



24 April 2023

Jayne Bryant MS  
Chair  
Children Young People and Education Committee  
Senedd Cymru

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Dear Jayne

### **Views on the implementation of the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021**

As the independent regulator for non-degree level qualifications in Wales offered by recognised awarding bodies, we want everyone in Wales to be confident that the qualifications achieved by our learners are fair, trusted and valued throughout the UK and internationally.

Given our role, we welcome the opportunity to contribute to the work of the Children, Young People and Education Committee on the implementation of the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 and its impact on progression to higher education.

### **Curriculum for Wales and qualification reform**

The introduction of Curriculum for Wales has been the catalyst to our current programme of work to reform qualifications for 14-16 years olds so that they relate to and support the new curriculum. Our primary focus has been on qualifications for the 14-16 sector as the new curriculum is for ages 3 to 16 and does not cover the 16-18 phase.

### **Public consultations to inform the qualification reform process**

As part of our qualifications reform programme, we have completed three large scale public consultations to help inform the future of qualifications for 14-16 learners in Wales. Added to

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this we have a live consultation on the 'full offer' of qualifications for 14-16 learners that will sit alongside new GCSEs. This consultation concludes in June 2023.

In 2019 we published our first consultation on qualifications to support the new curriculum. This set out the principles that have underpinned the reforms. These principles are that all 14-16 qualifications will:

- relate to and support Curriculum for Wales
- be available in both Welsh and English
- form an inclusive and coherent qualifications offer

This consultation also confirmed that as part of the reforms we would retain the GCSE brand. There was strong support for keeping the GCSE brand, with consultation responses emphasising that it is an established and understood brand which carries currency in Wales as well as portability outside of Wales.

Our second consultation in 2021 confirmed the future range of GCSE qualification to support the new curriculum. This consultation led to three broad types of decisions:

1. Retain GCSE qualifications in discrete disciplines for some subject areas but to review the content and assessment of these subjects in relation to Curriculum for Wales.
2. To integrate some subject areas into larger combined qualifications to better reflect Curriculum for Wales. This has occurred in Mathematics and Numeracy, The Sciences, English language and Literature, and Welsh Language and Literature. In these areas separate discipline-specific GCSEs will no longer exist.
3. To create brand new GCSE qualifications in subject areas which do not currently exist as GCSEs but which are explicitly mentioned in Curriculum for Wales. These include Social Studies, Dance and British Sign Language.

Following on from this we have recently completed a major consultation on the high-level content and assessment arrangements for the new suite of GCSE qualifications.

The proposals in the consultation were informed by an intensive period of co-construction that directly involved teachers and other key stakeholders including representatives from the further and higher education sectors.

The findings from the consultation and the resultant decisions will be published during the summer term.

### **Changes to GCSE content and assessment**

The new curriculum has necessitated changes to both the proposed content and assessment of GCSE qualifications, which we discuss below.

### **GCSE content and A Level progression**

We recognise the need for new 14-16 qualifications to provide a strong foundation for progression on to A Levels and other level 3 qualifications. Supporting progression has

therefore been an important consideration when developing the high-level content requirements for these new qualifications.

With respect to A Levels, we do not envisage wholesale reform will be needed. However, we will be conducting a light-touch review of A Levels to ensure that there is integrity in progression from GCSE to post-16 study and beyond.

We are currently in the process of scoping this review, although we do not anticipate any significant changes to A Levels. Instead, the review will be an opportunity to check for any fine tuning that may be required. We are acutely aware that A Levels are one of the principal routes to Higher Education and therefore we want to ensure that there is comparability with other parts of the UK and that Welsh learners are not disadvantaged in any way in comparison to learners in other parts of the UK.

### **Content links to cross curricular aspects of Curriculum for Wales**

In addition to updating and refreshing discipline-specific content, the new suite of 14-16 qualifications (including GCSEs) will build in where appropriate natural and authentic opportunities to link to the cross-cutting themes in Curriculum for Wales. These include the themes of diversity, human rights, sustainability and local, national and international contexts, as well as cross-curricular and integral skills.

### **Assessment**

Changes to GCSE assessment in many subjects will include a reduced emphasis on written examinations and the inclusion of a broader mix of assessment methods including project work and practical assessment.

More GCSE subjects will be unitised, giving learners more opportunities to sit some of their exams before the end of the course. We are also working with WJEC to look at opportunities for non-exam assessments to be taken earlier to help reduce the burden of assessment in the final two terms of Year 11.

Additionally, there will be an increase in the use of digital technology within the exams. This has the potential to increase the validity of the assessments as well as making them more engaging for learners and more resilient to unexpected events such as pandemics.

### **Integration in core subjects**

In keeping with the structure and organisation of the new Curriculum for Wales, we are creating new integrated GCSEs for mathematics and numeracy, the sciences, Welsh language and literature, and English language and literature.

These new GCSEs will replace the existing, separate GCSE Mathematics and GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy qualifications. Separate GCSEs in Biology, Chemistry and Physics will no longer be available; learners will instead have the option of taking either an integrated double award or single award GCSE in The Sciences. Separate Language and Literature GCSEs in Welsh and English will also be replaced by new integrated GCSEs.

## **Impacts of integration on progression**

To understand the impacts of qualifications and curriculum reform on progression to higher education we have engaged extensively with the universities sector across Wales and the UK. This has included discussions with individual institutions as well as representative bodies such as the Russell Group and UCAS. Our engagement has included discussions with university admissions teams as well as specific faculties within universities including those with highly competitive entry requirements such as medical schools.

It is important to note in relation to university admissions that in Wales AS qualifications are still linked to A Levels. AS Levels are typically taken by learners in Year 12 before they apply for university. This means that, unlike learners in England, Welsh learners are not reliant solely on GCSE grades to provide evidence of prior attainment for university admission. This position is welcomed by universities as it provides them with additional information to support applications.

We have had a consistently positive response to our engagement with the university sector. The emphasis on breadth of learning and experiences, and on development of skills such as problem-solving and critical thinking have been broadly welcomed.

In response to our GCSE consultations, we heard concerns from some about whether the new integrated qualifications in the Sciences, English, Welsh and Mathematics could potentially disadvantage learners from Wales when applying for university. We heard this most often in relation to the decision to replace separate GCSEs in Biology, Chemistry and Physics. We therefore included a specific focus on this in our discussions with higher education. Universities have reassured us that these changes will not disadvantage learners from Wales. Furthermore, this decision has been welcomed by learned societies such as the Institute for Physics, Royal Society of Chemistry and Royal Society of Biology all of whom are in favour of a more common route through science at GCSE. They also recognise the opportunities this structure offers for making strong links and connections between the different scientific disciplines.

Universities, particularly those based outside Wales are keen to understand more about changes to the curriculum and qualifications in Wales. They have a particular interest in understanding how the standards in future qualifications in Wales compare to those taken in other jurisdictions, particularly England.

We will continue to liaise with universities as the qualification reform programme develops. For example, we have a dedicated strategic engagement manager responsible for proactively engaging with the Higher Education Sector. We will also ensure that there is a clear communications strategy to help explain the changes happening to qualifications in Wales.

## **Key dependencies**

The success of curriculum and qualification reforms, and by extension learners' ability to progress onto the next stage in their educational journey, is contingent on a variety of factors that are the responsibility of Welsh Government. These include:

- the professional development programme to support the teaching profession in implementing the new curriculum.
- clarity around the role that qualification outcomes will play in the Welsh Government's new data and information ecosystem to support school evaluation and improvement.

We will continue to work with Welsh Government officials to gain further clarity around these areas and provide relevant support and input as appropriate.

### **Next Steps**

We will be publishing the approval criteria for new GCSEs in the summer term. This will mark a significant milestone in the project as well as providing greater visibility to stakeholders around what future qualifications will look like. It will also form the basis for WJEC to start developing the draft specifications and sample assessment materials.

Qualification specifications and sample assessments will be published the year before first teaching. In most subjects the new GCSEs will be first taught from September 2025, with the first award in Summer 2027. This means that the specifications and sample assessment materials for these subjects will be made available in 2024. There will be a small number of subjects that will be first taught in September 2026, the specifications and sample assessments for these will be made available in 2025.

A specification gives schools a detailed understanding of the qualification aims, structure and content and its assessment requirements. The sample assessment materials exemplify the assessments for each subject. We are committed to making these documents available the year before first teaching to allow schools sufficient time to plan and prepare for delivery.

Publishing approval criteria this summer will confirm the design parameters for these new qualifications and support our continued engagement with key stakeholders, including the higher education sector. We will ensure that universities are fully aware of the changes to qualifications in Wales so they can plan for reflecting these where necessary in their future admissions processes.

Yours sincerely



Philip Blaker  
**Chief Executive Officer**