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Effects of resit exams on student progression: An Australian case study

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Effects of resit exams on student progression: An Australian case study

Abstract

Resit exams allow students who have failed a subject a second chance to demonstrate achievement of the academic standards required for program progression. Contrary to previous studies in this field, this paper reports on the value of resit exams with a comprehensive discussion of the lessons learned from the implementation of resits in different conditions and is intended to assist educators to decide whether such exams are a useful and fair way to promote student progression. The data were obtained from student academic performance metrics, a survey with a total of 444 students, six student focus group interviews with a total of 29 students, and three individual staff interviews. The study suggests the benefits of resit exams as a tool to improve student learning outcomes and progression, especially with the close relationship between resit exams and threshold and high-stakes assessment requirements. While the psychological and progression benefits of resit exams were acknowledged by the participants, concerns were expressed about some aspects of the way the school offered the resits and the issue of inequality. Alternatives were proposed to avoid unnecessary failure and promote learning.

Practitioner Notes

1. Resit exams allow students who have failed a subject a second chance to pass – an especially useful facility where a subject employs a high-stake exam linked to threshold requirements.
2. A resit policy reduces student stress about failing the main exam and does not impact upon student investment of study time and effort.
3. The administrative aspects of providing resits require thoughtful consideration to ensure fairness, to maintain institutional reputation, and to minimise staff workload.

Keywords

resit exams, supplementary assessment, student perspectives, progression, assessment implementation, retention strategy

Effects of Resit Exams on Student Progression: An Australian Case Study

Introduction

There is no doubt that student progression, attrition and completion rates have concerned universities, the government, and the broader community for many years (Schmidt et al., 2022). One way to improve completion rates and promote progression is to reduce the rate of exam failure by allowing more than one attempt, which may be disrupted by misadventure, illness, or simple anxiety. The term *resit* refers to the opportunity for students to take an exam a second time, in this case after failing the first attempt. Resits thus provide students who have failed a subject with another opportunity to demonstrate achievement of the academic learning outcomes required for program progression (Burr et al., 2018; Juriansz, Nguyen, & Clark, 2022). This paper presents one way of using resits as a resource to support student progression, providing a comprehensive discussion of the lessons learned from the implementation of resits in different conditions—as a rapid assessment response during the pandemic versus as a long-term policy, focusing on the contextual factors influencing the use of resits. Resit exams have been adopted in several contexts in the UK and US as well as in other European and Asian countries (Burr et al., 2018; Nijenkamp et al., 2022). However, the use of resits in the Australian higher education system remains under-researched. This paper aims to explore the value of resit exams in Australian higher education and assist educators to decide whether such exams are a useful and fair way to promote student progression. This study contributes to the understanding and practice of resits and appraises their impact on student learning and on higher education institutions.

Literature

As described by Activity Theory (proposed by Engeström (2003) and based on earlier work by Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) and Alexei Leont'ev (1904–1979)), (learning) activities are oriented towards an object to produce outcomes in a process mediated by artefacts/tools and influenced by rules, the community, and division of labour. The implementation of resit exams involves a variety of stakeholders, including academics, subject coordinators, administrative exam staff, students, and school leaders. All stakeholders collaborate in implementing resit exam rules and policies in the teaching and learning context. The Activity Theory framework provides "the tools for revealing the social and material resources that are salient in activity" (Roth & Lee, 2007, p. 197). Most previous studies on this subject discuss the purposes of resits (the why) and some procedural concerns of resit implementation (the how). The literature on the use of resit exams in tertiary education is surprisingly scarce and primarily concerns the justifications and concerns related to fairness (Burr et al., 2018; Juriansz et al., 2022; Nijenkamp, 2022; Ricketts, 2010).

Use of Resit Exams in Higher Education Contexts

Justifications for resits vary according to context. For example, according to Proud (2015), university students in the UK are routinely examined in high-stakes assessments at the end of each academic year. However, these examinations do not count towards their final degree classification in year one, and they are merely used to determine whether students may progress to the second year of the program. Therefore, resits serve a dual purpose. First, they offer the student a second chance to show achievement of the required academic standards

to progress to the next year. Second, they "encourage the failing students to spend the summer working for these resits, which may mean that concepts, techniques and working practices are fresh in the heads of those experiencing resits over their peers who passed their examinations at first attempt" (Proud, 2015, p.681). In another context—the Netherlands, where grades are between 0 and 10 with 5.5 as the cut-off point for a passing grade, "Resits are limited to a maximum of three out of ten programs and take place during the summer period to discourage their use. In this way, the resit is positioned as an opportunity of last resort instead of a regular examination opportunity" (Arnold, 2016, p. 1107). Recently, Juriansz et al. (2022) reported on the implementation of a resit exams pilot project at an Australian university to support student learning and wellbeing as a response to challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid pivot to online learning and assessment. This study found resit exams to be suitable for high-stakes exams and threshold assessments. We recommend further investigation of the impact of resit exams beyond an urgent and therapeutic response to an unforeseen crisis.

Robust resit exam policies have resulted in significant improvements to student wellbeing and progression as they have allowed students to avoid unnecessary financial debt associated with repeating failed subjects (Burr, 2018; Juriansz et al., 2022; Nijenkamp et al., 2018, 2022; Proud, 2015; Ricketts, 2010). Resit (or supplementary) exams have the obvious benefit that students receive a second chance to demonstrate achievement of the required standards to pass a subject without the time and expense of an entire semester repeating the subject (Ricketts, 2010). Students who pass subjects and maintain their rate of progression are more likely to complete their program of study (Nijenkamp et al., 2022; Proud, 2015). The benefit of avoiding additional fee debt is significant. Students in Australia who drop out of university borrow an average of AUD12,000 in student loans, while receiving no qualification that would raise their earning potential (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018). For international students, tertiary education in Australia costs an average of AUD30,840, in addition to AUD20,290 per year in living costs (Playdon, 2021). Resits may ameliorate the psychological burden of failing a first attempt (Burr et al., 2018) whereby students avoid the social and employability consequences of academic failure (Ricketts, 2010) and are encouraged to work harder (Michaelis & Schwanebeck, 2016). For this reason, the use of resit exams appears to benefit both students and institutions; nonetheless, concerns have been expressed about fairness, administrative feasibility, and consistency of standards. However, the literature on resit exams in universities, especially the insights into the effects of resit exams on student progression, is rather under-developed.

Resit Exams and Concerns

Differing opinions on the effect of resitting exams—or their availability—on student learning and academic progress have been expressed in the literature. It has been estimated that a "rational student" will invest less effort in a subject for which a resit is available. Based on a theoretical economics model, Kooreman (2012) predicted that while students are only slightly more likely to pass the subject, their efforts will be severely reduced by the availability of resits. Kooreman observed that in practice, students used the first exam to discover the nature and difficulty of the exam with a view to preparing for the resit exams, whereas conscientious students prepared for the initial exam without any intention of resitting. Further research is necessary to explore whether the impact of resits on learning would have a similar impact in different disciplines or assessment types. In Kooreman's study, the students appear to have adapted their behaviours to a new culture of practice in which the facility of resit exams was

well known. Kooreman's findings were echoed by a laboratory study by Nijenkamp et al. (2022), who found that students reported less time investment if there was a possibility of a supplementary examination. However, both studies relied on predicted effects given economically rational behaviour. It is perhaps questionable whether in practice students have sufficient awareness of their own potential to budget study time on such a basis. Again, further research is needed.

Another consideration is whether resits offer an unfair advantage. That is the position taken by Pell et al. (2009), who point to the occasionally significant improvement by students in resit examinations. The authors of a resit exams pilot study in an Australian context found that students could improve their scores by more than a grade level after a resit (Juriansz et al., 2022). However, the results came from the first pilot of resits as a remediation measure to assist student wellbeing during the first outbreak of the pandemic. The authors called for further research on this topic. A previous study of UK universities stated that the common practice in resit exams was to cap the mark for resits at the minimum pass mark (Burr et al., 2018). Another possibility to reduce the perceived unfair advantage conferred by resits is to increase the time between initial exam and resit (Nijenkamp et al., 2018). This is predicted to reduce the "resit effect" of reduced investment of study time, while allowing genuine revision and additional support where necessary. However, effects on staff workload and student progression must be considered. Based on earlier findings (Burr et al., 2018; Slater, 2009), it is hypothesised that the more time that students have to prepare, the better for their learning, and students would prefer this. It is also hypothesised that academic workload for staff and the host school is heavier when there is a longer time lag between the main exam and the resit exams. To date, studies of the impact of different timings of resit exams on academic learning and staff workload have been sparse in the literature. How this timing affects student learning outcomes and progression remain under-researched.

These key questions related to the effects of resits as a long-term policy on student learning and progression all need answered to determine the value of resit exams in Australian higher education and inform educators' decisions on whether resit exams are a useful and fair way to promote student progression. In this study, we address the research question: *How does the use of resit exams affect student progression in an Australian higher education context?*

Methods

A case study approach is indicated for an exploratory study that examines a complex issue in a particular context that requires multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2004). Therefore, we adopted this approach to collect data from a trial of resit exams in an Australian law school. The research draws on a range of methods, with data collected from students in focus groups and surveys as well as exam results. Staff perspectives were also included through interviews with exam administrators.

Context

The COVID-19 pandemic and emergency measures adopted by universities around the globe for student learning prompted the law school at an Australian university in this study to implement resit exams. The school offers law subjects to law and non-law majors (for example, the *Enterprise Law* subject is offered to business students). It is important to note that in Australian higher education, the academic year normally starts in February with the autumn

semester, which lasts until the end of June. Students then have a two- or three-week break before the spring semester (about 15–16 weeks long), which starts in late July and ends in late November. Some universities offer summer semester subjects between November and January. Some offer subjects in trimesters (about 10–11 weeks long) or quarter-based terms (about 10 weeks in total).

The school held two resit exam trials with different timings. The first was held in July at the end of the first (autumn) semester, within a week of notification of the main exam results. The main purpose of the first trial was to give the students a second chance. The second trial was organised in February 2021 for students who failed subjects offered in second (spring) semester and summer schools, nearly three months after the spring semester finished. The main reasons for the different timings of the two resit trials were the much shorter time gap between the autumn and spring semesters and the closure of the university after the spring semester for two weeks over the Christmas/New Year holidays. The first trial was offered at short notice owing to the impact of the pandemic. It is important to note that the resit exams had not previously been offered at the school and are not common in Australian higher education contexts. The second trial was conducted as a continuing procedure, as the pandemic was still active and restrictions remained, although many universities in Australia in general and in New South Wales in particular encouraged students to return to campus in early 2021.

The resit exams were offered to all students who failed a law subject, and the scores were not capped. The school ensured that the level of difficulty and exam conditions were equivalent to those of the main exams. No additional academic support or feedback were offered to students who took the resits.

Data Collection and Analysis

As part of a larger project approved by the university Human Research Ethics Committee, this study utilised four sources of data: student academic performance data, an online student survey, student focus group interviews, and individual interviews with academic and professional staff members who were involved in managing resit exams.

The first source of data was student academic performance in the autumn and spring semesters in 2020. All results from students who sat the resits were collected from school records to investigate their impact on the final results. We collected the data from all students who failed one of two core first-year subjects on their first attempt. These were downloaded and arranged in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The subjects use a series of assessments with a final exam, so an exam score and an overall subject score were recorded. Two researchers (not involved in teaching) performed the analysis of the data separately and compared their observations. The third author, familiar with the subjects and assessment procedures, reviewed the findings.

A survey of students was conducted to identify student perspectives on different timings of resits on their learning and their preferences for the “ideal” time for this event. The participants were drawn from 444 students enrolled in the program who took the opportunity to resit exams for subjects failed in the autumn and spring semesters. An online survey was created by the research group based on previous studies on the impact of resits on student learning. The survey consisted of nine multiple-choice questions with the option of “Other” to give students

more choice and space in an open question to justify their answers. We developed the survey items (open-ended questions) based on previous work and peer reviewed by two school academics as part of the evaluation project, who suggested amendments to wording, number, and order of the survey items. The first survey was used in July 2020 at the end of the autumn semester to gather students' initial feedback on the use of exams to support their learning. Overall, 275 responses were received (a 17.2% response rate), including 59 (22.0%) from students who had attempted a resit exam and 209 (78.0%) who had not.

Following the pilot, the research team reflected on and refined the survey items. The revised survey was distributed to all students in April 2021. Links to both surveys using the Qualtrics online survey tool) were distributed to students on the school email list by the Deputy Dean of the school in this study. After two weeks, 82 students had responded (accounting for 18.5%). Three groups of students responded to the survey: (1) students who resat exams in the first trial only; (2) students who resat in the second trial only, and (3) students who resat in both trials. The data collected from the survey were analysed by two of the authors looking for themes and recurring topics in student comments.

Three semi-structured individual interviews with school staff members were conducted to explore the impact of different timings of resit exams on their workload. The interview questions were based on their involvement in organising the resits for the two trials. One was the school leader who initiated and managed the resit policy. He was responsible for curriculum development and review for the School of Law, and he engaged with curriculum issues across the university as a member of several university-level committees that review and develop assessment policy—in particular, supplementary exams. The second participant was the coordinator of a core subject with a high proportion of failed students. The third participant was an administrative officer with the student inquiries administration team, who assisted the school in collecting resit exam manuscripts, timetabling, grades, and results. Each interview was about 45 minutes long with the same interviewer/researcher. The semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom, a video conferencing tool that generated automatic transcripts after the interviews. The transcripts were then checked by two researchers in the research team to identify key themes. For the purpose of publication, pseudonyms have been used to provide anonymity and preserve confidentiality.

After importing the text files into NVivo (QSR, 2020), we coded the survey responses and focus group transcripts. Segments of text were then assigned to "nodes" in NVivo. Example codes included "Better use of time" and "One exam should not determine whole unit". To reduce overlap and redundancy of codes, the researcher double-checked by taking the list of codes and going back to the data, circled or highlighted the quotes that support the codes. Finally, the researcher reduced the codes into two overarching themes. All the data sources were pooled in an effort to triangulate findings and identify recurring themes. Focus group transcripts were cross-checked by more than one researcher to increase the reliability of the conclusions.

Results

Resit Opportunities and Academic Performance

To understand the impact of a resit exam policy on student learning, the marks attained in resits were compared with those from the original exam.

In the spring semester of 2020, there were 435 resit attempts from 444 eligible grades awarded. This is a considerable increase from the comparable rate of 175 resits from 257 in the previous semester. The academic performance data showed that 97.8% of the eligible students attempted the resit trial in February (435/444), which is a much higher proportion than in the first resit trial (67.2%). The students and staff mentioned that students all knew about the resit opportunities well in advance and there were more communications about the second resits than in the first round.

Table 1

Numbers of Students Offered Resits by Final Grade (After Resit): 2020

	Pilot 1: Autumn			Pilot 2: Spring		
Final grade	Attempts	Non-attempts	Total	Attempts	Non-attempts	Total
Distinction	12		12	3		3
Credit	33		33	27		27
Pass	87		87	137		137
Fail	36	66	102	234		234
Compulsory fail	7	14	21	7		7
FNS*		2	2	14	2	16
Incomplete				9	7	16
Pending				4		4
Total	175	82	257	435	9	444

*****Note: Fail Non-Submission (FNS) results are awarded where a student has not attempted all mandatory assessments.

It was noted that the range of changes in subject mark (range) was narrower in pilot 2 than in pilot 1, despite more students participating (Table 2). However, a higher proportion of students failed the subjects despite the resits in the second semester than the first semester: 54% (resit 2) and 21% (resit 1). This may be attributable to different subject offerings in semesters 1 and 2, or to attrition of the lowest performing students after semester 1, or to students having more experience in examinations and thus performing more consistently. It should also be noted in relation to Table 1 that resit opportunities were given to all students who failed the subjects, and the school did not cap the mark for the resit.

Table 2

Mean Change to Final Average Subject Mark Following Resit

Final grade	Change in mark (range)	Mean change	% Fails after resit
Pilot 1: Autumn	4–28	11	21%*
Pilot 2: Spring	11–21	16	54%*

To explore this further, two subjects (*Enterprise Law* and *Fundamentals of Australian Law*)—which were offered in both semesters—were investigated, and the results are presented in Table 3. The *Enterprise Law* subject was a "service subject" offering basic legal knowledge to students from other specialities, such as accountancy and construction. *Fundamentals of Australian Law* is an introductory law subject for all law students. It should be noted that the proportion of fail grades awarded was substantially lower than in other years (before the resits), which may be because in recognition of the stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the school permitted greater latitude in allowing withdrawal without academic penalty. *Enterprise Law* is a very large first-year subject with a rather high fail rate, as a compulsory subject taken in conjunction with a non-law speciality. The average increase in marks was between five and seven percentage points, which offers some reassurance concerning the test–retest reliability of the assessment. Moreover, the differences in scores were similar in both semesters. It is noted that the mode of delivery, teachers, and exam formats remained the same in both semesters of the study.

Table 3

Comparison between Two Large First-Year Subjects—Ratio of Resit Attempts

	Enterprise Law		Fundamentals of Australian Law	
	Pilot 1: Autumn	Pilot 2: Spring	Pilot 1: Autumn	Pilot 2: Spring
No. students	941	948	321	87
No. resit attempts	234	212	17	10
Mean change in mark	+5	+4	+6	+7

To address the second question of whether those who take resits were likely to require further resits, the number of students taking resits was compared with their record from autumn. If those who take resit examinations are simply less able students or are consistently weak, then a resit in one semester should predict weaker performance in subsequent semesters. However, if resits improve exam skills or motivate students to improve their performance, a resit should improve performance—and hence the likelihood of passing—in later semesters.

Of the 444 offers of resit opportunities in spring, 84 (or nearly 20%) were given to students who had taken a resit exam in the previous semester. From these, there were 64 attempts. Three students who had attempted a resit in autumn had the opportunity to take a resit in

spring but did not attempt it. The remaining 351 grades were for students who had not previously qualified for a resit (a further six either did not attend or did not qualify for the resit).

Of those who took a resit in autumn, 35/64 (54.7%) failed another resit in spring. Of those who took their first resit in spring, 200/351 (57%) failed. This suggests that any difference was slight, and students who fail in one semester are no more likely to fail in the following one than peers taking their first resit.

Table 4

Resit Students in Spring in Relation to those in Autumn

Autumn semester	**Spring semester**		
	Attempted resit	**Eligible but did not attempt resit**	**Total eligible for resit (Spring)**
Attempted resit in autumn	64	3	67
Not applicable*	351	6	357
Eligible but did not attempt resit	20	0	20
Total	435	9	444

*Not enrolled or did not require resit

Table 5

Grades Following Spring Resits

Spring grade	No. resit attempts
Distinction	3
Credit	27
Pass	137
Fail	268
Total	435

Asked whether the knowledge that resit policy or opportunities for resits were available had an impact on their investment of study time and effort for the main exams, two thirds of the surveyed students responded that it did not, while one third believed it reduced their investment of study time and effort in the main exams.

Students and Staff Attitudes Towards Resit Exams

The data from the student survey, student focus group interviews and staff interviews indicate that the students and staff were supportive of the resit exams because both pilots provided

students with a second chance to support their learning and wellbeing during the pandemic. The reasons for positive feedback on the resits mainly related to student wellbeing during the pandemic and progression through the program, as illustrated in the following comments.

> *The idea to incorporate resit exams was amazing, especially in a law degree which is already so stressful and long.* (Survey)

> *In terms of the exam resit policy, I'm pretty sure that they are scrapping the compulsory fail after COVID as well, which is good. [I would] extend the resit policy to first-year students as well, given that they're new to the university and it might act as a good second chance for them, especially given the way the School of Law offers its units.* (Student Focus group interview)

> *I have a very positive view and I think supplementary exams are an exceptionally positive experience for students in terms of fulfilling our fundamental role as educators, that is to provide students with fair and efficient opportunities to demonstrate their learning against the established learning outcomes. The history of assessing students, has always been one which has perhaps put too much stake on administrative efficiency and not the educated opportunity for the students. The idea that a student must perform at a high level at a very short amount of time two or three hours across a whole semester doesn't ring true.* (Staff 1)

Views on How to Improve the Resit Exam Experience

While students and staff were all positive about using resits to support students, concerns were expressed about some aspects of the practice and alternatives were proposed to avoid unnecessary failure and promote learning.

The first aspect that both staff and students noted was the decision not to cap the resit results. Their comments reflected those in the literature that resits were too lenient, were unfair to more diligent students who passed on the first attempt, discouraged effort, and unduly added to their stress.

> *It is unfair to students who have worked hard to pass exams at bare pass first time, and they are not allowed to resit to get a higher mark.* (Student Focus group interview)

Asked about the timing of resits, approximately 95% of respondents reported that they wanted resits to be held within one to three weeks of the notification of the initial exam results; 32.5% of respondents preferred one week after notification of results, whereas 62.4% wanted three weeks after notification of results but prior to commencement of the following semester. The main reasons for this are to support their progression in the program and their preparation for next semester, as well as allowing them to retain what they had learned but giving them sufficient time to revise.

> *We can get our results and then distinguish where we were lacking. One week would actually be perfect because you can go back to the information you had previously studied and do the extra work if need be. It also is more motivating*

> *in my opinion. You have that push to do better particularly after the release of those results. That motivation would die down two or three weeks after.* (Student survey)

> *Despite being so close to results, this is the best option to receive results prior to the next semester commencement, helps to retain the knowledge of the exam having been so close and also allows those who failed a chance to reflect without having too much time between exams.* (Student survey)

Three weeks were preferable for the majority of respondents for similar reasons, but this period allowed more time to revise.

> *I think three weeks is a reasonable amount of time. Any longer and it will start to become a burden. It would be preferable to hold it prior to Christmas for the spring resit, and prior to the start of spring semester for the autumn resit. To sit one week after the results are released may put too much pressure on someone who wasn't expecting to resit, and who may have planned for other commitments. As for during the exam period of the next semester, I feel this is too far away. Once a new subject begins, one tends to want to put the previous subject out of mind. A resit exam at this time would be too stressful, as one would effectively be (re)studying a whole extra unit for that semester.* (Student survey)

The first trial was held within one week of the result notifications while trial 2 was held after more than two months after the notification of the main exams results. The interviewees all mentioned this different scheduling was due to the academic year calendar and for the school convenience.

> *The spring students sit with the summer students, so there was actually one structure—one administrative structure—within which all students consider the real examination. And that was administratively easier for the school and, incidentally, of course, it gave the spring students until February to prepare and then resit*. (Staff 1)

However, from the students' perspective, the three-month lag was non-essential, and it even created some issues such as forgetting content, stress about the resits over the months and lack of clarity about the progression and the impact on their coming semester.

> *I think the exam time was too far out of the teaching period; it was a few weeks into the new semester, and it got confusing. I think the exam should be within the teaching period for that subject.* (Student survey)

More students (62.5% of respondents) prefer the shorter time lag, even within one week was preferable than the long period of time. They mentioned that ideally, the resits should be organised within two or three weeks after the notification of the main exam results. The reasons for this were the content and knowledge were still fresh in students' minds, and it would support their progression better.

> *We can get our results and then distinguish where we were lacking. One week would actually be perfect because you can go back to the information you had previously studied and do the extra work if need be. It also is more motivating in my opinion. You have that push to do better, particularly after the release of those results. That motivation would die down 2 or 3 weeks after.* (Student survey)

When asked about study strategies for resit exams when they had two to three months, the majority of respondents engaged in comprehensive revision and deep learning. Interestingly, the exam questions were good resources for them to analyse the areas of weakness for improvement as the students commented:

> *I revised the modules that I had learnt in class as well as go over the exam material. It was good to resit, as the main exam gave an idea of what the other exam was going to be structured like.*
>
> *I used my previous notes for the main exam and worked harder on the topics I knew I was weak on. I watched the podcasts on those topics and did further research to understand. After sitting the main exam, I knew what I needed to improve on and did so for the resit exam. I had to resit one of my unit examinations. I went from a fail to a high credit.*
>
> *However, a few students mentioned that they had not reviewed until just before the resit, with little attention.*
>
> *Last minute cramming.* (Student survey)
>
> *Not so much, like read some notes.* (Student survey)

The staff also supported the view that proper timing would allow students to revise better. They noted that the workload required for organising the resits was minimal, with little difference between the first pilot and the second one. The main difference was because the first resit was the pilot, the school needed to set up the procedure from the scratch. Moreover, the adjustment from in-person to online exams came with challenges. However, it was noted by all three staff members that the additional workload was relatively light.

> *It was the first time for everything … this was the first time we did resit and was the first time we did online exams; it was the first time for everything, so it was a little bit more. (Staff 3)*
>
> *And then, it said positive impact on student progression student retention and student wellbeing, and I think it's been yes, an additional burden on academic staff, but not an unreasonable and not an overly burdensome. (Staff 1)*
>
> *I know that the unit coordinator of Fundamentals [of Australian Law] in spring had to write three exams… the original the deferred and the supplementary … as unit coordinators they have that sort of burden, because they set the students who were doing the resit a separate deferred exam, and I'd already written that. (Staff 2)*

Discussion

Contrary to the findings of previous studies (Slater, 2009), which indicated negative perceptions of resits, this study supported recent findings by Juriansz et al. (2022) that resits are justified in some contexts. They are especially useful as a second chance where high-stakes exams and threshold requirements exist. Despite some concerns over the way the school offered the resits, students and staff were generally positive of the resit policy and practice. The positive attitudes towards resits could be explained by a number of factors. Obviously, both the school and students benefited from enhanced progression through the program. Thus, the learning experience may be more satisfactory. Moreover, the resits were well received by students owing to the nature and the design of the assessment practices in the programs and subjects that utilised exams. Some of these subjects had threshold requirements or high-stakes exams that caused exam stress for even the most diligent (Juriansz et al., 2022).

The study suggests that resit exams have benefits as a tool to improve student learning outcomes and progression, especially with the close relationship between resit exams and threshold and high-stakes assessment requirements. It is true that resit results may be significantly better than those from the first exam. However, this is not necessarily a failure of resits *per se*. It may be that the first examination does not provide a fair representation of the students' ability and the resit prevents unfairness rather than causing it. Obviously, given the presence of the resit policy, students were advised well in advance to take the resit opportunities. When there was an established policy and students were aware of it, 95% of them took the opportunity to resit. Contrary to previous studies (Kooreman, 2008; Nijenkamp et al., 2022), this study found that the established policy helped reduce student stress and anxiety about the possibility of failing the main exam but had no impact on student investment in study time and effort in the main exam (the fail rates were similar between the studied subjects in the first semester (without a resit policy) and the second semester (with an established resits policy). Given the same exam formats and marking procedures and standards, this indicates little or no impact of resit availability on student learning for the main exams. However, further research and data need to be collected in a longitudinal study to confirm this.

The established policy and the lack of capping on resit scores raised the issue of inequality for those students who strove to achieve a bare pass at this first attempt or advantaged students who are strategic. There was concern about unfairness with the model of offering resits to all failed students and not capping the results. It may be fairer to offer resits to all students, including not only failed students and those who pass but are interested in improving their scores, or if resits are offered to failed students only, the results should be capped, as practised in the UK universities highlighted by Burr et al. (2018) and Kickert et al. (2021). Moreover, given that law is a professional program in Australian higher education and relatively few students are enrolled each year, this practice could be manageable. How would a school cope with thousands of students enrolled each year and large numbers of students failing? The cost of administration and marking would be huge. Another drawback in the model identified in this study is the reputation of the qualification when the students can repeat the exams and receive a higher score for the second effort than those who passed the first

attempt. Learning at university may not be a competition, but after graduation, those students may compete for the same job. How could an employer differentiate between them? The impact on their future employment remains unclear. This is an area for further research.

The consequences of different timings of resit exams for academic performance and student learning for the resits were investigated. Earlier findings (Burr et al., 2018; Slater, 2009) indicate that the more time students have, the better they learn. Students may prefer this, but the impact of longer time lag was to increase staff workload. In other words, academic workload for staff and the host school was heavier when there was more time between the main exam and the resit exam. This study found that on the contrary, the staff did not perceive any great difference in terms of workload between the two pilots. The only difference was that the first required the staff to set up the resits from scratch. Once the arrangements were in place, the second pilot was the same as the first. In relation to studying for the resits, students would prefer a shorter time lag to maintain their knowledge of the content and revise from there without putting too much effort into re-learning it.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Study

We recognise a number of limitations to this study, in part attributable to the additional burden caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–21. First, the study context was limited to one school in a single university, which limits the generalisability of the findings to other contexts. Second, the survey items were developed in a relatively short period by the research team and despite reminders the response rate was lower than expected, given that students were all studying remotely, and no financial incentives could be offered. This may have an impact on the representativeness and generalisability of the findings.

Conclusion

This study addresses key questions regarding why and how to implement supplementary exams. Resit exams were positively acknowledged in educational contexts where there are subjects with threshold and high-stakes exams requirements. Resits bring the potential benefits of improving student progression, which had a consequent positive impact on student wellbeing and their learning experience. Where resits are needed, the design of supplementary assessment and administrative aspects of exam implementation requires thoughtful consideration to ensure fairness, maintain the reputation of the institution and minimise the associated staff workload.

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