Education Endowment Foundation

Improving GCSE resit outcomes: Understanding college practices and the impact of teaching hours

Scoping phase findings and lessons learned

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Executive summary

Background and purpose of the study

Improving GCSE English and maths outcomes for students that do not achieve grade 4 or above in these subjects at age 16 is a policy priority. Department for Education (DfE) statistics show that, in recent years, over a third of students entering the 16-19 phase do not achieve a grade 4 or above in both English and maths GCSEs and have consequently been required to continue studying English and/or maths during the 16-19 phase as a result of the 'condition of funding' requirement. Although this policy has been in place for over a decade, outcomes have not substantially improved over that period. Around 15-20 percent of GCSE English and maths resit candidates achieve a grade 4 or higher (JCQ, 2026, as cited in Camden, 2026b). At the same time, results vary substantially across providers, with a particularly wide distribution of institutional value-added in English (Maris and Robinson, 2025). Some post-16 settings consistently achieve stronger outcomes than others, even when serving broadly similar students, suggesting institutional practices may play an important role alongside student characteristics (Ibid).

Recent policy developments have sought to address these challenges. In February 2024, the government strengthened expectations around the number of teaching hours providers should deliver to GCSE resit students. DfE introduced, for the first time, minimum teaching hours expectations for all students without a GCSE grade 4 or equivalent and subject to the Condition of Funding, including GCSE resit students and those studying alternative Level 1 and 2 qualifications (DfE, 2024, as cited in Camden, 2024). Providers were expected to make "best efforts" to meet these expectations in 2024/25, with compliance monitored from 2025/26. These changes sit alongside wider reforms outlined in the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper (DfE, DWP, and DSIT, 2025), which aim to create a more graduated progression model for learners with very low prior attainment, including through the introduction of new level 1 "stepping-stone" qualifications in English and maths.

Against this backdrop, the scoping phase of this project set out to achieve two objectives; (i) assess the feasibility of evaluating the causal impact of post-16 settings increasing their teaching hours on GCSE resit outcomes, and (ii) understand how and why settings' approaches to GCSE resits differ, particularly in relation to teaching hours.

Evaluating the effects of increased teaching time on GCSE resit outcomes

Evidence from primary and secondary education indicates that increased instructional time can improve academic outcomes when used effectively (Kidron and Lindsay, 2014; Connolly, 2021; Kraft and Novicoff, 2024). However, there is limited evidence on the impact of increased teaching hours for 16-19 GCSE resit students. This project was set up on the assumption that the introduction of minimum teaching hour expectations in the 2024/25 academic year—when these were set as expectations, but compliance was not formally monitored—would lead to variation in provision across post-16 settings. This would have created a potential opportunity to evaluate the impact of increased teaching time on resit outcomes using a quasi-experimental design (QED). The feasibility of conducting such an evaluation was assessed as part of the scoping phase of this project using teaching hours data collected through a bespoke survey of post-16 settings (including general FE colleges, sixth form colleges, 16-19 academies, 16-19 free schools and specialist post-16 institutions (e.g. agriculture colleges)). Providers were drawn from a sampling frame that excluded school sixth forms and other institutions educating pupils below age 16. Eligible providers were drawn from the 2024 KS5 performance tables and further restricted to providers who taught at least 50 GCSE maths or English resit students in the last year of resit entry data available at the time of the research and where resit data was available, to ensure relevance to the policy. This resulted in an eligible population of 265 providers.

Our feasibility assessment – based on a survey completed by 53 post-16 settings and case studies with six colleges - unfortunately suggests such an evaluation is unlikely to be feasible. Only around one quarter of surveyed settings increased teaching hours (defined by the DfE as hours delivered in person through whole class, stand-alone

teaching) between 2023/24 and 2024/25. Most of the post-16 settings that did not increase their hours were either already meeting the minimum thresholds prior to 2023/24 or planned to increase them from 2025/26. As a result, new teaching hours expectations generated limited divergence in settings' teaching hours in 2024/25, reducing the contrast needed for causal analysis.

In addition, not all post-16 settings that increased their hours delivered *below* the minimum expectations in 2023/24 and *above* these thresholds in 2024/25; most were either already meeting the minimum expectations before they increased their teaching hours or did not increase their hours up to the minimum thresholds. Stable pre- and post-treatment periods were also hard to identify. Taken together, these findings suggest that it would be difficult to detect a causal effect of increased teaching time using a QED where such an effect exists.

The costs and perceived benefits of increasing teaching time

While most post-16 settings in our survey sample did not increase their teaching hours in response to the introduction of minimum expectations, a notable minority did, and an even larger proportion indicated that they planned to increase their teaching hours in 2025/26, when compliance monitoring was set to begin. Among those settings that reported increasing their teaching hours (irrespective of whether they were delivering below minimum expectations or above), the vast majority reported recruiting new staff, whilst a minority indicated that they had reallocated existing staff and/or used sessional staff. Only one college reported that they had not required any additional staffing. Amongst settings that increased their teaching hours and reported costs, the median additional investment in staffing was £80,000. Their views were mixed on whether the investment had a meaningful impact on student progress.

Whilst additional teaching time may support some learners, college leaders highlighted – both in the case studies and survey responses - that its impact is likely to depend on how additional hours are used, including the quality of teaching, curriculum design, learner engagement and additional support provided to students.

Variation in post-16 settings' choices and approaches to GCSE resits

Although it is unlikely to be feasible to estimate the impacts of increased teaching hours from our survey data, scoping work did highlight substantial variation across settings in how GCSE resits are delivered. These include differences in; curriculum design; staffing; grouping students; additional learner support; and qualification enrolment decisions. The evidence gathered suggests that these decisions are best understood as interconnected elements within a wider system of GCSE resit provision, rather than as simple moderators of the effects of teaching hours on learners' outcomes.

Curriculum delivery: Most of the post-16 settings which responded to our survey adopt a targeted curriculum approach for November resits, focusing on topics where students are weakest. However, approaches to summer resits vary more widely. Around half of General FE Colleges (GFECs) report teaching the full curriculum, compared with around one third of Sixth Form Colleges (SFCs) and 16-19 Academies, which are more likely to adopt a blended approach, covering the full curriculum but placing additional emphasis on areas where resit students tend to struggle. These differences likely reflect variation between provider types in learners' average prior attainment and in the resources they have to support GCSE resit learners.

Teacher experience and qualifications: The structure of teaching roles varies substantially between provider types. GFECs typically have teachers whose timetables are largely focused on resit teaching, whereas teachers in SFCs and 16-19 Academies are more likely to have prior experience teaching the subject at Key Stage 4 in schools but less likely to regularly teach multiple resit classes.

Grouping students: Post-16 settings also vary in how they group resit students, with GFECs more commonly streaming students by ability or by course or vocational area, whereas SFCs and 16-19 Academies are more likely

to allocate students randomly to classes in English and are fairly evenly split between grouping students randomly or based on ability in maths.

Additional learner support: Survey data suggests around six in ten settings offered one-to-one or small-group tutoring to some or all resit students. However, the availability, coverage and targeting of such support differed significantly across institutions. Between half and two-thirds of settings offer some form of small-group or one-to-one support, but only around one quarter provide this to all resit students, with others tending to target support at students with the greatest need. Around a quarter of settings report being unable to provide any students with additional support, with resource constraints often cited as the primary reason.

Qualification enrolment choices: Post-16 settings also differ in whether they enrol students with very low prior attainment (those without grade 3s in Year 11) for GCSE resits or alternative qualifications[1]. Within settings, enrolment choices also vary over time, and between English and maths. Around half the SFCs and 16-19 Academies in our survey sample enrol all students without a grade 3 in English onto GCSE resits, but around a quarter said they enrol students without grade 3s on FSQs at Levels 1 and/or 2 in Year 12 instead, sometimes with a view to these students progressing onto GCSE resits the following year. Enrolment decisions also differ by subject; the same settings are more likely to enrol all students without a grade 3 in maths on FSQs or to take a mixed approach based on prior attainment, rather than enrolling all students in GCSE resits. Amongst GFECs, the most frequently reported choice was a mixed qualifications offer based on student's prior attainment, although a third said they enrolled all students in GCSE resits regardless of prior attainment. Many settings described how they felt that current funding and accountability measures, combined with the greater societal recognition of GCSEs over alternative qualifications, incentivised them to enrol all students in GCSE resits, including those who achieved lower than a grade 3 at aged 16.

Methodological lessons learnt

This scoping phase highlights the challenges of conducting causal impact evaluations of institutional choices where these rely on policy or practice changes generating sufficient, timely and measurable variation across settings. It also underscores the importance of testing data collection mechanisms and ensuring the data collected is valid and reliable. Post-16 settings were able to provide current teaching hours data, but historic data were sometimes incomplete, and, in some cases, respondents' reporting was inconsistent, for example where they indicated they had increased their teaching hours but then provided teaching hours data which suggested the contrary. This limited confidence in whether apparent changes in teaching hours reflected genuine shifts in provision or differences in how settings recorded and reported their delivery when completed through a voluntary survey

The response rates to our college survey also highlight the challenges of reaching the relevant staff within post-16 settings, particularly large GFECs, which educate the majority of resit learners but were under-represented in our survey sample relative to the share of GCSE resit learners that they teach. This underlines the importance of starting survey fieldwork with a database of named contacts with direct responsibility for the relevant topic area, in this case English and maths course leads and curriculum directors. Without this, reliance on gatekeepers, such as senior leaders and college administrators who may be responding to generic institutional email addresses, can limit participation. Alongside a targeted contact strategy, survey length should be carefully managed. While targeting a short survey, the final survey had an average completion time of approximately 26 minutes. Longer instruments place greater demands on respondents and may reduce response rates, increase partial completion

[1] The 16-19 condition of funding rule requires students who have not achieved a GCSE grade 4 (or equivalent) in English and/or maths by age 16 to continue studying these subjects to receive funding, but students with lower than a 3 from KS4 can be enrolled onto other level 2 courses, level 1 courses and entry-level courses, most of which are Functional Skills Qualifications (FSQs).

and exacerbate non-response bias. Finally, the scoping phase findings suggest GCSE resit provision is best understood as a set of linked choices. Settings' decisions about teaching hours were inter-related with their choices about staffing, timetabling, curriculum coverage, grouping, exam entry, learner support and qualification enrolment. This reinforces the ToC developed through the scoping phase, which conceptualised GCSE resit provision as a system of interdependent choices rather than a linear pathway from teaching hours to outcomes. In the future, it may be more appropriate to evaluate broader choice sets in relation to GCSE resit provision, rather than attempting to isolate the impact of any one of these choices on students' outcomes.

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in this report:

AI was used in a limited way during this study. Enterprise Grade Microsoft Copilot was used to edit this report and improve the readability and clarity of the text. Use of AI complied with UK GDPR, the Data Protection Act 2018, and our organisational AI governance policies, which align with the AI Playbook for the UK Government.

Introduction

This project was initiated with two key objectives.

The first objective of the study was to evaluate the causal impact of increased teaching hours on students' GCSE resit outcomes (and the primary objective of the scoping phase was to assess whether the introduction of minimum thresholds created sufficient divergence in post-16 settings' teaching hours in 2024/25 to support a credible causal evaluation). For the purposes of the DfE policy, teaching hours are defined as hours delivered in person through in-person, whole-class, stand-alone teaching. This was motivated by the hypothesis that the introduction, for the first time, of minimum teaching hours expectations may have created divergence in post-16 settings' teaching hours, making it possible to evaluate the causal impact of increased teaching hours on student outcomes using a quasi-experimental design (QED).

A secondary objective was to explore the diversity in post-16 settings' broader practices for improving outcomes for GCSE resit students and how these influence teaching hours effects. Whilst the primary focus of this study was on teaching hours, we also set out to reveal the variation in settings' approaches to curriculum, staffing and organisation, learner support and enrolment decisions, and to examine how these choices interact with teaching hour effects to impact student progress in GCSE resits. This wider set of practices was reflected in the study's Theory of Change (see Appendix 1), which set out how teaching hours may interact with curriculum design, staffing, grouping, learner support, engagement and qualification enrolment decisions to influence GCSE resit outcomes.

The full project set out to answer the following Research Questions (RQs).

Primary RQ:

RQ1. What is the impact on the English and maths GCSE outcomes of learners aged 16 to 19 of post-16 settings' responses to the Education and Skills Funding Agency's (ESFA's) requirement that, from the academic year 2024 to 2025, students resitting maths and English GCSEs should study for a minimum number of hours per week[2]?

Secondary RQs:

RQ2. What is the impact of increases in teaching hours - which result from the government guidance - on the English and/or maths GCSE resit pass rates and grades of *disadvantaged* 16-to-19-year-olds (subgroup analysis)?

IPE research questions

RQ3. How do institutional factors, such as class size and composition, and teacher subject and pedagogical expertise, influence English and maths resit outcomes, and how are the effects of these factors moderated by post-16 settings' choices about teaching hours?

RQ4. How do post-16 settings typically staff the delivery of increased teaching hours for GCSE resit students and what costs do they incur as a result?

RQ5. How do course leaders and teachers perceive the impact of learner attendance and engagement in the resit course on students' ability to achieve a Grade 4 or above?

RQ6. What role does learner self-study, tutoring and independent learning outside the classroom play in achieving a Grade 4 or above?

[2] See Advice: funding regulations for post-16 provision 2024 to 2025 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) [Accessed 11/10/24]

RQ7. Do learners from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit from particular approaches to maths and English resits?

The aims of the scoping phase of this project were to:

- Assess whether the introduction of minimum thresholds created sufficient divergence in post-16 settings' teaching hours in 2024/25 to support a credible causal evaluation of the impact of increased teaching hours on GCSE resit outcomes, by comparing settings that increased their hours with those that did not.
- Examine trends in the teaching hours offered by providers over time.
- Investigate between-college variation in teaching hours and examine the causes and perceived consequences of this variation, as well as the potential benefits and challenges associated with delivering additional teaching hours.
- Report on other differences in post-16 settings' GCSE resit practices and explore settings' perceptions of the relative importance and relationships of these differences, including settings' choices of curriculum approaches, resourcing and organisation, learner expectations and support and qualification enrolment.

Study rationale and background

The importance of GCSE resit policy

The success of the GCSE resit policy is crucial for individuals, the economy and society:

- *For individuals*: Achieving a level 2 qualification in English and maths improves access to further education, employment opportunities, and earnings, while also benefitting health and civic engagement (OECD, 2019; Cherry *et al.*, 2020; Machin, McNally and Ruiz-Valenzuela, 2020; Hodge, Little and Weldon, 2021; Dickerson, McDool and Morris, 2022).

- *For the economy*: Strong numeracy and literacy skills are linked to economic growth, addressing employer-reported skills gaps and strengthening national productivity (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016; Grant, 2017).

- *For society*: Gaps in English and maths skills exacerbate educational and employment inequalities, particularly for disadvantaged and SEN students who dominate the resit group (Garcia and Weiss, 2017; DfE, 2024). Failure to address this could worsen existing disparities.

The scale of the overall challenge

Despite improvements in students' English and maths progress in the 16-19 phase being a policy priority for more than a decade, the challenge remains substantial.

Since 2014, 'condition of funding' rules have required students who did not achieve at least a grade 4 in GCSE maths or English to continue studying these subjects as part of their post-16 study programme. However, pass rates among resit students have remained low. Recent exam data indicates that around one in five post-16 resit entries achieve a grade 4 or above (Norden, 2025; Camden, 2026a).

Outcomes vary substantially between post-16 settings, with national performance data showing wide variation in GCSE resit progress and attainment. Research from the Education Policy Institute and inspection evidence from Ofsted suggest that these differences persist even among providers serving broadly similar student populations (Maris, 2024; Maris and Robinson, 2025; Ofsted, 2026). This suggests that while student prior attainment and background characteristics play an important role in shaping outcomes, institutional choices and practices may also contribute to differences in results.

Taken together, these patterns highlight the twin challenges that face the post-16 sector, of raising overall pass rates and reducing the variation in outcomes across providers. Closing this gap—by identifying the practices used in higher-performing post-16 settings and supporting lower-performing providers to adopt effective approaches and practices—represents a key opportunity to improve outcomes for the large cohort of students who fail to achieve grade 4 aged 16 and continue studying English and maths after this age. But taking advantage of this opportunity requires fresh insights from rigorous research into what works, when and for whom.

This challenge is greater for some post-16 settings than others

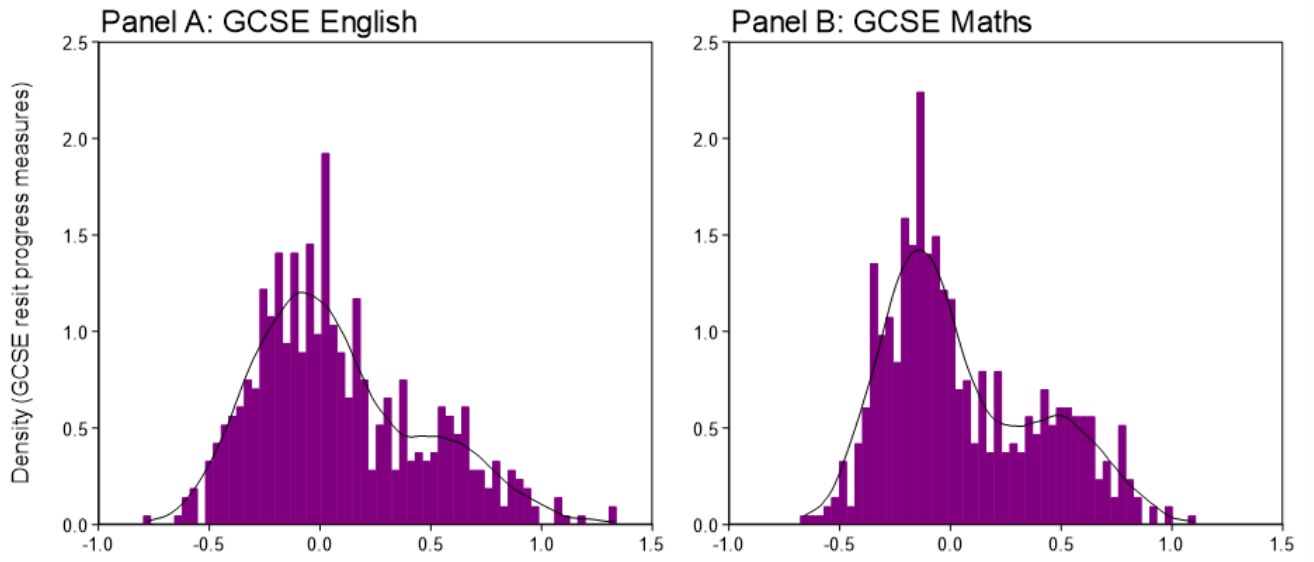
The scale of the GCSE resits challenge is not evenly distributed across the post-16 sector. Outcomes vary substantially between providers and part of the task of improving overall outcomes involves narrowing the gap between higher- and lower-performing institutions.

In the distribution of post-16 settings' GCSE resit progress scores (Figure 1), we observe two somewhat distinct groups, with one group tending to outperform the other. Further analysis (unpublished) shows that post-16 settings in the smaller, higher-performing group are disproportionately likely to be SFCs and 16–19 Academies or Free

schools, whereas the larger, lower-performing group is dominated by General Further Education Colleges (GFECs). This reflects important structural differences within the sector. GFECs typically serve larger and more diverse student populations, including disproportionately larger numbers of learners studying lower-level qualifications and from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Learners at GFECs are much more likely to be undertaking GCSE resits than learners in other provider types.

The choices settings make about their GCSE resit provision – for example their approaches to curriculum, teaching hours, staffing and organisation and student support – need to be interpreted in the context of their student intake. Approaches that appear effective in one type of institution may not transfer straightforwardly to others.

Figure 1 - The distribution of post-16 settings' GCSE resit maths and English progress scores (2016/17, 2017/18 and 2018/19 pooled)



Recent policy developments

In February 2024, government strengthened expectations around the teaching hours that providers deliver for English and maths resit students (ESFA, 2024). New guidance set out, for the first time, minimum teaching hours expectations for GCSE resits. For the purposes of the DfE policy, teaching hours are defined as hours delivered in person through whole-class, stand-alone teaching. The guidance was not enforced in the 2024/25 academic year and instead framed as an expectation that providers were supposed to make "best efforts" to meet, but it became a formal condition of funding from 2025/26, with compliance subject to monitoring through the 16–19 funding system. The February 2024 guidance stated that providers should aim to deliver:

- English: 3 hours per week
- Maths: 4 hours per week

These hours had to be delivered as stand-alone, whole-class, in-person teaching, with any additional support provided on top of this minimum. Over a typical 33-week teaching year, this would equate roughly to ~99 hours of English and ~132 hours of maths.

Following feedback from the sector, the government revised the policy slightly, specifying a single annual minimum requirement for each subject instead of weekly hours (DfE, 2026a). From 2025/26, providers must deliver 100 hours of English per year and 100 hours of maths per year.

Institutions were still encouraged to offer an extra 35 hours of maths teaching from 2025/26, in addition to the 100 minimum teaching hours – equating to an extra hour of maths teaching each week (relative to English) for full-time students – but compliance with these extra hours is not measured, in recognition of sector feedback (DfE, 2026b).

The importance of this policy change, and of the government's overall efforts to improve English and maths outcomes in the 16-19 phase were reinforced in the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper (DfE, DWP, and DSIT, 2025), which set out a series of reforms to existing policy to create a more graduated progression model that could better support learners with very low prior attainment. A central element of these reforms was the planned introduction of new level 1 "stepping-stone" qualifications in English and maths. These qualifications are intended to support students who achieved very low GCSE grades (grade 2 or below), helping them build foundational literacy and numeracy skills before attempting a full GCSE resit.

The White paper also restated the 100-hours minimum teaching expectation for GCSE resit and emphasised the importance of building the evidence base on 'what is working to improve outcomes' in post-16 maths and English outcomes and continuing 'to build and mobilise the evidence base in the FE sector…to inform guidance and support for colleges as the evidence base develops' (DfE, DWP, and DSIT, 2025).

Teaching hours as a potential driver of resit outcomes

Existing evidence suggests that variation in GCSE resit results between post-16 settings may partly reflect differences in the quantity of teaching hours delivered, particularly where increased hours are combined with high-quality teaching and tailored support for students. This hypothesis is driven by existing evidence from primary and secondary education which has shown a link between increased teaching hours and improved academic outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged learners, where the additional time is used effectively (Kidron and Lindsay, 2014; Connolly, 2021; Kraft and Novicoff, 2024).

However, evidence on the causal effects of increased teaching hours for post-16 GCSE resit students is scant, restricting the ability of policy makers, setting leaders and curriculum leads to make evidence-informed decisions about minimum teaching hours.

Policy changes created an opportunity for a quasi-experimental evaluation of the effects of increased teaching time

The introduction of minimum teaching hours expectations created a potential opportunity to evaluate the causal effects of increased teaching hours. Because the new expectations initially applied as guidance rather than a funding requirement, post-16 settings had some flexibility in how quickly they responded to the new guidance, with some providers increasing their teaching hours during the 2024/25 academic year, while others waited until the requirements became mandatory. This opportunity helped provide the motivation for this study.

In the next section, we set out the research design and methodology used.

Research design and methodology

Scoping phase objectives

This study was carried out between April 2025 and March 2026, and had three objectives:

1. Assess the feasibility of a quasi-experimental evaluation of the impact that an increase in teaching hours has on post-16 settings' GCSE resit outcomes in maths and English.

2. Investigate between-college variation in teaching hours and examine the causes and perceived consequences of this variation.

3. Explore post-16 settings' perceptions of the relative importance and relationships between different choices about their GCSE resit provision, including timetabling, assessment timing, staffing choices and quality, curriculum and pedagogy, and access to additional support.

The research questions guiding this study are set out in the introduction. These focus on assessing the impact of increased teaching hours for GCSE resit students, as well as exploring how institutional practices, learner behaviours and contextual factors influence outcomes, either directly or indirectly by shaping teaching hours choices. The methods in the full study were designed to address these questions through a combination of quantitative impact analysis and qualitative investigation of implementation and experience (note this report only covers the scoping phase for the full study).

Methods

The scoping phase comprised the following methods:

- Qualitative case studies with three high-performing and three low-performing colleges, analysed thematically.

- A survey, containing predominantly quantitative questions, which secured responses from 54 post-16 settings and was distributed to all standalone post-16 providers, including general further education colleges (GFECs), sixth form colleges (SFCs), 16–19 academies, 16–19 free schools and specialist post-16 settings (e.g. agricultural colleges). Providers were drawn from a sampling frame that excluded school sixth forms and other institutions educating pupils below age 16. Eligible providers were drawn from the 2024 KS5 performance tables and further restricted to providers with sufficiently large cohorts of GCSE resit students (or, where resit data were unavailable, larger Year 12 intakes) to ensure relevance to the policy. This resulted in an eligible population of 265 providers.

Qualitative case-studies

College case studies each comprised two interviews (on average): one with the Curriculum Director or Deputy Principal with oversight of GCSE resit provision, and one with the Subject Course Leader(s) or subject teacher for maths and/or English GCSE resits. In advance of the interviews, participating colleges were asked to complete a short proforma capturing key contextual information, including: the expected number of students resitting GCSE English and/or maths in 2024/25; planned exam entry points (November, May/June, or both); the number of teaching hours being delivered to the current cohort; and the average number of teaching hours delivered to past cohorts (2016/17 to 2023/24). Responses to this proforma were used to tailor the interview schedules and probe areas of particular relevance for each institution.

Three high- and three low-performing colleges were selected for these case studies. High- and low-performing colleges settings were sampled after ranking all GFECs and SFCs/16–19 Academy Converters according to the difference between the progress achieved by their GCSE resit students (based on college progress measures for

maths and English[3]) and the progress expected given institutional and student characteristics, including provider type, learner numbers and learner profile[4]. This approach enabled the selection of higher- and lower-performing settings while accounting for structural differences that are likely to influence outcomes. In total, the sample comprised four GFECs and two SFCs / 16–19 Academies. Based on historical progress measures, three of the four GFECs were identified as low performing, while one GFEC and two SFCs/16-19 Academies were comparatively high performing.

To aid interpretation of the qualitative findings, the case study sample was selected to capture diversity in provider type, institutional performance, curriculum offer and learner intake. The sample included both GFECs and 16-19 providers, and encompassed institutions serving learners with a range of prior attainment profiles and educational needs. The colleges also varied in their approaches to GCSE resit provision and in the balance of academic, technical and vocational programmes offered. Further contextual information is not reported in order to preserve the anonymity of participating institutions.

Across the six case study post-16 settings, a total of 11 staff participated in interviews. These included six senior leaders with responsibility for GCSE resit provision, with roles including Vice and Assistant Principal, Head of School, and Executive Director of Curriculum. We also spoke to five faculty leaders and teachers.

These interviews explored:

- Their approach to GCSE resits in 2024-25 and 2025-26, including how they responded to the new minimum teaching hours expectations, how many teaching hours they delivered in each year, how many hours they planned to offer in 2025/26, and factors which influenced their choices.
- The teaching hours they have delivered since 2017/18, and what administrative records they hold.
- Their perceptions of the impact of teaching hours, and of the impact (and unintended consequences) of increasing their teaching hours to meet new minimum thresholds.
- Staffing and cost implications of increasing their teaching hours, where applicable.
- Their choices in relation to curriculum design; staffing and organisation of resit classes; learner expectations and support; qualification enrolment decisions, and the rationale for thee choices.
- Learner engagement and attendance at GCSE resit provision.

Findings from this strand informed the development of a Theory of Change (ToC) and the design of the college survey, as described in the section below. The ToC is provided in Appendix 1, while reflections on how the evidence from the scoping phase supported or challenged this model are presented later in the report

[3]We used post-16 settings' progress measures data from the three years prior to the Covid pandemic (2016/17, 17/18 and 18/19) as more recent data on post-16 settings' resit progress measures had not been published. This means we may have identified post-16 settings for our case studies which were particularly high- or low-performing before the pandemic but whose performance has since improved or declined significantly.

[4] These characteristics were: Total number of students in each college and year; The share of female students in each college and year; The share of students aged less than 19 and between 19 and 24 in each college and year; The share of students who report having a disability in each college and year; The share of white students in each college and year; The share of students in courses below level 2 and those in level 2 courses in each college and year (which is likely to be an indicator of the prior attainment profile of post-16 settings' intake).

Interviews were conducted online using semi-structured topic guides. Each interview lasted up to one hour, and all responses were anonymised to ensure that no individual or institution could be identified in reporting. Each participating college received a £100 token of appreciation for their involvement, provided either in cash or as Amazon vouchers.

Online survey

The online college survey was designed to provide a concise and accessible means of capturing key information from a wide range of providers, building directly on insights from the case studies described above. The survey was informed by exploratory interviews with senior leaders from the Maths and English departments at each of the six case study settings. These interviews helped to identify the issues most salient for providers, informed the terminology used in the questionnaire, and ensured that the survey reflected the realities of post-16 GCSE resit delivery.

The survey asked post-16 settings about:

- Their approach to GCSE resits in 2024-25 and 2025-26, including how they responded to the government guidance issued in Feb ’24, and the rationale for their choices.
- Their approach to GCSE resits before 2024-25 and whether / when they made changes to the number of teaching hours delivered for GCSE resits, and why.
- Their perceptions of how the number of hours students spend in GCSE resit classes affects their chances of achieving a Grade 4 or above.
- How staffing limitations, experience and qualifications affected their choices, and how the guidance issued last year is/will affect staffing decisions and allocations.
- Class sizes and how decisions / preferences around class sizes have affected their choices
- Learner engagement and attendance of GCSE resit provision.
- Other choices relating to GCSE resit provision, such as teaching staff quality, pedagogical adaptations, curriculum design, timetabling, assessment timing and access to additional support.

In addition, the survey incorporated a small number of questions developed by ICF researchers, specifically focused on post-16 settings’ enrolment decisions. These questions were incorporated when EEF indicated ICF had been commissioned to conduct a different study on GCSE resit enrolment choices, so as to avoid over-burdening settings with two surveys from different research organisations, at a similar time, on related topics.

To test and refine the survey instrument, cognitive interviews were conducted with three college leaders from the case studies (two from GFECs and one from an SFC) who were responsible for GCSE resits. These sessions aimed to assess the clarity, relevance and interpretability of survey questions and response options. Participants were asked to review a draft version of the survey and to ‘think aloud’ as they read and answered each question, verbalising their immediate reactions, interpretations and any points of confusion. The interviewer used targeted probes (e.g. asking what specific terms meant to participants or how easy questions were to answer) to explore comprehension, recall and judgement processes in depth. This approach enabled the research team to identify ambiguities, refine wording, and improve the overall flow and usability of the survey prior to wider dissemination.

The final instrument was a user-friendly online survey, developed using Questback software. It collected data on post-16 settings’ teaching hours and their perceptions and approaches to curriculum design, the staffing and organisation of resit classes, learner expectations and support, and the qualifications in which students are

enrolled. Care was taken to keep the survey focused and manageable in length, in order to maximise response rates while still capturing sufficient detail to address the research questions.

Eligible providers comprised standalone post-16 providers, including general further education colleges (GFECs), sixth form colleges (SFCs), 16–19 academies, 16–19 free schools and specialist post-16 settings (e.g. agricultural colleges), but excluding school sixth forms and institutions that also educate pupils below age 16. This reflected the study's aim of understanding approaches to supporting GCSE resit learners across the providers that educate the overwhelming majority of this population, while recognising the substantial additional burden and cost that would be entailed in surveying school sixth forms, which together educate only around 4% of GCSE resit learners but number over two thousand nationally (Maris and Robinson, 2025).

Contact information for eligible providers was gathered using internet searches and phone calls. Between September 30th and November 14th 2025, 275 providers (see Table 1b below) received invitations to take part in the survey. Because direct email addresses were unavailable, invitations and follow-up reminders were sent to each college's principal via publicly listed college emails. The survey specifically targeted senior leaders responsible for English and maths GCSE resits.

Several initiatives were used to promote the survey and boost participation, including:

- Sharing the survey through NFER and EEF social media channels.
- Distributing a bulletin via the Sixth Form College Association (SFCA) and broadcasting details to post-16 settings using EdCo's contact list.
- Offering a £50 voucher to one nominated participant per college, and entering post-16 settings into a prize draw for one of ten £1000 cash prizes.
- Sending reminder emails, making follow-up calls to post-16 settings that hadn't responded, and extending the deadline for survey completion to November 30, 2025.

The goal was to reach 111 responses, representing a 40 percent response rate, which was informed by initial sample size/ power calculations. The survey was designed to take 25 minutes and the average completion time recorded was 26.4 minutes. Following data cleaning, in which one duplicate college response was removed, the final number of responses was 53 (see Table 1a below). 11 of these responses were secured with the SFCA's support, which helps explains why Sixth Form Colleges and 16-19 Academies were over-represented in our sample relative to their share of overall students (see Table 1b below). Beyond provider type, it is not possible to assess whether responding colleges differed systematically from non-responders. For example, colleges choosing to respond may have been more likely to provide higher-than-average teaching hours. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as potentially subject to non-response bias.

Table 1a - Completed responses by channel of invitation

Channel	Complete responses	Partial responses	Total
NFER	36	7	43
SFCA	10	1	11
EdCo	0	0	0
ETF	0	0	0
Total	46	8	54
Response rate	16.7%	3%	19.6%

Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025

Note: Sample drawn from all providers listed in 2024 KS5 performance table data, removing school sixth forms and institutions that also educate pupils below age 16, leaving 368 post-16 providers. Individual providers were then removed if they taught less than 50 GCSE resit students in maths or English in 2018/19 (after matching in the most recent GCSE resit entry data, which is from that year) and/or they had less than 500 Year 12 students where GCSE resit entry data was missing or suppressed, leaving a total eligible sample of 265 settings. This process was designed to identify all standalone post-16 providers but remove those likely to have very low counts of GCSE resit students. Eligible college groups in KS5 performance data were also broken into their constituent colleges.

Table 1b - Completed responses by provider type, for the survey sample relative to the target population

	Population		Survey sample	
	Freq	%	Freq	%
General FE Colleges	207	75	30	57
Agriculture and Horticulture Colleges	9	3	1	2
Sixth Form Colleges	31	11	13	25
16-19 Academies (Convertors and Sponsor Led)	22	8	9	17
16-19 Free schools	6	2	0	0
Total	275	100	53	100

Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025

The survey data was used to examine changes in post-16 settings' teaching hours over time and to assess the contrast between post-16 settings that responded to new minimum expectations by increasing their teaching hours in 24/25 and those that did not. This informed our assessment of the feasibility of evaluating the causal impact of increased teaching hours on students' GCSE resit outcomes using a QED. The survey data was also combined with the qualitative data from the six college case studies to analyse post-16 settings' GCSE resit practices, as well as their perceptions about the most effective models for improving GCSE resit learners' outcomes.

Due to sample size limitations, when comparing practices and perceptions across provider types, we collapsed the number of provider categories into two; GFECs (which combines the 30 General FE College respondents and 1 Agricultural and Horticulture College respondent) and 'Other' (which combines the 13 Sixth Form College respondents and 9 respondents from 16-19 Academies).

QED design options

In the study plan, we identified two potential QED designs, both utilising Difference-in-Differences (DiD), for evaluating the impact of increased teaching hours on GCSE resit students' outcomes, as summarised below.

Our preferred QED option involved comparing changes in student outcomes between the 2023/24 and 2024/25 academic years in post-16 settings that increased their teaching hours in response to the introduction of minimum expectations, relative to settings that postponed increasing their teaching hours until this became a condition of funding in 2025/26, after removing settings which were already delivering the minimum hours prior to 2024/25.

As a contingency option, we also identified a retrospective Difference-in-Differences design with multiple time points, which used the historic teaching hours data collected from post-16 settings via the survey, and which would be based on the approaches described by either Callaway and Sant'Anna (2020) or Wooldridge (2021). Unlike the main QED design, this approach could have been feasible if most post-16 settings were already meeting the minimum teaching hour thresholds prior to 2024/25.

Assessing the feasibility of the QED design options

We assessed the feasibility of our two QED designs by answering the following questions:

- **Assessing contrast**: What proportion of post-16 settings increased their teaching hours between 2023/24 and 24/25? How did this compare for maths and English?
- **Quantifying the number of post-16 settings in the 'treatment' group**: Amongst post-16 settings that did increase their teaching hours, what proportion indicated they increased their teaching hours from below the minimum threshold in 2023/24 to above it in 2024/25? How did this compare for maths and English?
- **Quantifying the number of post-16 settings in the 'comparison' group**: Amongst post-16 settings that didn't increase their teaching hours, what proportion delivered fewer than the minimum threshold number of teaching hours in both 2023/24 and 24/25? How did this compare for maths and English?
- **Statistical power calculations**: Have we collected data from enough treatment and comparison group post-16 settings to detect an effect size of between 0.1 and 0.3 SDs, if an effect exists? How did this compare for maths and English?
- **Assessing teaching hour stability in the pre-treatment period**: Were teaching hours relatively stable before 2023/24 in treatment and comparison group post-16 settings? How did this compare for maths and English?

For our preferred option to be feasible, we were looking for:

- Sufficient post-16 settings to have responded to the survey and provided teaching hours data.
- Sufficient proportions of post-16 settings in both the treatment group and the comparison group.
- Our power calculations to suggest we should be able to detect a minimum relevant effect size of settings increasing their teaching hours, where an effect exists.
- Most post-16 settings to have *not* already been delivering, prior to 2024/25, the number of hours which was communicated by DfE as a minimum expectation from 2024/25.
- Stable teaching hours amongst treatment and comparison group post-16 settings in the period leading up to the introduction of minimum teaching hour expectations.

For our contingency option to be feasible, we were looking for:

- Sufficient post-16 settings to have responded to the survey and provided historic data on the teaching hours they delivered in years prior to 2024/25.
- A large share of post-16 settings in the sample to have been already delivering, prior to 2024/25, minimum teaching hours expectations, but some settings to have never met these minimum thresholds.
- Sufficient proportions, in each year, of post-16 settings that increased their teaching hours and post-16 settings who continued offering a lower number of hours.
- Clear timepoints when post-16 settings increased their teaching hours, but period of relatively stable teaching hours in the pre- and post-treatment periods.

Findings

In this section, we present our findings in two parts. The first summarises differences in post-16 settings' teaching hours and our assessment of the feasibility of the two QED designs described in the previous section. The second part describes the variation in post-16 settings' approaches, practices and perceptions, relating these back to the IPE RQs. Findings are grouped by research question within each of the two parts.

Differences in post-16 settings' teaching hours and QED feasibility

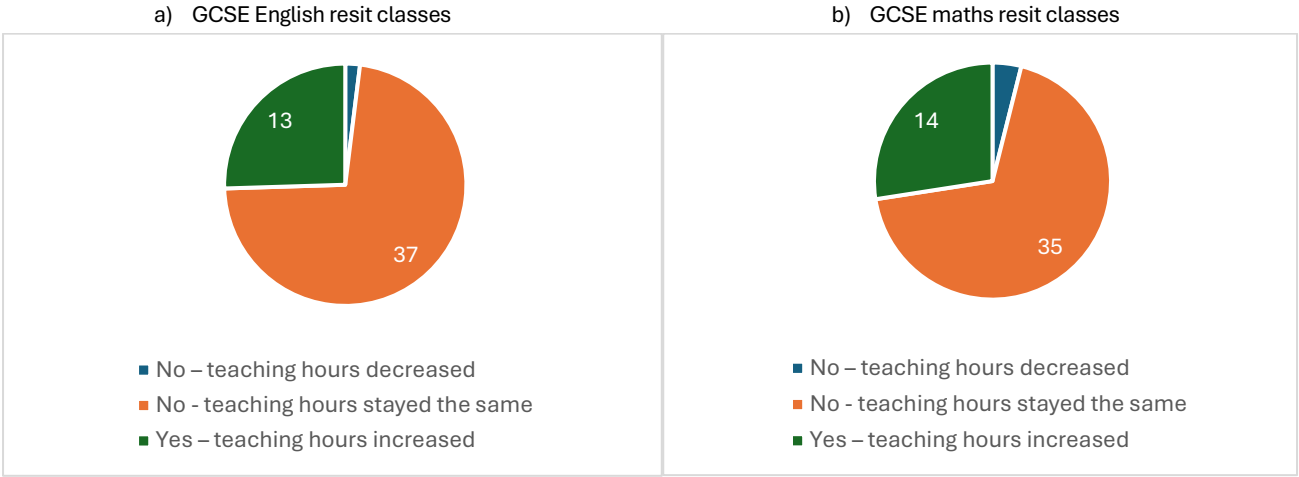
First, we report findings assessing the feasibility of answering RQ1 using one of the two QED designs described earlier in the report (see 'QED design options').

RQ1. What is the impact on the maths and English GCSE outcomes of learners aged 16 to 19 of post-16 settings' responses to the Education and Skills Funding Agency's (ESFA's) requirement that, from the academic year 2024 to 2025, students resitting maths and English GCSEs should study for a minimum number of hours per week?

Assessing contrast

We asked post-16 settings, '*Did the total teaching hours for GCSE resit students at your college increase between 2023/24 and 2024/25?*' As shown in Figure 2 below, around a quarter (n=13 for English and n=14 for maths) of settings indicated they had increased their teaching hours, but over two-thirds (n=37 for English and n=35 for maths) said that their hours had stayed the same (and one/two settings reported a decrease in English/maths respectively). This suggests that the introduction of minimum teaching hour expectations led to relatively limited divergence in teaching hours across the settings in our sample in 2024/25, constraining our ability to detect the impact of this change.

Figure 2 – Changes in teaching hours between the 2023-24 and 2024-25 academic years

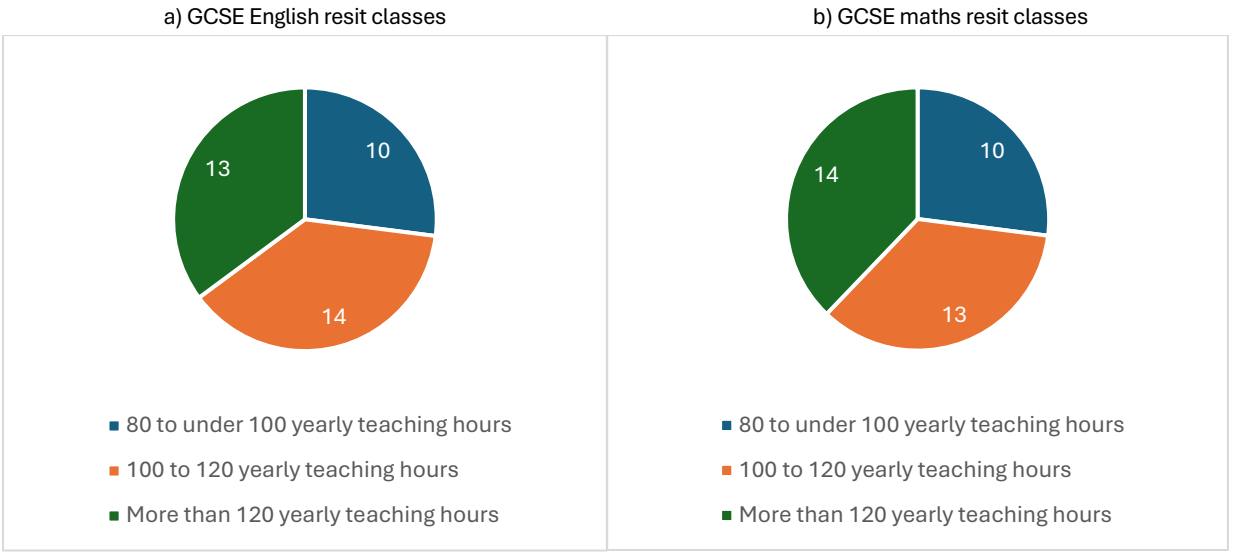


Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Q5. Did the total teaching hours for GCSE resit students at your college increase between 2023-24 and 2024-25?
Note: N=51 (Note two of the 53 post-16 settings that responded to the survey did not answer this question).

Most of the post-16 settings which did not increase their GCSE resit teaching hours in response to the new expectations were already meeting the minimum thresholds, as shown in Figure 3 below. 27 of the 37 settings that did not increase their teaching hours in 2024/25 were already delivering 100+ hours in maths (Figure 3a) / English

(Figure 3b) the previous year. This suggests that the change in policy guidance had no effect on the teaching hours offered by half of our college sample, who were already delivering the minimum hours and did not change the number of hours they offered thereafter.

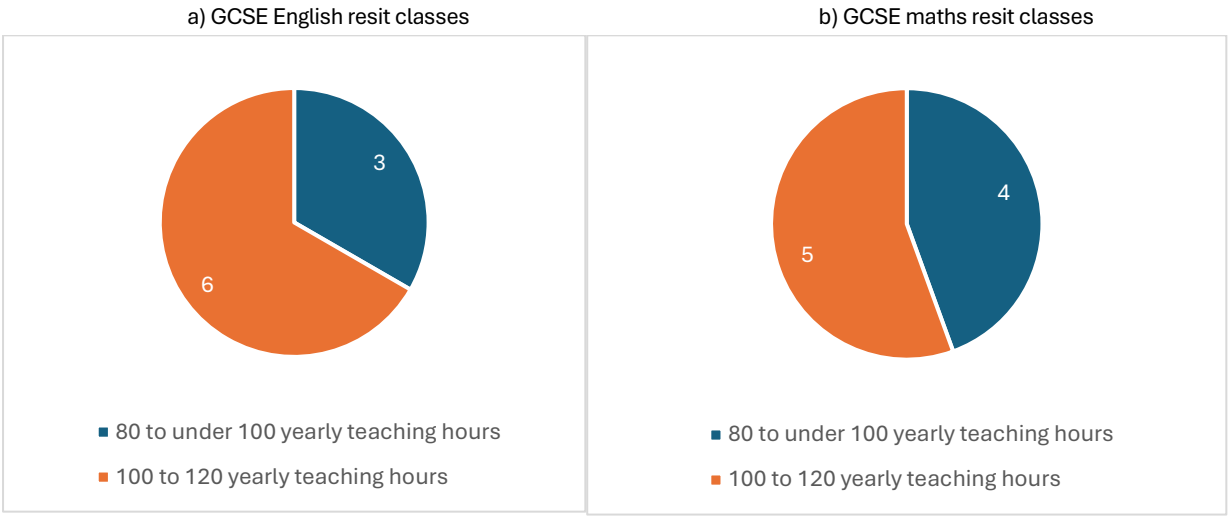
Figure 3 - Teaching hours offered to students in 2023/24, amongst those post-16 settings who did not increase their teaching hours between 23/24 and 24/25



Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Q3. How many teaching hours have you delivered, on average, to previous cohorts of English and maths GCSE resit students?
Note: N=37

Positively, survey data suggests that the policy change influenced the intentions of post-16 settings that were not delivering the minimum hours in 2023/24 and who did not increase their teaching hours in 2024/25, as shown in Figure 4 below. Among this group of 9 settings, most (6 for English and 5 for maths) indicated that they planned to increase their hours to meet the minimum expectations in 2025/26, when compliance was formally monitored. This reflects a positive, but delayed, response to the policy. However, because relatively few post-16 settings increased their teaching hours in 2024/25, our ability to detect a measurable impact of the revised guidance is constrained. Furthermore, some settings (3 for English and 4 for maths) that remained below the minimum thresholds in 2024/25 indicated they had no intention of meeting the expectations in 2025/26, despite compliance being monitored and a condition of funding from that time.

Figure 4 – Planned teaching hours for 25/26, amongst post-16 settings that did not increase their hours between 23/24 and 24/25 and who did not meet the minimum thresholds in 24/25

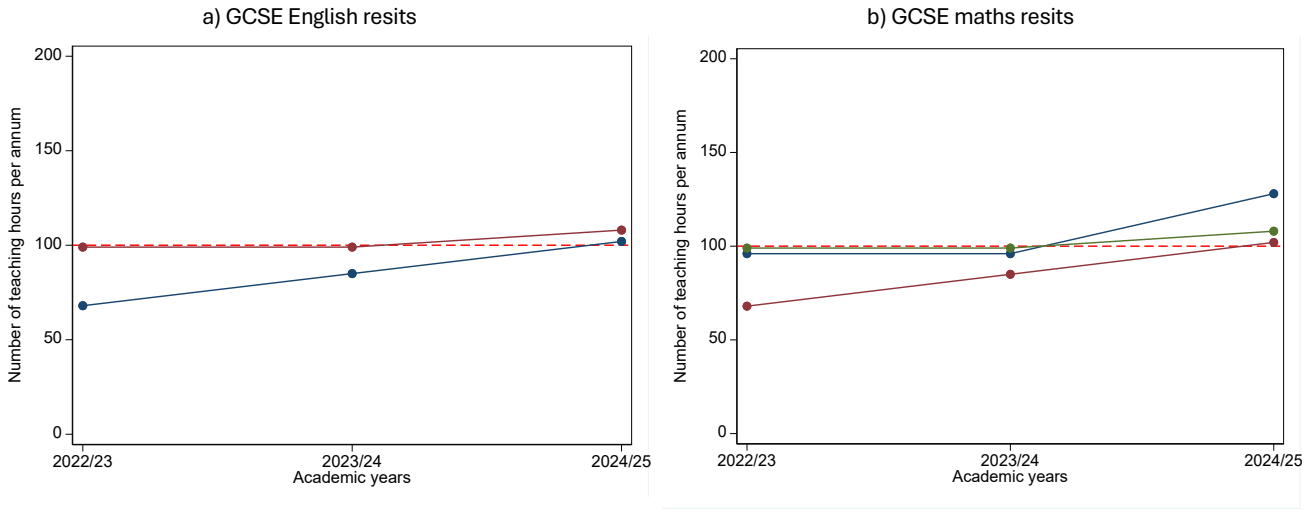


Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Q2. In the 2025-26 academic year, how many teaching hours are you planning to deliver to English and maths GCSE resit students?
Note: N=9

Quantifying the number of post-16 settings in the 'treatment' group

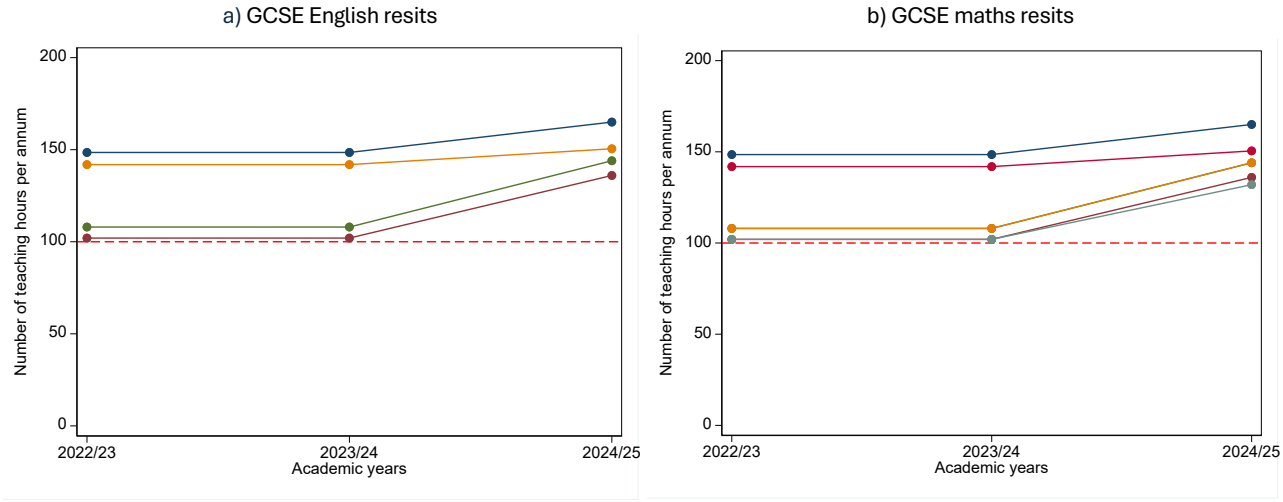
Around a quarter of the 53 post-16 settings in our sample (13 for English and 14 for maths) indicated they increased their teaching hours in 2024/25, but not all of these settings reported increasing their hours from below the minimum expectations to above them. Three of the settings that indicated they had increased their English / maths teaching hours in 24/25 reported offering the same number of teaching hours in 23/24 and 24/25. A further share who increased their teaching hours between 2023-24 and 2024-25 indicated they were already delivering the minimum expectations prior to 2023/24 (four settings for English and six for maths, as shown in Figure 6 below), and others indicated that they had increased their teaching hours in 24/25 but not up to or above the minimum thresholds (four for both English and maths, shown in Figure 7 below). This left very few settings (two for English and three for maths) in our 'treated' group (see Figure 5) - defined as those post-16 settings that increased their teaching hours from below the minimum expectations in 23/24 to above these thresholds in 24/25 – which severely constrains our ability to detect an impact of settings' response to the policy change.

Figure 5 – GCSE resit teaching hours offered in English and maths, among post-16 settings who increased their GCSE resit teaching hours from below the minimum thresholds in 2023/24 to above these expectations in 24/25



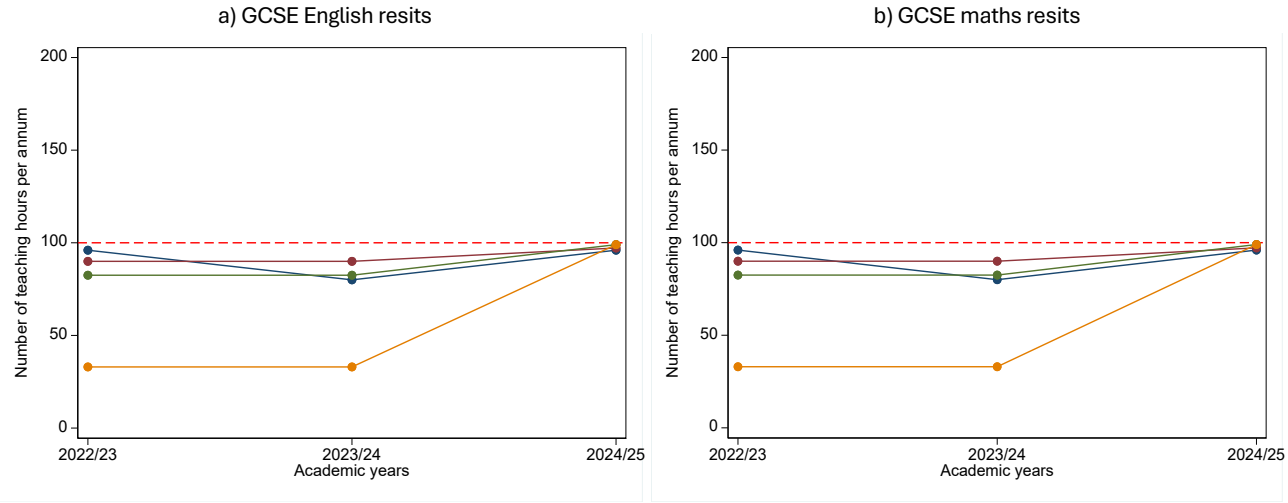
Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Note: For English, only two post-16 settings fulfil these criteria. In maths, three post-16 settings fulfil these criteria

Figure 6 - GCSE resit teaching hours offered in English and maths, among post-16 settings who increased their GCSE resit teaching hours in 24/25 but were already meeting minimum thresholds beforehand



Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Note: For English, only four post-16 settings fulfil these criteria. In maths, six post-16 settings fulfil these criteria.

Figure 7 - GCSE resit teaching hours offered in English and maths, among post-16 settings who increased their teaching hours in 24/25 but not up to the minimum expectations



Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Note: For English, only four post-16 settings fulfil these criteria. In maths, four post-16 settings fulfil these criteria.

Quantifying the number of post-16 settings in the 'comparison' group

Over two-thirds of the post-16 settings in our sample[5] (37 out of 49 for English, and 36 out of 49 for maths) said they hadn't increased their teaching hours in 2024/25, but not all these settings delivered fewer than the minimum expected hours in both 23/24 and 24/25, a necessary condition for us to classify them to the 'comparison' group. Only 12 settings for English and 11 for maths met these conditions. The remainder either delivered consistently more than the minimum thresholds in both years, or they inconsistently reported more teaching hours for 24/25 than 2023/24 despite saying that they had not increased their hours between these two time points.

Power calculations

The methodological literature on statistical power and minimum detectable effects in QED design involving difference-in-differences estimation is relatively underdeveloped, with far less applied guidance available than for experimental designs. Therefore, we adopted two different approaches to assessing whether the numbers of 'treated' and 'comparison' group post-16 settings in our sample might be sufficient to detect an effect of settings' increasing their teaching hours in response to the policy change.

In the first approach, we estimated the required number of clusters (i.e. post-16 settings) to detect a range of minimum detectable effect sizes (MDES), for a two-level Cluster Randomised Assignment (CRA) design, given design parameters and assumed variance structure. This approximates DiD regression estimation where outcomes are measured at the student level, but allocation to the treatment or comparison group is at the college level. We estimated the required number of clusters based on the following parameters:

- 14% of clusters receiving the treatment for English / 21% receiving treatment for maths – based on post-16 settings' responses to our survey
- 680 GCSE resit students on average per college for English / 730 for Maths – based on post-16 settings' responses to our survey

[5] 49 of 53 post-16 settings reported teaching hours for both 23/24 and 24/25 for English and maths.

- An intra-cluster correlation coefficient between 0.1 and 0.3 – this is likely to be relatively low given post-16 settings' average size and the lack of overt/covert selection happening

- Covariance (the proportion of post-intervention variance in GCSE grades explained by covariates, including Y11 GCSE grades) of between 0.5 and 0.8 – the top of this range is perhaps more realistic given GCSE resit students are sitting similar tests of the same skills and knowledge, typically 6-12 months apart

- Alpha (false positive rate) of 0.05

- Minimum Detectable Effect Size (MDES) of between 0.1 and 0.3

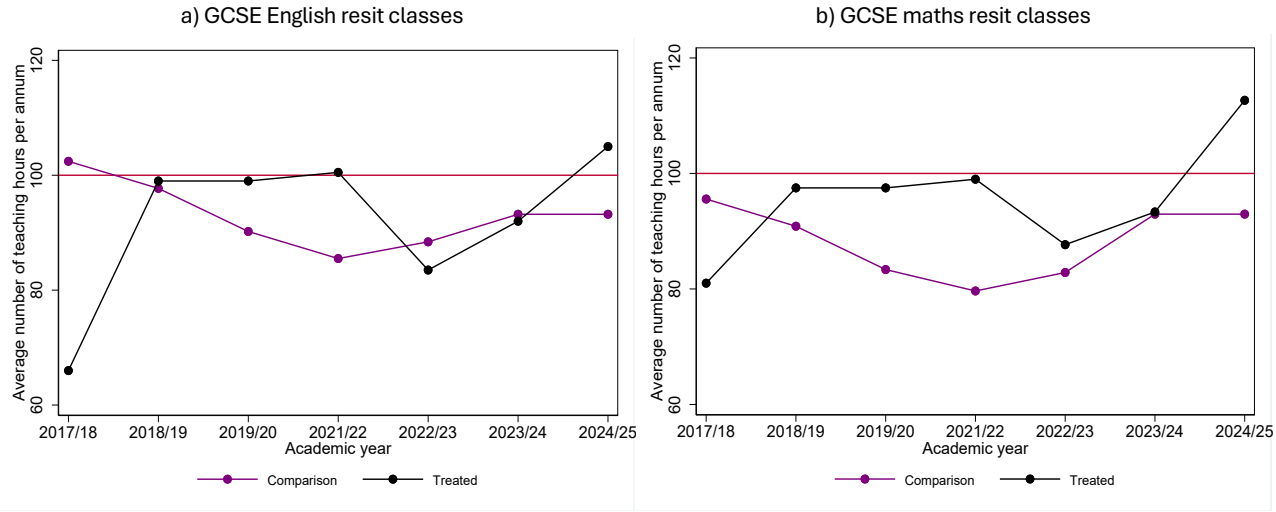
The estimated number of clusters required varied depending on the above parameters but was never less than 26 clusters (see Appendix 2), which suggests that we do not have teaching hours data from enough treatment and comparison group post-16 settings in our survey sample to detect an effect size of 0.3 SDs, even in the most optimistic of modelled scenarios.

In the second approach, we ran Monte Carlo simulations (as set out in the Study Plan) to assess the likelihood of detecting an effect, where one exists, using difference-in-difference estimation, using the same assumptions as in the first approach. For each iteration of each simulation, we generated a dataset where the effects of treatment were significantly positive, then we estimated the model to test the null hypothesis (i.e. that there is no effect) before identifying whether we were able to identify a significant effect or not. We determined whether the power of our estimation would exceed 80% in each scenario, to assess the likelihood of detecting a significant effect in the final sample. Whilst the results of this second approach were more encouraging, our assessment of teaching hour stability in the pre-treatment period compounded our concerns about sample sizes (see below), resulting in the conclusion that a QED is unlikely to be feasible, regardless of precise estimates of required sample sizes.

Assessing teaching hours stability in the pre-treatment period

Based on our survey data, only 2-3 (in English and maths, respectively) post-16 settings increased their teaching hours between 2023/24 and 2024/25 from below to above the minimum thresholds, while only 11-12 settings delivered below the minimum threshold in both years. However, examining longer-run trends complicates the picture further. Historic teaching hours data suggests some settings classified to the 'comparison' group increased their hours in the run up to 2023/24 before subsequently plateauing. Conversely, some 'treatment' group settings appear to have been restoring provision to earlier levels rather than increasing the number of hours they had typically delivered in response to the policy change. This raises questions about whether the treatment and comparison settings exhibited similar trends in teaching hours prior to 2023/24, which has implications for interpreting the effects of increasing teaching hours in 24/25 in response to the policy change. Figure 8 illustrates this by presenting average teaching hours in treatment and comparison settings between 2017/18 and 2024/25.

Figure 8 - Average teaching hours amongst post-16 settings classified to the 'treatment' and 'comparison' groups, between 2017/18 and 2024/25



Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Note: For English, the number of post-16 settings in the treated group is 2, and the number of post-16 settings in the comparison group is 12. For maths, it is 3 and 11, respectively.

Assessing the feasibility of the contingency QED option

To assess the feasibility of our contingency QED options, we examine the historical teaching-hours data shared by the 53 post-16 settings in our sample and answer the two questions below.

1. **Assessing contrast**: What proportion of post-16 settings increased their teaching hours at some point between 2017/18 and 24/25? How did this compare for maths and English?

2. **Assessing teaching hour stability in the pre- and post-treatment period**: Amongst those post-16 settings that increased their teaching hours at some point between 2017/18 and 2024/25, were their teaching hours relatively stable in the periods before and after this? How did this compare for maths and English?

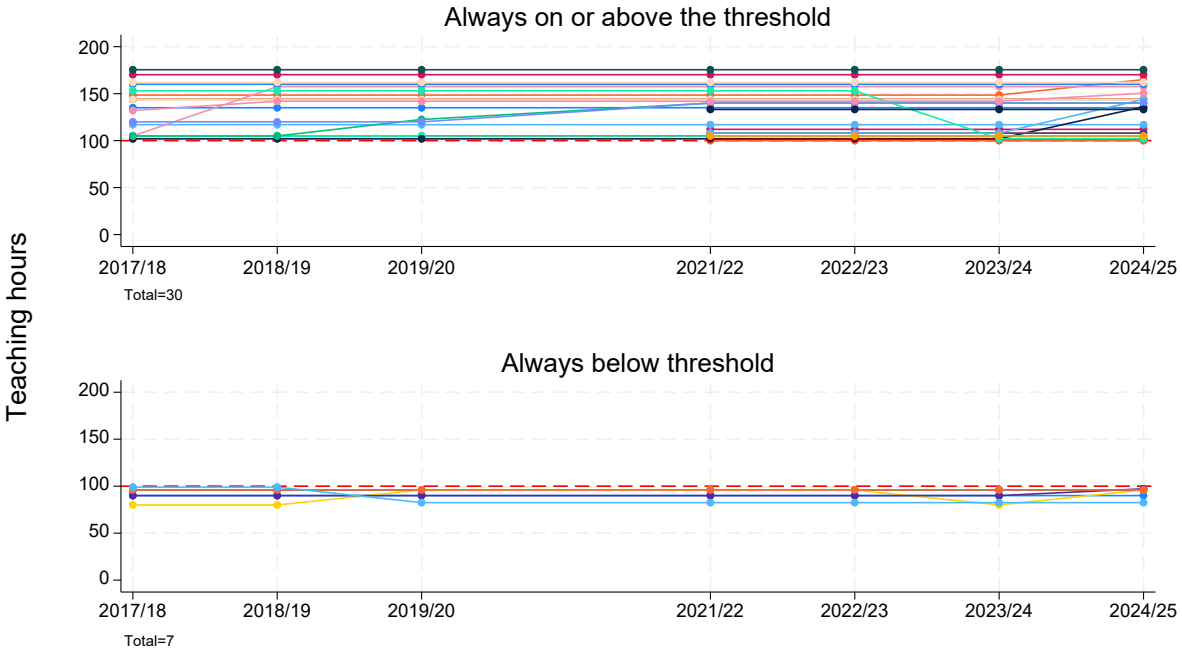
Given the answers to these two questions, and the results presented above for the main QED design, we did not go further and quantify the number of post-16 settings that could be assigned to the treatment and comparison conditions or assess whether our analyses would be sufficiently powered for the contingency QED design.

Assessing contrast

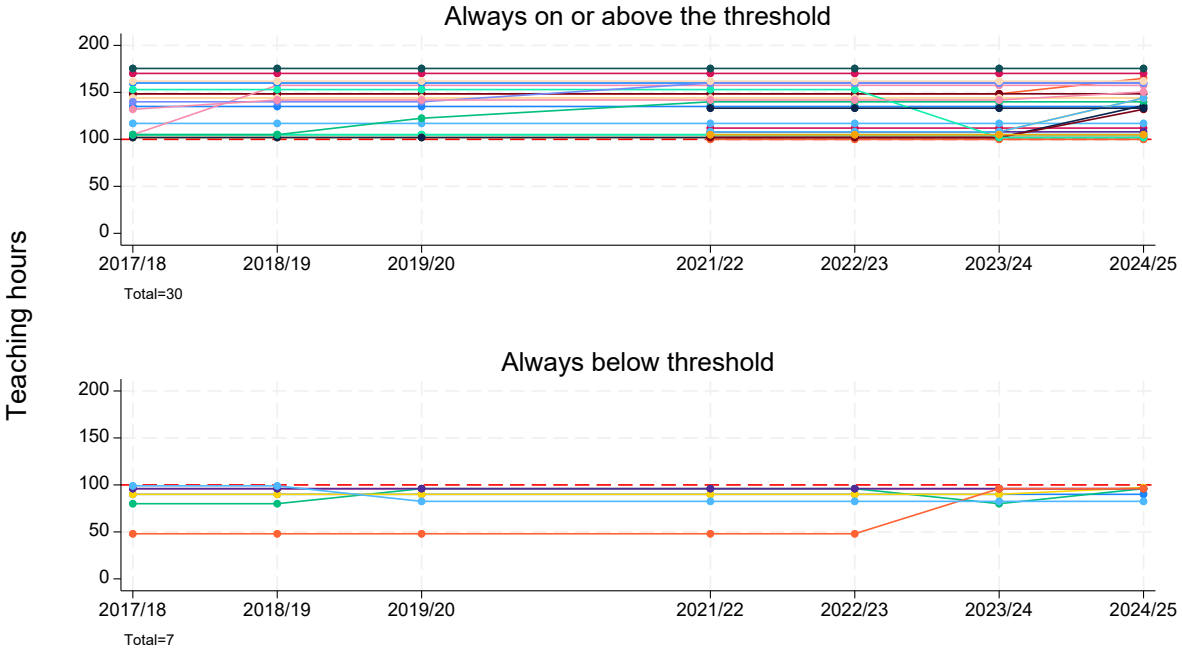
Historic teaching hours data suggests that most post-16 settings have delivered a consistent number of hours every year in our time series, with 30 of the 53 settings in our sample having consistently delivered more than the number of hours specified as a minimum threshold for 2024/25 onwards, and 7 have delivered consistently less. These figures are the same for maths and English, as shown in Figure 9 below. Relatively few settings (six for English and seven for maths) increased their teaching hours from on or below 100 hours per annum to above 100 hours at some point in our time series.

Figure 9 - Teaching hours, by year, delivered by post-16 settings which consistently offered on or above 100 hours per annum, or who consistently offered fewer than 100 hours

a) GCSE English resit classes



b) GCSE maths resit classes

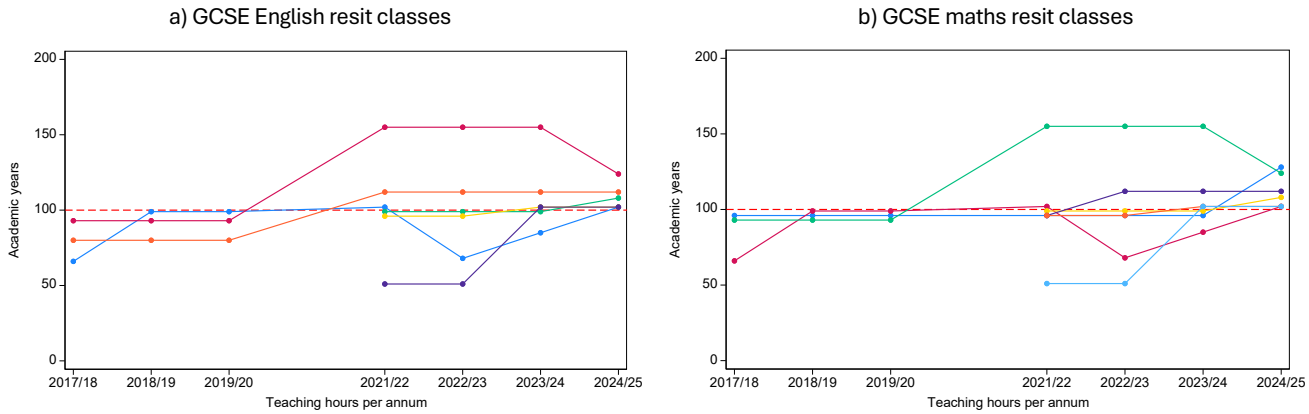


Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Note: N=37 for English and N=37 for maths

Assessing teaching hour stability in the pre- and post-treatment period

Figure 10 below shows that, among those few post-16 settings (six for English and seven for maths) that did increase their hours from on or less than 100 hours per annum to more than 100 hours between any two years in our time series, their hours were typically unstable before and afterwards. Stable pre- and post-treatment periods are not evident, making it challenging to interpret the effects of post-16 settings increasing their teaching hours in any given year.

Figure 10 - Teaching hours, by year, delivered by post-16 settings that increased their teaching hours from fewer to more than 100 hours per annum



A further 3 post-16 settings decreased their teaching hours between any two years in our time series, from on or above 100 hours per annum to fewer than 100 hours per annum (in both maths and English).

Conclusion on QED feasibility

Based on the results presented in this section, we conclude that neither the main nor contingency QED design is feasible, for two main reasons:

1. **We do not have teaching hours data from a large enough sample of post-16 settings to be confident of detecting the effects of increasing teaching hours in response to the policy change.** This is due to a combination of:
    - The modest survey sample size we achieved.
    - The lack of divergence in teaching hours across our college sample in 2024/25 created by the introduction, for the first time, of minimum teaching expectations.
    - The fact that most of the post-16 settings which increased their teaching hours between 2023/24 and 2024/25 indicated they were either already meeting minimum thresholds prior to 2023/24, or they did not increase their teaching hours up to or above the minimum thresholds specified.

2. **Most post-16 settings have not changed their teaching hours since 2017/18, whilst those settings that have increased their teaching hours at some point have tended to fluctuate their teaching hours year-on-year.** This constrains our scope to compare post-16 settings that have increased their teaching hours with those that have not and complicates the identification of stable pre- and post-treatment periods, and therefore also the interpretation of the effects of increasing teaching hours in any given year.

RQ2. What is the impact of increases in teaching hours - which result from the government guidance - on the maths and/or English GCSE resit pass rates and grades of disadvantaged 16-to-19-year-olds (subgroup analysis)?

Unfortunately, the scoping phase suggests that a causal evaluation of the impact of teaching time increases on student outcomes is unlikely to be feasible, which prevents us answering RQ2 above. However, as shown in the next section, our survey and case study data do shed light on the substantial variation in how post-16 settings organise and deliver GCSE resits. Further research, after linking our survey data to administrative data, is needed to examine how settings' approaches relate to differences in their student outcomes.

IPE research questions: findings from the survey and interviews

This section presents the survey and interview findings, focusing on: (i) teaching hours and the perceived benefits, costs and trade-offs of increased teaching hours; and (ii) related institutional decisions on enrolment, curriculum design, staffing, organisation, and the provision of additional student support, which are likely to interact with teaching hours to impact learner outcomes (see Appendix 1: Theory of Change). Differences in choices across provider types should be interpreted with respect to how student profiles vary across these provider types, given that a substantial share of the variation in resit outcomes reflects differences in the composition of settings' student intakes (for a fuller discussion see Maris and Robinson, 2025) .

Teaching hours and the perceived benefits, costs and trade-offs of increased teaching hours

Teaching hours

As described in the previous section, most post-16 settings in our survey sample did not increase their teaching hours in response to the new expectations announced in 2024. Responses from interviewees were, however, more evenly balanced; some settings reported they had not changed, and did not plan to change, weekly teaching hours in response to new guidance, but others reported they had increased teaching hours, either within scope of the policy change (standalone, whole-class, in person teaching) or sometimes by providing additional group-based support outside regular lessons. One setting offered 1–2 extra hours per week in maths during the final term to help students working at a high Grade 3 to achieve a Grade 4 in their exams. Another provided targeted interventions during holidays, and still others ran optional drop-in workshops over half-term. One setting offered early morning sessions, although they felt these were perceived by students as 'punishment', and another setting was considering offering twilight or early morning sessions. One setting also reported that students who switched from part-time to full-time learning during the year would still receive 100 hours of teaching through 'uplift sessions' delivered by academic coaches, initially funded by the Covid-19 catch-up scheme and later through a mix of internal budgets and external funding.

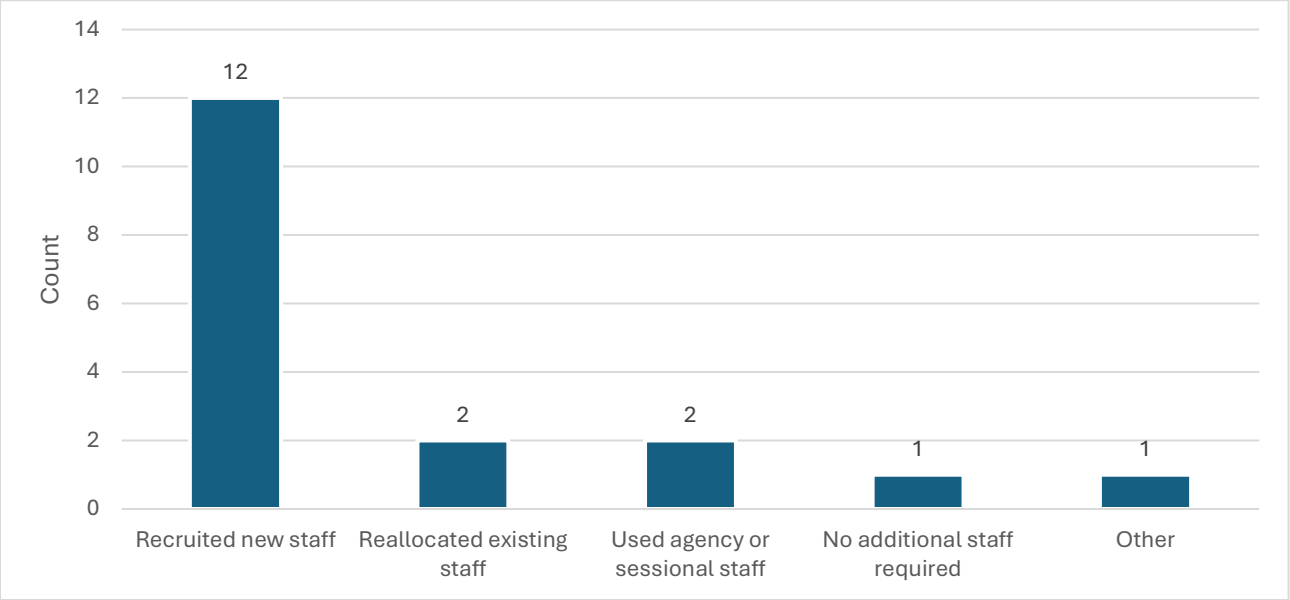
Some settings were also considering offering more targeted support to certain groups of pupils. For example, one setting was planning to offer one extra hour of resit lessons per subject per week to students with SEND and those in selected vocational areas, based on identified needs.

The costs of increasing teaching hours for GCSE English and/or maths resits

While most post-16 settings in our survey sample did not increase their teaching hours in response to the introduction of minimum expectations, a notable minority did, and an even larger proportion indicated that they planned to increase their teaching hours in 2025/26, when compliance monitoring was set to begin. It is important to understand the investment made by those settings when increasing their teaching hours.

Among all post-16 settings that reported increasing teaching hours for GCSE English and/or maths resits between 2023/24 and 2024/25, regardless of whether they were already meeting the minimum threshold, the vast majority reported recruiting new staff (Figure 15). Some also indicated that they had reallocated existing staff and/or used sessional staff. Only one college reported that they had not required any additional staffing. However, investigating differences by provider type, we see that all of the settings in our sample who recruited new staff or used agency/sessional staff were GFECs, whereas SFCs and 16-19 Academies suggested they had been able to reallocate existing staff or that no additional staff were required.

Figure 11 - How post-16 settings staffed increases in teaching hours between 2023/24 and 2024/25



Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Q10. How did your college staff the increase in teaching hours for 2024-25?
Note: N=15. Multiple response question, allowing more than one option to be selected. This question was only posed to post-16 settings whose total teaching hours for GCSE resit students increased between 2023-24 and 2024-25 for English and/or maths.

Among the 15 post-16 settings that increased their teaching hours for GCSE English and/or maths resits in 2024-25, 11 provided data on the additional costs they had incurred. The median additional investment in staffing amongst these post-16 settings was £80,000. Of the 11 settings:

- Three did so without incurring any additional staffing costs.
- Five reported staffing costs between £50,000 and £100,000.
- Three reported staffing costs exceeding £100,000.

Some settings that suggested they had avoided additional costs by reallocating staff from elsewhere indicated, via qualitative comments, that this was achieved by diverting staff away from elective vocational subjects.

While staffing represented the primary area of additional expenditure, most of the 11 post-16 settings that reported cost data suggested modest investments in materials or resources such as textbooks, worksheets, or online platforms (median spend £300). Only a small number of settings reported any additional costs related to room hire or facilities, and just three settings indicated incurring other types of costs.

One curriculum director reported that government guidance on hours was decisive in prompting their college to increase provision from two to three hours per subject per week, despite the setting's financial constraints. However, while this had helped the setting to increase teaching hours to closer to 100 hours annually, they had been unable to afford (and to recruit) the three extra maths staff they had wanted to deliver these hours.

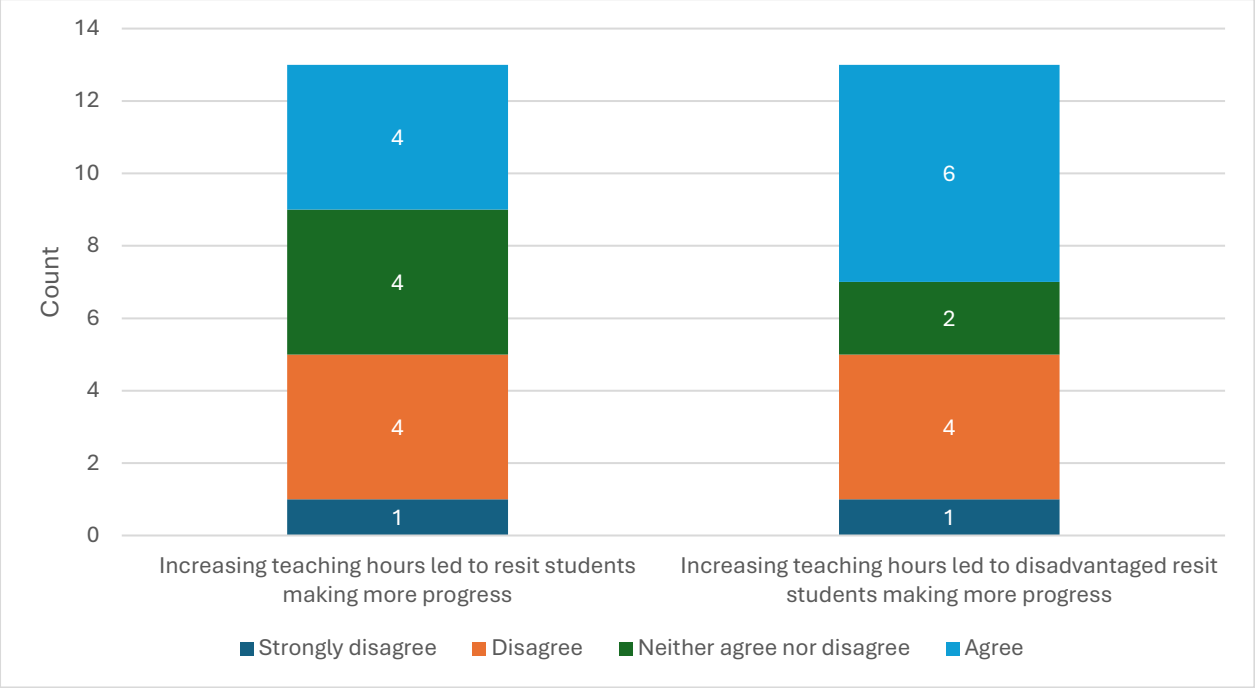
Several other settings reported being unable to fully meet the new minimum teaching hour guidelines because of financial and staffing pressures. One setting suggested they could not afford to recruit additional English and maths teachers to deliver the increased hours, and a maths curriculum director at another college described offering four hours per subject to all students as 'prohibitive' because it would require an additional teacher for each subject. Instead, the setting operated below the recommended hours, providing up to two extra hours per week to selected

students identified through mock exams as having the potential to move from a high Grade 3 to a strong Grade 4. Due to staffing constraints, this targeted support was offered in maths only.

The perceived impacts on students of increasing teaching hours

Among the post-16 settings that increased their teaching hours for GCSE English and/or maths resits in 2024-25, views were mixed on whether the investment had a meaningful impact on student progress (see Figure 16). Five respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the additional hours had led to improved student progress, compared to four who agreed, and four who neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 12 - Post-16 settings views on whether increasing teaching hours in 2024-25 led to better progress being made by students in general, and by disadvantaged students specifically

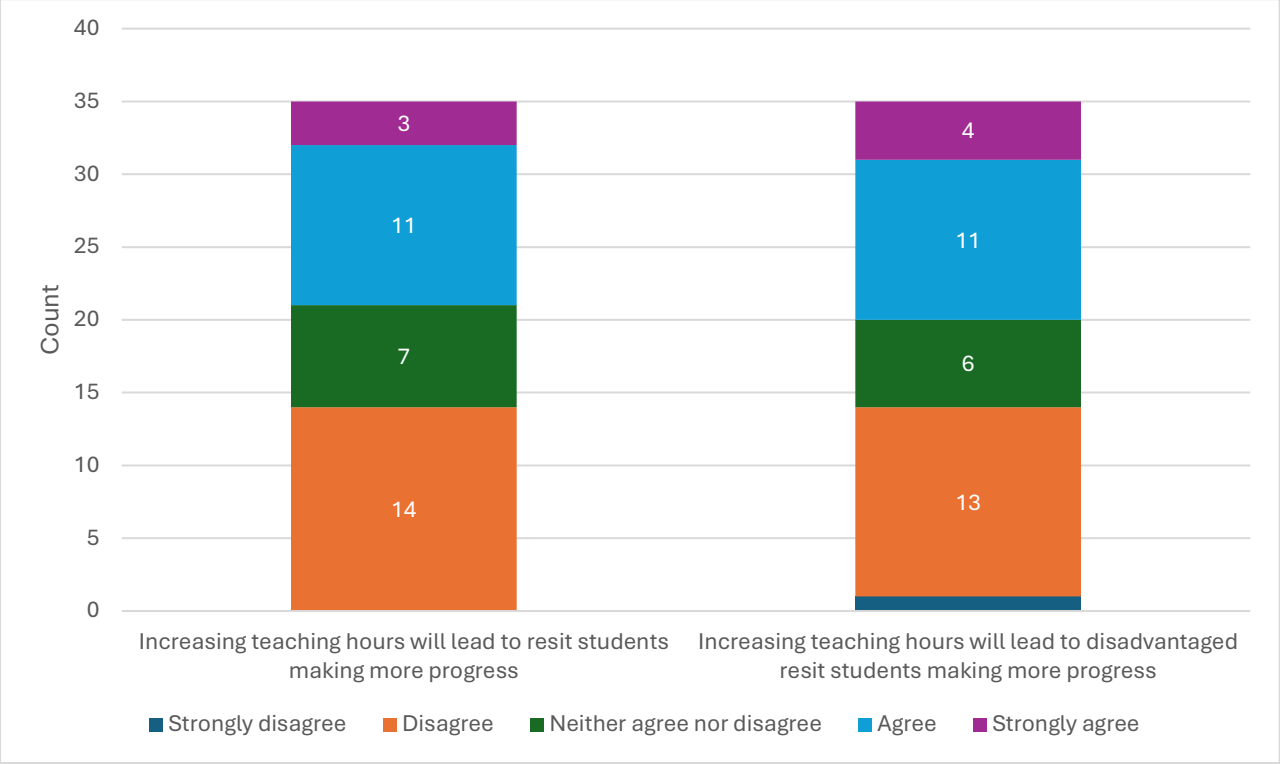


Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Q12. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Note: N=13. This question was only posed to post-16 settings whose total teaching hours for GCSE resit students increased between 2023-24 and 2024-25 for English and/or maths. 'Disadvantage' was defined as students facing greater social or economic barriers or who have learning difficulties or disabilities.

When asked about the impact of increased teaching hours on disadvantaged students, nearly half (n=6) agreed that disadvantaged resit students had made more progress as a result of the increase in teaching hours, while five disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Post-16 settings that had not increased their teaching hours expressed similarly mixed views when asked about the likely impact of doing so. Their perspectives largely mirrored those of settings that had implemented the change. Among these post-16 settings, 14 of 35 post-16 settings agreed or strongly agreed that increasing teaching hours would lead to better outcomes, while 14 disagreed (and the remainder were neutral). Perceptions were broadly consistent when considering all students and disadvantaged students specifically.

Figure 13 - Relationship between teaching hours and student progress, according to post-16 settings that did not increase teaching hours for GCSE English and/or maths resits between 2023-24 and 2024-25



Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Q15. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Note: N=35. Question posed only to those post-16 settings that did not increase total teaching hours for GCSE English and/or maths resits between 2023/24 and 2024/25. 'TH' refers to teaching hours. 'Disadvantage' was defined as students facing greater social or economic barriers or who have learning difficulties or disabilities.

In response to an open survey question, some post-16 settings elaborated on why they felt the increase in teaching hours had a negative rather than positive effect.

Several reported that extending the length of individual lessons led to student fatigue: *'The lessons were increased from 2.5 hours to 3 hours... Fatigue meant little extra learning was able to be done in the extra half an hour'*. Others noted that the change exacerbated existing resourcing challenges, particularly where post-16 settings struggled to staff the additional hours or faced constraints around room availability. A few settings even reported diverting time away from staff development activities to accommodate the increased teaching load: '*We have had to reduce the amount of time staff teaching these areas have to complete staff development... this may lead to a decrease in quality of teaching across multiple years.*'

Some respondents felt that the additional hours were demotivating for students, especially those who were required to spend more time on subjects they already found difficult or unenjoyable. Others highlighted that the increase in resit hours had reduced the time available for vocational programmes, which they viewed as an unintended but significant consequence. A small number of settings also felt that the increased focus on resits contributed to heightened anxiety among students, for example one college leader commented: '*For the majority this will not help and only increase their anxiety*'.

Conversely, some post-16 settings described positive effects. For example, increasing the length of lessons was said to improve students' stamina and resilience. Others believed the additional hours had directly benefited students' learning and outcomes.

However, more often than not, post-16 settings reported a mix of positive and negative effects. Some noted that the impact varied between students within the same class; whilst some learners appeared to benefit, others experienced increased anxiety or disengagement. A number of settings were uncertain about the overall impact, suggesting it was too early to tell or that the effects were inconclusive.

Several post-16 settings also emphasised that the way teaching hours were timetabled was more important than the total number of hours delivered. Some reported that, due to timetabling constraints, they had to schedule twilight sessions or deliver lessons outside of term time in order to meet the new expectations. Others noted that delivering three hours per week across the academic year amounted to 96 hours, just short of the 100-hour minimum threshold, highlighting the practical challenges of aligning provision with policy requirements.

These findings support the ToC assumption that additional teaching time is most likely to improve outcomes where it creates more high-quality learning opportunities, rather than where it simply increases the volume of timetabled provision.

Related institutional decisions on enrolment, curriculum design, staffing, organisation, and the provision of additional student support

RQ3. How do institutional factors, such as class size and composition, and teacher subject and pedagogical expertise, influence maths and English resit outcomes, and how are the effects of these factors moderated by post-16 settings' choices about teaching hours?

Post-16 settings' survey responses and interviews with high- and low-performing settings highlight variability in how they manage and deliver GCSE resits, including their enrolment decisions, when they enter students for exams, class sizes, student grouping, and curriculum approaches. Settings were surveyed about these factors because they were expected to interact with their choices relating to teaching hours. Case study evidence gathered early in the scoping phase reaffirmed that these choices may influence one another and learner outcomes. Informed by the case study evidence, the survey asked about these choices, anticipating the need to examine them as interconnected elements within a wider system of GCSE resit provision.

As reflected in the ToC, these institutional factors were not expected to operate independently. Instead, they were viewed as interconnected choices that could influence how teaching hours are organised, delivered and experienced by learners, and therefore shape the extent to which additional teaching time translates into improved GCSE resit outcomes.

Approaches to enrolment

Under 'condition of funding' rules, students who have not achieved a GCSE grade 4 (or equivalent) in English and/or maths by age 16 are required to continue studying these subjects whilst continuing their 16-19 study programmes in order to remain eligible for funding (*16 to 19 funding: maths and English condition of funding*, 2026). However, students who achieved below a grade 3 at Key Stage 4 can be enrolled on a range of qualifications, including FSQs and other alternatives which do not contribute to main GCSE resit performance measures.

The effects of changes in teaching hours on GCSE resit outcomes may vary depending on post-16 settings' qualification enrolment choices, if the same increase in teaching hours produces different effects for different groups. Here we briefly and broadly describe how settings' enrolment choices vary, but interested readers are signposted to a forthcoming EEF commissioned report by ICF Consulting which explores settings' enrolment choices and the relationship between these choice and student outcomes in much greater detail.

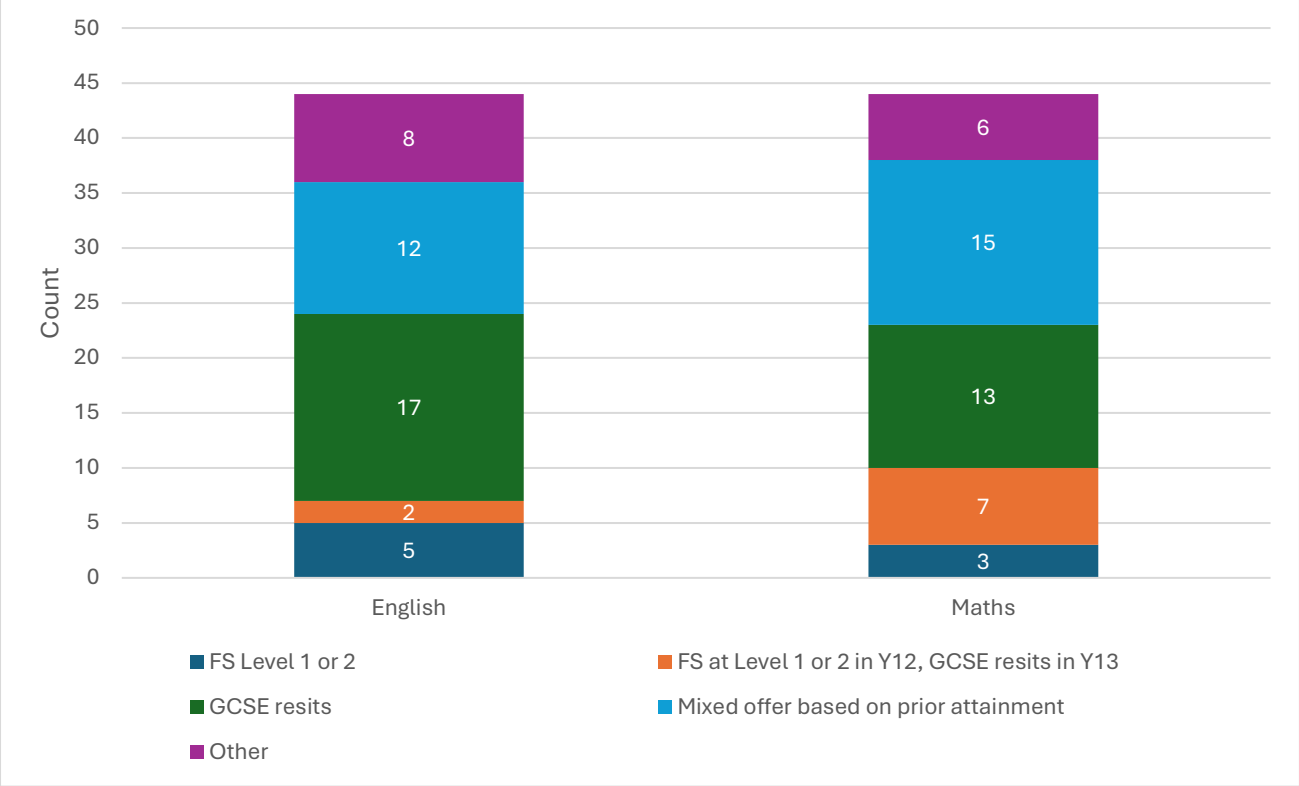
Our survey results suggest that post-16 settings' enrolment decisions vary widely (see Figure 18). These decisions differ not only between English and maths, but also within the same settings over time. Qualitative comments indicated that many settings feel there is tension between funding and accountability incentives to 'blanket enrol' all students on GCSE resits, regardless of what grade they achieved, and their preference for matching students to the qualifications best suited to their needs and capabilities.

Key findings include:

- In English, 17 post-16 settings in our survey sample reported enrolling all students without a grade 3 onto GCSE resits, while 12 offer a mixed model, typically enrolling students with grade 1 or 2 onto FSQs and those with grade 3 onto GCSE resits.

- In maths, the mixed model was more common in our survey sample: 15 post-16 settings reported using this approach, compared to 13 who enrolled all students without a grade 3 onto GCSE resits.

Figure 14 - Qualifications that students are typically enrolled in if they achieved less than a grade 3 in GCSE English and/or maths at the end of Year 11

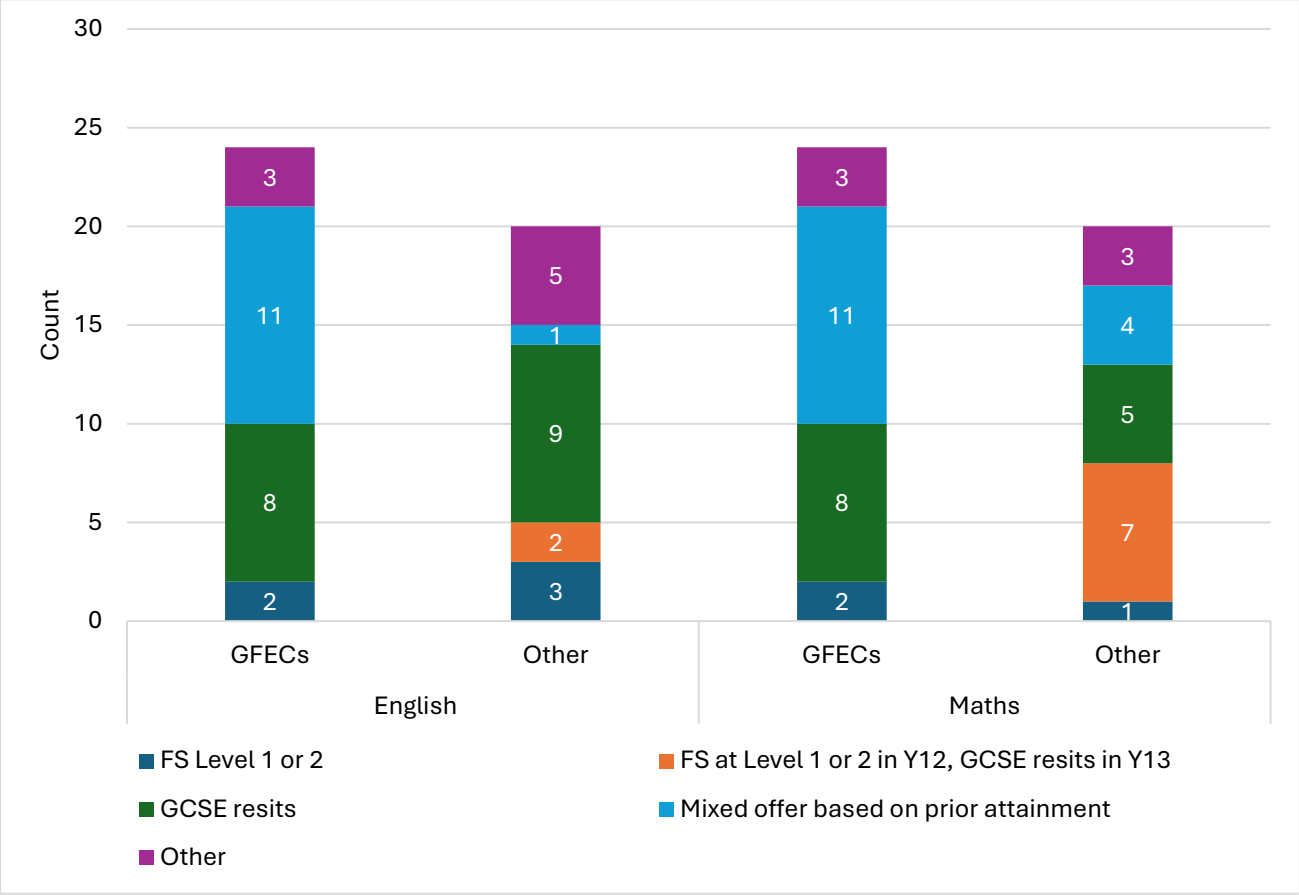


Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Q22. What qualifications do you typically enrol students in if they achieved less than a grade 3 in GCSE English and/or maths at the end of Year 11?
Note: N=44. All post-16 settings were eligible to respond. FS = Functional Skills

However, we should remember that leaders from Sixth Form Colleges and16-19 Academies made up around 40 percent of our survey sample, but nearly 90 percent of resit students attend GFECs, and provider types differ markedly in their qualification enrolment decisions (see Figure 19). GFECs suggested they were more likely to adopt a mixed model based on prior attainment, while SFCs and 16-19 Academies were more likely to apply a single policy to all students. In English, this typically meant enrolling all students onto GCSE resits, while in maths it often involved enrolling students onto FSQs in Year 12 followed by GCSE resits in Year 13. These choices may reflect differences, between provider types, in their resources and the prior attainment and needs of their students. In

practice, analysis of administrative data suggests uptake of level two FSQs is very low, particularly in maths, which would suggest that the majority of students enrolled on FSQs are likely to be on level one FSQs (Maris and Robinson, 2025).

Figure 15 - Qualifications that students are typically enrolled in if they achieved less than a grade 3 in GCSE English and/or maths at the end of Year 11, by provider type



Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Q22. What qualifications do you typically enrol students in if they achieved less than a grade 3 in GCSE English and/or maths at the end of Year 11? All post-16 settings were eligible to respond.
Note: N=24 for GFECs; N=20 for other post-16 settings (SFCs and 16-19 Academies). FS = Functional Skills.

Changes to enrolment qualifications over time

20 out of 44 post-16 settings indicated that they had changed, since 2021-22, the qualifications onto which they enrol students without grade 3s from Year 11. 23 reported they had not changed their enrolment choices (and one did not know).

Post-16 settings that reported making changes to their enrolment decisions elaborated on the nature of these changes and the reasons behind them. Their responses often illustrated the trade-offs they faced between doing what they believed was best for their students and responding to perceived funding and performance table incentives.

- Some post-16 settings reported shifting from non-GCSE qualifications to GCSE resits, citing alignment with accountability measures or a belief that GCSEs offer better long-term outcomes for students: *'Due to value added scores and the difficulty with the FS especially at L2, there is very little reason to enter/enrol students on to alternative quals other than GCSE'*.

- However, others moved in the opposite direction, opting for FSQs or alternative qualifications to better support students with lower prior attainment to gain a qualification: '*For maths… we entered 275 students for FS1… this was highly effective, so we have continued this year'*.

- A few post-16 settings reported switching between different non-GCSE qualifications, often in response to changes in funding eligibility or perceived rigour: '*Last year we used Number and Measure exam, this year we have moved back to Functional Skills Level 1*.'

- Some post-16 settings also reported changing providers or delivery models to better meet student needs or manage costs: '*We have changed functional skills provider for English and have adapted the qualification for EAL students from ESOL to iGCSE'*.

These findings align with insights from the qualitative case studies, which also revealed a wide variety of enrolment strategies and changes over time. For example, some interviewees suggested they generally placed students without Level 3s on FSQs or other similar courses in Year 12, with the expectation that they would subsequently progress onto GCSE resits in Year 13. But, by contrast, some case-study post-16 settings said they automatically enrol all students on GCSE courses regardless of prior attainment, except where students had special education needs (SEND) or low levels of English. Some case study settings described navigating competing pressures, balancing the desire to support students in achieving a qualification with the need to maximise income and perform well in accountability measures.

Timing of entry onto GCSE exams

The timing of exam entry may also influence how many hours of tuition students receive prior to sitting an examination and how those hours are distributed across the academic year. In interviews, post-16 settings indicated that they determined the timing of students' entry for GCSE resit exams (whether in November or May/June) based on prior performance, initial assessments and, in at least one case, discussions held with students at the start of the academic year[6].

Some interviewed settings reported previously entering large numbers of students for November resits in order to reduce cohort sizes for the May/June exams but felt this approach have led to poor outcomes because it had demotivated learners who made little progress in November. As a result, these post-16 settings had shifted to a more targeted model, entering only students with high prior attainment (typically those just below a Grade 4) in November, with other students entered in May/June. However these colleges may be atypical given that other quantitative research suggests there has been a clear and substantial increase in the use of November resits over time, despite a selective approach to November resit delivering better overall attainment (Maris and Robinson, 2025).

Some other interviewed settings indicated more nuanced approaches. For example, one allowed students with lower prior attainment to resit in November if they demonstrated a particularly high level of resilience, with the belief being that the exam experience supported their broader development. Another permitted November resits where parents were willing to cover the cost, although this was reported to have had mixed results.

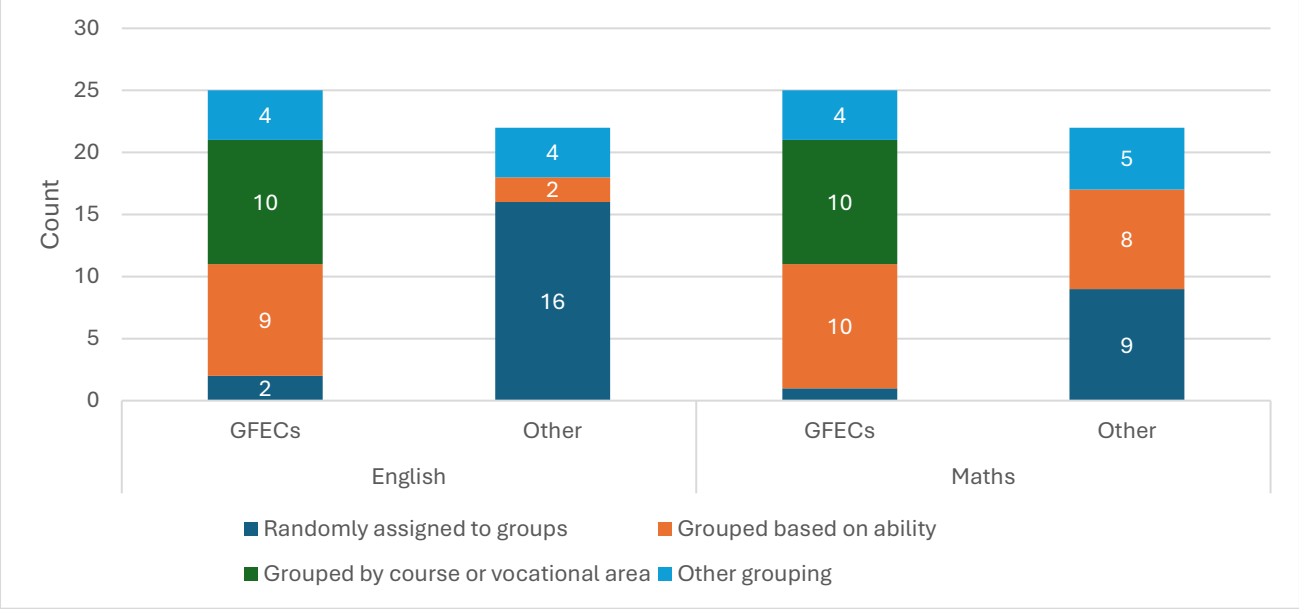
[6] Readers should note that maths and English condition of funding guidance was updated for 2025/26 to include reference to November GCSE resit exam entries. For more detail, see: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/16-to-19-funding-maths-and-english-condition-of-funding/2025-to-2026-academic-year-16-to-19-funding-maths-and-english-condition-of-funding.

Grouping students

Post-16 settings' survey responses suggest they differ in how they group students for GCSE resits. Approaches also vary between provider types and subject areas (see Figure 20).

GFECs were more likely to group students by ability or by vocational area, while other providers (SFCs and 16-19 Academies) were more likely to assign students randomly, particularly in English, where nearly three-quarters (n=16) used random assignment.

Figure 16 - Grouping of students for GCSE resits in 2024-25, by provider type



Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Q28. How did you group students for GCSE resits in 2024-25?
Note: N=47 (N=25 for GFECs; N=22 for SFCs and 16-19 Academies). All post-16 settings were eligible to respond.

In response to an open survey question, one respondent described a nuanced approach:

> *In English, they are first grouped by whether they have sat GCSE before… then randomly assigned. In maths there is a bit of grouping by ability – brighter students might do a November resit… students with [Grade] 2 or below do Functional Skills instead – but mostly the groups are randomly assigned.*

Differences in settings' choices about how to group students (e.g. keeping lower-attaining students together or diverting them to alternative qualifications) may contribute to differences in their outcomes. Interviewees indicated that decisions about grouping were often linked to wider considerations around staffing capacity, teacher expertise and the allocation of teaching hours, meaning that decisions about grouping and teaching time were often considered together rather than independently. While these factors may shape how GCSE resit provision is organised, the evidence does not establish a clear causal relationship between any individual decision and student outcomes. Notably, some interviewed staff felt grouping must be paired with the right teacher: *'Ensuring the correct tutor is in class with the correct level of student… Staff are placed to teach the Grade 1–2 or Grade 3 groups depending on their skill set'*. In other words, teacher expertise and pedagogical skills, particularly experience with certain ability levels, are seen as critical.

Interview findings provided additional insights. Some post-16 settings reported collapsing or reorganising classes following January results, with one curriculum director noting that small class sizes after November resits could prompt cost-saving measures such as regrouping students or outsourcing provision.

Several settings suggested they group students by prior GCSE attainment. For example, one college placed Grade 3 students close to a pass in "target classes" for November resits, while those with Grades 1 or 2 were placed in "improver classes". Some interviewees suggested they streamed students by prior grade because they questioned the value of having students aiming for different grades in the same classes. However, in contrast, some settings planned to mix Grade 2 and Grade 3 students. Other recent evidence suggests that streaming students by prior grade is logistically complicated and, in some cases, has negative impacts on student engagement relative to grouping students by their main subject area (Maris and Robinson, 2025).

Some settings also indicated that they used targeted groupings for particular student groups, including those with SEND or EAL needs. Two settings reported separate arrangements for students with education, health and care plans (EHCPs), where timetabling allowed, while another offered SEND students additional weekly resit hours. Staff also questioned how well GCSE exams suited some SEND students, noting that SEND was often a factor in repeated resit failure.

Class size

The ToC focused primarily on decisions relating to teaching hours, curriculum, staffing, assessment and learner support. However, interviewees also identified class size as an important contextual factor which could influence learners' experiences of GCSE resit provision.

Survey responses suggest the mean and median class sizes for GCSE English and maths resit classes in 2024-25 were broadly similar across subjects (see Table 2). On average, English classes had 19.0 students, while maths classes had a slightly higher average of 19.6. The median class sizes were 18 for English and 18.5 for maths.

Table 2 - Mean and median class size of GCSE English and Maths resit classes in 2024–25

	English classes	Maths classes
Overall		
Mean	19.0	19.6
Median	18	18.5
GFECs		
Mean	18.8	19.2
Median	18	18
SFCs and 16-19 Academies		
Mean	19.4	20.0
Median	20	20

Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Q10. What was the average class size of GCSE maths and/or English classes in your college in 2024-25?
Note: N=48. This question was posed to post-16 settings that reported they were offering resits in 2024-25.

Some interviewees suggested that class size could affect student outcomes indirectly through its influence on teaching and support. For example, one course leader reported that in larger classes, lower-attaining and quieter students were more likely to be overlooked and opportunities to provide individual support were more limited. Consequently, interviewees felt that larger class sizes could make it more difficult to identify and respond to students' learning needs.

Curriculum delivery

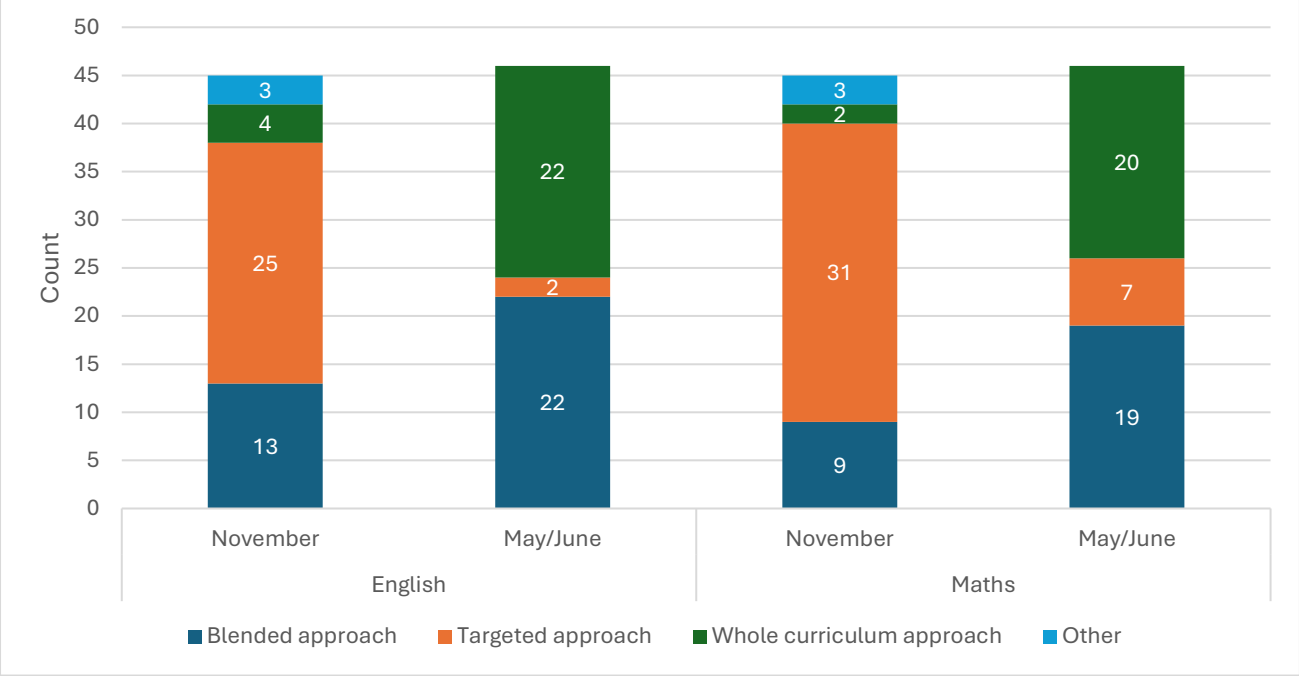
Survey data suggests post-16 settings vary in their approach to delivering GCSE curriculum content, particularly for those students entered into summer exams. Case study evidence suggested these decisions about curriculum delivery are made in conjunction with choices about teaching hours.

Most settings responding to the survey reported adopting a targeted approach to curriculum delivery for November resits, focusing primarily on topics where students typically struggle rather than covering the full curriculum. This was the case for more than half of post-16 settings (n=25) delivering English GCSE resits and more than two thirds (n=31) for maths.

Approaches to May/June resits were more varied (see Figure 21). Nearly half of post-16 settings reported using a blended approach, almost half (n=22) for English and 19 for maths, where the full curriculum is covered but with additional emphasis on areas of difficulty. Most of the remaining settings reported using a whole curriculum approach - 22 delivered the entire GCSE specification in English and 20 took this approach in maths.

Qualitative comments (see below) help to contextualise these findings, with several post-16 settings describing how their approach is shaped by student needs, available time, and institutional priorities.

Figure 17 - Approach to curriculum coverage for GCSE resit students in 2024-25 by subject and month of exam entry



Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Q12. Which of the following best describes the approach you took to curriculum coverage for GCSE resit students in 2024-25?
Note: For November resits, N=45; for May/June resits, N=46. For November resits: GFECs N=24, other post-16 settings N=21 (SFCs and 16-19 Academies). For May/June resits: GFECs N=25, other post-16 settings N=21. All post-16 settings were eligible to respond to this question.

Additional analysis revealed notable differences by provider type. GFECs were more likely than SFCs and 16-19 Academies to adopt a whole curriculum approach for May/June resits, and to a lesser extent for November resits as well.

Interviewees generally emphasised the importance of allocating equal weekly hours to English and maths to 'raise the status' of both qualifications. Interviewees also noted that the number of weekly teaching hours was generally the same regardless of whether students were entered for exams in November or May/June. However, views on the adequacy and impact of the number of teaching hours varied across settings.

One curriculum director cautioned that exceeding three hours per week per subject could negatively affect attendance, retention and achievement, while another course leader described using a fast-paced approach to help students cope with exam pressure. Another course leader argued that the GCSE curriculum contained too much content, limiting opportunities to revisit areas of weakness.

These findings suggest that decisions about curriculum coverage and teaching hours are often interdependent, with settings adapting one in response to the other.

RQ4. How do post-16 settings typically staff the delivery of increased teaching hours for GCSE resit students and what costs do they incur as a result?

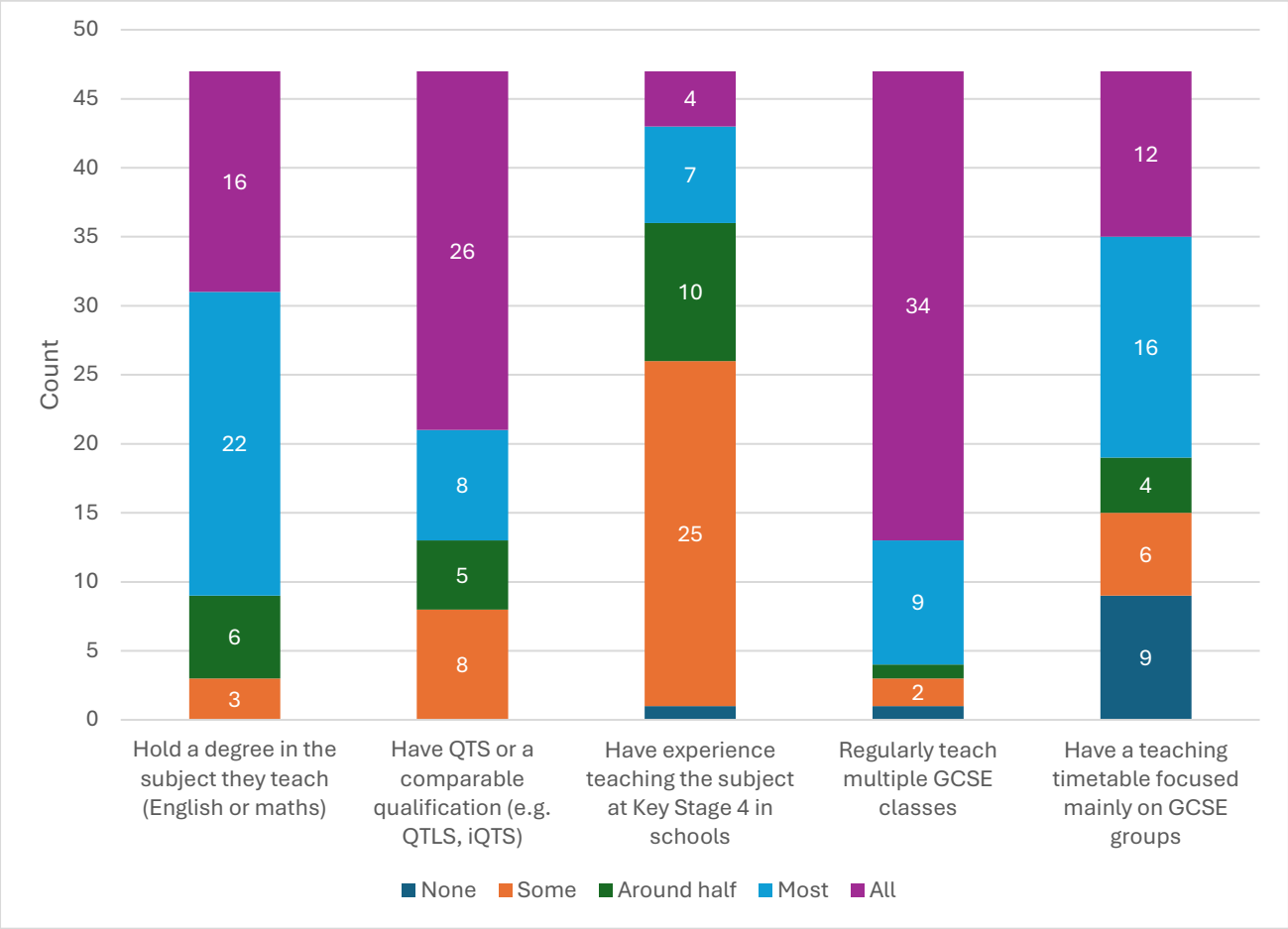
Post-16 settings also vary in the way they staff GCSE resit classes, with financial constraints often cited as the primary driver of their staffing choices. For example, settings differ in terms of: the levels of experience among staff, how new resit teaching staff are developed, and how higher numbers of teaching hours are covered.

Teacher experience and qualifications

Staffing choices were seen as potentially amplifying or undermining the benefit of increased hours. Most post-16 settings responding to the survey - nearly four in five (n=38) - reported that most or all of their resit teachers hold a degree in the subject they teach (Figure 22). Similarly, almost three in four settings (n=34) said that most or all of their resit teachers hold Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) or equivalent. Most also indicated that their resit teachers regularly teach multiple resit classes, as distinct from covering ad hoc or single classes.

However, there was greater variation in other aspects of teacher deployment. Six out of ten post-16 settings (n=28) reported that more than half of their resit teachers had a timetable focused mainly on GCSE groups, and over half of settings indicated that fewer than half of their resit teachers had experience teaching the subject at KS4.

Figure 18 - Proportion of GCSE resit teachers with selected characteristics, 2024–25



Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Q26. Thinking about the staff who taught GCSE English and maths resit classes at your college in 2024-25, approximately what proportion have the following characteristics?
Note: N=47. All post-16 settings were eligible to respond. QTS refers to Qualified Teacher Status.

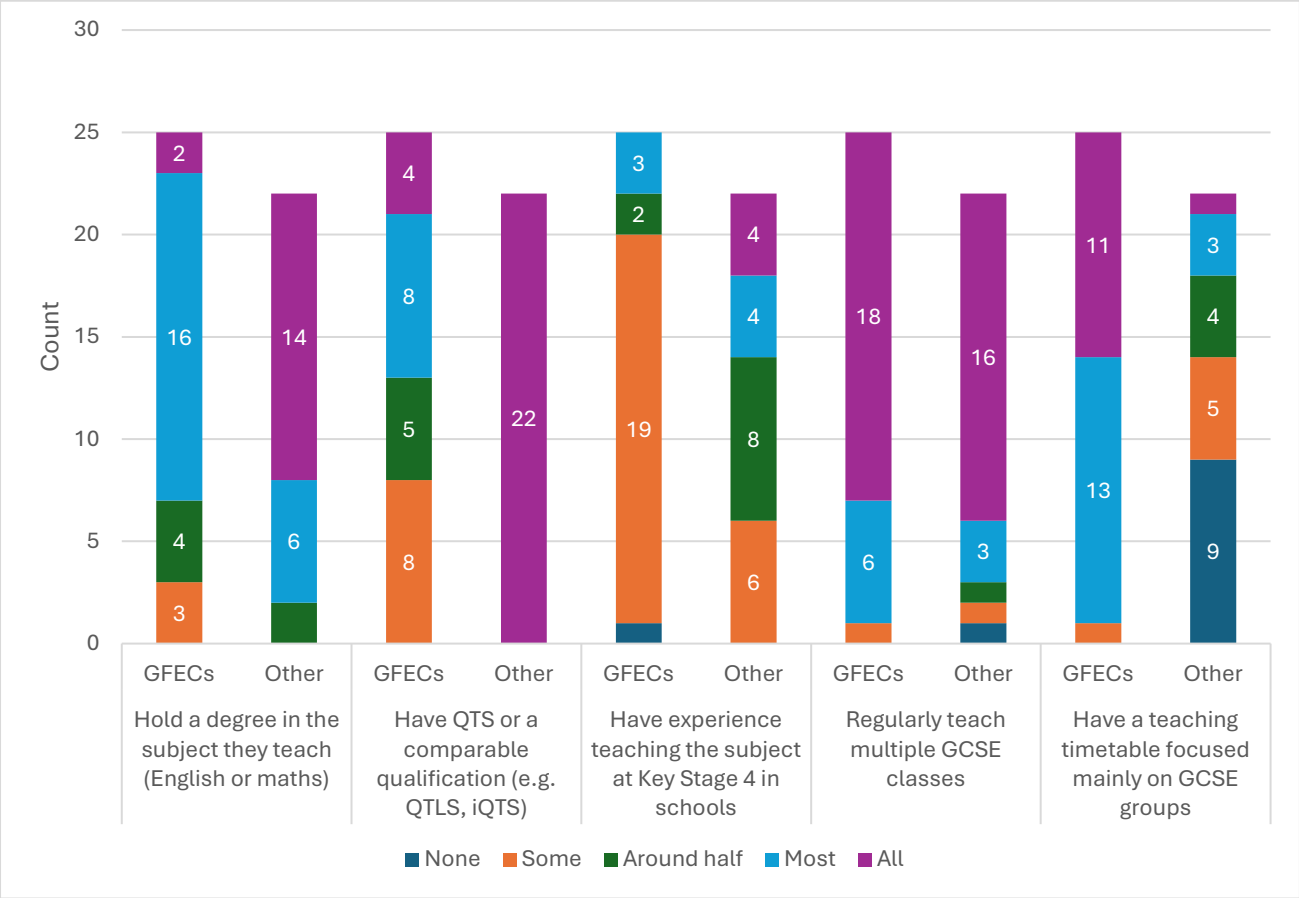
Differences between GFECs and other providers (namely SFCs and 16-19 academy converters) were particularly stark (see Figure 23).

Compared to GFECs, SFCs and 16-19 Academies were more likely to employ GCSE resits teachers with:

- QTS or equivalent (22/22 reported 'all' staff had QTS or equivalent versus 4/25)
- a degree in the subject they taught (14/22 reported 'all' staff had a relevant degree versus 2/25)
- experience of teaching at KS4 (4/22 reported 'all' staff had this versus 0/25), although the value of this was debated by some interviewees.

By contrast, GFECs were more likely to report that all their GCSE resit teachers had a timetable focussed mainly on GCSE classes (11/25 versus 1/22), while a similar proportion from both groups reported all their staff regularly taught multiple GCSE classes (18/25 for GFECs and 16/22 for other providers).

Figure 19 - Proportion of GCSE resit teachers with selected characteristics, 2024–25, by provider type



Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Q26. Thinking about the staff who taught GCSE English and maths resit classes at your college in 2024-25, approximately what proportion have the following characteristics?
Note: N=47. N for GFECs = 25; N for other types of settings = 22 (SFCs and 16-19 Academies).
All post-16 settings were eligible to respond. QTS refers to Qualified Teacher Status.

In response to open survey questions, several post-16 settings highlighted the importance of teacher expertise, subject knowledge and experience of teaching GCSE resit learners. Respondents often suggested that the quality of teaching staff was at least as important as the number of teaching hours delivered, and some felt that improvements in staffing quality could have a greater influence on student outcomes than increases in teaching time. One respondent commented: '*The teacher makes a huge difference and in maths, it is very much about improving students' confidence and having quick wins at the start of the course. The other big difference is they are guaranteed to have a specialist maths teacher for the duration, which many haven't had in KS4.*'

One college found that moving to a new timetable model (longer, doubled sessions with one teacher) built consistency and trust: '*Students build relationships by being with the same teacher... English and maths retakes are all about relationships and trust between teacher and student... We have received excellent student feedback since moving to [this schedule]*'. By contrast, another reported that having more frequent but shorter sessions was better: '*3 x 1hr lessons are shown to be more effective than 2 x 1.5 hr sessions. We've seen higher attendance and engagement with our VLE and homework strategy as a result*'. These perspectives suggest that institutional factors like timetabling, and staffing can amplify or undermine the benefit of increased hours. As one respondent explained: '*I feel the increase in hours is more about the structure of the timetable... additional hours [matter] but they need to be timetabled in the best way*'.

Findings from the qualitative interviews reinforced the findings from the surveys, confirming that settings adopted different approaches to staffing GCSE resit provision and that staff experience and subject expertise were considered paramount. The value of targeted professional development, and of leadership structures supporting resit delivery, were also emphasised. Settings with experienced or specialist teachers, dedicated staff for GCSE English and maths, and a strong resit culture were reported to achieve better outcomes, whereas those relying on non-specialists or facing staff shortages suggested this impaired teaching quality and student progress.

Interview findings highlighted substantial variation in how post-16 settings staff GCSE resit provision. However, a consistent theme across interviews was that staff expertise, subject knowledge and experience of teaching GCSE resit learners were viewed as more important than any single staffing model. Settings adopted a range of approaches to teacher deployment, often reflecting local workforce availability and organisational priorities. Some reported assigning their most experienced lecturers to particular student groups, such as those working towards a grade 4, while others highlighted challenges arising from staff turnover or difficulties recruiting specialist teachers. Several settings also described investing in staff development, recruiting teachers with strong GCSE experience, or creating dedicated GCSE resit teams in order to strengthen provision.

There was also variation in the extent to which settings relied on subject specialists. In some settings, GCSE resits were taught by dedicated English and maths specialists, while in others responsibility was shared across a wider teaching team, including non-specialists. Interviewees suggested that strong leadership, collaborative working practices and experience teaching resit learners could help mitigate some of the challenges associated with non-specialist delivery. Some settings also reported that having staff dedicated solely to GCSE English and maths contributed to a stronger resit culture and more consistent support for learners.

Workforce development

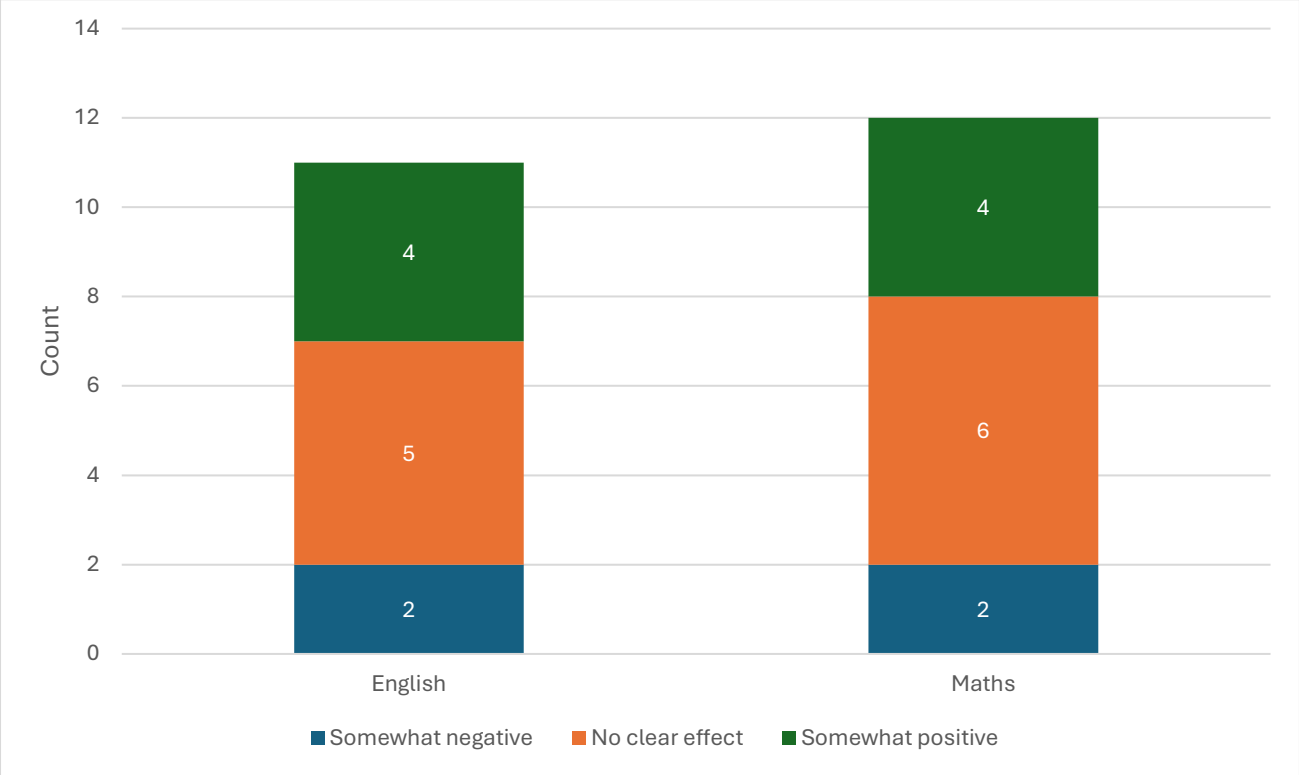
Interview findings provided limited evidence on workforce development approaches. However, there was some evidence to suggest that workforce development was seen as a way to maximise the impact of teaching hours, by building internal staff capacity to effectively teach GCSE resits. For example, one case study setting offered bursaries to classroom support workers to train to become maths lecturers, to help ease recruitment pressures. This approach was reported to have alleviated the impact of staff shortages, and to have improved student attendance, retention and achievement, in contrast to previous years in which the setting had relied more heavily on short-term, part-time agency staff to deliver additional maths hours.

Another setting used student mentors, selected from those who had already achieved strong passes, to run pre-term support sessions for returning learners close to the target grade. This setting also reported prioritising the recruitment and retention of high-quality teaching for GCSE resit provision, including through enhanced pay, favourable working conditions and reduced teaching timetable to enable staff to run revision sessions.

RQ5. How do course leaders and teachers perceive the impact of learner attendance and engagement in the resit course on students' ability to achieve a Grade 4 or above?

Learner attendance and engagement was seen as vital, and perceptions about the impact of increasing teaching hours were often related back to their effect on learners' attendance and engagement. Among the post-16 settings that indicated, in response to our survey, that they had raised their teaching hours in 2024-25, opinions were varied on how this affected attendance and engagement in resit classes, but about half suggested there was no clear effect (see Figure 24).

Figure 20 - Perceived effect of increasing teaching hours in English and maths on student attendance and engagement in GCSE resit classes



Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Q32. What effect has increasing teaching hours had on student attendance rates and engagement (e.g. participation and effort) in GCSE resit classes?
Note: N=11 for English, N=12 for maths. Question posed only to those post-16 settings that increased total teaching hours for GCSE English and/or maths resits between 2023-24 and 2024-25.

GCSE resit attendance and engagement

As set out in the ToC, attendance and engagement were viewed as potential moderators through which teaching hours might influence GCSE resit outcomes. The case studies and survey therefore explored not only the amount of teaching time provided, but also the factors that participants felt affected learners' attendance, engagement and capacity to benefit from that time.

In response to an open question, survey respondents described attendance and engagement as being shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including students' aspirations, attitudes, and ability levels, as well as the availability of tailored support and number of teaching hours. These, in turn, were seen to be influenced by:

- Prior attainment and students' previous experiences of learning.
- Support at home and in school.
- Relationships with teachers and other staff.
- High expectations and a positive college culture.
- Staff expertise and pedagogical skill.

Several post-16 settings pointed to the enduring effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on student behaviour, expectations, and mental health. Several noted that absence had become more normalised, and that some students and parents were less concerned about missed lessons: '*A post-COVID disengagement from education*

in some sectors of society has influenced behaviour, and absence seems more acceptable … there doesn't seem to be as much concern from some parents when classes are missed'.

While a few post-16 settings felt that increased teaching hours had contributed to better attendance and engagement, most viewed this as just one factor among many. The overall impression was that additional hours alone were unlikely to drive meaningful change without being accompanied by broader support strategies.

Instead, timetabling, class sizes, and how English and maths are positioned within the broader study programme, were seen as more critical to student engagement and attendance. Several case study colleges described how instability in these areas had undermined engagement. Others highlighted the importance of aligning English and maths timetables with vocational courses and ensuring consistent staffing in the delivery of GCSE resit classes.

Several post-16 settings also commented on the importance of one-to-one and small-group support for supporting attendance, particularly at key points in the academic year. Others highlighted the role of a whole-institution approach to attendance, with consistent messaging and shared responsibility across staff. Home circumstances were also frequently cited, with some settings noting that external factors, such as caring responsibilities or housing instability, could significantly affect attendance and engagement.

Some interviewees emphasised the value of formative assessment and diagnostic tools in identifying student needs early on. Others suggested they were hampered by delays in receiving Key Stage 4 data. Teaching quality and pedagogy were also seen as central, with some post-16 settings attributing improvements in engagement to the adoption of more effective teaching approaches.

Some case study colleges also suggested that timetabling could have a big impact on attendance and engagement, and that increasing teaching hours could have consequential implications for timetabling. Several interviewees commented on the importance of timetabling. One course leader noted higher attendance when lessons were not scheduled after 4pm, on Friday afternoons or in three-hour blocks. Relatedly, one setting observed improved engagement after moving from a single weekly three-hour lesson to two 1.5-hour sessions, while another reported strong attendance for 1 hour 40-minute lessons, which they noted broadly aligned with exam durations. Shorter, more frequent lessons were also seen to reduce the impact of missed sessions. However, one setting reported lower attendance in maths, taught twice weekly, than in English, taught once weekly, describing this as offering 'two opportunities to miss a lesson' rather than one.

These findings support the ToC's assumption that the relationship between teaching hours and learner outcomes is unlikely to be straightforward. Whilst participants viewed attendance and engagement as important mechanisms through which teaching hours may influence outcomes, they also emphasised that these were shaped by a wider set of organisational, pedagogical and learner-level factors. Consequently, the extent to which learners benefit from available teaching hours was seen to depend not only on the amount of time provided, but also on how that provision was organised and supported. Case study colleges suggested that more targeted approaches to tackling student absence were often more impactful. For example, one setting reported using a RAG rating to inform targeted attendance interventions, and another suggested that they had successfully improved attendance and engagement by employing staff to monitor engagement in classrooms and ensure adherence with attendance policies. Another had implemented a system in which designated 'achievement managers' followed up with learners experiencing attendance issues.

RQ6. What role does learner self-study, tutoring and independent learning outside the classroom play in achieving a Grade 4 or above?

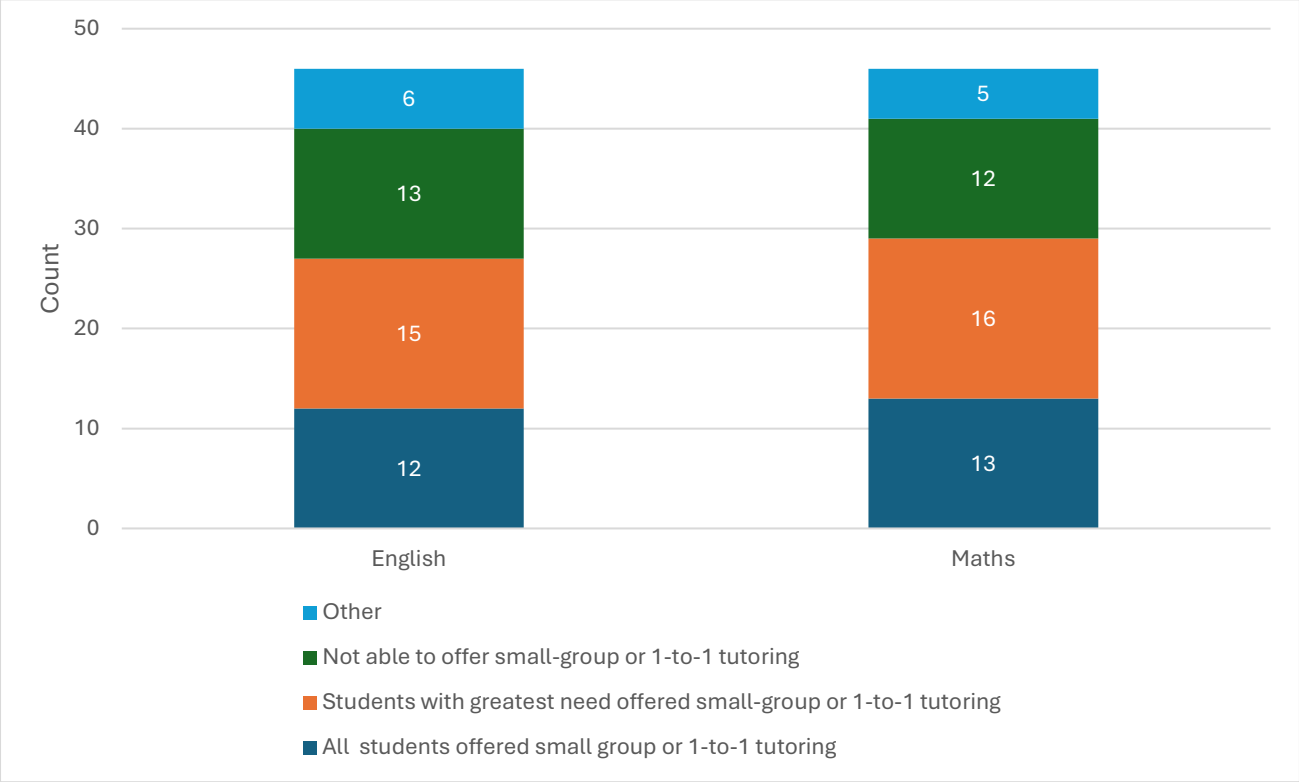
Post-16 settings differ in the additional support and learning opportunities they provide beyond timetabled GCSE teaching. These include one-to-one and small-group tutoring, other personalised learning methods, the use of

artificial intelligence, homework, and independent or remote learning. Interviewees and survey respondents viewed these factors as influencing students' GCSE resit outcomes and, as such, they may help explain variation in outcomes beyond differences in teaching hours alone. Where these activities took place outside timetabled lessons, they would not be reflected in measures of minimum teaching hours.

Additional support provided to GCSE resit students

Approximately six out of ten post-16 settings responding to the survey reported offering some form of one-to-one or small-group tutoring to some or all students in English (n=27) and maths (n=29) (Figure 25). Around a quarter of post-16 settings reported offering this support to all resit students, while a further third reported targeting support towards selected groups of students. Approximately one in four post-16 settings reported being unable to offer any small-group or one-to-one tutoring. Qualitative interviews suggested that, in some settings, targeted support was offered to students judged to be at greatest need, including those close to the Grade 3/4 boundary, students with SEND, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, these criteria were not specified in the survey question and therefore cannot be quantified from the survey data.

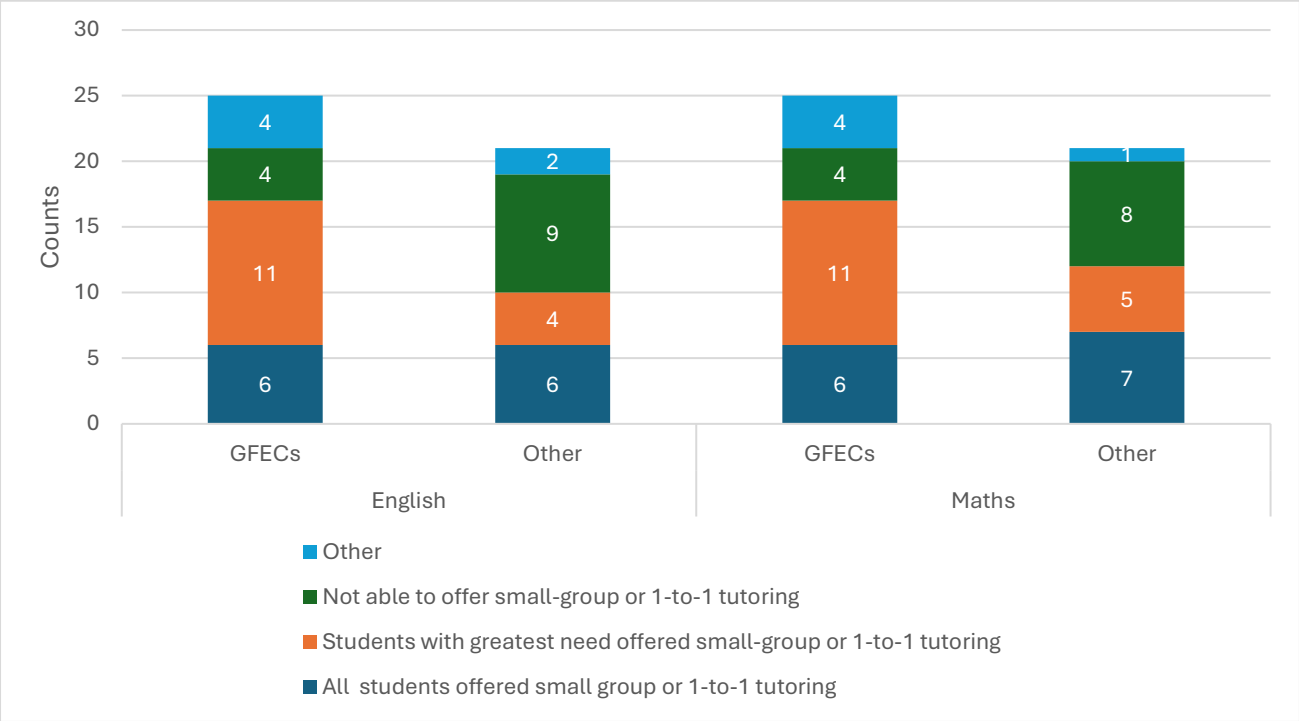
Figure 21 - Approach to offering additional support to GCSE resit students in 2024-25



Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Q29. Which of the following best describes your approach to offering additional support to GCSE resit students in 2024-25?
Note: N=46. N for GFECs = 25; N for other post-16 settings = 21 (SFCs and 16-19 Academies). All post-16 settings were eligible to respond to this question.

When broken down by provider type, both GFECs and other providers (SFCs and 16-19 Academies) were similarly likely to offer one-to-one or small-group support to all students (see Figure 26). However, GFECs were more likely to target this support at students with the greatest need, while other providers were more likely to report being unable to offer such support.

Figure 22 - Approach to offering additional support to GCSE resit students in 2024-25, by provider type



Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Q29. Which of the following best describes your approach to offering additional support to GCSE resit students in 2024-25?
Note: N = 46. N = 25 for GFECs; N = 21 for other post-16 settings (SFCs and 16-19 Academies).

Individualised and small-group learning

Several course leaders from case study colleges highlighted the value of small-group or one-to-one support for selected students. This form of provision was often seen as more targeted and responsive to individual learner needs, particularly for students who were struggling with confidence or had specific gaps in their understanding.

Some interviewees expressed a clear preference for offering personalised support over increasing timetabled whole-class teaching hours. They felt that additional classroom time did not always translate into improved outcomes, especially if students were disengaged or lacked the foundational skills to benefit fully from extended lessons. In contrast, small-group or one-to-one sessions were seen as more flexible and better suited to addressing individual barriers to learning.

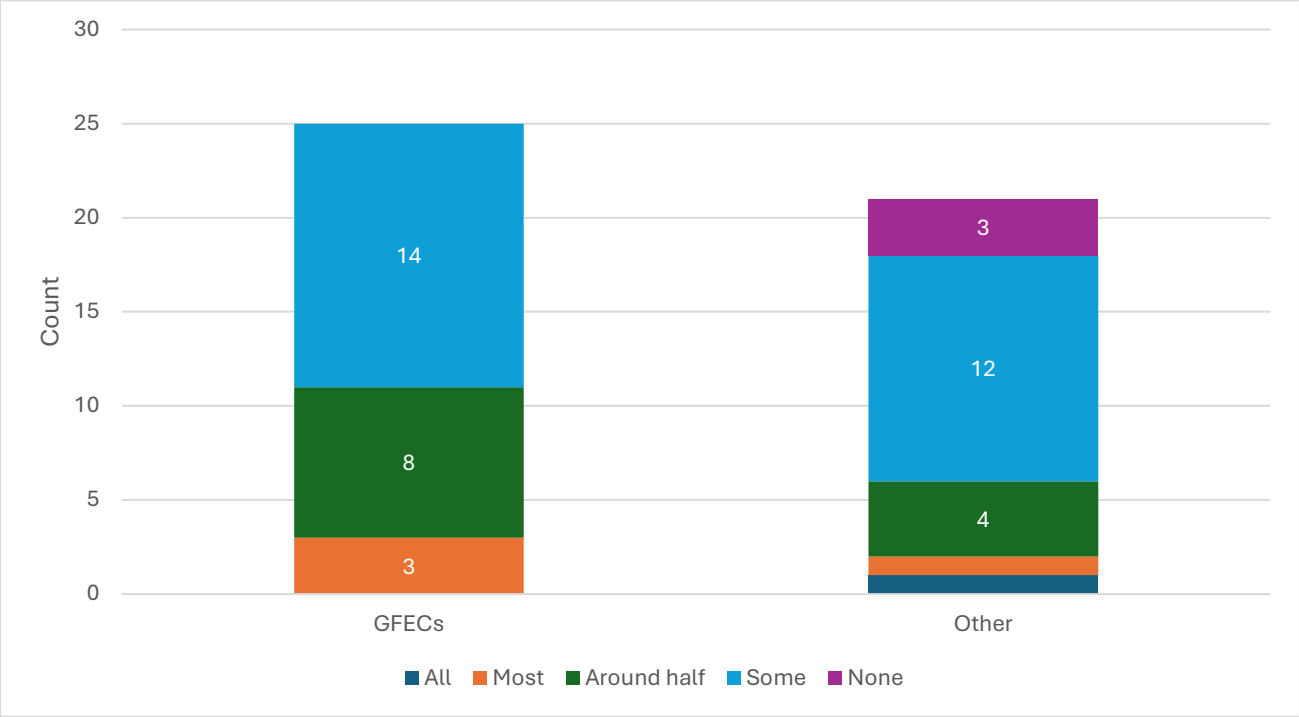
However, the feasibility of delivering such support varied between post-16 settings. While some appeared to have embedded small-group tutoring into their resit provision, others reported that resource constraints limited their ability to offer anything beyond core classroom teaching. A few settings described creative approaches, such as scheduling one-to-one sessions during holiday periods to provide academic mentoring.

These reflections suggest that while individualised support is valued by practitioners, its implementation is uneven and often dependent on staffing capacity, funding availability, and institutional priorities. This also raises important questions about how best to balance the quantity of teaching hours with the quality and personalisation of support, particularly for students who may be at risk of disengagement.

In-class support

Survey responses revealed that most post-16 settings (n=29) reported less than half of GCSE resit classes included additional in-class support, such as from a teaching assistant. About a third (n=17) reported delivering in-class support in half or more of their resit classes. As shown in Figure 27, SFCs and 16-19 Academies in our sample are less likely than GFECs to provide in-class support to a majority of their resit students. This may reflect differences in student needs, the scale of resit provision, and/or the feasibility of resourcing additional support in smaller institutions.

Figure 23 - Proportion of GCSE classes in 2024-25 that included additional in-class support, by provider type



Source: NFER survey of FE providers, 2025
Q30. Approximately what proportion of your GCSE classes in 2024-25 included additional in-class support (e.g. from a teaching assistant or similar)?
Note: N=46. All post-16 settings were eligible to respond.

Self-study

Two case study colleges highlighted the potential contribution of homework to improving GCSE outcomes. One setting reported recently reintroducing homework to support students' recall and perceived this to be valuable, even if students were sometimes reluctant to complete it and staff had limited capacity to follow up non-completion. The same setting also assigned online homework to November resit students who had narrowly missed a Grade 4 in the previous summer. In English, this involved tutor-marked work, while in maths it consisted of online tasks and self-marking quizzes, completed between September and November outside college hours.

Survey responses suggested that self-study expectations differ between providers. Among post-16 settings that reported setting weekly self-study hours for English and Maths (e.g. for revision or homework), the most common expectation was between one and two hours per week. No college reported setting more than two hours per week. The remaining settings set less than one hour of self-directed study per week. In response to open survey questions, some post-16 settings noted that student motivation, access to resources, and competing demands on learners' time influenced how much self-study could realistically be expected.

RQ7. Do learners from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit from particular approaches to maths and English resits?

Insights from the closed and open responses to the survey, as well as the college interviews, shed light on post-16 settings' views on how best to support disadvantaged learners with GCSE English and maths resits. In the survey, 'disadvantage' was defined as students facing greater social or economic barriers or who have learning difficulties or disabilities. While interviewees did not refer to a specific definition of disadvantage when discussing learners' experiences, they described ways in which learners from disadvantaged backgrounds were perceived to benefit from certain approaches to maths and English resits. These benefits were most commonly associated with provision that addressed gaps in foundational skills and supported learners' confidence.

Concerns about one-size-fits all approaches to resits

Survey responses consistently indicated that funding and accountability incentives for post-16 settings to enrol all students without a grade 4 in GCSE resits often result in the lowest achieving group – who are disproportionately learners from disadvantaged backgrounds - resitting GCSE exams when they are unlikely to achieve grade 4s. Some GFECs, which tend to educate a higher proportion of these learners, said a more flexible approach is needed. For instance, one respondent lamented the *'inflexibility in the Condition of Funding policy... affects attendance [for] those who have to do a GCSE and have failed a few times'*. While the 16-19 condition of funding allows students who have not achieved grade 3 to study other qualifications, some settings said that, in practice, these qualifications are typically used a stepping stone to a GCSE, meaning that most disadvantaged learners continue to study GCSEs at some point during the 16-19 phase.

The importance of targeted support and encouragement

Interviewees tended to indicate that students entering settings with lower GCSE grades required sustained and targeted support and encouragement regardless of the number of teaching hours.

Interviewees emphasised the importance of building these learners' confidence. This was thought to be particularly important for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. One setting reported plans to prioritise confidence-building early in the academic year, with the possibility of extending this focus throughout the year. This approach reflected a perception that many students arrived with very low confidence; as one course leader noted, it could feel *"as if they've already given up before we even start"*. The approach involved enabling learners to experience success on manageable tasks before progressing to more demanding content.

In another setting, a curriculum director explained that motivating lower-attaining students required *"changing their mentality through hearts and minds"* to counteract negative messages they had internalised, while cautioning that this work often felt like *"fighting against a current"*.

Another course leader suggested that lower-attaining students benefited most from smaller classes sizes because higher-attaining peers could dominate teacher attention in larger classes, and larger classes restricted opportunities for teachers to provider more tailored support.

Increased teaching hours

As noted earlier in this section, survey respondents were split on whether they thought disadvantaged students benefit disproportionately, or at all, from increased teaching hours. Six of 13 post-16 settings in our survey sample that had increased their teaching hours in 2024/25 agreed that disadvantaged resit students made more progress as a result of the extra hours, whilst five disagreed (the remainder were neutral). Some comments reflected this cautious optimism: *'Our progress measure for high needs learners increased [after increasing hours]',* reported one

college, although they also saw overall maths progress drop due to staffing issues. Another respondent observed that disadvantaged students often have additional barriers – poor attendance, less support at home, more mental health concerns – so extra hours alone might not close the gap.

On the other hand, some staff felt that *when implemented thoughtfully*, more time was beneficial for disadvantaged learners. For instance, longer sessions allowed for *'realistic opportunities for students to develop exam stamina'*, which can be particularly useful for those who lack past exam practice or confidence.

Reflections on the Theory of Change

This section reflects on the Theory of Change (ToC) developed early in the scoping phase and examines the extent to which the survey and case study evidence aligns with it. The ToC (see Appendix 1) was developed early in the project because teaching hours were hypothesised to represent only one of several interacting influences on GCSE resit outcomes. The ToC helps identify the mechanisms through which teaching hours may affect attainment, the contextual factors that may strengthen or weaken those effects, and the potential confounding influences that would need to be considered in any impact evaluation.

The findings from the survey and interviews suggested that the relationships between teaching hours, curriculum design, staffing, learner support and student outcomes are more complex and context-dependent than is implied by the linear model we initially developed. The following critique highlights where the evidence supports the ToC, where it diverges, and what this means for interpreting the mechanisms through which post-16 settings influence learner progress.

Evidence to support the logic model

Inputs and contextual assumptions

The ToC assumes that minimum teaching hours expectations were a strong lever for raising the teaching hours post-16 settings offered students. Evidence from this study does not definitively confirm or contradict this assumption. Overall, the new minimum expectations had a modest impact on settings' teaching hours between 2023/24 and 2024/25 - around two-thirds kept their hours the same between these years, but most of these settings planned to increase their teaching hours in 2025/26 instead, when compliance was monitored.

Activities and provider-level decisions

The ToC outlines several levers (labelled as actions/decisions) that post-16 settings might use to improve outputs and outcomes, including changes to teaching hours, curriculum redesign, enhanced support, timetabling changes, expert staffing, mentoring and feedback, and qualification choices. The relationships between these factors were expected to be complex. The evidence suggested they may operate through multiple and potentially interacting mechanisms, their effects are likely to be context-dependent, and they may influence one another as well as learner outcomes. Based on the evidence gathered, they are best understood as interconnected elements within a wider system of GCSE resit provision, rather than as simple moderators of teaching hours.

The survey and interview findings also reveal:

- **Large variation** in curriculum approaches, staffing models, and grouping strategies, particularly between provider types.
- **Trade-offs**: Some interview and survey respondents indicated that increased hours sometimes displaced vocational learning time; longer lessons increased fatigue; staffing constraints limited timetabling flexibility.
- **Misalignment with policy incentives**: Funding and accountability systems may incentivise a "GCSE default" position, even when FSQs or staged progression may better support students with very low prior-attainment (i.e. lower than a grade 3 from Y11).

Whilst the ToC identifies the right activities, our research findings suggest that post-16 settings' choices are heavily influenced and constrained by structural factors, and that these differ between GFECs and SFCs/16–19 Academies.

Outputs

The ToC's expected outputs (greater teaching hours, stronger staff expertise, improved curriculum alignment to students' needs, and reduced drop-out) reflect the hypothesised results of the interacting actions / decisions taken by colleges, as shown in the ToC. At least some of these were expected to be influenced by the introduction of minimum teaching hours expectations, either directly or indirectly:

- **More students receive the minimum number of teaching hours:** This was expected to be influenced by the introduction of teaching hours expectations. Whilst only a quarter of post-16 settings increased their teaching hours between 2023/24 and 2024/25, most of the two-thirds who kept their hours the same intended to increase them in 2025/26.

- **Higher teaching staff quality and expertise:** Increasing teaching hours was expected to have staffing implications, which could affect learners' outcomes if access to subject specialists with expertise in teaching GCSE resits was reduced. Survey evidence suggested that, amongst the post-16 settings that increased their teaching hours in 2024-25 and provided data on additional costs, the additional investment had been £80,000. Some other settings also suggested they had avoided additional costs by reallocating staff, for example by diverting staff away from elective vocational subjects. Survey evidence also suggested staffing models differ markedly between provider types.

- **Curriculum better tailored and student support improved:** The interaction between teaching hours and curriculum design was uncertain, as was the relationship between teaching hours and one-to-one or small group support. However, both curriculum design and individual / small-group support were highlighted as impactful on their own. Targeted curriculum approaches for November resits are widespread, matching ToC expectations. Whilst case study colleges highlighted the importance of one-to-one and small group support, only a minority of survey respondents indicated they have the capacity to offer this to all students.

- **Reduced drop-out:** The effects of minimum teaching hours expectations on student drop-out were not directly investigated, but the limited reported improvements in attendance amongst surveyed settings that had increased their teaching hours does somewhat suggest that higher hours alone may not be sufficient to reduce drop-out rates in a meaningful way.

Evidence that the introduction of teaching hours expectations affected these outputs is unclear.

Outcomes (short- and medium-term)

The ToC identifies a series of short-term and medium-term outcomes, including better overall content knowledge, increased student confidence and self-efficacy in English and maths, and better assessment outcomes for learners, including for disadvantaged learners. Increased teaching hours were expected to contribute to these outcomes, both directly and indirectly through their interaction with other related actions/ decisions taken by college. The evidence offered a nuanced picture:

- **Attendance and engagement remain the biggest barriers**, and case study colleges indicated that increased hours alone rarely improve them.

- **Teaching quality** — not hours — was consistently cited as one of the most influential factors (aligning with wider literature).

- We found no evidence that increasing teaching hours leads to increased **student confidence** in English and maths. Rather, interviewees emphasised the importance of targeted encouragement and support to build learners' confidence.

- **Additional hours were perceived to have mixed perceived impact on disadvantaged learners**, with staff divided on the positive and negative effects. Some survey respondents suggested

additional hours may have benefitted learners, whilst others felt it may have contributed to heightened anxieties, learner fatigue and demotivation.

In addition, evidence that increased teaching hours positively affects the ToC's primary medium-term impact – improved GCSE pass rates (at grade 4 or above) – is lacking at this stage. This study was unable to generate evidence on whether increased hours improves outcomes –because causal effects estimation was reliant on the introduction of teaching hours expectations having created significant divergence between 2023/24 and 2024/25 between those colleges responding to the new guidance and those who postponed that change to the following year. Unfortunately, in reality, the contrast generated by the policy change was minimal. However, the evidence that was gathered suggests that increased teaching hours are neither the primary driver nor a sufficient driver to achieve those outcomes. Case study colleges generally stressed, instead, the impacts of teacher expertise, timetabling, class size, one-to-one and small group support and learner motivation, rather than teaching hours.

Long-term impacts

The ToC's ultimate impacts, which include improved access to further and higher education, improved employability, and a reduction the proportion of young people that are not in education, employment and training (NEET), are outside the scope of this study. Thus, while these long-term goals are appropriate, the evidence does not yet validate the ToC pathways leading to them.

Interpretation: What the evidence means for the ToC

The ToC provides a useful and coherent framework for understanding how post-16 settings may seek to improve GCSE resit outcomes, the role that increased teaching hours may play, and how teaching hours may interact with other actions/ decisions to influence learners' outcomes. It successfully captures the main levers available to providers, including teaching hours, curriculum design, staffing, and learner support, and it reflects the importance of teaching quality and student engagement, which were highlighted in the survey and interview data. In this sense, the ToC aligns well with the evidence gathered from post-16 settings.

However, at the same time, the evidence also highlighted a number of limitations in how the relationships between these elements are represented. In particular, the role of teaching hours appears less central than initially assumed; the evidence suggests that additional time is only effective when combined with high-quality teaching, targeted support and encouragement. The data also points to substantial differences between provider types, highlighting that post-16 settings operate in different contexts and serve different student profiles, which shape how, and to what extent, different approaches can be implemented.

The findings further underscore the importance of recognising the constraints within which post-16 settings make decisions. Staffing and timetabling limitations, coupled with budget pressures, all influence the feasibility of particular strategies and help to explain the variation observed across institutions. In addition, the diversity of the learner population, particularly among those with very low prior attainment, suggests that a single, uniform ToC is unlikely to reflect the differences between provider types in their context and choices.

Finally, the findings draw attention to the role of wider policy and accountability structures in shaping providers' choices. Decisions about which qualifications to enrol students in (when they got lower than a grade 3 in Year 11), curriculum design, and resource allocation are not driven solely by what is in the best interests of students but are also influenced by funding rules and performance measures, which can create tensions between what is educationally optimal and what is institutionally incentivised. Taken together, this suggests that while the ToC offers a strong conceptual starting point, the processes through which outcomes are realised are more conditional, context-dependent, and mediated by external factors than a linear model might imply.

Conclusions

The scoping phase of this study highlights the complexity of improving GCSE English and maths outcomes for post-16 resit learners. The primary aim of this study was to evaluate the causal impact of increased teaching hours on students' GCSE resit outcomes. This was motivated by the assumption that the policy changes introduced in 2024 may have created sufficient variation over the transition period to support a robust causal evaluation. Unfortunately, the scoping phase of this study suggest that the introduction of new expectations drove limited divergence in teaching hours between providers over the transition period. Most post-16 settings were either already meeting the minimum teaching expectations prior to the change or planned to adjust provision only once compliance became mandatory. Even amongst post-16 settings that did increase their teaching hours in response to the new expectations, most suggested they were either already meeting the minimum thresholds, or that they increased their hours but not up to or above the minimum expectations. As a result, the scoping phase suggested that a causal impact evaluation of increased teaching hours was unfeasible.

However, the study usefully reveals substantial variation across post-16 settings in how GCSE resits are organised and delivered, although it is important to remember that results should be interpreted cautiously due to small sample sizes and the fact the sample may not be representative. The evidence gathered suggests that post-16 settings vary widely in teaching hours, curriculum approaches, especially for students retaking exams in the summer, how they organise classes, what learner support they offer, and how they decide which qualifications students pursue. These differences appear to reflect both institutional choices and structural factors, including the types of learners served by different provider types. Taken together, the findings highlight that the implementation of post-16 English and maths policy is far from uniform, and that settings are interpreting and responding to national policy and expectations in diverse ways.

For college leaders, the findings underline the importance of considering how different elements of resit provision interact. Many post-16 settings emphasised that additional teaching time alone is unlikely to improve outcomes without being accompanied by effective curriculum design, strong teaching expertise and targeted support for learners, which can affect attendance and engagement, which were typically perceived by case study colleges as the most important success factors. Leaders therefore face strategic choices about how to deploy limited resources. Decisions about grouping students, focusing the curriculum on key areas of weakness, or providing small-group and one-to-one support may be as important as the total number of teaching hours delivered.

The study also highlights operational challenges associated with implementing new teaching hour expectations. Post-16 settings that increased teaching hours tended to indicate that they needed to recruit additional staff, often at significant cost, and/or to make difficult timetabling adjustments. In some cases, leaders reported that increasing English and maths hours reduced time available for vocational learning or placed additional pressure on staffing capacity. Post-16 settings also raised concerns about the potential unintended consequences for students of the new expectations, including increased fatigue or reduced motivation where additional teaching hours were not accompanied by changes to teaching approaches or support. These practical challenges suggest that institutional capacity — particularly staffing availability and financial resources — will play an important role in determining how successfully the policy change will be implemented in practice.

At the same time, some college leaders suggested that additional teaching time may have particular benefits for certain groups of learners, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This points to the possibility that the effects of policy changes may vary across student groups. Post-16 settings need to consider how provision can be tailored to meet the needs of learners with different levels of prior attainment, motivation and confidence.

The scoping phase was not designed to produce policy recommendations, but some implications for policymakers do nevertheless emerge from our findings. First, the results highlight the importance of policy makers to appreciate how implementation is likely to differ between provider types. GFECs typically serve larger numbers of resit learners

with lower prior attainment and therefore likely to have faced greater barriers to implementing the new teaching hours expectations.

Second, the introduction of minimum teaching hour expectations appears to have practical cost implications that are not evenly distributed across providers. Increasing teaching hours can require significant staffing investment and may lead to indirect trade-offs in curriculum planning. Policy makers may therefore need to consider how funding arrangements and guidance reflect the real costs of implementing these expectations.

Third, the findings highlight the need for stronger evidence about effective approaches to supporting GCSE resit learners. While this study identifies substantial variation in practice, it does not yet establish which approaches lead to better outcomes. Building this evidence base — by linking data on post-16 settings' choices and practices with administrative data on student outcomes — could help inform future policy and support settings to adopt approaches that are most likely to improve learner progress.

Overall, improving post-16 English and maths outcomes is unlikely to depend on a single policy lever. Instead, progress will depend on how the menu of qualifications accessible to students evolves over time, how flexibly different types of providers with different student profiles can adapt the student offer to best meet the needs and ability levels of their learners, and how effectively teaching time, curriculum design, staffing expertise, learner support and qualification options are combined by providers in practice. Recognising this complexity and the lack of uniformity in institution's contexts and learners — and supporting post-16 settings of every type to navigate practical and financial challenges — will be central to strengthening the effectiveness of post-16 English and maths policy in the coming years.

Methodological lessons learned

Data availability and quality

The scoping phase highlighted the importance of testing mechanisms for collecting institutional data from post-16 settings and ensuring this data is available, consistent and interpretable. Settings were able to provide current teaching hours data, but historic data were sometimes incomplete or difficult to compare across years. In some cases, respondents' reporting was inconsistent, for example where they indicated they had increased their teaching hours but then provided teaching hours data which suggested the contrary. This limited confidence in whether apparent changes in teaching hours reflected genuine shifts in provision or differences in how settings recorded and reported their delivery.

Recruitment and participation

The survey secured useful responses from a range of standalone 16–19 providers, but the achieved sample was below the original target and was not representatively distributed across provider types. SFCs and 16–19 Academies were over-represented relative to their share of the GCSE resit population, while GFECs, which educate the majority of resit learners, were under-represented relative to the share of GCSE resit learners they teach.

The achieved response rate also reflects the challenges of engaging the target population through survey methods. Efforts to involve sector bodies, including the Education and Training Foundation and the Sixth Form Colleges Association, helped secure the responses achieved. However, due to limited availability of named contacts, invitations were primarily sent via publicly available contact routes (e.g. principal email addresses), and to generic institutional email addresses, requiring internal routing to reach relevant staff. This approach is likely to have reduced engagement, as the survey relied on internal forwarding to reach the appropriate respondents.

This highlights the importance of developing a targeted contact strategy at an early stage of survey-based research. Securing named contacts with direct responsibility for the topic area, such as English and maths leads or curriculum directors, is likely to improve both response rates and data quality. Where this is not possible, reliance on gatekeepers, such as senior leaders and college administrators who may be responding to generic institutional email addresses, can limit participation, with implications for survey response rates, statistical power and internal and external validity.

This matters because institutional choices about GCSE resits vary by provider type. Provider mix therefore affects both the descriptive findings and the feasibility of any evaluation design. In future school or setting choices evaluations, recruitment assumptions should be tested early, particularly where the evaluation depends on securing sufficient numbers of settings in specific treatment and comparison categories. Where the settings most relevant to the policy question face high delivery pressures, additional engagement strategies may be needed to secure participation.

The scoping phase also reinforced the value of targeted qualitative engagement. Interviews with senior and curriculum leaders helped interpret the survey findings, including why post-16 settings had or had not changed teaching hours and how they understood the policy expectations. This qualitative evidence was essential for distinguishing between apparent compliance, delayed implementation, and wider institutional decisions that were not primarily driven by the policy change.

The design of the survey instrument involved balancing conciseness with the need to capture relevant detail. While the original intention was to develop a short and focused survey, the decision to combine NFER's instrument with another instrument being developed by ICF for separate but related research into GCSE resit practices, resulted in a tool that covered a broader range of topics, including teaching hours, staffing, curriculum and learner support.

As a result, the final survey had an average completion time of approximately 26 minutes. Longer instruments place greater demands on respondents and may reduce response rates, increase partial completion and exacerbate non-response bias. Although efforts were made to maintain clarity and usability, the breadth of content required respondents to draw on multiple sources of information, which may have increased cognitive burden and contributed to a higher proportion of partial responses. Future surveys should prioritise core variables more tightly or consider modular designs to balance depth of data collection with feasibility.

Implementation considerations

The scoping phase showed substantial variation in how post-16 settings organise and deliver GCSE resits, but insufficient variation in the specific practice required for the preferred impact evaluation: moving from below to above minimum teaching hour expectations in 2024/25. This distinction is important. A sector may display considerable variation in their overall practices, while still lacking the variation needed to evaluate a specific policy change.

The findings from this study also underline the importance of understanding GCSE resit provision as a set of linked choices. Post-16 settings' decisions about teaching hours were intertwined with their choices about staffing, timetabling, curriculum coverage, grouping, exam entry, learner support and qualification enrolment. The potential effect of additional hours is likely to depend on how those hours are used and on the characteristics of the learners receiving them.

For future evaluations of school or setting choices, scoping work should therefore test whether the proposed treatment is sufficiently discrete, comparable and meaningful across settings. If implementation varies substantially, it may be more appropriate to evaluate broader models of provision or to examine associations between combinations of practices and outcomes, rather than attempting to isolate the impact of one element.

Ethical, consent and safeguarding issues

No major ethical, consent or safeguarding barriers emerged that would, in themselves, prevent further research in this area. The scoping phase involved senior leaders and curriculum staff and did not require direct participation from pupils or parents. The main ethical considerations related to confidentiality, anonymity and the careful reporting of findings so that individual post-16 settings could not be identified, particularly where data related to performance, staffing constraints or institutional decision-making.

Operational constraints

The costs to post-16 settings of increasing their teaching hours are likely to have influenced their response to the introduction of minimum expectations. Settings indicated their ability to increase their teaching hours was shaped by staffing availability, recruitment challenges, room availability, timetable capacity and the need to protect vocational learning time. Some settings that had increased their teaching hours reported substantial additional staffing costs. These costs are likely to have deterred many other settings that indicated they were delaying increasing their hours until formal compliance monitoring was due to begin, thereby reducing the variation we observed over the transition period. When future school or setting choices projects rely on contrast generated during a policy transition period, early data needs to be gathered about when institutions intend to respond to policy changes, to reaffirm that a sufficient timeframe exists during the transition period.

Evaluation considerations for future trials

Further research into GCSE resits should investigate post-16 settings' choice sets across a broad range of factors, given the evidence presented in this report about the interrelatedness of their choices across different factors. These factors include: qualification enrolment pathways, targeted support for learners with low prior attainment,

grouping approaches, staffing models, curriculum coverage, and the balance between whole-class teaching and small-group or one-to-one support. Variation in these factors may relate to learner outcomes.

Future evaluations of policy changes should prioritise early testing of the treatment-comparison group contrast which is anticipated. This includes empirically identifying how many settings are likely to change their practices, when they will change these practices, whether the changes will be sufficiently large, and, therefore, what level of contrast can be expected between treated and comparison groups.

Overall, this research underscores the importance of conducting scoping phases before committing to main-stage impact evaluations, particularly where there is uncertainty about whether settings can and will implement changes dictated by policy within the evaluation timeframe; whether these changes can be measured reliably; and whether the available sample size is likely to be sufficient to support causal impact analyses.

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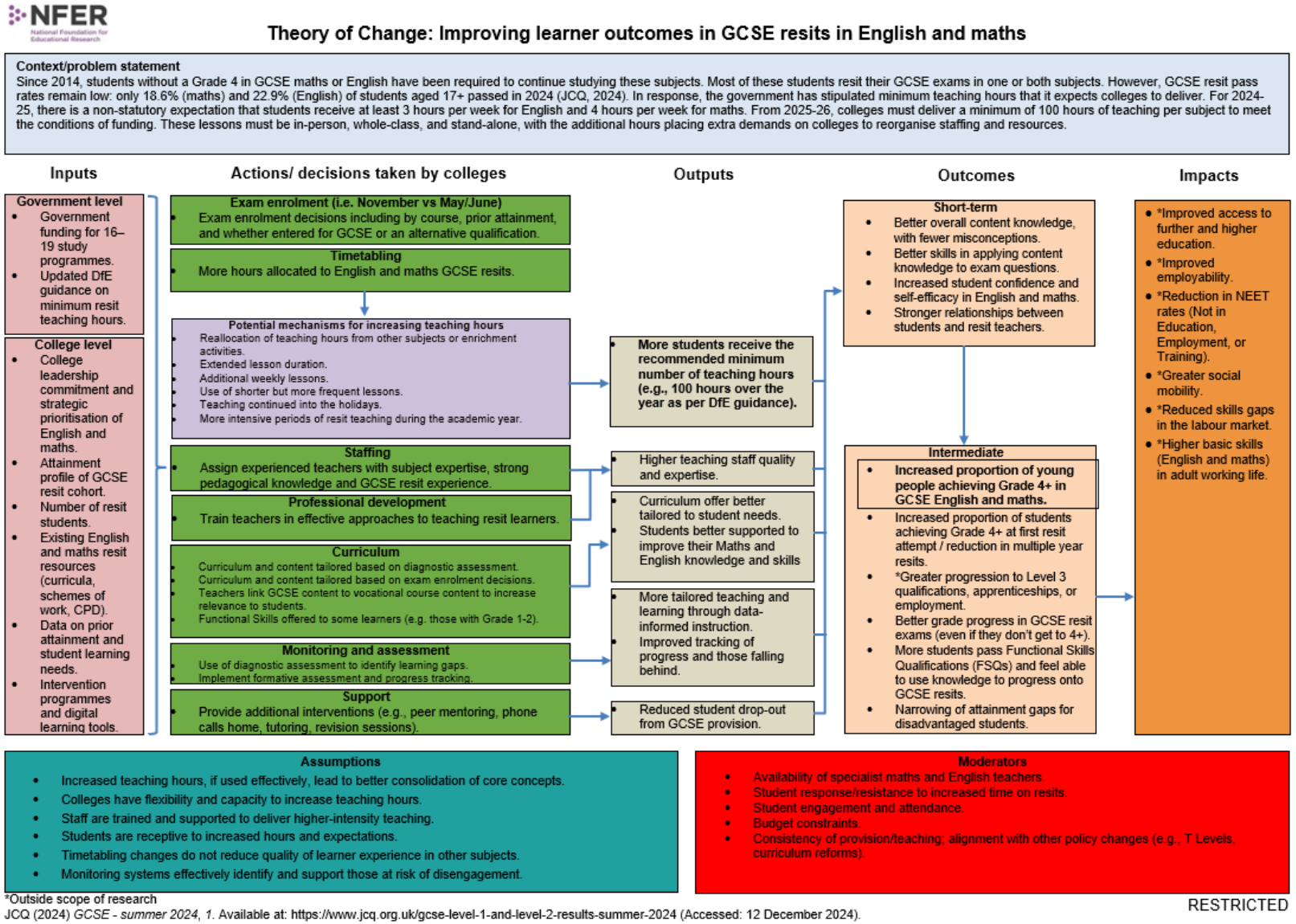
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Appendix 1: Theory of Change



Appendix 2: Required number of clusters

Based on a two-level Cluster Randomised Assignment (CRA) design

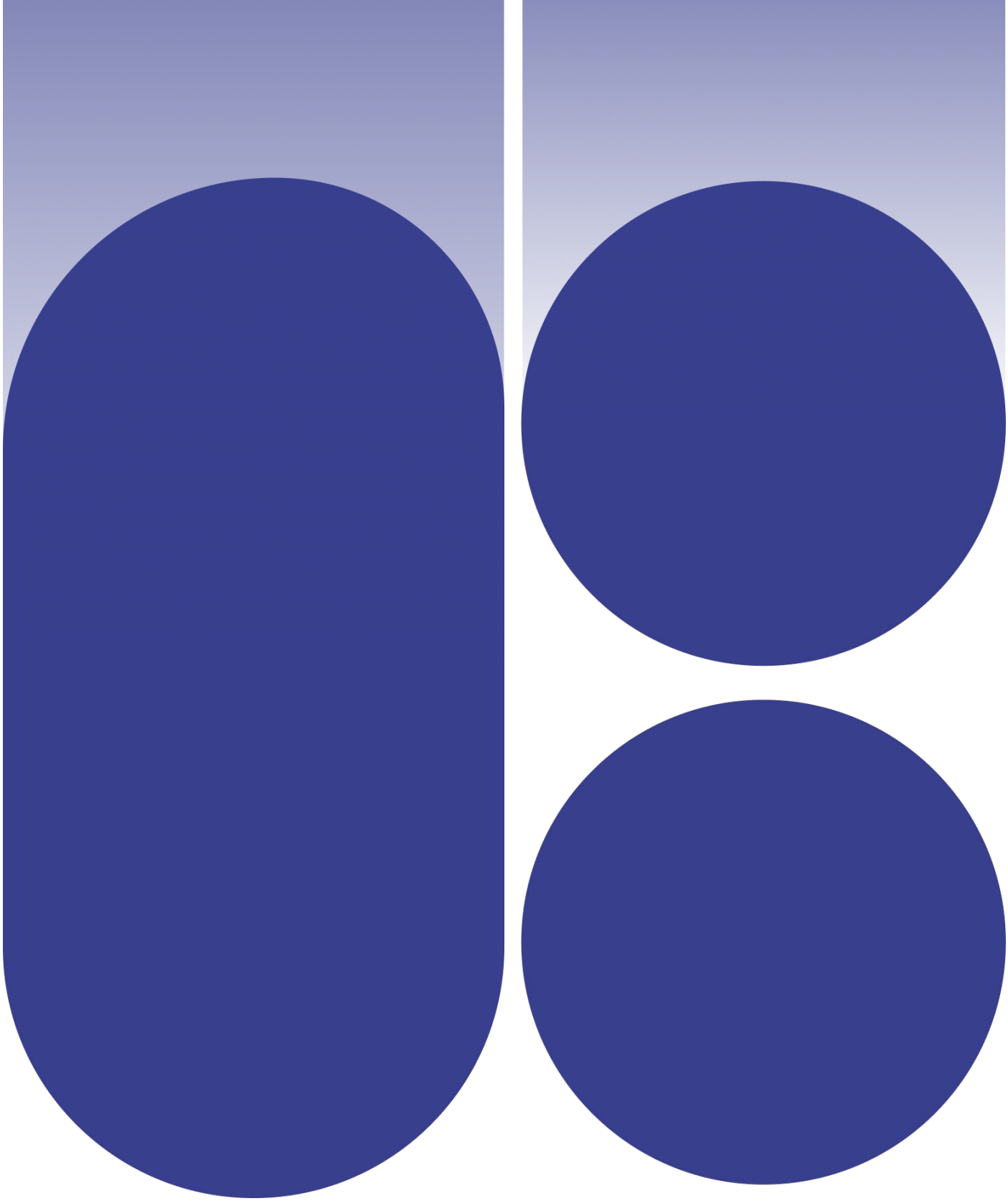
Maths			
MDES	Covariance	ICC	# of settings Required
0.1	0.5	0.1	241
0.15	0.5	0.1	108
0.2	0.5	0.1	62
0.1	0.6	0.1	194
0.15	0.6	0.1	87
0.2	0.6	0.1	50
0.1	0.7	0.1	146
0.15	0.7	0.1	66
0.2	0.7	0.1	38
0.1	0.8	0.1	98
0.15	0.8	0.1	45
0.2	0.8	0.1	26
0.1	0.5	0.2	478
0.15	0.5	0.2	213
0.2	0.5	0.2	121
0.1	0.6	0.2	382
0.15	0.6	0.2	171
0.2	0.6	0.2	97
0.1	0.7	0.2	287
0.15	0.7	0.2	129
0.2	0.7	0.2	73
0.1	0.8	0.2	192
0.15	0.8	0.2	87
0.2	0.8	0.2	50

English			
MDES	Covariance	ICC	# of settings Required
0.1	0.5	0.1	332
0.15	0.5	0.1	149
0.2	0.5	0.1	85
0.1	0.6	0.1	266
0.15	0.6	0.1	119
0.2	0.6	0.1	68
0.1	0.7	0.1	200
0.15	0.7	0.1	90
0.2	0.7	0.1	52
0.1	0.8	0.1	134
0.15	0.8	0.1	61
0.2	0.8	0.1	35
0.1	0.5	0.2	658
0.15	0.5	0.2	293
0.2	0.5	0.2	166
0.1	0.6	0.2	527
0.15	0.6	0.2	235
0.2	0.6	0.2	133
0.1	0.7	0.2	395
0.15	0.7	0.2	177
0.2	0.7	0.2	100
0.1	0.8	0.2	264
0.15	0.8	0.2	119
0.2	0.8	0.2	68

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