

By email

Janet Finch-Saunders, MS  
Chair of the Petitions Committee

12 January 2021

Dear Chair,

**RE: Petition P-05-1025 Ensure fairness for students taking exams in 2021**

Since the closure of schools and cancellation of exams in March 2020, the education sector has been operating in extraordinary and volatile circumstances. It continues to be a very difficult time for everyone in the sector and the petitioners' concerns are understandable.

On 14 July 2020, to mitigate ongoing disruption to teaching and learning, Qualifications Wales published two new regulatory documents; *Requirements for Adapting Assessments for GQ Qualifications for 2021* and *Special Conditions for Adapting Qualifications for GQ Qualifications for 2021*. Whilst QW has a responsibility to ensure that any adaptations made by WJEC are compliant with these regulatory requirements, it is WJEC which holds responsibility for the detail of these adaptations.

Due to differences between subjects, a 'blanket' approach for adapting qualifications was not possible so when WJEC first made adaptations to their qualifications, following consultation, in July, they were subject specific and the fairest way possible to mitigate disruption at that time. Some of these adaptations included optionality, where appropriate and where possible. However, during the Autumn Term, it became clear to Qualifications Wales and WJEC that these adaptations did not go far enough to mitigate the ongoing disruption caused by COVID-19. In response, WJEC made further adaptations, under the existing framework, to their qualifications and communicated these to centres in November.

QW is assured that WJEC gave due consideration to the adaptations made, though it was clear at the outset that it would not be possible to adapt qualifications in such a way as to suit every learner in every centre in these extraordinary circumstances, given that centre approaches vary and given that COVID-19 is having a differential impact on regions, centres and individual learners. Indeed, the qualifications system can only go so far in helping to address the differential impact of COVID-19 within the wider education sector.

Whilst adaptations to the assessments for qualifications were made by WJEC, no content was removed from their qualification specifications. This was to ensure parity with the approach taken by other UK regulators and to ensure that learners in Wales were not disadvantaged relative to their peers in other jurisdictions. This enabled teachers to decide what was

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practically possible to cover in the unique circumstances of their schools, but in the knowledge that adaptations made by WJEC reduced assessment pressure for learners.

More recently, on 14 December 2020, the Minister for Education set out her policy direction to Qualifications Wales on the awarding of approved GCSE, AS and A level qualifications in summer 2021, which reflects the assessment approach proposed by the Minister's Design and Delivery Advisory Group (DDAG). This policy position can be summarised<sup>1</sup> as follows:

- The principle of a three pillared approach to general qualifications which incorporates non exam assessment, internal assessment and external assessment, recognising this needs to be considered on a subject specific basis taking individual qualification structures into account;
- Non exam assessment, as adapted by WJEC, should continue as planned; Internal assessment should be internally managed and marked, but should utilise external assessment material provided by WJEC based upon adapted past papers to reduce administrative burden and ensure equity of assessment experience. Practitioners should be able to exercise professional judgement as to how and when these assessments are delivered within an assessment window, so that they can be embedded in teaching and learning plans and learners' preparation can be supported
- External assessment should be externally set and marked, although advance notification of topics should be provided to support learning. These will be classroom based assessments and flexibility should be provided as to how and when the assessments are taken within an assessment window to support learners;
- These components should be mark based and should be used by the WJEC to determine the grades that learners are awarded;
- This approach should include necessary arrangements to ensure equity and fairness for learners including reasonable adjustments, processes for appeals, access to private candidates and special consideration procedures. Given the variability that there has been in teaching and learning consideration should be given as to how the special consideration process may be adapted to support those learners who have been the most adversely affected.
- Overall grade outcomes in summer 2021 should reflect a level of generosity that is similar to those awarded in summer 2020.

Qualifications Wales has considered the direction, the views of the DDAG, and the views of its own stakeholder group and has decided to proceed in line with the adopted policy position of Welsh Government and the recommendations of the DDAG.

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<sup>1</sup> As summarised in a letter to David Jones (Chair of Qualifications Wales) and Phillip Blaker (Chief Executive Officer, Qualifications Wales), dated 14 December 2020, from Kirsty Williams AS/MS (Minister for Education)

On 18 December 2020 we updated our regulatory document, *Requirements for Adapting Assessments for GQ Qualifications for 2021*, accordingly.

However, this is a new approach that WJEC will be delivering and there will be risks and challenges. Qualifications Wales set out the need to do further work with stakeholders and the DDAG at the start of the New Year, over the coming weeks to confirm the appeals process and how grades will be awarded.

At the heart of all Qualifications Wales decision making is the wellbeing of learners and teachers in Wales. This includes ensuring equity and fairness for learners, including learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, as far as is reasonably possible in the context of our shared extraordinary circumstances. The solutions to the awarding of qualifications this year are limited and we seek to find solutions that are as fair as possible.

Most recently, the Minister for Education announced that unless there is a significant reduction in cases of coronavirus before 29 January, school and college students will continue to learn online until the February half term. Qualifications Wales has announced that the spring internal assessment window, due between 22 February and 23 April for GCSE, AS and A levels, is cancelled as a result of this decision. Qualifications Wales is currently working with the DDAG to review existing contingency plans and revisit assessment arrangements for the award of these qualifications in summer 2021. We expect new arrangements to be put in place shortly following advice to the Minister from DDAG.

Yours sincerely,



Phillip Blaker  
Chief Executive Officer, Qualifications Wales