maturation' which students experience at A-level, as discussed earlier in this study, both in terms of 'knowledge' and 'examination technique'. Appendix 9, for example, shows instances of Economics candidates increasing their modular

performance by up to three grades in the January 2007 re-sits and by as much as an astonishing five in Business Studies. The final sentence of the HOS's quoted thoughts above can be compared to Barlow's (1995, p.73) advice for candidates following A-levels in a linear format when he suggests, rather forlornly, that during the festive break at the same stage of the course they should "imagine there is a big test on the first day of the Spring term." In contrast, Barlow (p.80) then praises the capacity of modular exams to "motivate you to work hard sooner rather than later, so inoculating you against the mid A Level dip in effort."

From a somewhat different perspective, candidates could become overloaded due to factors beyond their control and not just because of the *number* of modules they have decided to re-sit. Whether re-sitting in the summer of either year or January of the upper sixth, unlucky students could be burdened with a timetable which includes six hours of examinations on the same day (over seven if they are permitted extra time). In response my observation during the summer series of examinations in 2007 that about a third of the lower sixth candidates sitting three hours of AS-level Economics modules in the morning, then had to endure a further three hours of AS-level Physics in the afternoon, the School X's AEO agreed that this kind of scenario appears to be a particular issue in the first year of the A-level course. He recollected that:

"The problem here is the policy decision that was taken in 2001, after a media outcry (the extent of which, unfortunately, I have been unable to corroborate) that all three AS modules in any given

subject should take place on the same day. At A2-level it does not arise as each subject takes three days to examine (or two if there's coursework); one for each module. At [School X] we have already done what we can to mitigate this problem by allowing one [AS-level] module to be taken in January (that is, in the lower sixth)."

In acknowledging that students are likely to lose focus towards the end of three hours of back-to-back papers, interestingly, the AEO deliberately "arrange[d] to put the re-sit exams last so the candidates have their best chance of doing well in the 'new' modules." It could be reasonably maintained on the one hand, that this arrangement, in turn, minimises their chances of performing well in the re-sit and may even increase the likelihood of further attempts at the same module. On balance, however, it seems to be a creditable approach, especially if credence is given to the aforementioned HOS's 'long-term memory' theory, combined with the fact that UMS points are already assured from at least one previous attempt at the module.

Furthermore, with the introduction of the new specifications and fewer modules, there should now be more 'space' in the timetable for examination boards to plan together and avoid the spectre of overloading candidates with an inordinate number of papers in a single day. A move in this direction was taken by the JCQ in 2007, when, influenced by "an overwhelming number" of schools and colleges calling for an end to "the timetabling [of] two or more units within a specification in the same session", it decided that "each AS and A2 unit will be timetabled separately" from 2009 onwards (JCQ, 2007b). This move is likely to encourage those candidates, otherwise deterred by the

prospect of back-to-back papers, to go on re-sitting and also relieves the school's AEO of any decisions he previously made about the order they were sat, which of course did not necessarily suit the interests of individual students.

4.1.2 The reasons why students re-sit AS-levels

Unsurprisingly, 'meeting UCAS offers' was the overwhelming reason for re-sitting offered by virtually *all* the interviewees, although the CUA pondered that 'upgrade week' (to be introduced in the summer of 2009 and discussed in more detail in chapter five) may motivate "a handful of students to aspire beyond their predictions, and achieve grades which may enable them to switch universities." The AEO practically summed up the feelings of everybody with his comment that "if they needed just 'Cs' for UCAS, not many would care about re-sitting to get 'As'. On results day, whether or not they have got into their first choice university overrides everything else, including the possibility that the actual grades they get when they open the envelope may not reflect their real potential." As Lambert and Lines (2000, p.82) remind us, A-levels are "de facto university entrance qualifications, a function that is refined still further through the specificity of the grades. These carry a clear message...from the A and B offers of the ancient 'red brick' universities to the Ds and Es of the 'new' universities." Appendix 10 provides some indication of the extent to which both Economics and Business Studies students have been able to convert 'Cs' into 'Bs' and 'Bs' into 'As' (especially the latter) in pursuit of meeting the kind of offers that are made by the former

type of institution. In context of this prime incentive for examination performance, in an earlier interview the AEO noted that:

“Very few students bother to ask for re-marks, as long as they’ve got in [to university], even when they are on the cusp of a higher grade and there are signs of sub-standard marking in the module where they’ve done badly... . They don’t want to risk getting a lower grade, even though that would be virtually impossible on the strength of just one module [that is, because their UMS score is far into the higher grade band].”

‘Pressure’ to re-sit, of course, is still likely to be exerted by other parties, with a vested interest in improved results, not least the teachers themselves and especially heads of department. There was a degree of acceptance amongst a number of interviewees that encouragement by the school’s staff itself to re-sit could be at the root of some of the problems associated with ‘examination overload’ for a number of candidates each year, susceptible as they may be to the influence of their mentors, to the point where ‘they take on more than they can chew’. Davies (1986, p.20) stressed the need for a “mutually agreed approach” to goal-setting between the two parties in order for the student to be “committed...more personally involved [and]...more intrinsically motivated”. Fortunately, although students *in theory* at School X are supposed to seek the dual consent of their tutors and head of the relevant department for their re-sit plans, confirmed by their signatures to this effect, a ‘safety’ valve’ in the process still exists to allow them to retain control over how many they *actually* take. The AEO informed me of the reality that “after submitting their

paperwork, many then change their minds in the lead up to exams and email me accordingly.”

4.1.3 The impact of the 2008 changes on re-sits

Numerous possible influences of the changes to A-level were considered, but two areas were prominent amongst them:

1. Introduction of the A* grade

The HOS remains somewhat ‘bemused’ by the pressure which he sees has been exerted by a handful of universities on the QCA to introduce this additional grade. As far as he is concerned, “Cambridge and the like are already operating on an A* system because an important criterion in their selection process has become 270 [UMS score] or above at AS-level, which is 90 per cent anyway.” This understanding is shared by the DOS who discovered via his correspondence with admissions tutors that “270 remains the ‘gold standard’ amongst Oxbridge and a few of the Russell Group universities, not the new A*, certainly in the subject that students want to read at University, or in the case of Medicine, possibly all of them.” The CUA was able to further corroborate such criteria. From his attendance of an Autumn UCAS conference in 2008 he discovered that “most successful Cambridge candidates have...between 87 and 92 per cent [UMS] across three AS

subjects.” Of more specific interest in determining the future influence of the A* grade, from the same conference he was able to reveal that:

“The new grade will not be used by universities for a few years on the grounds that the number awarded will vary enormously between subjects, and also that it is likely that the independent sector will dominate the award of it.”

The implication here from the combined views of the HOS and DOS, together with the information provided by the CUA, is that the A* *in itself*, the award of which requires candidates to score an average of 90 per cent in their two A2 units, is likely to be of little relevance to the AS-level re-sit aspirations of ‘high-fliers’, come January of the upper sixth. Instead, it is increasingly likely that prospective Oxbridge candidates will continue to re-sit in the summer at the end of the lower sixth (without necessarily declaring as such on their UCAS forms - as is the case according to the CUA with most students in this situation at School X). This would be in an attempt to reach largely self-imposed 180 UMS targets (out of a maximum of 200 in the new specifications), now that this criterion has become common knowledge amongst sixth formers.

In this sense, for *this* calibre of candidate, AS- and A2-levels have *indeed* been decoupled (despite the QCA’s refusal to detach them at one of its board meetings in 2006, as referred to earlier), in that the former is only relevant to achieving an A* to the extent that it contributes to an ‘A’ grade *overall* at A-level, which is the other criterion for achieving the new grade. In other words,

the prospect of a student recording outstanding results at A2-level, but failing to reach grade 'A' standard overall (that is, 320 UMS from a possible 400 in the revised structure) is highly unlikely. Appendix 3 shows how it is now technically possible for a student to achieve a score as high as 379 overall at A-level (combining full marks and AS-level and 179 UMS at A2-level) and still only be rewarded with an 'A' grade. In the context of Oxbridge candidates securing top grade predictions from their first year of study, an afterthought on the influence of 180 (and above) scores at AS-level *and* the potential impact of the new A* grade is provided by HOBG who commented that "irrespective of what our girls get, if there are weaknesses in their application they will be found out at interview anyway."

There may therefore be a greater tendency for a school's most academic students to focus their attention on A2-level exams, rather than AS-level re-sits, in the upper sixth. The former (A2-level modules) are the real key to achieving an A*, for self-esteem's sake at least, irrespective of whether the likes of Oxbridge bother to include them in their offers of a place. On the other hand, although the latter (AS-level re-sits in the upper sixth) may be of little relevance in terms of gaining entry to the country's elite universities, as before, of course, they will retain their importance in a (sub-180 UMS from the lower sixth) student's quest to achieve his potential in the A-E range and meet offers from less competitive establishments. The handful of responses that I received by email from the maintained sector also suggests that the introduction of the A* in non-selective schools is viewed as an insignificant development.

Where the introduction of the A* *may* have a greater influence might be in persuading School X to abandon a current aspect of its examinations policy and enter candidates for an A2 module in January. This would give them an opportunity to re-sit at this level in the final summer in their quest to reach this level of attainment, even though such a move, in the words of the DHC, would “wipe out teaching in January altogether.” If the A* joined, or even replaced the A/B percentage pass rate as the ‘litmus test’ of an independent school’s academic prowess at A-level, things could change. The first, albeit faint sign in this direction has already been shown. In response to a request from the Head Master, the DOS and the AEO produced statistics which indicate on a departmental basis the number of ‘A’ grades at A-level from the Summer 2008 examinations that would convert into the new A* grade. Interestingly, the Head Master then shared these findings, via email, with all the school’s Heads’ of Department, which naturally adds even more spice to the cross-subject competition that already exists...

Despite all this, on balance the DHC still thinks it is unlikely that the school will introduce January A2 modules as early as 2010 (and of course, he probably knows more than I do on this matter). Part of his reasoning, in addition to the issue of disruption, is the apparent lack of reaction to its introduction by Oxbridge, as regards future offers, at least for 2010, as discussed earlier. Reflecting on the importance of the 90 per cent benchmark at AS-level, the DHC reminded me that “270 [UMS] in the subject that [students] want to do [at university] seems more important at present.” He also referred to, however, what he saw as “our ‘secret weapon’” (at School X), this being the almost exclusively Chinese boarding house, containing students who collectively over

the past few years have consistently achieved a greater than 95 per cent A/B pass rate which is significantly above that for the upper sixth as a whole. Up to forty of the fifty boarders in any given year are sixth formers. The extent to which their examination performance inflates both the school's A-level results and Oxbridge entry count each year arguably mitigates the need (at least from a marketing perspective) to do A2 modules in January.

There is also, again, the question of whether a student's preoccupation to reach the summit of the extended grading system is conducive to his preparation for university. Montgomery (1978, p.22) 'looked back' to a time in the 1940s when admissions tutors found it "helpful to be able to know how well a student could face up to new ideas which did not depend upon his careful teaching in a favoured school." Ironically, in the case of Chinese students in particular, this sentiment may be gaining more ground in some higher education circles. In confidence, I was given access to a series of emails by a colleague, detailing his correspondence with an admissions tutor at an Oxbridge college who "had become cautious of students who come from China...who do very well, especially in mathematical subjects at A-level – and go steadily downhill [at university]." However, the DHC foresaw a time when A2 modules could still be sat in January, *if* a comprehensive system of post-qualification application (PQA) for university were introduced, but as chapter five argues, this remains a rather big 'if'.

2. Reduction in the number of modules from six to four

“I can see there being even more re-sits of the first module in those subjects which enter candidates in January [in the lower sixth].” This was the simple, immediate answer given by the DOS, when asked how the ‘two plus two’ modular system would impact on examination performance, which indicated that he had already given this kind of question a good deal of thought. The logic he employed to reach this prediction was twofold: firstly, he foresaw that “the rush to squeeze in all the teaching and then prepare candidates for a January module with greater content than before is likely to be inadequate in some subjects.” The second and, he believed, more pertinent reason was...

“for most subjects, the first module now counts for 50 per cent rather than 30. There is now a 50/50 split between most AS modules whereas before it was typically 30/30/40. Put another way, January and summer was weighted 30:70. Therefore I think more people (that is, students) will ‘get it wrong’ in January – plus the fact they will be even more motivated to take a module again which counts for half the marks [at AS-level] and not just a third.”

The GEO on the other hand, whilst agreeing with the DOS, pointed to the transitional difficulties that some students may have in making the step up from GCSE to A-level. He thought that the work required in preparing for the first module would be a “shock to the system for many of our lads, who breezed through GCSE and probably expect to do the same again.” It seems that a number of departments at School X which previously entered

candidates for a January examination in the lower sixth (in subjects which consist of six modules in the outgoing syllabuses) have also concluded that it is too much of a 'rush' to finish it, with the introduction of the new specifications. A discussion with the AEO revealed that only eight subjects entered candidates for the January module in 2009, compared to thirteen a year earlier, although he believed that this decrease is tempered by the fact that "a couple of departments (which previously entered candidates) have changed examination board and didn't fancy too much change all at once."

The DHC was also drew attention to the fact that School X teaches a number of subjects which have retained six modules. Most significantly, Mathematics and Further Mathematics were not reviewed for 2008, due to the significant overhaul they underwent in 2004 and subsequently, this department has not been affected. As QCA's Programme Leader for A-Levels informed me by email in response to a number of questions I sent him by this medium on the restructuring of the qualification, it was thought by the examinations' regulator that "a period of stability" was important for these subjects (QCA, 2008b). Elsewhere, despite having new 'stretch and challenge' specifications, it was also "thought that a six unit model was more appropriate" for other subjects, some of which are taught at School X, namely, Music, Biology, Physics and Chemistry. (QCA, 2008b). This is due to the 'theory and practice' elements which are deemed to be necessary in them (QCA, 2008b). From those taught at the school, only the Music Department, one of two departments to change examination board, has stopped entering candidates for an AS-module in January.

4.2 Focus Groups

The use of a focus group on three occasions, consisting as it did as an item on the agenda of annual meetings between the Heads of Business Education departments at the eight Group Y schools, was largely opportunistic. By not having to host any of them and therefore relieved of the burden of many tasks which are normally associated with the moderator's role, I was able to collect a wealth of data in these hour long sessions. The contributions of my colleagues were important in achieving my objectives, particularly as their interaction produced a 'synergy' of views which are relevant, specifically, to a range of examination-related issues in the teaching and learning of A-level Economics and Business Studies. Again, areas of analysis for the focus groups reflect the simple coding frame that was used for recording the discussions that took place and are arranged into the three sections that follow.

4.2.1 The extent of re-sits: past, present and with a view to the future

At the time of the third focus group meeting in June 2008, the Economics and Business Studies departments in five of the eight schools in Group Y, including School X itself, entered candidates for a single AS-level module in the January of the lower sixth year (see Appendix 4 for examination entry details for the group's schools, identified as 'A' to 'G', in addition to School X itself). For all five of these schools, there is an opportunity for students to re-

sit this module a few months later in the summer term, along with the remaining two AS-level modules. In the upper sixth, further opportunities to re-sit exist in January and June, meaning that over the two years, candidates can be entered up to four times for the first module and up to three times for the other two.

In three of the schools (one of which only offers Economics and not together with Business Studies like all the rest), AS-level modules, as determined by a school-wide policy, cannot be taken until June in the lower sixth, but like in the other five schools, can still be re-sat in both January and June in the upper sixth. The departmental re-sit policies in all eight schools are unlikely to change with the new specifications (School G is then moving to IB in 2010), although in line with the policies of five of seven of my colleagues in the group, I too would like to see School X allow upper sixth students to sit January A2 modules. At the time of writing, as indicated by the school's Deputy Head (Curriculum) in the previous section, this is an unlikely prospect.

Three schools therefore follow a linear route at AS-level in the lower sixth.

This aside, in all but one of the schools in the group, there was no 'active' and consistently applied school policy which put a limit on the number of re-sits that could be taken in any one examination series. Perhaps unsurprisingly, School G "monitor[s] the papers [students] do, with four the suggested maximum...increasingly disillusioned [as they are] with A-levels". Instead, there was a tendency in the group to counsel students on a one-to-one basis. This level of interaction is the context for the advice that Davies (1986) offers to tutors who strive to motivate their students to maximise their examination

performance. He urges them to first appreciate (p.19) “differences in temperament, past experiences, attitudes and ability” before trying to help students on an individual basis. In those schools where the advice of form tutors took precedence over departmental members (as it does at school X, ultimately in the form of a signature acknowledging consent for their tutees’ re-sit plans), colleagues admitted that more students would be likely to have their number reduced, than if the opposite scenario applied and *they*, as head of the subject, had the most control. Problems identified with this procedure included the possibility of a ‘kneejerk’ reaction to ‘examination overload’ by some tutors, who may not fully appreciate the generic skills which are employed by students in both Business Studies and Economics modules and the extent of overlap there is, at times, between them.

In addition, problems associated with ‘inconsistency of application’ by tutors (some seeing four modules – that is, an average of one re-sit per AS-level as representing the ceiling, and others, as one member admitted, “signing whatever came their way”) were also noted. But irrespective of which party had the most influence on a student’s plans, the importance of these counselling sessions was stressed by one colleague who commented that candidates were inclined to “think they can ‘do it all’ and need to be reigned in.” This was particularly in schools which sat A2-levels in January, where examination overload during this month was a more likely prospect. A number of common themes emerged in the advice that was given to students, as departments became more knowledgeable over time about playing the ‘re-sit game’ and these were voiced with more conviction, with each annual meeting of the group. Two that were prominent amongst them were:

1. When to do modules and re-sits

The QCA (2007c) concluded that taking advantage of ‘maturation benefits’ was a key reason for re-sitting subjects where “the student’s general understanding and ability...will have improved over time.” In Economics, colleagues were unanimous in agreeing that students, to use the words of one Head of Department were “more often than not guaranteed an ‘A’ grade” in AS-level units if they re-sat them alongside their A2 ‘extension module’. Most typically, students were encouraged to wait until the final summer of the course to re-sit the AS-level macroeconomic module at the same time as the more advanced module, studied at A2-level. For the six schools following the OCR Economics syllabus, this meant candidates were advised to take the AS-level module *The National and International Economy* at the same time as the A2-level module, *The UK Economy*. Where school policy permitted (as it did not, in the case of School X), departments also stressed the logic of doubling up microeconomic modules at both levels in the January of the upper sixth (for example, *The Market System*, or *Market Failure and Government Intervention* from AS-level, with the second year options, *Economics of Work and Leisure* or, *Transport Economics*).

This logic again mirrors the conclusion drawn by the QCA report (2007c) that there is a “clear focus of resitting activity [where]...the structure of the subject is such that the student revisits topics at a higher level at A2, and so it is easier to achieve high grades in re-sits of AS units at the end of the A level course.” In addition, one colleague also entered his students for the A2 synoptic module *Economics in a European Context* in January, with minimal

classroom time devoted to teaching its content. His decision to do this was based on the simple premise that the content of the examination (based around pre-released 'stimulus') is invariably weighted towards AS-level work (particularly 'market failure') and he sees "nothing to lose" in his students "having a go".

The same is true for Business Studies, but the pattern is less clear-cut than it is for Economics. All seven of the schools offering this subject at A-level (School B, as seen in Appendix 4 combines Economics with Politics, instead of Business Studies) follow the AQA examination board's syllabus. At AS-level, the three modules have the following titles: *Marketing Accounting and Finance, People and Operations Management, and External Influences, Objectives and Strategy*. At A2-level they are called, with remarkable predictability, *Marketing, Accounting, Finance, People and Operations Management*, and the synoptic paper, *Objectives and Strategy*, the remaining module being a choice between coursework and a further examination entitled *Business Report and Essay*. Again, school policy permitting, it would appear that the structure of this course should make it relatively easy for teachers to persuade students that dovetailing their knowledge from the two levels in modules covering the same sub-divisions of the subject should maximise their examination performance.

With AQA Business Studies at AS-level, however, the second and third aforementioned modules (*People and Operations Management, and External Influences, Objectives and Strategy*) involve an examination for each, but questions for both are based on the same pre-release case study. Compared

to OCR Economics, this may be a significant factor in producing a “scatter gun approach to re-sits”, to quote the Head of Department of the co-educational School D. He believed that the time spent by students in becoming familiar with the case study prompted them to “give both modules a go”, rather than make a conscious choice to match their AS-level re-sits with current extension study at A2-level. Moreover, this is also likely to be an important influence on the tendency for students in four of the seven schools doing both subjects to re-sit more Business Studies modules in the January series, on average, than Economics. This is not the case at School X, however, where the mean number of re-sits per Economics candidate (see Appendix 11) tends to be a little higher than that for Business Studies in June of the lower sixth and both January and June of the upper sixth. A reason for this could be the ‘coursework factor’ in Business Studies at School X, a high grade from which helps to negate the need to do re-sits, *in addition* to the fact which is common to all schools in Group Y (as discussed in more detail further on in this chapter) that Economics candidates are more likely to apply to the most competitive universities. They are arguably, therefore, more motivated to keep re-sitting the relatively ‘easy’ AS-level modules in their quest to meet a standard ‘triple-A’ offer from prestigious universities.

2. Higher education

There was little evidence at the meetings, in fact virtually none at first-hand if hearsay and rumour can be excluded, that re-sits have jeopardised the university applications of Economics and Business Studies students in recent

years. Despite this, two members of the group (out of the five which entered candidates for January modules in the lower sixth) still occasionally erred on the side of caution and recommended to marginal re-sitters (for example, students looking to strengthen an 'A' grade performance from the first module and increase their overall UMS score at AS-level) to wait until January in the upper sixth if they had any doubts about the conditions set by their chosen universities. By this time, students would be more reassured and focussed on meeting offers of places at universities, made in all likelihood without mention of re-sits.

Overall at the meetings, however, the notion that re-sitting might damage a student's prospects in higher education generated relatively little interest amongst the group. On the contrary, the tendency was to encourage summer re-sits in the lower sixth in order for students to achieve high scores at AS-level, given that their performance at this stage in the course is almost invariably used by schools as the main criterion for predicting overall A-level grades. The overwhelming consensus from the group was that students are more likely to fear the prospect of being deprived from applying to 'top' universities, by virtue of receiving mediocre predictions, than the remote possibility of rejection, due to an academic record tarnished by re-sits.

Members of the group were also more concerned about the extent of discrimination that might exist by universities against the independent sector in general. There was some brief, tangential discussion about this and in particular, the admission policies of the London School of Economics in the context of its reliance on overseas fees (Attwood, 2007a) and the quota for students from state schools that it operates (Goddard, 2005).

4.2.2 Impact on results

All departmental heads empathised with the remark of one of our number that “with the AS marks being easier to attain than at A2, we think re-sits are a crucial route to success for some of our weaker students.” Spectacular examples of improved performance by candidates were offered, involving candidates who increased their AS-level result by three grades or even more, after re-sits in the upper sixth. The extent to which re-sits can improve results is analysed in detail for the specific case of School X in the next section of this chapter. One colleague, for example, shared his experience of the performance of an economist who “barely scraped into the upper sixth ...on an ‘E’ grade after AS-level and January re-sits. He sat all three AS units in the summer alongside his A2 ones and came out with a clear ‘A’. He had never once shown any sign of being an ‘A’ grade candidate.” Although difficult to quantify with precision, without reference to relevant documents, the group collectively estimated that in approximately 70 to 80 per cent of all re-sat units in January of the upper sixth, students produced their highest scores to date. Improvements of two grades or more in both subjects ranged from “relatively rare” in one school, to “commonplace” in others. Appendix 9 provides an idea of the extent to which previous grades can increase or decrease following re-sits.

There was evidently a fairly solid consensus, however, as expressed by a colleague, that in comparison to Business Studies, “Economics offers better success in the re-sits” and most identified with his observation that this was “probably due to the increased maturity of our students.” Two further factors

are arguably just as important. The first could be that the synergetic gains enjoyed by students who draw on the A2 study of micro- and macroeconomic concepts to answer less demanding AS-level questions in these areas, are greater than those experienced across modules and between levels in Business Studies, as indicated earlier. Secondly, there was almost unanimous agreement that Business Studies is *indeed* 'easier' at AS-level than Economics, but that at A2-level it is at least as challenging, especially if coursework was avoided; subsequently, the irritation caused by publication of the Cambridge list was strongly evident. This collective opinion would also be somewhat at odds with Bachan and Barrow's (2006) post Curriculum 2000 estimation of "comparative difficulty..." of around two-thirds of a grade between the two subjects "...in favour of Business Studies", even allowing for the fact that grade differences are more likely to be compressed in a selective school with a 'five grade Bs' criterion for entering the sixth form. Therefore, the general belief amongst the group was that it is possible that students are more likely to be closer to their performance ceiling at AS-level in Business Studies. By comparison, there may be greater scope for grade improvement in Economics at A2-level, in examinations which include questions that often rely more heavily on a student's ability to recall knowledge from AS-level units. Both these ideas receive further attention in the next section which examines the findings of the student questionnaire, but suffice to say here that they appear to be reaffirmed by the data in Appendix 11.

Whatever the currency of these arguments, the tendency was for colleagues to *generally* conclude that it was more likely for Economics students to achieve a final A-level grade that was at least as good as the AS-level grade

they achieved in the first year of the course. Analysis of results for School X (see Table 4), however, concludes slightly in favour of Business Studies. A reason for this could again be the influence of coursework in Business Studies (which was a decisive factor in the view of the Director of Studies at School X, in enabling 'less academic' students to maintain and possibly improve upon, their AS-level grade), the results from which may help to counterbalance the sterner challenge of the two written papers at A2-level in this subject. In Group Y, only two other departments enter their students for Business Studies coursework, on the same compulsory basis as School X.

Obviously, the relative teaching strengths within the department at School X across the two subjects could also be a factor in producing results which are somewhat at odds with the rest of the group. As could a number of other factors, including the tendency at the school for Chinese students to opt for Economics and the associated challenges they face of coping with some conceptually demanding topics, deprived as they are of their native language. Students at School X from the Far East rarely achieve less than the top grade in Mathematics and Sciences, but this degree of certainty is less for other subjects they take at A-Level. These points again highlight the importance of data triangulation in achieving a level of generalizability in this project's findings, particularly in the form of information from colleagues running similar departments in the independent sector.

4.2.3 Impact on teaching (re-sits combined with modular format)

Even though there was not a single school that gave 'block leave' to its students during the January re-sits, as is customary in the summer series of examinations, the mood amongst the group was summed up by a participant who commented that:

“...once the exam window is open we effectively suspend progress. Many of our students take the opportunity to re-sit, even when they have good grades to start with. During this time it is virtually impossible to have full teaching sets and it would be a little harsh to push ahead with new material, given that the ones re-sitting are more likely to be the weaker ones anyway.”

Typically, students are permitted to take a morning or afternoon off to revise when they have an examination in the next AM/PM session and this policy alone, virtually universal amongst the eight schools, tends to decimate attendance levels in lessons which supposedly are otherwise operating 'normally'. Disruption to A2-level work, particularly for those departments which enter candidates for both AS-level re-sits and the more advanced modules later on in January, is inevitable, the extent of which is captured by a colleague who despondently reflected: “We rarely have a full class at any time of the month and students are present in different numbers and combinations (ability-wise), with different needs at different times. A complete nightmare and very difficult to get on with the syllabus [at A2-level]...and sometimes it

has been difficult to complete it.” Another participant, however, was able to see the occasional benefits of teaching classes whose size and composition had been radically altered because of student absence, due to examinations in other subjects. In particular, he was relating his thoughts to the recent growth in popularity of Economics, which has caused a longer tail of candidates who are struggling to come to terms with the subject and “are left behind in the classroom whilst most of the others are away doing maths exams.” This in turn reduced the ‘mixed ability’ orientation of the class and allowed him to focus on helping weaker students. Bachan and Barrow (2006) noted “that a high proportion of Economics candidates (relative to Business Studies) complement[ed] their study of Economics with the study of Mathematics at A-level” and as the data in Appendix 1 shows, this is also the case for School X.

There was widespread agreement that AS-level revision sessions have come to dominate timetabled lessons during the first two weeks of the spring term, with three heads of department admitting that A2-level teaching was also put on hold during the last week of term before the Christmas break. This was almost invariably in addition to lunch-time sessions which were devoted to re-sit preparation, particularly for the pre-released Business Studies case study. The switch to AS-level teaching before Christmas by those who made it was deemed important in order to get students, as one saw it, “back into AS mode.” This included reminding candidates of the relative importance of the two lowest assessment objectives (‘knowledge’ and ‘relevant application’) and not dropping ‘easy marks’ (for definitions, labelling diagrams and so on). Common alternatives for candidates *not* re-sitting were A2-level project work

(in Business Studies) and Oxbridge preparation (especially for the economists). Past-paper practice for the more challenging examinations ahead in the summer was also used, but combined with a general acceptance that this made 'whole class progress' with mixed ability groups (when the re-sitters returned) in the tougher A2-modules more problematic.

Yet, with the exception of School G, moving as it is to an IB-only route at post-16 level in 2010 (which, incidentally, means that it still has to make the transition to the new A-level specifications, through which it will need to guide two cohorts of students before the change is fully in place), the other seven departmental heads were, on balance, positive about the modular format and the opportunities for re-sits. Supportive comments for this combination include that quoted below from School B, which in fact does not enter candidates for January modules in the lower sixth and follows a linear route at AS-level:

"I have become accustomed to modules and given they exist can see no reason to radically alter what is. I think the student's base knowledge of key concepts like (mainly in reference to economics) 'elasticity' is much stronger than it used to be because this understanding is tested early through external exams and reinforced still further, if need be, through re-sits."

A more practical argument in favour of re-sits is advanced by School F, one of five schools which make the maximum use of re-sits in that it enters candidates for modules at every opportunity (including A2-level in January of the upper sixth). Its representative considered the benefits in terms of university offers:

“In the old system we considered the period between mid-December and mid-January to be a ‘fallow period’ and in a purely linear system, or even one without AS-level [re-sits] in January, it’s doubtful that pupils would work towards their summer exams anyway. Re-sits are often essential for those who need to get an ‘A’ grade and we tell them that if they have 240 (UMS points – the minimum needed for an ‘A’ at AS-level) from the first year, it’s not enough.”

Even School G’s departmental head, who “on balance...prefer[red] a linear format...when I could teach the Economics syllabus with the only constraint being to get through it by February in the upper sixth before doing a concentrated period of revision and exam technique”, reflected:

“I know that teaching the lower sixth when they had no exams at the end of the year was tough and that they did not work hard enough. Boys especially tend to leave it to the last minute. Perhaps [the linear format] was not so good in Business Studies where there is a lot more to learn, rather than learning concepts and theories [as in Economics].”

The mood in the group was generally positive about both modules and re-sits. There were, of course, a number of critical points made. Particularly in Business Studies, the tendency for modules to ‘fragment learning’, “made it difficult at times”, in the view of one colleague, “to look at problems holistically.” Another spoke of internal rivalries in their own school which had been

exacerbated by cross-subject indicators of student performance. He suggested that students were at times “over-encouraged” by teachers to enter themselves for as many modules as possible in a particular subject, to the point where their examination load was indeed “excessive”. Some had, he continued, a “re-sit strategy which was bereft of any focus of what best to do and when...but shaped too much by other people.” I am quite confident that the heads of Economics and Business Studies departments at these meetings have the best interests of their students in mind when they give advice about examinations. The fact remains, however (as shown specifically in the next section for School X), that Economics and Business Studies continue to feature prominently in entrance numbers for re-sits (if somewhat less so in the last two years when other subjects have caught up to an extent). Therefore, irrespective of earlier arguments which attempt to provide educational justifications for re-sits, other departments are still likely to perceive them as being at the forefront of nurturing an ‘attitude’ amongst students, to quote an Independent School Headmaster of repute, Anthony Seldon (cited, Mansell, 2007, p.IX), “that if it is not in the exam, it does not matter.”

Looking towards the future and the new specifications, as shown in Appendix 4, all the schools in the group (including School G, until they switch over to the IB) intend to continue with their current strategies for examination entries at both AS- and A2-level; but there should be less disruption to lessons with the move to four modules. There was some talk at the final meeting in the summer term of 2008 that the new system would mean an even greater ‘rush’ to complete the first module in time for a January examination, which counts for 50 per cent (UMS) of the first year in Economics (OCR) and 40 per cent in Business

Studies (AQA), compared to 30 per cent for both subjects in the old syllabuses. School G was even more opposed to an AS-level module in January (irrespective of being constrained by school policy), and this is reflected in email correspondence with me a few weeks after the meeting, the sentiment of which is interesting for its apparent *lack* of ‘homogeneity’ with the rest of the group. Its Head of Department maintained that:

“...taking exams in January of the lower sixth is crazy. I do not understand why anyone does it. Give the students a chance, give yourselves a chance! We are not allowed to do it and I fully support the policy. I found the [Group Y] discussion of how to teach in order to enter unit 1 in January tedious and dispiriting (and irrelevant).”

In the context of only having to teach two modules in each year in the new specifications, he added:

“We teach ‘AS’ as a linear course and ‘A2’ as a linear course. We do not have to split up topics between papers for AQA Business Studies. [In Economics], one teacher teaches microeconomics and one teaches macro.”

This approach to teaching is entirely logical and two other schools admitted to giving serious thought to abandoning the first January module in the lower sixth (before deciding not to), which *would* have meant a majority of five in the group following a linear route at AS-level. On an incidental point, each of the three

maintained schools who responded fully to my emailed questionnaire also declared their intention to continue entering candidates in this examination series. All Group Y's participants agreed that a reduction to four modules made the team-teaching of each more problematic, given the general intention to enter candidates for their first module after just a term. However, in a system where AS-level is still equally weighted with A2-level and with no decoupling between them as regards the final A-level UMS score, in addition to scant evidence that re-sits are likely to harm a student's future prospects, including most importantly, university applications, it seems that most departments are still content to 'play the numbers game'.

There is also the argument, made by School C's representative, that as about half the teaching weeks in the AS-level academic year have already been taught by the time of January examination series, it made sense to enter students for one of the two modules. To counterbalance the general view that the first term may be 'rushed', he welcomed only having to teach one module thereafter, particularly as his department was one of the five in the group whose school also entered students for A2 modules in January, which would still mean serious disruption to teaching throughout virtually the whole month.

4.3 Questionnaires

Responses to the questionnaires, which involved more than 300 sixth form and pre-A-level students between 2006 and 2008 (the numbers for each cohort are in Appendix 5), together with supporting data from cumulative

records of unit results provided by the awarding bodies, are analysed in this final section of the chapter. In accordance with the principle objectives of the study, it continues to examine students' motives for re-sitting and the impact it has on their results.

It should be noted that the first students to participate in the questionnaire at the beginning of the 26 month period for this method of research, they being, the A2 students in the last few days of their A-level courses in May 2006, did *not* have the option of sitting their first AS-level module in the January of the lower sixth in 2005. This only became permitted on a school-wide basis the following year. This is likely to be an important influence, both on the proportion of A2 candidates who re-sat AS-level modules in the upper sixth and the number of modules that were taken on average by each re-sitting candidate. The incidence of re-sitting in the second year of the course can be seen in Appendix 11. There was a total of 248 modules re-sat in both subjects by 103 candidates in January 2005 and January 2006 at an average of 2.4 per student. This falls to 2.2 if *all* students continuing the subjects at A2-level (110 in total) are counted. The respective figures for January 2007 and January 2008 combined, for cohorts who were able to sit a module in the winter of the lower sixth are significantly lower. Only 169 modules were taken again by 87 students at an average of 1.9 per re-sitter, falling to 1.7 if *all* 101 candidates are included. Therefore, more than twice the proportion of candidates did not feel the need to re-sit in the latter two years.

The idea that more students see A-levels as a 'means to an end' in their quest to meet university offers, without them necessarily being an opportunity to

realise their full potential and produce grades they will be proud to enter on their curriculum vitae for the next twenty years, has been well established in this study. Previous discussion has also concluded that there is little in the design of the out-going A-level structure to discourage candidates from re-sitting AS-level modules. Their accumulated score is not decoupled from that achieved at the equally weighted A2-level and little *concrete* evidence has surfaced to suggest that universities actively discriminate against candidates who have re-sat modules, before or after the offer of places have been made. In relation to this latter point, Appendix 12 consists of a range of data collected via the questionnaire, including that which shows a fairly significant minority of candidates coming to the end of their school career had, indeed, understood (without actually encountering) that certain universities had admission policies which discriminated against re-sits. Not surprisingly, responses of this nature were overwhelmingly from Economics students at School X, with their much greater tendency to apply to Oxbridge (to the tune of around 8:1 compared to Business Studies) and competitive courses such as Law and Medicine at other Russell Group universities (Manchester being the most commonly mentioned). In addition, it can be ascertained from Appendix 12 that this perception has gradually intensified in recent years as students (particularly those studying Economics) have become more aware of universities' access to examination data.

A browse through the UCAS website (2008a) reveals that only the London School of Economics is in the Times Online's (2008) top ten 'University Rankings League Table' for 'Economics' and 'Business' as an institution that 'prefers' its applicants to have made one sitting per module. This rather

tenuous stipulation, however, has not been conditional in any of the handful of offers which are made to School X's business education students each year by the LSE. None of the 156 A2 candidates who participated during this study (26 of whom were taking a gap year without deferred entry and therefore not applying to university), when asked to indicate by a show of hands after the questionnaires had been collected in, responded in the affirmative that they were holding offers which were conditional on grades (or UCAS points) being achieved at the first time of asking. It can also be seen in Appendix 12 that the average grade offer for Economics which was held by the three cohorts of students (between 2006 and 2008), was roughly two grades higher than Business Studies (that is, 'AAB' as opposed to 'BBB'). In view of this, it could be inferred from appendices 13a and 13b, which show that a higher proportion of Economics candidates (compared to Business Studies) are re-sitting at least one module in the final summer of the course in each of the June series between 2005 and 2008, that they are also striving to improve upon a much higher AS-level score. The data in these two appendices show that they are entering the final series of examinations from an average UMS base of 242 (which converts into a low grade 'A' at AS-level), compared to 222 in Business Studies (mid grade 'B').

It can be determined from appendices 13a and 13b that despite this discrepancy, the economists have still managed to further increase their AS-level UMS by more points than the business students (13 per student compared to 11). In addition, they took a slightly lower average number of modules *per re-sitting candidate* (Appendix 11) in this final round of examinations (1.67 as opposed to 1.71 in Business Studies) over the 2005 to

2008 period. If the figures for all four series of re-sits for each A-level cohort (June/January/June) in Appendix 11 are considered (only possible for candidates commencing A-levels at School X from September 2005), however, each economist on average has in fact taken slightly more. But whether it be on a UCAS application form, CV or the A-level certificate itself, a grade 'A' is of course a grade 'A' and recorded as such, regardless of where it falls within the 480 to 600 UMS range and, by virtue of it being based on a criterion-referenced form of assessment, irrespective of how many re-sits it took to get to this level of attainment.

It is difficult to say, however, which has the stronger influence over these figures between the two subjects. Is it, for example, the case that many Economics students take longer to mature in the subject – at least to the point where they believe they have reached their potential and done justice to their relatively superior academic prowess, as reflected by their GCSE grades? Or, as seems in the case of School X, are they better equipped to perform highly in the AS-level modules at the end of the course, when they have completed *all* of the extension modules? A-level Economics students are now aware that a UMS of around 240 from AS-level modules is unlikely to be a firm enough foundation to achieve the 'A' grade that is probably part of their first choice university offer, as supported by the evidence in Appendix 12. Re-sitting less taxing AS-level modules in pursuit of this goal, rather than taking the risk of achieving a similar score in the sterner tests at A2-level, without the insurance of re-sits at School X, is clearly the most logical strategy.

Furthermore, it is possible that the prospect of 'examination overload' has been reduced by an earlier start for AS-level examinations in the summer term

over the past two or three years, combined with the directive from QCA (as discussed earlier) which prevents A2-level modules being sat on the same day. Several AS-level subjects (including Business Studies) are now examined in May before the spring half-term break and a student's final A2 modules may not be sat until the end of June. A weakness of the classroom-based questionnaire used in this study was its inability to collect data from students after their final series of examinations, in order to test the idea that their summer timetable of AS and A2 modules combined may have been little more congested than that of a few months earlier in January, when they only had to worry about the former. Appendix 12 shows that A2 students were still re-sitting around four AS-level modules on average (in *all* subjects), in each of the three January series, usually over a period of just eight or nine school days; but only a small minority responded that they had a grievance about the way they were timetabled, to the point where they felt it had been detrimental to their performance.

Numerous other factors probably play a part in the re-sit patterns and outcomes between the two subjects in the final summer series. For example, in Business Studies, the 'cushion of coursework' (as referred to by the DOS during an interview) virtually guarantees a top grade in this module, which further cements a student's overall UMS score, possibly to the point where there is some complacency in his preparation for the final round of examinations in this subject. The average score for A2 coursework (30% of total A2 marks) of final summer re-sitters over the 2005-2008 period (few of whom achieved an 'A' at A-level in Business Studies, as shown in Appendix 13a) was 70 from a possible 90 UMS for this module (or 78 per cent). As

might be expected, this is still 6 marks down on the average of *all* Business Studies candidates, which includes those who are academically more able and have been able to focus on this piece of work in the upper sixth, in addition to making progress at A2-level generally, without the disruption and worry of re-sits. The average score for those candidates who did *not* re-sit in the final summer is 9 marks higher.

Another influence which may have encouraged some Business Studies students to lose their focus in re-sits is the much greater tendency for General Studies to count towards their first choice university offer. Appendix 12 shows that the difference between the subjects is indeed stark, with General Studies accepted in 43 per cent of the offers for Business Studies students, but only 8 per cent for Economics, from three cohorts of A2 students. In relation to this, it was apparent from responses to the questionnaire that the 'new' universities established in the early 1990s were around three times more likely to accept General Studies than the 'old' institutions which already had this status. Appendix 12 further shows that a much greater proportion of Business Studies had 'old polys' as their first choice university.

However, if the Business Studies re-sitters had performed as well in their other two written A2 modules (which together count for the remaining 70 per cent of the marks) as their projects, and scored 78 per cent of the UMS in each, it would have left them with an average overall UMS at A2-level of 234 (high B grade), instead of the average UMS of 207 (high C) that they actually achieved. Even more significantly, if they had been entered for the alternative module to coursework instead, and produced the same level of performance

in this rather exacting test of 'report and essay' writing skills, as their other two written modules on average (that is 137 UMS out of a possible 210 or 65 per cent), their total A2-level mark would be still less impressive at 196.

Interestingly, overall the Economics re-sitters still recorded an average UMS of 209 at A2-level, without the chance to inflate their results via coursework.

These figures give an indication of the benefits of doing coursework in Business Studies, at least as far as their contribution to boosting a student's grade is concerned, especially given the relative difficulty of the other two modules at A2-level. They also provide some grounds for the argument that students of this subject may feel less pressured to keep on re-sitting until the end of the course in their pursuit of relatively modest offers from their first choice universities. Not surprisingly, over 90 per cent of the A2 Business Studies candidates responded that they preferred A-level courses which combined coursework with examinations (compared to around two-thirds of the economists – see Appendix 12). This response may have been influenced, of course, by the timing of the final questionnaire that the A2 students participated in. It was administered during the week after they had submitted their (almost invariably) high-scoring projects, subject as they still were to external moderation.

On the other hand, a re-sitting Business Studies student at this stage in the course might also be more preoccupied with the much tougher challenges at A2-level compared to the first year or, as one candidate put it in response to the questionnaire, "sick and tired of doing another case study" (covering modules two and three at AS-level). It may be of some significance that there

were seven cases of non-attendance for re-sit modules in the final summer for Business Studies over the 2005-2008 period, compared to just one in Economics. In one instance, a Business Studies candidate who *did* attend his re-sit examination recorded the incredibly low score of just 3 UMS and in another, a result was recorded which was five grades down (from an 'A' to a 'U') on his previous best. A tentative link could be made here, between an apparent tendency amongst a small minority of Business Studies students to completely 'implode' in their re-sits, and the discussion that took place in the second of the three focus groups, which briefly considered their occasional 'lack of maturity' in the examination hall. In a similar vein, Bachan and Barrow (2006) note the "greater interest in the subject content" shown by Economics students and their "higher aspirations", compared to their Business Studies counterparts.

Attempting to gauge the views of students about the worthiness of re-sits also revealed something of a 'sea-change' of opinions between the economists and business students as they progressed through the final two years of their school careers. There was a distinct tendency for the relatively high-performing pre-AS-level, prospective Economics students (soon to achieve an average of six A* grades at GSCE) to be negative about re-sitting modules (mainly on the basis that they 'devalued' A-levels or were not 'fair' on those who did well without using them); compared to their prospective Business Studies counterparts (awarded an average of less than two A* grades at GCSE). Only around one in four pre-AS-level economists were in favour of re-sits, compared to well over half of the Business Studies students. By the time that the same cohort had progressed to the end of their A-levels,

however, around three-quarters from both subjects produced positive comments about the role of re-sits, even though the economists often thought, as discussed earlier, that they undermined their university applications to an extent. Clearly, during the course of the sixth form, students from both subjects, in more or less equal measure, had come to appreciate the contribution they ultimately made to help fulfil their post-18 aspirations.

Between June 2005 and June 2008, a total of 92 Economics and 119 Business Studies students followed the course to A2-level. Over this period in the four final summer examination series combined, in Economics, a total of 87 modules were taken by 51 students, compared to just 63 by 36 students in Business Studies. The fact that well over half of the economists (compared to less than a third taking Business Studies) were still re-sitting AS-level modules at the end of the course seems to support the theory advanced by School G (amongst others) in the last of the three Group Y focus groups that Economics is certainly more demanding than Business Studies in the first year of the course. The average annual gain per re-sit module (in relation to previous highest scores) from these four summer series between 2005 and 2008 was 8.32 UMS for Economics and 3.93 UMS for Business Studies (see Appendix 11). In fact in June 2006, the six Business Studies candidates who re-sat thirteen modules between them in the final summer actually failed to meet their previous best mark by an average 1.46 UMS.

In contrast to the aforementioned 'implosion' of a handful of Business Studies, re-sitting for a second or third time at the end of the course, the strong core of Far Eastern students in recent Economics cohorts (with few taking Business

Studies – see Appendix 1) have the opposite influence on the differential in the UMS gain between the subjects in the final series of examinations. Cumulative records show that they rarely fail to improve their overall score in AS-level re-sits, even where previous attempts have been awarded with the top grade. Even a cursory examination of their scripts at this level (which have either been requested from the board by the student himself, or by me as examples of ‘good practice’) is enough to see how answers to questions requiring precise application of economic, often fairly abstract knowledge, are on the whole very well executed. Sanderson (1997) commented that “A-levels...can be seen...as a kind of cognitive mastery of tasks which [are]...specific and instrumental”, and it is in those areas of Economics which require this aptitude, where the Chinese students at School X seem to have demonstrated a particular instinct.

Appendix 11, however, also shows the extent to which the gains in January re-sits for Business Studies have exceeded Economics at School X. In January 2007, for example, the highest average improvement per module in Business Studies (from 45 taken in total, by 22 students) was a huge 31 UMS, although this was admittedly over twice the next highest average increase in this subject over the 2005-2008 for which data is available. For Economics, the highest was only 8 UMS in January 2006, when 21 candidates re-sat a total of 52 modules between them. At least in the case of School X, these comparisons do not appear to support the ‘scatter gun’ approach to re-sits by Business Studies students at this stage of the course, which was a theory held by several Group Y participants. As discussed earlier though, given the

differences between the schools in examination policies and whether or not they pursue the coursework route, this is not *too* surprising.

Where re-sitting Economics students *did* outperform Business Studies students at School X, in the final summer examination series, this *is* more in line with the Group Y reasoning which suggested that there is a greater likelihood of students performing well in their AS-level modules if they sit them at the same time as the A2-level extension modules, which at School X of course are not taken until the final summer. Both the findings from the focus groups *and* the questionnaire are occasionally at odds with the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ conclusions which have been drawn about the subjects by, for example, Bachan (2004), Coe (2006), as well as the presumptions behind the controversial ‘Cambridge list’. It is not one of the intentions of this study, however, to try and disprove such claims, in its attempt to shed light on the costs endured and benefits enjoyed by students taking AS-level re-sits in, contrary to popular myth, two quite distinct subjects at an independent boys’ school in recent years. Even though the gains for the economists at School X are greater in re-sits in the final series, the fact that the business students tend to out-perform them by a more impressive margin in the previous January (Appendix 11) is the main reason they are more successful at maintaining, or improving upon, the AS-level grade they achieved at the end of the first year (as shown overleaf in Table 4).

5. The future of A-levels and re-sits

This chapter consists of a brief assessment of how the re-structured A-level could influence some of the key issues which have been examined in this study. The new model, introduced in September 2008, appears to represent something of a 'half-way house' between the Curriculum 2000 format and the linear model which it replaced. The following pages consider the impact that a reduction from a six to four unit A-level course might have on the significance of re-sits, particularly for Business Studies and Economics students, in their quest to meet university offers and maximise their performance. Fewer modules will certainly mean fewer re-sits, and this fact, combined with less teaching content in the new specifications over the two years, should also provide greater scope for formative assessment in the traditional classroom sense.

Not only will there be fewer examinations. The time limit for them per subject from 2009 will also be reduced to an average of seven hours of written papers, from a maximum of ten and a half in the previous system (BBC, 2006 News Website, 2006). This should further help to satisfy institutions, such as the NASUWT, that measures are being taken to prevent 'examination overload' in post-16 education. On closer inspection, however, QCA Chief Executive Ken Boston's pledge to cut back on the "stacks of tests sat by students" looks less convincing (BBC News website, 2006a), at least in the case of School X. The vast majority of the outgoing A-level syllabuses followed at the school have less than eight hours of written examinations. As regards Economics and Business Studies, the former has seven and three-quarter hours and the latter subject, if supplemented by coursework rather than the alternative of an examination, has

only six. It appears that this statement by Boston, therefore, might be yet another exaggerated claim from an educational spokesman for a public body, in the context of changes to the A-level examination system.

With the introduction of only four units over the two year course, however, whilst more teachers may simply not have enough time to adequately prepare candidates for January modules at both AS- and A2-level, they might benefit instead from less disruption to their lessons. As a result, many more students may well flourish in an environment where 'teaching to the test' does not dictate the classroom ambiance, and instead develop a level of intellectual awareness which helps them to make the transition between school and university.

Of particular interest to the aims of this study is the expansion to a seven point grading system, with the addition of the A* grade, which will be achieved by only a small proportion of outstanding students from the summer of 2010 when the first A-level awards from the new structure are made. As already discussed, members of the Russell Group of universities, most notably Oxford and Cambridge, have pressured the Government in recent years for a system which helps them to more effectively and efficiently identify scholarly brilliance, given the fact that the 'A' grade is now the most commonly achieved award at A-level. Their influence in this capacity, as indicated by innumerable reports in the media, is unlikely to have been insignificant.

The notions of 'strategic fit' and 'strategic stretch' which were brought to prominence by Hamel and Prahalad (1994), although more widely applicable to a commercial, rather than educational context, maybe of some use here in

explaining the position of the country's elite universities. Johnson and Scholes (2002, p.5) define strategic fit as the ability of organisations to "identify opportunities in the...environment and adapting resources and competences so as to take advantage of these." Strategic stretch, on the other hand, is the '*leverage* of the resources and competences of an organisation to provide competitive advantage and/or yield *new* opportunities (my italics, p.8).

Therefore, organisations pursuing a strategic fit for their product will strive to take advantage of the relevant opportunities that already *exist* in the environment and which have been created by external factors, especially the Government, outside of its control. Whereas strategic stretch might mean an organisation trying "to change the 'rules of the game' in its market to suit its own competences" (p.8), and *create* its own opportunities.

It is my argument that the collective contribution to grade inflation that has partially resulted from the incremental changes that have been made to the A-level qualification over the last twenty years, including those ushered in by Curriculum 2000, have prompted universities, especially the more prestigious ones, to *adjust*, that is 'inflate' their admission criteria and make offers to students accordingly. This line of reasoning is akin to a strategic fit approach that a commercial organisation might adopt as it seeks to position itself in the marketplace. A wealth of data now exists on completed UCAS application forms for universities to consider in any revision they may make to selection criteria for their courses. These include the number of A* grades at GCSE, individual grades (or UMS scores) for AS-level modules and summer re-sits, and the number of 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' subjects being studied. The study of A-level Mathematics, for example, has become a compulsory prerequisite for a

growing number of Economics courses at university. Universities such as Bath go further still and recommend the study of Further Mathematics for studying the subject on a single honours basis (University of Bath website, 2008).

A trawl of university websites reveals that more admission policies include subjects which many students, somewhat curiously, still regard as being a waste of time. These include General Studies (often compulsory in independent schools), Advanced Extension Awards and the fastest growing A-level in 2006-07 (Lightfoot, 2007a), Critical Thinking. Perhaps the most obvious tool at the universities' disposal is their ability, over time, to increase their offers to reflect the grade inflation which is taking place at A-level. From 2010 the award of A* grades will give them even greater room for manoeuvre. The impact of its introduction on university offers may take a few years to be properly assessed. At the time of writing, it is far from certain what it will be, not least because (as mentioned earlier), the nation's top universities are unsure about how it should influence their admission policies.

It is my argument, however, that pressure exerted by leading universities such as Cambridge (Frean, 2006) for the introduction of the A* grade has enabled them to strongly influence the 'rules of the game' which are determined by government institutions; if not change them as such. This may have subsequently assisted them in 'stretching' their strategic capabilities by helping to create opportunities in the student marketplace which previously either did not exist, or at least involved rather cumbersome selection procedures in order to identify. On the other hand, there are prominent educationalists, Bekhradnia (2003) amongst them, who stress the need for "diagnostic tools to help admissions staff to distinguish the

academic potential of applicants, often with *identical* A level results” (my italics). In suggesting this approach, Bekhradnia stops short of adding his support to those who believe that prestigious universities should differentiate less on academic performance and more on the basis of private and public sector schooling.

The University of Cambridge’s stance on which subjects at A-level constitute *appropriate* preparation for their courses as per their 2006 ‘list’, could also be adjudged to be a matter of strategic stretch. The influence that this list (and the contribution it has made to the notion of ‘first and second class’ A-levels) has had on student numbers opting for Economics and Business Studies at School X over the past two years, and at other selective schools in the Midlands, may have been significant, as indicated by the data in Appendix 1. This would hardly be surprising. The influence that universities have had in helping to determine subject choices for A-level students, especially in selective schools in the independent sector, has grown in recent years, as shown by the findings of this study. Members of the Russell Group in particular have the same potential, through the conditions they make in their offers, to influence whether or not they re-sit at all. As discussed earlier, however, the introduction of the A* grade may in itself have the effect, in time, of decoupling AS- and A2-levels for the strongest candidates and with it their motives for re-sitting first year modules in the second year.

The scope that exists for students to improve their overall performance by re-sitting at AS-level was shown in the last chapter. This may have contributed to making grade predictions, upon which offers of a place are made, less reliable.

The minutes from a House of Commons Hansard debate (2007a), together with various press reports, state that as many as 55 per cent of predicted grades are incorrect. The figure for School X (as I was informed by the DOS) is a relatively impressive 25 per cent, considering, in particular, the number of students it enters for re-sits. Motivated by its aim to widen access to higher education, the Government is concerned that “in terms of both under-prediction and over-prediction - both of which are a cause for concern - students from the lowest socio-economic groups are the most adversely affected” (House of Commons Hansard, 2007a). As a result, they are either failing to meet offers of a place on competitive courses, or forced to apply to less prestigious institutions which require grades below their potential.

If the A-level survives beyond its next review in 2013, which is made more likely by the Conservatives standing in opinion polls at the time of writing and their support for ‘traditional qualifications’ (Woolcock and Webster, 2007), students by that time may at least have to make some form of post-qualification application (PQA) to university. This would represent something more than just a ‘tinkering’ with the qualification by consecutive governments, as reported by the TES (2006) and would potentially be a more radical reform than the 2008 restructuring itself. The idea of “shift[ing] the A-level timetable back to Easter” in order to allow such a change has been fully backed by Cambridge University (TES, 2006). In addition, a Government commissioned report in 2004 “argued strongly that students needed to have A-level results before applying to university” (BBC News website, 2008b). Bill Rammel, Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education declared in 2007 that the Government is “doing

everything in [its] power to urge universities to move towards having a full system of PQA by 2012” (House of Commons Hansard, 2007a).

Bringing examinations forward by as much as half a term to accommodate the PQA process as preferred by Cambridge, however, is an unlikely prospect, not least because the A-level structure, even *with* the post-September 2008 changes, makes it unworkable. A combination of on-line marking technology, electronic access to modular results by universities and fewer examinations to process in the new four module A-level *does* provide some scope for an earlier publication of results during the first week of August, perhaps by the end of July if there was just a single awarding body (Cassidy, 2002). However, this would still be an inadequate time scale for PQA to be administered and a later start for undergraduates in their first year (even though this could be compensated by longer semesters further on into degree courses) is unlikely to find favour with both universities and the Government alike. Amongst the ‘practical’ concerns for the former would be a loss of income, especially from overseas students and the latter would fear, to quote the former Minister for Higher Education, Alan Johnson “that some students might drift into other activities” (cited, Manchester Online, 2003). In light of all the talk of PQA and its reliance on earlier results, I was surprised to discover that A-level results will not be published until August 20th in 2009 (that is, about a week later than usual), albeit due to the extra burden placed on examination boards in the legacy year of the old specifications and the arrival of the new ones (UCAS website, 2008b).

Whilst calls by universities in Cassidy’s (2002) report for a single examination board to administer A-levels are primarily motivated by an interest in speeding up

marking and the publication of results, another consequence of such a move is arguably more important in ensuring a 'level playing field' for students than, for example, an end to re-sits altogether. Reilly and Bachan (2002, p.26) draw attention to the extent of the "variation in outcomes across Examination Boards" and conclude that pre-Curriculum 2000 in the 1990s this was much more evident in A-level Business Studies than Economics, conceding that "recent amalgamations of Examination Boards are likely to reduce such variability". The withdrawal of coursework from specifications (and the 'extra help' which students are likely to receive, especially privately educated ones, as referred to earlier) is also likely to be conducive to achieving greater consistency for grading standards, but this might be counterbalanced by different approaches to electronic and hard-copy marking (both in terms of type and extent) by the three major boards. Even so, the 'soft/hard' distinction between, respectively, A-level Business Studies and Economics is set to continue and a logical progression of the Cambridge 'list' could be the award of more UCAS points to those subjects which are deemed to be 'tougher' (Attwood, 2008). Such a move would be "strongly resisted by the QCA", however, as a senior member of its staff informed me by email, in response to a number of questions on this and other issues (QCA, 2008b).

Perhaps a more likely way forward for the introduction of PQA would be a 'hybrid option' which does not rely on earlier results, like that proposed by the Director-General for Higher Education, Alan Wilson, whereby university places are formally offered on the strength of past academic achievements (possibly a combination of both GCSE and AS-level performance), rather than predicted grades (BBC News website, 2006b). Such a move would encourage more

students to adopt a 'linear mentality' towards their AS-level examinations instead of adopting a 'fail-safe' philosophy to sixth form life, given the cushion of re-sits. A further consequence of this form of PQA might be an increased tendency for students to 'stick with what they know' and continue with subjects at AS-level which were 'tried and tested' at GCSE, particularly in those where the transition between the two stages is not considered to be that great. This would probably have a detrimental impact on Economics and Business Studies numbers, particularly in the independent sector, where these subjects are often not a choice at GCSE. Consequently, there would be greater pressure on many students who opt for them to develop maturity in all four assessment objectives in the first year of the course.

On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that rising tuition fees at university, together with a downturn in the economy, is contributing to a rising number of students taking a gap year. Davidson (2008) estimates that "about a third of all school-leavers destined for university take time off to travel the world, earn a bit of money or generally take stock of their lives." He concluded that the onset of the 'credit crunch' has seen more students make a bigger contribution to their university fees, instead of relying on parental income, which has meant gap years are becoming orientated to finding employment rather than exploring distant lands. Davidson's research is reaffirmed by the data in Appendix 12 which shows that a significant and steadily increasing minority of Business Studies students at School X take a gap year, either with the intention to re-apply or by deferring entry. This option has been less popular amongst their Economics counterparts in recent years, who, given the nature of their subject choices at A-level, may feel less compelled to test their vocational talents. In

addition, the Chinese students at the school that the subject attracts only rarely take a year off before starting university.

The current state of the economy and the rising cost of university life might therefore attract more students to the idea of making a PQA *after* they have finished their A-levels and fully considered the opportunities available to them at university based on the strength of their results (without disruption to their studies, for example, in the form of 'open days'). Some students opting for this route might still, for the sake of their own self-esteem or to strengthen their curriculum vitae, re-sit in either the January or June during their gap year to improve their grades, even though it would not be relevant to their application for university. Others, irrespective of their performance at A-level may simply want a break from education, after "three consecutive years of exams" (Garner, 2002). With 22 per cent of undergraduates failing to finish their courses (Bakewell 2008), having more time to weigh up their options for higher education should also help to reduce the drop-out rate and add substance to the Labour Party's 2010 target for university participation. Another change which could be made to A-levels, of course, is the 'outright ban' of re-sits, which has been proposed by the former Chief Inspector of Schools, Sir Mike Tomlinson (Garner, 2008). Unlike the introduction of PQA, however, which in itself does not depend on the removal of the modular format, Tomlinson also calls for a return to once-only terminal examinations at the end of the second year, disillusioned as he is, in particular, by the number of students who re-sit units, even where they achieved an 'A' grade at the first time of asking (Garner, 2008).

This study has showed the extent to which students, especially those intending to apply to Oxford or Cambridge, are keen to reach somewhere around the 90 per cent benchmark at AS-level, which is becoming widely understood as a key indicator of scholarly potential by these institutions. This level of performance also represents a sound foundation for achieving an 'A' grade overall at A-level, especially in an institution such as School X where A2 modules are not sat until the end of the course. Students (encouraged by their teachers and parents) can hardly be criticised for re-sitting to achieve these twin objectives any more than the QCA can be for deciding not to decouple AS- and A2-levels during their deliberations on the restructured course at its fifty fourth Board Meeting (QCA website, 2007).

Numerous press reports (Henry and Hennessy, 2007, amongst them) draw attention to the part that re-sits have played in "making A-levels impossible to fail." Overall pass rates nudged upwards again in 2008 to 97.2 per cent in "the era of 'unfailable' A-levels" (Clark and Harris, 2008). Over twenty years ago, as noted in the opening chapter, Sir Keith Joseph similarly referred to an era when "all shall have prizes" (cited, Times Educational Supplement, 2006), at a time when the CSE and GCE O-level were replaced by the GCSE on a seven point 'A' to 'G' grading system (increasing to eight points in 1994 when the A* was added). He announced that fail grades in the 14-16 curriculum would virtually disappear with the move to this stretched scale and that each of the seven grades would "show a clear mark of achievement and ability" (cited, TES, 2006). The same is now arguably true with A-level, especially in establishments such as School X where students are not only free to drop their weakest subject at the end of the first year, but have to achieve at least three 'D' grades to progress to

the second. Having a 'three Ds' requirement (or higher) further insulates independent schools from the damning prospect of any of its sixth formers failing an A-level outright and enables it to take a year-on-year 100 per cent pass rate for granted. Apparently, School X operates the 'three Ds' proviso in the 'best interests' of its students. They may, for example, fail to be offered a place at their chosen university if they apply with weak predictions and so might be better off finishing off their A-levels in a more 'suitable place' elsewhere, despite the spectacular gains which re-sits make possible and the fact that most have been at the school for ten or more years...

There is nothing in the new A-level structure to suggest that the pass rate will start to decline over the next few years and the addition of an A* grade, forecasted to be awarded to only 6 per cent of students in 2010 (Clark and Harris, 2008) enables the grading system to discriminate over a much greater spread of performance. As the analysis of examination results in the last chapter showed, however, AS-level re-sits are often crucial in helping to ensure that Business Studies and Economics students at School X secure high grades (see Appendix 10) in their quest to meet offers made by 'old universities' rather than the 'new universities' established in the 1990s, particularly as A2-level examinations are only taken at the end of the course. There is little evidence in this study to indicate that re-sits have jeopardised university applications to date, and given the degree of support that students appear to receive in the independent sector in the run-up to *all* external examinations, they are too important to their post-sixth form ambitions to ignore. Discussion in earlier chapters of information drawn from both primary and secondary research showed how re-sits were much more likely to be viewed cautiously by private

schools a few years ago, but are now fully embraced by most; not least because of inter-departmental competition and cross-subject performance indicators.

For many fee-paying parents, re-sits are an important safety valve for producing the kind of results which represent a sufficient return on their investment, confirmed for many (at least in my experience of innumerable parents' evenings and 'open days') by the ability of their children to avoid admission to an 'old poly'. Figures published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2007) show how numbers of students from 'low participation neighbourhoods' attending the top twenty research-led universities have fallen in recent years. They serve as another indication for the continuing gulf in educational prospects between students in the independent and maintained sectors. A limited form of PQA that represents something of a 'half-way house' between the extreme systems of post AS-level and post A2-level applications is the 'upgrade week' to be introduced in 2009, which has been set up in particular to give students from "low achieving schools" who exceed their predicted grades, a few days to apply for courses at more prestigious universities (Taylor, 2006). This initiative may help to bridge the gap in post A-level aspirations between students in the two sectors, but Taylor also reports that some universities, understandably, fear it will lead to their best applicants being 'poached'.

Upgrade week is also viewed with 'caution' by the Head Master of School X who fears, quite reasonably, that a number of students might give up offers of places on courses at universities which they have spent many hours researching, including the attendance of 'open days' and interviews. At the school, however, 75 per cent of predictions are accurate and students invariably apply to

universities which require them to fulfil their potential in respect of these. It is more likely, considering the popularity of gap years in the independent sector, that the 5 per cent of students who are *under*-predicted by the school (probably those who achieve, mainly by re-sits, a grade at A-level which is one or two higher than at AS-level in the lower sixth), will delay their entry into university and take time to fully consider their options.

At the time of writing, as discussed in various places throughout this study, there is little indication that the Government's 'flagship' 14-19 Diploma will have widespread appeal across the two sectors. Even in the maintained sector itself, responses to my emailed questionnaire, although limited, still contained a negative reaction to its introduction to the point where one colleague is now "actively looking for employment" in an independent school. The number of students commencing the Diploma in September 2008 was only around a quarter of the expected 50,000 that the Government originally expected its introduction would attract (Lipsett, 2008). Of much greater appeal to the independent sector are the IB and the Pre-U which combine academic rigour with the award of more university entry points than the standard three A-levels - a seemingly irresistible cocktail for schools looking to keep their distance from vocational qualifications, whilst consolidating their position in league tables. Again, their take-up has been below expectation, but they remain (especially the IB) credible alternatives for many schools in the independent sector, not least School X, who for the time being are content to stick with, to quote Griffiths (2006) for a second time, "what they know and sort of love."

6. Conclusion

My concluding thoughts in the closing pages of this study, in relation to the impact and potential consequences of re-sitting AS-levels at School X, can be divided into two areas:

Costs, benefits and differences in the two subjects

From my analysis of examination results, it can be concluded that Business Studies students were on the whole more dependent on performing well in their AS-level modules (including re-sits), than Economics students, to secure good grades and meet their university offers. In concurrence with discussion at the Group Y meetings, this *generally* supports the view that Business Studies students find the transition to A2-level a tougher challenge than their Economics counterparts. This interpretation is, however, complicated by such factors as the role played by coursework in Business Studies and the fact that students of this subject may have a greater tendency to rely on the virtual guarantee of a good grade in this module, together with relatively high scores at AS-level, to meet university offers which are usually significantly lower than those made to Economics students. This could encourage complacency amongst some Business Studies students, whereas the Economists might tend to be less confident about achieving the required grades. In addition, the A2-level extension modules in Economics revisit AS-level themes to a greater extent than Business Studies, which enables students to more effectively dovetail their knowledge between questions requiring either an elementary or

advanced application of the same concept. This situation is likely to continue, given that both A2-level modules in the new OCR Economics specification are 'synoptic', compared to just one in the second year of the AQA Business Studies course.

The study also discovered that where Business Studies students are still re-sitting AS-level modules in the summer of the second year, there is a greater tendency for them to 'implode' in examinations, frequently achieving a UMS score that is worse than their previous best attempt. This is more likely to be due to poor preparation (especially where familiarisation with a new case study is required), rather than examination overload, especially now that AS-level re-sits in Business Studies take place before the summer half-term break. In one respect, this is hardly a 'cost' to those students whose revision is inadequate, given the 'fail-safe' design of a re-sits system without penalty; but *any* kind of pre-occupation with AS-levels in the latter stages of the course is likely to hinder their A2-level prospects.

On the other hand, in agreement with observations made by Bachan and Barrow (2006), my findings suggest that the Economists tend to benefit more from 'maturing' into the subject as the course progresses and gradually acquire more confidence in handling fairly abstract topics, often of a diagrammatic nature. As a result, in each of the four years for which data was collected, on average they recorded significant gains in the final summer series of re-sits, motivated as they are likely to be, by meeting typical offers of 'AAB' and above from universities (compared to 'BBB' in Business Studies). Unsurprisingly, given these circumstances, the Economists on average re-sat

a slightly greater number of modules over the two years, which is in some contrast to the caution they were more likely to express about re-sits in response to the questionnaire, particularly in the context of jeopardising their higher education prospects.

Assessment

In chapter two I argued that teachers could use a candidate's script, together with accompanying mark scheme and adopt an ipsative form of assessment. In my own experience, I have found that a productive approach for coaching students on a one-to-one basis is to effectively pit them against themselves. The aim here is to help students to fully understand the strengths and weaknesses of their examination technique, and aspire to a superior level of attainment, compared to their previous performance. I invite them to take the lead and justify where their answers have met the four 'assessment objectives' (reproduced in this study on page 81). In a way, the increasing absence of hard copy annotation with the advent of electronic marking could actually make this a more fruitful exercise, because the student's commentary on their script is not influenced by the red ink of the examiner.

Taking a question with a generic theme spanning across both subjects (for example, 'company growth'), which requires an extended response together with, ultimately, 'informed judgement', students can be asked to clarify:

AO1: Where they have used knowledge appropriately and precisely. They may struggle to understand why they have been penalised for a definition of 'economies of scale' which omits 'unit', or 'average' cost in their answer.

AO2: Where they have applied their knowledge relevantly. Students may be able to offer any number of benefits that are associated with increases in scale, but often fail to relate it to a particular business or industry.

AO3: Where they have analysed. Most candidates are able to incorporate 'cause and effect' links for appropriate concepts, but have they developed them fully? Cost advantages → competitive prices → increased market share and profit → enhanced reputation → external economies of scale, and so on.

AO4: Where they have evaluated. On examining their script, it may dawn upon them that they have merely provided a summary, without showing any judgement of their analysis. Stronger candidates will be able to develop their discussion beyond the standard 'arguments for and against', or 'short and long run impacts' of a scenario and test the parameters of the question itself by, for example, exploring different notions of growth.

This degree of individual attention for every candidate looking to re-sit is, of course, unmanageable for teachers, especially in a selective independent school where there will always be a cluster of students, eager to have those

items in their scripts where they have earned less than maximum marks, fully dissected. Apart from being time-consuming, it also discriminates in favour of students with an inclination to pursue any opportunities that exist for 'extra help', perhaps cajoled by their parents into so doing. A 'cut and pasted' composite script containing answers from a small number of candidates planning to re-sit, who in turn participate on the basis described above in group form, therefore represents a realistic compromise. Practitioners of whiteboard technology could choose to scan the sample answers into an electronic document and enhance their interaction with students by projecting responses which are colour-coded to match assessment criteria. Extension work in the classroom could include 'tweaking' examination questions in an attempt to improve their ability to 'think on their feet' and adopt a more versatile approach to revision. Opponents of the four assessment objectives, such as Mansell (2006), are still likely regard such approaches as only slightly more elaborate forms of 'teaching to the test', than rote learning of the mark scheme itself. On the other hand, there are supporters, like Dudley and Swaffield (2008, p.115), of students taking advantage of opportunities to "revisit and consolidate their learning" by making "formative use of summative data", and this is how I would prefer to interpret this role for re-sits. In light of this stance, and as argued in chapter two, aided by reference to a JCQ document (2007a, p.15), examination scripts are a particularly appropriate source for identifying "characteristic strengths and weaknesses in candidates' knowledge".

It is easy for teachers to become swamped by demands on their time for a multitude of reasons associated with re-sits, ranging from lunchtime revision

lessons to marking a barrage of past papers, and being on hand to offer impromptu counselling sessions to students who, to quote my colleague in Group Y again, may “need to be reigned in” from doing too many examinations. No extra space is made in their classroom timetable for these extra chores and teaching practices which subscribe to formative assessment methods, with the objective of informing students on how they can improve upon a previous standard, are unlikely to be formally recorded and instead remain ‘invisible’ to the external observer, including inspection bodies.

For independent school teachers such as myself, there is also the dilemma that our willingness to support students in their re-sit preparations may be somewhat in vain, given the conclusions of the QCA (2007b, pp4-5) study which reported that the gains made by students in the maintained sector are “largely the same.” Bekhradnia (2003) also argued that excessive ‘spoon feeding’ at A-level by independent schools has contributed to many privately educated students underperforming at university. Without reward in kind from the school for the extra workload that re-sits have engendered, or in the form of superior improvements in results compared to our competitors in the public sector (let alone the prospect that we could be hampering students’ transition to higher education), there remains the temptation to revert to a more ‘hands off’ approach in the form of revision packs and memorisation of past papers and mark schemes. Teachers’ attempts to resolve such dilemmas in a heavily results-orientated school which still promises a ‘rounded education’ are unlikely to be exhausted.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACCOMPANYING GLOSSARY

AQA	Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (examination board).
CIE	University of Cambridge International Examinations is a global provider of qualifications for 14-19 year olds.
Edexcel	Examination board, whose name (the author discovered from its website) is derived from 'educational excellence'.
EEC	European Economic Community: an association of European countries, established in 1957 to promote European economic unity, now called the European Union with 27 members.
HMI	Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools: the highest class of school inspector, employed by the Office for Standards in Education in England.
IB	The International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme is a two year curriculum, primarily aimed at students aged 16-19.
iSAMS	Internet Based School's Administrative Management System, which can be customised to a school's specific requirements.
JCQ	The Joint Council for Qualifications is the single voice which represents the UK's awarding bodies.

NASUWT	The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers now has the largest membership of any union representing teachers and headteachers in the UK.
OCR	Oxford Cambridge and RSA (examination board).
Ofsted	The Office for Standards in Education is the non-ministerial department of Her Majesty's Chief Inspectorate of Schools in England, which merged with the Adult Learning Inspectorate in April 2007.
Pre-U	The Cambridge Pre-U is a post-16 Diploma which has been devised with the aim of preparing students with appropriate skills and knowledge which are more conducive than A-levels to study at university.
QCA	The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority maintains the national curriculum and associated assessments (replaced in 2008 by Ofqual: Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulator).
UCAS	The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service processes applications for entry into higher education.
UMS	Uniform Mark Scales have been used since the introduction of the modular A-level system in 2000, in order to ensure that marks from different series of exams have the same value when contributing to

the student's overall grade. Raw mark grade boundaries, which vary depending on the difficulty of exams, are converted to corresponding UMS boundaries, which are fixed.

APPENDICES

TABLE 1: Distribution of A-level grades at School X (excluding General Studies) as a percentage of all grades in total (in brackets) obtained, 2000-2008*

	A	B	C	D	E	N	U	Number of Candidates (Upper Sixth)
2000	108 (39)	71 (65)	59 (87)	30 (98)	6 (+99)	1	0	88
2001	136 (47)	69 (70)	59 (91)	21 (98)	5 (+99)	1	0	93
2002	132 (40)	83 (65)	73 (87)	31 (96)	8 (+99)	0	4	103
2003	147 (45)	86 (71)	57 (87)	31 (98)	4 (+99)	0	2	102
2004	150 (42)	113 (73)	57 (89)	29 (98)	7 (+99)	-	2	113
2005	172 (41)	148 (76)	72 (93)	25 (99)	4 (+99)	-	2	134
2006	232 (58)	101 (83)	42 (93)	20 (98)	7 (100)	-	0	123
2007	226 (61)	85 (84)	44 (96)	10 (98)	6 (100)	-	0	111
2008	249 (55)	125 (83)	45 (93)	25 (98)	8 (+99)	-	1	128

* Data sourced from annual 'A/AS Level and GCSE Results Summary' documents, published by the school for internal use, over the 2000-2008 period.

TABLE 2: Percentage of candidates in England and Wales achieving each grade 1992-2008 (all A-levels)

Data for 1992-2002 from the QCA website (2002), for 2003-2005 and 2008 from the Education Guardian website (2008), and that for 2006-2007 is compiled by the Joint Council for Qualifications, but accessed via the Education Guardian website (2007).

Year	A	B	C	D	E	N*	U*	% A-E Pass
1992	12.8	16.3	17.4	18.0	15.3	9.8	10.4	79.8
1993	13.8	16.7	17.7	18.1	14.8	9.3	9.6	81.1
1994	14.8	17.1	18.6	18.1	14.4	8.8	8.1	83.9
1995	15.8	17.2	19.0	18.1	14.1	8.4	7.5	84.1
1996	16.2	18.1	19.8	18.3	13.7	7.6	6.4	86.0
1997	16.2	19.0	20.5	18.5	13.4	7.2	5.2	87.6
1998	17.2	19.0	20.9	18.3	12.9	6.9	4.9	88.2
1999	17.8	19.2	21.1	18.2	12.7	6.6	4.5	88.9
2000	18.1	19.3	21.3	18.4	12.4	6.3	4.2	89.5
2001	19.1	19.4	21.5	18.0	12.1	6.0	3.8	90.2
2002	20.7	21.9	22.7	18.1	**16.6		-	-
2003	21.6	22.9	23.0	17.8	10.1		4.6	95.4
2004	22.4	23.4	23.2	17.5	9.5		4.0	96.0
2005	22.8	23.8	23.3	17.2	9.1		3.8	96.2
2006	24.1	24.0	23.2	16.8	8.7		3.4	96.6
2007	25.3	24.4	23.1	16.0	8.1		3.1	96.9
2008	25.9	24.9	23.1	15.7	7.6		2.8	97.2

* Following the introduction of Curriculum 2000, from 2004 onwards, A-levels were awarded on a six point (excluding 'N'), rather than a seven point, A-U system.

** Only figures for E, N and U combined were published.

Accounting
Art and Design
Business Studies
Communication Studies
Dance
Design and Technology
Drama/Theatre Studies
Film Studies
Health and Social Care
Home Economics
Information and Communication Technology
Leisure Studies
Media Studies
Music Technology
Performance Studies
Performing Arts
Photography
Physical Education
Sports Studies
Travel and Tourism

APPENDIX 1: Number of candidates commencing AS-level Business Studies and AS-level Economics at School X, at the start of the academic year in September (2000-2008)*

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
AS-level Business Studies	38	32	41	39	40	32	36	25	16
Of whom did AS-level Maths	6	10	13	10	10	6	12	5	5
Of whom were Far Eastern candidates	1	0	4	1	2	2	0	0	1
AS-level Economics	25	29	30	35	30	30	32	45	45**
Of whom did AS-level Maths	10	14	14	18	19	17	22	26	27
Of whom were Far Eastern candidates	2	1	1	2	3	7	9	6	10
All AS-level candidates	104	103	120	142	126	116	131	122	128
% of all (Business Studies)	37	31	34	27	32	28	27	21	13
% of all (Economics)	24	28	25	25	24	26	25	37	35

* Data sourced from a combination of examination board documents, school lists and the corroboration of colleagues at School X.

** Excluding two candidates from a neighbouring independent girls' school.

TABLE 3: A-level Business Studies and A-level Economics 1992-2008
Percentage of candidates achieving each grade in England and Wales

Data for 1992-2001 from the QCA website (2002), for 2002-2005 and 2008 from the Education Guardian website (2007), and that for 2006-2007 is compiled by the Joint Council for Qualifications, but accessed via the Education Guardian website (2007).

Year	A		B		C		D		E		N*		U*	
	BS	Econ	BS	Econ	BS	Econ	BS	Econ	BS	Econ	BS	Econ	BS	Econ
1992	5.7	11.8	13.7	14.8	18.2	15.2	22.0	16.5	17.8	16.1	11.7	11.4	11.0	14.2
1993	6.0	11.8	14.6	14.7	18.9	15.3	22.1	17.2	18.5	16.3	10.3	11.8	9.6	12.9
1994	6.7	13.7	15.0	15.3	19.6	16.6	21.4	17.4	17.7	15.6	10.4	10.7	9.2	10.7
1995	7.2	14.4	15.3	15.6	20.7	16.7	21.7	16.8	16.6	15.0	9.3	10.8	9.2	10.7
1996	7.7	15.1	15.5	16.1	21.6	18.1	21.0	17.6	16.6	14.8	8.9	9.3	8.7	8.9
1997	7.7	15.9	19.4	17.1	23.6	19.1	21.1	18.5	14.7	13.7	8.6	8.2	5.0	7.5
1998	8.1	17.3	19.5	17.9	24.2	19.7	20.6	17.4	13.8	13.1	7.9	8.0	6.0	6.7
1999	9.0	18.6	19.6	18.5	24.5	19.9	20.3	17.8	13.4	13.2	7.7	6.9	5.6	5.0
2000	9.8	20.8	19.2	18.8	25.1	18.9	21.1	17.9	13.1	12.6	6.8	6.5	4.8	4.5
2001	11.0	22.0	20.6	19.1	25.7	20.4	20.5	17.6	12.4	11.3	6.2	5.8	3.6	3.8
2002	11.4	25.3	21.9	24.1	27.8	22.1	22.2	16.0	**16.7	**12.5			-	-
2003	12.5	28.4	23.3	26.1	27.3	21.7	22.1	14.4	11.2	6.7			3.6	2.5
2004	14.1	30.2	24.2	26.6	27.5	21.6	21.4	13.4	9.9	6.0			2.9	2.2
2005	15.0	31.0	25.6	27.0	27.9	20.7	20.4	13.4	8.5	5.9			2.6	2.0
2006	16.7	32.4	25.9	26.4	28.0	21.1	18.8	12.9	8.3	5.5			2.3	1.7
2007	18.0	33.2	27.3	26.9	27.6	20.7	17.7	12.6	7.4	5.2			2.0	1.4
2008	17.9	35.1	27.7	27.2	28.3	20.1	18.0	11.8	6.5	4.5			1.6	1.3

* Following the introduction of Curriculum 2000, from 2004 onwards, A-levels were awarded on a six point (excluding 'N'), rather than a seven point, A-U system.

** Only figures for E, N and U combined were published.

APPENDIX 2: Number and Percentage of candidates achieving each grade in A-level Business Studies and A-level Economics at School X 2002-2008 (cumulative percentages in brackets)*

		A	B	C	D	E	N**	U
2002	BS	5 (21)	1 (25)	10 (67)	6 (92)	0 (92)	0 (92)	2 (100)
	Econ	11 (61)	5 (89)	2 (100)	0 (100)	0 (100)	0 (100)	0 (100)
2003	BS	15 (63)	6 (88)	2 (96)	1 (100)	0 (100)	0 (100)	0 (100)
	Econ	12 (52)	8 (87)	3 (100)	0 (100)	0 (100)	0 (100)	0 (100)
2004	BS	9 (27)	16 (76)	4 (88)	4 (100)	0 (100)		0 (100)
	Econ	9 (36)	10 (76)	5 (96)	1 (100)	0 (100)		0 (100)
2005	BS	9 (31)	12 (72)	6 (93)	1 (97)	1 (100)		0 (100)
	Econ	12 (46)	11 (88)	2 (96)	1 (100)	0 (100)		0 (100)
2006	BS	18 (55)	12 (91)	2 (97)	1 (100)	0 (100)		0 (100)
	Econ	15 (68)	4 (86)	2 (95)	0 (95)	1 (100)		0 (100)
2007	BS	13 (50)	11 (92)	2 (100)	0 (100)	0 (100)		0 (100)
	Econ	11 (61)	7 (100)	0 (100)	0 (100)	0 (100)		0 (100)
2008	BS	19 (61)	7 (84)	5 (100)	0 (100)	0 (100)		0 (100)
	Econ	13 (50)	6 (73)	5 (96)	1 (4)	0 (100)		0 (100)

* Data sourced from 'Centre Cumulative Record of Unit Results' (AQA and OCR), 2002-2008.

** Following the introduction of Curriculum 2000, from 2004 onwards, A-levels were awarded on a six point (excluding 'N'), rather than a seven point, A-U system.

APPENDIX 3: Grade boundaries (uniform mark score) for AS and A-level**

Curriculum 2000		2008 Specifications	
AS-level	A-level	AS-level	A-level**
Maximum UMS of 300	Maximum UMS of 600	Maximum UMS of 200	Maximum UMS of 400
Grade A: 240 UMS	Grade A: 480 UMS	Grade A: 160 UMS	Grade A* 320 UMS**** Grade A: 320 UMS
Grade B: 210 UMS	Grade B: 420 UMS	Grade B: 140 UMS	Grade B: 280 UMS
Grade C: 180 UMS	Grade C: 360 UMS	Grade C: 120 UMS	Grade C: 240 UMS
Grade D: 150 UMS	Grade D: 300 UMS	Grade D: 100 UMS	Grade D: 200 UMS
Grade E: 120 UMS	Grade E: 240 UMS***	Grade E: 80 UMS	Grade E: 160 UMS***

** From data following a request for information, via the QCA website (2008), by the author.

** Results for candidates who fail to achieve the minimum pass grade E in both Curriculum 2000 and 2008 specifications are recorded as unclassified (U).

**** Candidates who achieve an A grade on the Advanced GCE have access to the A* grade, if they also gain at least 180 UMS in their A2 units. An important anomaly in the system is that it is theoretically possible for a candidate to achieve an A* grade by scoring a minimum of 320 UMS to meet these criteria (that is, 180 UMS at A2-level and 140 at AS-level), or in another scenario, score as high as 359 UMS and still only achieve a grade A at A-level overall (that is, 200 at AS-level and 179 UMS at A2-level). Knowledge of this anomaly should encourage 'decoupling' between AS- and A2-level, at least by the brightest students, as discussed in Chapter 5.

APPENDIX 4: Information for Group Y independent senior schools (Economics and Business Studies)*

School	Type	A-level Subjects	When sit modules (Curriculum 2000)	Re-sit policy (Curriculum 2000)	When sit modules (2008 specifications)	Re-sit policy (2008 specifications)	Notes
A	Co-ed	Economics Business Studies	AS: Jan & June A2: Jan & June	AS: June/Jan/June A2: June	As before	As before	
B	Boys	Economics (Politics)	AS: June A2: June	AS: Jan/June A2: None possible	As before	As before	No Business Studies at the school
C	Boys	Economics Business Studies	AS: Jan & June A2: Jan & June	AS: June/Jan/June A2: June	As before	As before	Down from 2 to 1 Jan A2 module
D	Co-ed	Economics Business Studies	AS: June A2: Jan & June	AS: Jan/June A2: June	As before	As before	Also do combined Econ & BS
E	Co-ed	Economics Business Studies	AS: Jan & June A2: Jan & June	AS: June/Jan/June A2: June	As before	As before	Down from 2 to 1 Jan A2 module
F	Co-ed	Economics Business Studies	AS: Jan & June A2: Jan & June	AS: June/Jan/June A2: June	As before	As before	
G	Boys	Economics Business Studies	AS: June A2: June	AS: Jan/June A2: None possible	As before	As before	Moving to IB in 2010
School X	Boys	Economics Business Studies	AS: Jan & June A2: June	AS: June/Jan/June A2: None possible	AS: as before A2: Jan & June (?)	AS: as before A2: June (?)	

* Data collected from the final Group Y meeting in June, 2008.

APPENDIX 5: Groups at School X participating in the student questionnaire, May 2006 to July 2008

2005-2006 Academic year	May 2006 A2-level students 22 Economics & 33 Business Studies students	June 2006 AS-level students 30 Economics & 32 Business Studies students	July 2006 Pre-A-level Students* 24 Economics & 37 Business Studies students		
	2006-2007 Academic year	May 2007 A2-level students 18 Economics & 24 Business Studies students	June 2007 AS-level students 32 Economics & 36 Business Studies students	July 2007 Pre-A-level Students* 36 Economics & 24 Business Studies students	
		2007-2008 Academic year	May 2008 A2-level students 26 Economics & 31 Business Studies Students	June 2008 AS-level students 45 Economics & 25 Business Studies students	July 2008 Pre-A-level Students* 37 Economics & 15 Business Studies students

* These were prospective students, including a number who decided not to commence the subject in September, but excluding new entrants to the sixth form, most noticeably Far Eastern students, the vast majority of whom opted for Economics rather than Business Studies, out of the two subjects.

APPENDIX 6a: School X student questionnaire

Pre-AS-level Questions:

Which subjects did you do at GCSE and what grades did you get in them?

What do you think your strongest and weakest subjects were at GCSE?

Why are you opting to do Economics/Business Studies?

Do you think the new A* grade at A-level is a good or bad thing (final 2008 cohort only)?

1. Which AS-level subjects are you going to study?
2. Do you have a university choice and subject in mind?
3. Do you have a positive or negative view about re-sits? Briefly justify your answer.

AS-level questions:

1. Which AS-level subjects are you studying (please list *all* of them)?
2. Which subject are you thinking of studying at which university?
3. Do you have a positive or negative view about re-sits? Briefly justify your answer.

1. Did you re-sit your January module in Economics/Business Studies in June?
2. Why did you re-sit, for example: disappointed with first attempt, influence of other people, to improve university chances?

APPENDIX 6b: School X student questionnaire (continued)

A2-level questions:

1. Which A2-level subjects are you studying (please list *all* of them)?
2. What is your first and reserve offer and at which university (subjects and grades/points)?
3. Do you have a positive or negative view about re-sits? Briefly justify your answer.
4. Which subject, if any, did you drop after AS-level?

In relation to their lower sixth re-sits

1. If you re-sat your first AS-level Economics/Business module in the summer, did you improve your UMS score in it?
2. What was your overall subject grade at AS-level, compared with your first module grade from January in the lower sixth?

In relation to January re-sits in the upper sixth

3. Which Economics/Business Studies modules, if any, did you re-sit in January?
4. Why did you re-sit, for example: disappointed with first attempt, influence of other people, to improve university chances?
5. If you re-sat any AS-level Economics/Business Studies modules in January, did you improve your UMS scores in them?
6. What is your subject grade now, compared to what it was after the summer exams last year?
7. More generally, how many units did you re-sit in total from all your subjects and how many hours of exams was this?
8. What was your range of grades on results day in the summer of last year, compared to March this year?
9. Was it worthwhile doing the re-sits?

In relation to summer re-sits in the upper sixth, post-18 issues and reflection upon A-levels in general

10. Do you intend to re-sit any more Economics/Business Studies modules this summer? If so, which ones?
11. Which of these are you re-sitting for the first, second, or third time?
12. Why are you re-sitting, for example: disappointed with first attempt, influence of other people, to improve university chances?
13. Would your approach to exams have been any different if the opportunity to re-sit did not exist?
14. Irrespective of any particular subject, do you prefer examinations only, or combined with coursework?
15. Does General Studies count in any way towards your UCAS offers?
16. Have you come across any evidence that universities discriminate in favour of applicants who do not re-sit?
17. Do you think that the opportunity to re-sit should exist in its present form, in a different form, or not at all?
18. Are you going to HE this year, taking a gap year first, deferring entry or doing something else when you leave school?
19. Do you think that your performance was ever affected in any way by the number of re-sits you took, or their timetabling?

APPENDIX 7: Questionnaire sent by email to maintained sector schools

Q1. Have you seen any noticeable drift in student numbers from A-level Business Studies to A-level Economics, or vice versa in the last two to three years?
Q2. If so, could you offer a reason why, whether internal or external to the school?
Q3. Do you put candidates in for AS-level modules (Economics and Business Studies) in January in the Lower Sixth and / or A2-level in January, in the Upper Sixth?
Q4. Can candidates re-sit when they like (i.e. June in the Lower Sixth and both January, and June in the Upper Sixth), and as many times as they like? If not, what other re-sit policy as a school or department do you have in place?
Q5. As regards your post-16 curriculum, does your school offer any alternatives to A-levels, for example IB or vocational qualifications – please could you specify?
Q6. Are candidates allowed to study both Economics and Business Studies, if so, through to AS-level only, or right through to A2-level?
Q7. Could you share any opinion that you might have about the inclusion of an A* grade in the new A-level specifications?
Q8. Is there likely to be any change in the way you enter candidates for modules at either AS- or A2-level given the new specifications, and any change as regards re-sits as per Q4?
Q9. Is your school considering changing over to any other post-16 qualification/s this September, or the near future and if so, does this mean a complete break with A-level, or is it still being retained?

APPENDIX 8: Number of candidates at School X who achieved a grade ‘A’ at A-level in Economics and Business Studies, after re-sitting all three AS-level modules in January of the Upper Sixth (June 2005-June 2008)*

	Economics¹	Business Studies¹
Total number of candidates re-sitting all three modules in January, between June 2005 and June 2008	30²	42²
Total number of whom achieved a grade ‘A’ at A-level	11³	8³

* Data sourced from ‘Centre Cumulative Record of Unit Results’ (AQA and OCR), 2005-2008.

- 1 Over the period (accounting for four separate cohorts of students) there were 92 Economics candidates and 119 Business Studies candidates in total at A2-level. From these totals, 51 Economics candidates achieved a grade ‘A’ at A-level (55%) compared to 59 in Business Studies (50%).
- 2 33% of all Economics candidates and 35% of all Business Studies candidates re-sat all three AS-level modules in January of the Upper Sixth.
- 3 37% of all these re-sitters in Economics ultimately achieved a grade ‘A’ at A-level, compared to just 19% in Business Studies.

APPENDIX 9: Mark change analysis (School X) for January 2007 AS-level re-sits*

Subject	Number of students increasing or decreasing individual module <i>marks</i> by subject (compared to <i>previous</i> performance in June 2006)			Number of students Increasing or decreasing <i>Grades</i> in individual modules by subject (compared to <i>previous</i> performance in June 2006)						Drop grade(s)
	Down	Same	Up	Same	1 Grade	2 Grades	3 Grades	4 Grades	5 Grades	
PE	1		4		3	1				1
Mathematics Total	6	2	23	13	5	5	2	1		5
Geography Total	3	1	6	4	3	1				2
English Total			4	1	1	1	1			
Classical Civilization			5	3		2				
Religious Studies										
Economics Total	6	2	29	15	14	2	3			3
Politics Total	3	1	10	5	6			1		2
History Total	6	1	17	7	9	2		1		5
Physics Total	1		24	8	12	5				
Business Total	4	3	38	10	17	10	2	2	2	2
Biology Total	11	1	13	6	7	1				11
Chemistry Total	2	1	13	6	5	4				1
Computing	1		1	2						
French			8	2	5		1			
General Studies Total			17	1	4	1	5	5	1	
Design and Technology			3		1	1		1		
Theatre Studies			3	1	1	1				
Spanish	3		12	4	4	5				2
School Total	47	12	230	88	90	42	14	11	3	32

* Adapted from information supplied to the author by the Director of Studies at School.

APPENDIX 10: Overall grade improvement at A-level (School X) as a result of AS-level re-sits, 2005-2008*

	A	B	C	D	E	A/B % Pass	A% Pass
	June 2005 Economics						
With re-sits	12	11	2	1	0	88	46
Without re-sits	9	9	5	2	1	69	35
	June 2005 Business Studies						
With re-sits	9	12	6	1	1	72	31
Without re-sits	5	6	10	6	2	38	17
	June 2006 Economics						
With re-sits	15	4	2	0	1	86	68
Without re-sits	10	9	0	2	1	86	45
	June 2006 Business Studies						
With re-sits	18	12	2	1	0	91	55
Without re-sits	13	15	3	2	0	85	39
	June 2007 Economics						
With re-sits	11	7	0	0	0	100	61
Without re-sits	7	8	3	0	0	83	39
	June 2007 Business Studies						
With re-sits	13	11	2	0	0	92	50
Without re-sits	10	10	6	0	0	77	38
	June 2008 Economics						
With re-sits	13	5	7	1	0	69	50
Without re-sits	6	9	6	3	2	58	23
	June 2008 Business Studies						
With re-sits	19	7	5	0	0	84	61
Without re-sits	15	9	6	1	0	77	48

* Data sourced from 'Centre Cumulative Record of Unit Results' (AQA and OCR), 2005-2008.

APPENDIX 11: Analysis of re-sit performance for students commencing A-levels between September 2005 and September 2008, at School X*

Subject & Cohort	May/June Lower Sixth Option to do 1 AS-level re-sit					January Upper Sixth Option to do up to 3 AS-level re-sits					May/June Upper Sixth Option to do up to 3 AS-level re-sits				
	Number of units taken in total, all students	Mean number of units per L6th student doing subject	Number of unit scores higher than first sitting	Number of unit scores lower than first sitting (and same)	Av. score change per module (UMS) from all re-sits +/-	Number of units taken in total, all students	Mean number of units per U6th student continuing at A2 & per re-sitter	Number of unit scores higher than previous highest	Number of unit scores lower than previous Highest (and same)	Av. score change per module (UMS) from all re-sits +/-	Number of units taken in total, all students	Mean number of units per U6th student continuing at A2 & per re-sitter	Number of unit scores higher than previous highest	Number of unit scores lower than previous Highest (and same)	Av. score change per module (UMS) from all re-sits +/-
Econ 03-05	No AS-level module in January 2004					59	2.27/2.27	41	15 (3)	+6.85	30	1.15/1.88	21	8(1)	+4.97
	35 Lower Sixth students					26 Upper Sixth students continuing the subject, of whom all 26 re-sat at least one AS module in January and 16 re-sat at least one AS module in June									
BS 03-05	No AS-level module in January 2004					72	2.48/2.57	60	10(2)	+15.51	29	1.00/1.81	18	11(0)	+2.59
	39 Lower Sixth students					29 Upper Sixth students continuing the subject, of whom 28 re-sat at least one AS module in January and 16 re-sat at least one AS module in June									
Econ 04-06	No AS-level module in January 2005					52	2.36/2.48	31	14(7)	+8.14	13	0.59/1.44	8	5(0)	+4.00
	30 Lower Sixth students					22 Upper Sixth students continuing the subject, of whom 21 re-sat at least one AS module in January and 9 re-sat at least one AS module in June									
BS 04-06	No AS-level module in January 2005					65	1.97/2.32	37	27(1)	+8.72	13	0.39/2.17	7	5(1)	-1.46
	40 Lower Sixth students					33 Upper Sixth students continuing the subject, of whom 28 re-sat at least one AS module in January and 6 re-sat at least one AS module in June									
Econ 05-07	19	0.63	9	10	+0.53	37	2.06/2.06	22	12(3)	+7.14	18	1.00/1.50	13	4(1)	+13.60
	30 Lower Sixth students, of whom 19 re-sat the first module in the summer					18 Upper Sixth students continuing the subject, of whom all 18 re-sat at least one AS module in January and 12 re-sat at least one AS module in June									
BS 05-07	15	0.47	9	4(2)	+4.00	45	1.73/2.05	36	6(3)	+31.45	5	0.23/1.25	3	2	+4.60
	32 Lower Sixth students, of whom 15 re-sat the first module in the summer					26 Upper Sixth students continuing the subject, of whom 22 re-sat at least one AS module in January and 4 re-sat at least one AS module in June									
Econ 06-08	23	0.72	21	1(1)	+17.39	41	1.58/1.87	23	17(1)	+4.27	26	1.00/1.86	16	8(2)	+10.36
	32 Lower Sixth students, of whom 23 re-sat the first module in the summer					26 Upper Sixth students continuing the subject, of whom 22 re-sat at least one AS module in January and 14 re-sat at least one AS module in June									
BS 06-08	12	0.33	6	4	+1.08	46	1.48/1.84	34	10(2)	+13.40	16	0.52/1.60	11	2(3)	+10.00
	36 Lower Sixth students, of whom 12 re-sat the first module in the summer					31 Upper Sixth students continuing the subject, of whom 25 re-sat at least one AS module in January and 10 re-sat at least one AS module in June									

* Data sourced from 'Centre Cumulative Record of Unit Results' (AQA and OCR), 2005-2008.

TABLE 4: Impact on subject performance (measured by grades) as a whole, as a result of re-sits, for Economics and Business Studies at School X (2005-2008)*

	January Lower Sixth: 1 AS unit taken	June Lower Sixth: 2 AS units taken & option to do 1 AS re- sit	January Upper Sixth: Up to 3 AS re-sits (no A2 units taken)	June Upper Sixth: Up to 3 AS re-sits, 3 A2 units for Econ and 2 BS (in addition to coursework)
Subject & Cohort	AS-level Grade	AS-level Grade	AS-level Grade	Final A-level Grade
Economics 2003-2005	No January AS-level module sat in January 2004	A B C D E U 12 10 7 4 2 0	A B C D E U 16 7 2 1 0 0	A B C D E U 12 11 2 1 0 0
	35 students 2003-04		26 students 2004-05	
Business Studies 2003-2005	No January AS-level module sat in January 2004	A B C D E U 7 11 6 8 3 4	A B C D E U 19 8 2 0 0 0	A B C D E U 9 12 6 1 1 0
	39 students 2003-04		29 students 2004-05	
Economics 2004-2006	No January AS-level module sat in January 2005	A B C D E U 20 8 1 0 1 0	A B C D E U 19 3 0 0 0 0	A B C D E U 15 4 2 0 1 0
	30 students 2004-05		22 students 2005-06	
Business Studies 2004-2006	No January AS-level module sat in January 2005	A B C D E U 20 10 7 2 1 0	A B C D E U 25 2 5 1 0 0	A B C D E U 18 12 2 1 0 0
	40 students 2004-05		33 students 2005-06	
Economics 2005-2007	A B C D E U 19 8 3 0 0 0	A B C D E U 14 9 5 2 0 0	A B C D E U 13 4 1 0 0 0	A B C D E U 11 7 0 0 0 0
	30 students 2005-06		18 students 2006-07	
Business Studies 2005-2007	A B C D E U 17 6 4 2 2 1	A B C D E U 9 9 7 5 1 2	A B C D E U 16 8 2 0 0 0	A B C D E U 13 11 2 0 0 0
	32 students 2005-06		26 students 2006-07	
Economics 2006-2008	A B C D E U 7 9 6 7 2 1	A B C D E U 16 5 9 2 0 0	A B C D E U 18 6 2 0 0 0	A B C D E U 13 5 7 1 0 0
	32 students 2006-07		26 students 2007-08	
Business Studies 2006-2008	A B C D E U 27 5 3 1 0 0	A B C D E U 15 13 5 3 0 0	A B C D E U 19 10 2 0 0 0	A B C D E U 19 7 5 0 0 0
	36 students 2006-07		31 students 2007-08	

* Data sourced from 'Centre Cumulative Record of Unit Results' (AQA and OCR), 2005-2008.

APPENDIX 12: Miscellaneous data from Questionnaire 6b (A2 students at School X) collected in May 2006, May 2007 and May 2008 in the final week of the A-level course

	Student cohort		
	2004-2006 22 A2 Economics students 33 A2 Business Studies students	2005-2007 18 A2 Economics students 26 A2 Business Studies Students	2006-2008 26 A2 Economics students 31 A2 Business Studies Students
Economics			
Average university offer ¹	341 points (AAB)	344 points (AAB)	332 points (AAB)
Gap year? (deferred or no application)	3 yes 19 no	3 yes 15 no	3 yes 23 no
Preference for some coursework in a subject?	14 yes 8 no	12 yes 6 no	18 yes 8 no
Average number / hours of re-sits in January (all subjects)	4.5 re-sits (5.2 hours)	3.8 re-sits (4.1 hours)	3.7 re-sits (3.9 hours)
General Studies count towards first choice? ²	1 yes 20 no	2 yes 15 no	2 yes 22 no
Perception of discrimination against re-sits?	9 yes 13 no	8 yes 10 no	11 yes 15 no
First choice university: 'new' or 'old'? ³	19 old 2 new	15 old 2 new	21 old 3 new
Business Studies			
Average university offer ¹	295 points (BBB)	305 points (BBB)	302 points (BBB)
Gap year? (deferred or no application)	8 yes 25 no	6 yes 20 no	6 yes 25 no
Preference for some coursework in a subject?	31 yes 2 no	23 yes 3 no	30 yes 1 no
Average number / hours of re-sits in January (all subjects)	4.4 re-sits (4.6 hours)	4.2 re-sits (4.0 hours)	3.9 re-sits (4.2 hours)
General Studies count towards first choice? ²	13 yes 13 no	11 yes 12 no	9 yes 18 no
Perception of discrimination against re-sits?	5 yes 28 no	5 yes 21 no	6 yes 25 no
First choice university: 'new' or 'old'? ³	20 old 6 new	17 old 6 new	19 old 8 new

1. A-level grades for the outgoing Curriculum 2000 specifications convert into UCAS tariff points as follows: A (120), B (100), C (80), D (60) and E (40). Source:ucas.com, 2008. Average university offers were arrived at by converting all offers for a subject cohort (both points and grade offers) into just points and then finding the average for each candidate. The closest equivalent grade offer (rounded upwards or downwards) is also given in brackets.
2. For candidates' first choice university which they are holding an offer for, either to start in the following academic year or deferred entry (a higher proportion of whom are likely to be studying Economics, due to its tendency to attract Chinese students in School X, all of whom, normally, do not take a gap year).
3. 'New' meaning those universities created from former polytechnics in the 1990s and 'old' being those already established before this time.

APPENDIX 13a: Business Studies candidates (School X) who re-sat at least one module in the final summer series in the upper sixth, their UMS improvement at AS-level and final grade at A-level (2005-2008)*

Upper sixth UMS & grade after January 2005	Final AS-level UMS & grade June 2005	Final UMS & grade at A-level June 2005	Upper sixth UMS & grade after January 2006	Final AS-level UMS & grade June 2006	Final UMS & grade at A-level June 2006	Upper sixth UMS & grade after January 2007	Final AS-level UMS & grade June 2007	Final UMS & grade at A-level June 2007	Upper sixth UMS & grade after January 2008	Final AS-level UMS & grade June 2008	Final UMS & grade at A-level June 2008		
236 (B)	253 (A)	360 (C)	262 (A)	262 (A)	505 (A)	252 (A)	270 (A)	498 (A)	214 (B)	220 (B)	409 (C)		
199 (C)	199 (C)	280 (E)	246 (A)	246 (A)	474 (B)	227 (B)	231 (B)	502 (A)	237 (B)	253 (A)	467 (B)		
230 (B)	238 (B)	382 (C)	195 (C)	197 (C)	420 (B)	212 (B)	253 (A)	478 (B)	203 (C)	212 (B)	418 (C)		
253 (A)	268 (A)	433 (B)	196 (C)	219 (B)	448 (B)	194 (C)	198 (C)	457 (B)	242 (A)	247 (A)	491 (A)		
214 (B)	219 (B)	379 (C)	203 (B)	210 (B)	441 (B)	4 from 26 A2 Business Studies candidates re-sat in the final summer series			218 (B)	218 (B)	384 (C)		
213 (B)	237 (B)	406 (C)	171 (D)	171 (D)	303 (D)				197 (C)	223 (B)	440 (B)		
216 (B)	218 (B)	378 (C)	6 from 33 A2 Business Studies candidates re-sat in the final summer series						234 (B)	236 (B)	446 (B)		
280 (A)	295 (A)	503 (A)							210 (B)	219 (B)	391 (C)		
289 (A)	300 (A)	509 (A)							212 (B)	244 (A)	437 (B)		
258 (B)	267 (A)	435 (B)							236 (B)	251 (A)	492 (A)		
213 (B)	233 (B)	438 (B)				10 from 31 A2 Business Studies candidates re-sat in the final summer series							
232 (B)	246 (A)	443 (B)											
209 (C)	261 (A)	470 (B)											
262 (A)	264 (A)	438 (B)											
248 (A)	262 (A)	440 (B)											
236 (B)	236 (B)	397 (C)											
16 from 29 A2 Business Studies candidates re-sat in the final summer series													

* Data sourced from 'Centre Cumulative Record of Unit Results' (AQA), 2005-2008. From the table, the average increase in UMS from the final summer re-sit/s (over the entire period) was 11, from an average UMS after the previous January re-sits of 222 UMS (mid grade B). The final AS-level UMS score was therefore 233 (high grade B). The average score at A2 level for these re-sitting candidates (from 3 modules, one of which was coursework) was 208 UMS (high grade C).

APPENDIX 13b: Economics candidates (School X) who re-sat at least one module in the final summer series in the upper sixth, their UMS improvement at AS-level and final grade at A-level (2005-2008)*

Upper sixth UMS & grade after January 2005	Final AS-level UMS & grade June 2005	Final UMS & grade at A-level June 2005	Upper sixth UMS & grade after January 2006	Final AS-level UMS & grade June 2006	Final UMS & grade at A-level June 2006	Upper sixth UMS & grade after January 2007	Final AS-level UMS & grade June 2007	Final UMS & grade at A-level June 2007	Upper sixth UMS & grade after January 2008	Final AS-level UMS & grade June 2008	Final UMS & grade at A-level June 2008
246 (B)	246 (A)	464 (B)	227 (B)	234 (B)	364 (C)	261 (A)	263 (A)	512 (A)	194 (C)	239 (B)	400 (C)
204 (C)	234 (B)	465 (B)	212 (B)	254 (A)	404 (C)	250 (A)	271 (A)	515 (A)	251 (A)	275 (A)	488 (A)
195 (C)	232 (B)	450 (B)	266 (A)	268 (A)	503 (A)	200 (C)	242 (A)	421 (B)	251 (A)	252 (A)	452 (B)
257 (A)	283 (A)	533 (A)	253 (A)	265 (A)	485 (A)	231 (B)	231 (B)	465 (B)	219 (B)	228 (B)	459 (B)
229 (B)	256 (A)	456 (B)	242 (A)	268 (A)	502 (A)	235 (B)	235 (B)	476 (B)	186 (C)	212 (B)	319 (D)
233 (B)	244 (A)	452 (B)	265 (A)	265 (A)	488 (A)	251 (A)	251 (A)	424 (B)	262 (A)	274 (A)	526 (A)
267 (A)	267 (A)	512 (A)	257 (A)	258 (A)	458 (B)	263 (A)	285 (A)	557 (A)	236 (B)	239 (B)	435 (B)
236 (B)	236 (B)	470 (B)	248 (A)	252 (A)	485 (A)	257 (A)	270 (A)	507 (A)	223 (B)	224 (B)	381 (C)
257 (A)	264 (A)	530 (A)	8 from 22 A2 Economics candidates re-sat in the final summer series			259 (A)	262 (A)	503 (A)	259 (A)	270 (A)	484 (A)
232 (B)	247 (A)	446 (B)				229 (A)	251 (A)	451 (B)	235 (B)	266 (B)	490 (A)
266 (A)	269 (A)	497 (A)				239 (B)	271 (A)	496 (A)	243 (A)	243 (A)	378 (C)
246 (A)	249 (A)	448 (B)				275 (A)	275 (A)	462 (B)	272 (A)	276 (A)	490 (A)
268 (A)	277 (A)	503 (A)	12 from 18 A2 Economics candidates re-sat in the final summer series			13 from 26 A2 Economics candidates re-sat in the final summer series			207 (C)	234 (B)	376 (C)
235 (B)	237 (B)	447 (B)									
212 (B)	224 (B)	426 (B)									
264 (A)	270 (A)	491 (A)									
16 from 26 A2 Economics candidates re-sat in the final summer series											

* Data sourced from 'Centre Cumulative Record of Unit Results' (OCR), 2005-2008. From the table, the average increase in UMS from the final summer re-sit/s (over the entire period) was 13, from an average UMS after the previous January re-sits of 242 UMS (low grade A). The final AS-level UMS score was therefore 255 (moderate grade A). The average score at A2 level for these re-sitting candidates (from 3 written modules and with no option for coursework) was 209 UMS (high grade C).