

Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg
Absenoldeb Disgyblion

Welsh Parliament
Children, Young People and Education Committee
Pupil absence

Ymateb gan Cymwysterau yng Nghymru

Evidence from Qualifications Wales

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry on pupil absence.

The issues of pupil absence and the impact on children and young people's learning and wider well-being has been a long-standing debate. Previous reports published by Estyn have highlighted the correlation that absence from the school site has on educational performance¹. For example, pre-pandemic, only around two-fifths of pupils who missed between 10 and 20% of school time achieved 5 good GCSEs including English/Welsh and mathematics. This correlation is further supported by the Key Stage 4 indicators by year and absence rates published by Welsh Government². Although the causes of lower attainment are complex, higher absence from school is unlikely to be beneficial to learning overall.

Despite the efforts of schools and colleges to provide remote learning and keep learners engaged, we have heard that the pandemic has led to more issues of absence. We know that schools and colleges have worked tirelessly to meet these difficult and unprecedented challenges and are continuing to deal with disruptions. We also know from information published by Welsh Government on pupils' attendance during the pandemic³ that there is higher absence from school this year among qualification year groups. Throughout this period, our priority as the independent regulator of qualifications has been and continues to be, to secure a fair system for measuring learners' attainment.

We recognise the important role we have to play in contributing to Welsh Government's education COVID-19 recovery plan⁴, and support the recommended

¹ [Secondary school attendance rises but still needs improvement | Estyn \(gov.wales\)](#)

² [KS4 indicators by year and absence rates \(gov.wales\)](#)

³ [Attendance of pupils in maintained schools: 6 September 2021 to 10 June 2022 | GOV.WALES](#)

⁴ [Renew and reform: supporting learners' wellbeing and progression \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#)

strategies for improving attendance as identified in the independent report commissioned by the government – “Attendance review – implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for school attendance”.

In our response to this inquiry, we make the following key points:

- the extensive disruption to teaching and learning has inevitably impacted on learners. In response, and in accordance with Welsh Government policy, in 2020 and 2021 we put alternative arrangements in place that allowed for outcomes to be awarded to learners based on the judgement of their school or college (centre). This enabled learners to progress and continue their education;
- recognising the well-established link between attendance and attainment, we note that the trend in which absence increases as learners move through school has continued through the pandemic, with most absences recorded in year 11;
- disruption to face-to-face teaching and learning during the pandemic has not been uniform, so individual learners will have been impacted differently, and it is possible that some learners who share protected characteristics may have been more negatively impacted than others;
- while qualifications and assessments can have an impact on young people’s mental health and well-being, and in turn, influence their engagement and school attendance, it would be an oversimplification to make a very strong link – there are likely to be many factors affecting young people’s mental health and well-being. Indeed, we have heard that the absence of normal assessments has been a cause of anxiety for many learners who fear that their grades may not hold the normal levels of credibility;
- to help alleviate learner anxieties and concerns, and to support learner attendance and engagement with their education, we have established, alongside other key stakeholders, a range of supportive communications. This includes the ‘*Lefel Nesa / Power Up*’⁵ campaign which provides information and resources to prepare learners for an exam or assessment, revision resources and well-being tips so that learners can take the next step in their education with confidence. We will continue to support learners in this way as we move forward into 2023;
- to support learners’ preparation for qualifications in 2023, and as we continue the journey towards pre-pandemic standards, advance information will be provided to help schools and learners focus revision topics;
- the introduction of the new curriculum is intended, amongst other aims, to improve learners’ experiences: we hope that this will in turn improve pupil attendance;
- qualifications only form a small part of the education system, as the system measuring learners’ educational attainment. However, they do have a role to

⁵ [Qualifications Wales / Power Up](#)

play. To that end, we are committed to ensuring that new made-for-Wales qualifications will be designed in such a way that it is more likely that learners will have positive experiences of assessment, and that they help learners to engage with their learning and develop their confidence and independence; and finally,

- our work in reshaping the wider 14-16 offer will include qualifications that will likely appeal particularly to those learners whose attendance tends to be worse. This, in our view, will play an important longer-term role in terms of supporting the planned curriculum reforms, providing a learner experience that is bespoke to the learner's needs and aspirations and in re-engaging certain groups of learners with their education.

It is important to acknowledge that poor attendance is due to many complex and often inter-related factors including social, cultural, familial, educational, and personal. While qualifications and the qualification system alone can't mitigate these factors, we are committed to doing all that we can to prevent them from adding disadvantage or exacerbating existing disadvantages⁶, and to make examination and assessment experiences as positive as possible for learners.

At the same time, we should not lose sight of the fundamental purpose of qualifications. Qualifications mark the end of a learner's journey through a particular stage of their education allowing them to demonstrate the knowledge and skills they have gained. They also have a link with educational outcomes overall by incentivising higher system and learner performance. If absenteeism rates remain high in the long term this will obviously continue to negatively impact on the attainment of those learners in Wales and may contribute to perceptions of falling standards.

We would like to thank the [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) for undertaking this inquiry on the issue of absenteeism of pupils registered at maintained schools and pupil referral units, and hope that the information provided is useful.

Further detailed information on each of the points raised above is provided to members in an Annex to this letter. Should you require further information from us, we would be more than happy to provide this to you.

We support the Minister in his call for a system-wide approach to addressing school absence and welcome the opportunity to work with government and other partners in this important task. Improving attendance will in turn improve learner outcomes, contributing to a healthier, resilient, and prosperous Wales.

⁶ <https://qualificationswales.org/english/publications/equalities---managing-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-the-awarding-of-qualifications/>

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Philip Blaker', written in a cursive style.

Philip Blaker
Chief Executive

Annex 1

Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The pandemic has had a significant impact on the delivery of both general and vocational qualifications in Wales. It led to the closure of school and college (centre) sites and the cancellation of the 2020 and 2021 exam series.

During these unprecedented times, our priority as the independent regulator has been to develop approaches for the award of grades that were as fair as possible for all learners, recognising that there were no risk or issue-free approaches, and, wherever possible, enable them to progress to the next stage of their learning or career.

On 18 March 2020⁷, to help fight the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19), the education minister for Wales (“the Minister”) announced the closure of schools and the cancellation of the 2020 exam series. Given the timeframe before the examination series was due to start, it was decided that the only option would be to ask schools and colleges to provide ‘Centre Assessed Grades’ for learners. However, recognising that this would lead to inconsistencies across centres we looked for a process to moderate them and maintain a close relationship to exam standards. In October 2020, we published a statistical report⁸ with more detailed analysis of equalities impacts of the summer 2020 arrangements.

In December 2020 due to rising Covid rates and increased disruption, the Minister took the decision to cancel examinations for January and summer 2021. In line with the policy approach adopted by the Welsh Government and the recommendations of the Design and Delivery Advisory Group (DDAG), it was decided that learners undertaking Approved GCSE, AS and A levels would have their qualifications awarded through a ‘Centre Determined Grades’ model, meaning that grades would be determined by centres based on their own assessment of learner work. We wrote to the Minister in February 2021⁹ setting out the principal limitations and risks associated with this approach.

As part of our work to comply with the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty, we have completed Equalities Impact Assessments to inform our policy decisions relating to alternative arrangements. We also require awarding bodies to comply with equalities law through our Standard Conditions of Recognition¹⁰ and we support

⁷ [arrangements-for-summer-2020-exam-series-decisions-taken-following-consultation.pdf \(qualificationswales.org\)](#)

⁸ [equalities-impact-analysis-publication.pdf \(qualificationswales.org\)](#)

⁹ [20210223-response-to-ministerial-direction.pdf \(qualificationswales.org\)](#)

¹⁰ <https://qualificationswales.org/english/publications/standard-conditions-of-recognition/>

awarding bodies by providing guidance documents such as Fair Access by Design¹¹, which sets out ways to address accessibility within qualification assessment design.

At the core of all our considerations is fairness to all learners, whether they share particular protected characteristics or not.

The role of qualifications and their purpose

The pandemic has highlighted the important role played by schools and colleges in the lives of our children, young people, and their families. Nevertheless, the disruptions caused by the pandemic have been incredibly challenging for them.

All learners studying for qualifications during the pandemic have experienced uncertainty around assessment arrangements. Many have had difficulty progressing to their next stages due to the disruptions to face-to-face teaching and learning. Vocational learners in further education settings have had courses significantly disrupted, affecting their ability to complete practical and work-based elements of their qualifications. Many of our children and young people have found it harder to manage their mental health and wellbeing, and it has shone a light on the stubborn inequalities that still exist in parts of our educational system.

The link between attendance and attainment is well established¹². Because of this well-established link, improving learner attendance has long been an important policy aim for successive Welsh Governments, as well as for local authorities and individual schools.

Data shows that absence increases as pupils move through school, which often adversely impacts performance in examinations and assessment at the end of Key Stage 4 (KS4). This trend has continued through the pandemic, with most absences recorded in year 11. We also know that even in normal times, disadvantaged learners with specific characteristics are more likely to have poor attendance and worse outcomes. For example, the Welsh Government's statistical publication on absenteeism from schools by pupil characteristics¹³ shows that absence was higher amongst pupils eligible for Free School Meals pre-pandemic. Quite simply, it's a vicious circle where those that most need the support of schools are the most likely to have higher absence.

The recent independent report into school absence commissioned by Welsh Government¹⁴ states that poor attendance is often related to 'a range of anxiety,

¹¹ <https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/information-for-stakeholders/for-awarding-bodies/fair-access-by-design/>

¹² [Being Present: the Power of Attendance and Stability for Disadvantaged Pupils \(nfer.ac.uk\)](#)

¹³ [Absenteeism from schools by pupil characteristics: September 2018 to August 2019 | GOV.WALES](#)

¹⁴ [Attendance review: implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for school attendance | GOV.WALES](#)

mental health, and wellbeing issues' (page 17). We know that examinations can represent an additional, albeit temporary, stressful factor for some learners.

Before the pandemic, the impact on learners' mental health and wellbeing of sitting multiple examinations and other high stakes assessments within a short timeframe was a concern. However, the pandemic has also shown that changes to assessments and uncertainty can also cause stress and concern. According to research recently undertaken by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) in England, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted young people's learning and adversely affected their mental health causing a 'double-hit to their educational prospects'¹⁵. However, minimising the negative impact of new qualifications and assessment on learners' mental health and wellbeing is a challenging and complex task.

We know that qualifications and assessments are not the only factors that impact on young people's mental health and well-being. Any form of assessment presents a degree of challenge. Successfully facing that challenge can help build a learner's confidence and resilience. It is also difficult to separate out and identify the sources of exam stress or anxiety for learners, particularly in education systems that use high-stakes assessment for a variety of accountability and performance measures.

It's also worth noting that some learners often express positive views on assessment and examinations as they are perceived as providing a robust and reliable measure of attainment, minimising bias – providing a level playing field¹⁶. Others have concerns about 'imposter syndrome' and their grades not being valued unless they are assessed in the way that the qualification was designed. Recent research indicates that learner mental health has only a small impact on subsequent attainment¹⁷.

We also know that the disruption to face-to-face teaching and learning during the pandemic has impacted upon learners differently. As outlined in our published Equalities Impact Assessment¹⁸, it is possible that some learners who share protected characteristics may have been more negatively impacted by this disruption than other learners.

Our analysis of Summer 2020 and 2021 results provides some interesting insights:

- in most subjects, gender attainment gaps have been in favour of girls in recent years. Compared to recent years, the gender attainment gaps for the 2020 (revised) grades tended to be wider (more in favour of females) for the top

¹⁵ <https://natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-survey>

¹⁶ ['We don't want to be known as the kids who didn't do GCSEs' \(schoolsweek.co.uk\)](#)

¹⁷ [Full article: The power of positive emotions? The link between young people's positive and negative affect and performance in high-stakes examinations \(tandfonline.com\)](#)

¹⁸ <https://qualificationswales.org/english/publications/equalities---managing-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-the-awarding-of-qualifications/>

grades for GCSEs, AS and A levels and narrower (less in favour of females) for the middle grades for A level. However, these patterns were not consistent across all subjects;

- the free school meal eligibility attainment gaps for the 2020 (revised) grades tended to be wider (more in favour of learners not eligible for free school meals) for the top grades for GCSE and AS and narrower (less in favour of learners not eligible for free school meals) for the middle grades for A level, compared to previous years. However, these patterns were not consistent across all subjects;
- the special educational needs provision attainment gaps for the 2020 (revised) grades tended to be wider (more in favour of learners without special educational needs provision) for the top grades for GCSE and AS, compared to previous years. However, these patterns were not consistent across all subjects;
- comparison of 2020 (revised) grades to 2019 by broad ethnic group shows increases in results for all broad ethnic groups for both the high and middle grades for all qualification types;
- in 2021, relative to those eligible for Free School Meals (eFSM), learners not eligible achieved 11.5pp more A* grades, up 2.8pp from 2020 and up 6.2pp from 2019. A similar pattern was observed at A*-A. At A*-C the attainment gap widened in 2021 after narrowing in 2020;
- in 2021, relative to males, females achieved 10.7pp more A grades, up from 9.5pp in 2020 and up from 7.4pp in 2019.

When looking at this data, it is important to note that that results from 2020 and 2021 came from different assessment and awarding arrangements after the cancellation of exams. As such, they are not directly comparable with each other, or years in which exams or other standardised national assessments took place.

It is neither possible to disentangle the effect of different assessment and awarding arrangements (including higher results) and impacts of pandemic on attainment gaps, nor for qualification assessment arrangements to address or resolve disadvantage caused by other factors. For example, some learners may have had more limited access to online resources or lower levels of engagement and support whilst learning at home compared to other learners.

Return to exams in 2022 and supporting learners

The Welsh Government's focus moving forward - as described in their Education COVID-19 recovery plan, Renew and Reform – is to maximise learning and minimise disruption.

On 25 January 2022, the Minister confirmed that exams and assessments would go ahead this year. In doing so, he recognised that this remained the fairest way of

assessing learners, even in these difficult circumstances, and represented the least disruptive approach.

While centres were still expected wherever possible to deliver the full qualification specification to their learners, to support the Minister's decision and help reduce the impact of disruption to face-to-face teaching and learning time during the pandemic, we required awarding bodies to adapt the assessment requirements for Approved GCSE, AS and A level qualifications and made-for Wales vocational qualifications. This included adaptations to exam content as well as prior notification of areas of examination, so that assessments could be as fair as possible, and that they enable teachers to focus their time on the key areas of learning.

With the return of exams in 2022, we have considered what approach should be taken to grading, and what measures could be put in place to support the 2023 cohort of learners. To reflect the fact that we are in a pandemic recovery period and that learners' education has been disrupted, we decided to treat 2022 as a transition year. We have therefore required awarding bodies to aim for results in summer 2022 to reflect broadly a midway point between 2021 and 2019.

Our decision to do so is guided by decisions made in other parts of the UK and the need to ensure that learners in Wales are not disadvantaged relative to learners elsewhere, particularly where qualifications are used to progress to higher education institutions.

While we will continue the journey towards pre-pandemic standards next year, to support learners' preparation for completing qualifications, advance information will be provided and released ahead of each exam series¹⁹. Whilst the whole specification subject content should still be taught, advance information will give an indication of the topics, themes, and content that learners can expect in their exams so that they can focus their revision. These measures are transitional and signal our journey back to pre-pandemic assessment arrangements.

We know that the decision taken on the approach to grading GCSE, AS and A levels will have an impact on certain vocational qualifications used for similar purposes, including progressing to further study. Therefore, we have required awarding bodies to take account of the approach taken for these qualifications when setting standards in other vocational qualifications so that learners taking these qualifications are not disadvantaged compared to their peers.

Following two years of alternative assessment and awarding arrangements, learners have been understandably anxious about the return to exams. To help alleviate those anxieties and concerns, and to support learner attendance and engagement, we have

¹⁹ <https://qualificationswales.org/media/8458/220513-qw-letter-to-centres-eng.pdf>

established a range of communications to support them. We have also worked in partnership with other key stakeholders in the education system, including Careers Wales, E-sgol, WJEC and the Welsh Government, to establish the '*Lefel Nesa / Power Up*'²⁰ campaign. This campaign has provided information and resources around what learners can expect in an exam or assessment, revision resources and well-being tips so that learners can take the next step in their education with confidence.

We will continue to support learners in a similar way as we look ahead to examinations and assessments in 2023.

How the new Curriculum for Wales and our work in redesigning qualifications for 14-16-year-olds can help improve attendance

The significant step change in approach intended by the new Curriculum for Wales gives schools an exciting opportunity to tailor their curriculum ('school curriculum') and select which activities and topics they teach to support their learners and create a better learning experience for pupils.

We know that schools that had successfully improved attendance in the past have given particular attention to their curriculum offer, with the aim of ensuring that learners find what is offered engaging, interesting, and relevant to them. While addressing the immediate post-pandemic needs of learners, and re-establishing, adapting and extending pre-pandemic strategies should remain a priority, the introduction of the new curriculum should also be seen as a key driver for change in terms of improving learner experiences, and in turn improving pupil attendance.

Ensuring that each school curriculum is relevant and accessible to every learner, and that it engages and supports them to have high aspirations for their education and future careers is critical. However, we know that achieving this will take a whole-system approach.

While qualifications are, of course, only a small part of the education system – a part of the jigsaw focused on measurement, they do have a role to play.

Our responsibility is to agree how qualifications should change to support the introduction of the new curriculum, help realise its ambition and meet the future needs of learners. Our vision is for learners to take qualifications that inspire and prepare them for life, learning and work. To achieve this vision, and as part of our co-construction approach to the development of the next generation of 14-16 qualifications, we are actively looking at what content they cover and how they should be assessed in future.

²⁰ <https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/assessment-arrangements-20212022/power-up/>

We have heard from many teaching professionals and educational commentators of their desire to see, in both the short and long term, a more balanced and varied approach to assessment which includes both teacher assessment and examinations, in particular recognising that different learners prefer different types of assessment.

In undertaking this important work, we are also applying the lessons that we have learned from the experience of the pandemic. This experience has led us to ask fundamental questions about the design of teaching, learning and assessment, and the way in which qualifications are assessed and awarded. The pandemic has also changed perceptions of qualifications and highlighted the need for greater robustness and resilience in the system.

We want new made-for-Wales qualifications to be designed in such a way that it is more likely that learners will have positive experiences of assessment. Well-designed assessment should help learners to engage with their learning and to develop their confidence and independence. This can be done for example, by ensuring that the assessment method is appropriate to the learning being demonstrated, by including a mix of different assessment methods within a qualification to cater for different preferences, and by considering the context in which assessments take place. Other solutions being actively considered include less overall assessment, more engaging subject content and greater flexibility and choice where possible.

Based on our discussions with stakeholders through the co-construction process, we believe these considerations will lead to concrete changes in the design of qualifications in future, including more varied methods of assessment and an increase in the amount of non-exam assessment (NEA).

The recently published report on improving school attendance identified a need to *“make the learning experience worthwhile and relevant for older learners in key stage 4 whose attendance tends to be worse and who are more likely to become disengaged”*, and that *“person-centred planning should lead to better understanding of what’s important to the learner and help identify issues before they escalate and should also help with early intervention”*.

To that end, developing and funding a suite of well-understood, vocational options was seen as critical to address not only short-term attendance challenges for the most disengaged students, but also as an important long-term strategy supporting the planned curriculum reforms and the associated reforms to qualification and examination practices.

We believe that the range of publicly funded qualifications that can be taken at 16 should offer something for everyone and cater for the needs of all learners. This is

central to our vision of a qualification offer that prepares 16-year-olds for life, learning and work.

Whatever level a learner is working at, qualifications can be a useful means of recognising attainment, and providing them with the foundation and confidence to progress to further learning or work. All learners should be able to study qualifications that will engage them in their learning, help them make meaningful progress, evidence their achievements, and show what they're ready to tackle next.

While the qualifications that will feature as part of a reshaped wider 14-16 offer will be available to learners of all aptitudes and abilities, many of these will likely appeal particularly to those learners who would otherwise be disengaged. This work, in our view, will certainly play an important longer-term role in terms of supporting the planned curriculum reforms, providing a learner experience that is bespoke to the learner's needs and aspirations and in re-engaging groups of learners with their education.