



CAMBRIDGE ASSESSMENT

A comparison between modular and linear examinations in secondary education: the impact of maturational effects and regular feedback on performance and motivation

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Abstract

As part of a recent reform in education in England, the assessment of GCSEs (qualifications taken by students aged 14–16) is organised into modules which can either be taken at the end of the course in a linear fashion, or can be taken at different points throughout the course in a modular approach to teaching and learning.

Previous research suggested that students who are assessed early in the course are disadvantaged by their immaturity, if not by their narrower experience of the subject and perform worse than those assessed at the end. Also, it has been argued that regular feedback on performance helps to identify learning needs and encourages students to do better.

The present study set out to investigate the above claims combining quantitative and qualitative research. In the quantitative strand of the research the performances of English and mathematics students were analysed. In the qualitative strand, questionnaires and interviews with students and teachers of both subjects were conducted.

This research showed that English students certificating midway through the course were at a disadvantage compared to those who certificated at the end. Girls were at a greater disadvantage than boys. However, early assessment was an advantage for both girls and boys in the coursework modules. Early assessment was also an advantage in mathematics, where students obtained significantly higher marks in early sessions than in later sessions.

Feedback was found useful and motivating and students reported that it encouraged them to do better on the next modules. Mathematics students were more satisfied with the feedback than students of English and found it easier to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their performances. However, students missed the opportunity of receiving suggestions about areas to improve on in order to change, if necessary, their focus of learning or their learning strategies.

