



## **Qualifications Wales (QW) response to CYPE Committee's Scrutiny of Covid-19 and its impact on children and young people**

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## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 As the independent regulator of Qualifications in Wales, we monitor awarding bodies' compliance with our Conditions of Recognition, review existing qualifications, oversee the design of new qualifications, and support the qualifications system. Our regulatory approach is to be outward-looking, so we engage, communicate and collaborate to strengthen our ability to promote public confidence in the Welsh qualifications system and to meet the needs of learners in Wales.
- 1.2 Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures. Summer 2020 will be proof of that on so many fronts. Given the decision to close schools and cancel exams as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, establishing new arrangements for this summer is essential to make sure that learners receive grades and are able to progress to the next stage of their lives, whether that is further study, training or employment.
- 1.3 For all learners studying GCSEs, AS, A levels and the Skills Challenge Certificate (SCC), we proposed to introduce a set of aims to underpin the awarding of grades in the summer 2020 exam series, and to implement a specific appeals process for this summer.

## 2. Background

- 2.1 On 18 March 2020, the Minister for Education announced<sup>1</sup> that schools across Wales would close for the statutory provision of education at the latest on 20 March 2020.
- 2.2 We attended meetings with the Minister and WJEC to consider options for arrangements for summer exams in 2020. The Minister subsequently announced<sup>2</sup> that the summer series of exams for 2020 would not go ahead and learners due to sit their exams this summer would be awarded a fair grade to recognise their work.
- 2.3 Since this announcement, we have been working with Welsh Government, WJEC and fellow qualifications regulators to ensure that learners due to sit exams will be awarded a fair set of grades to recognise their work and support progression onto the next stage of their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Welsh Government (2020) *Statement from Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams on school closures in Wales* <https://media.service.gov.wales/news/school-closures>

<sup>2</sup> Welsh Government (2020) *Written statement on summer examinations 2020* <https://gov.wales/written-statement-written-statement-summer-examinations-2020>

### 3. Response to cancellation of summer exams 2020

- 3.1 The Covid-19 pandemic has changed everyone's lives and is an unsettling time for learners. Clearly, under normal circumstances, our preference would have been for exams to go ahead as planned, so that the worries and concerns of learners and centres could be avoided. We understand how difficult the situation is. We want to do everything we can to support those affected by the current situation and our priority continues to be ensuring fairness for learners.
- 3.2 Our focus throughout this period has been to establish an approach for the summer exam series, which is as fair as possible to learners, and is in their best interests in terms of their progression into work, further education or training. We have made a concerted effort to communicate with learners and other stakeholders through a range of channels on a regular basis, and to reassure them that they can have confidence in the process that will be used for awarding grades for general and vocational qualifications this year. Information about how we have communicated with learners is provided throughout this report.
- 3.3 Recognising that it is a very difficult time for all learners (including children and young people, education professionals and parents, we created a dedicated Covid-19 area on our website to provide current information on any developments. Since the Ministerial decision to cancel exams on 18 March 2020, we have published regular statements<sup>3</sup> on our decisions.
- 3.4 To support these statements and provide answers to questions raised via email, telephone and social media, a section hosting a series of Frequently Asked Questions<sup>4</sup> is available in the Covid-19 area. These are reviewed and updated to reflect the latest information. In response to the number of enquiries, infographics were developed to explain the necessarily more complex approach to AS levels<sup>5</sup> and year 10 learners<sup>6</sup>.
- 3.5 The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in an increase in traffic to our website and in activity from learners and wider stakeholders engaging through our social media channels.
- 3.6 The total number of impressions through Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn from the time schools were closed in March to the end of May – that is, the total number of opportunities to read our content – was just over 1.1 million, an increase of 394%. The

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<sup>3</sup> Qualifications Wales (2020) *Qualifications Wales Statements*

<https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/coronavirus---covid-19/qualifications-wales-statements/>

<sup>4</sup> Qualifications Wales (2020) *Frequently Asked Questions* <https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/coronavirus---covid-19/frequently-asked-questions/>

<sup>5</sup> Qualifications Wales (2020) *Approach to AS levels in Wales summer 2020*

<https://www.qualificationswales.org/media/5807/approach-to-as-levels-in-wales-summer-2020.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Qualifications Wales (2020) *Approach to GCSEs in Wales summer 2020*

<https://www.qualificationswales.org/media/5743/approach-to-gcse-in-wales-summer-2020.pdf>

number of interactions with our content (including likes, shares, comments or re-tweets) totalled 75,000, an increase of 1,104%. Twitter accounted for the majority at almost 64,000, while Facebook added 10,000. Almost 22,000 people clicked through from our social media channels to our website for more information.

3.7 The External Relations Team has responded to over 250 direct emails and telephone calls from a range of stakeholders, including parents, learners, centre staff, senior leaders and private tutors since the closure of centres in March.

3.8 In addition to the formal updates, we have been sharing blogs about the decisions taken during the Covid-19 pandemic. These aim to reflect concerns raised and explain our thinking and are listed below:

- *Testing times for us all (23 March)*
- *Multiple answers to complex questions (30 March)*
- *Doing what's right, not what's easy (6 April)*
- *AS grades, marks and units – why it's complicated (23 April)*
- *Calculate, adapt or delay – the way forward for vocational qualifications (24 April)*
- *Sharing our thinking as we go (1 May)*
- *Looking ahead for those halfway through courses (6 May)*
- *Unprecedented times call for decision based on trust – A parent's perspective (14 May)*
- *The fairest approach for Year 10 learners (15 May)*
- *What now that the summer exams season is cancelled? (26 May)*
- *Year 10, Year 12 – we hear you (9 June)*
- *The impact of COVID-19 on university admissions (8 June)*
- *Planning the path to next summer's GCSEs, AS and A levels (25 June)*
- *Finding solutions to this major challenge (29 June)*
- *Cancelled exams doesn't mean we haven't worked hard for our grades (3 July)*

3.9 To further support learners and wider stakeholders during this difficult time, we have created a Help and Advice<sup>7</sup> page on our website providing links to resources to help with the uncertainty that Covid-19 has caused. The resources range from remote learning to well-being advice and guidance. We have worked with other organisations to share the most useful information. Organisations across the education sector have come together to actively promote #StaySafeStayLearning, a dedicated online for learners and families.

3.10 In the interest of supporting learner progression, we have worked closely with FE and HE, sharing information with a clear message that this year's qualifications will be as valued

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<sup>7</sup> Qualifications Wales (2020) *Covid-19 Help and Advice webpage*  
<https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/coronavirus---covid-19/help-and-advice/>

and robust as any other year. We continue to work with FE and HE – creating [blogs](#) and films and infographics to support the message to learners and other stakeholders.

- 3.11 We are working with UCAS and will join their online forum for learners on 15 July on 'Why Qualls matter?'. We are also sharing information via a short film with UCAS for learners to understand the appeals process/es here in Wales.
- 3.12 We continue to actively engage with stakeholders.

#### **4. GCSE, AS, A level and Skills Challenge Certificate qualifications - Arrangements for summer 2020**

- 4.1 On 3 April 2020, we published Information for Centres on the submission of centre assessment data. This set out the information necessary for schools and colleges to collect and submit data to WJEC to allow results to be issued to this year's cohort of learners. We engaged with a range of representative groups, as well as WJEC, to help us develop this guidance quickly and effectively. Included in this pack of information was a message to learners<sup>8</sup>. In the interests of fairness, the centre assessment data submitted will be standardised by WJEC using a statistical model that is currently being developed by them and will be approved by us, and will ensure that a common standard is applied to grading learners.
- 4.2 On 6 April 2020, the Education Minister for Wales issued us with a Direction<sup>9</sup> under Section 53 of the Qualifications Wales Act 2015 to have regard to Welsh Government policy regarding the cancellation of exams and the subsequent determination of grades. The Direction requires us to ensure that a fair and robust approach to issuing grades to the summer 2020 cohort of learners is adopted.
- 4.3 We consulted on proposals relating to key aspects of the arrangements for summer 2020 for a period of two weeks between Tuesday 28 April and Wednesday 13 May 2020. We acknowledged that this timeline was tight, due to the extraordinary circumstances surrounding this consultation and the understandable requests for early clarity – for learners, centres and those who will use the 2020 qualification results. We thank all those who contributed to this consultation.
- 4.4 In this consultation<sup>10</sup>, we asked people to tell us what they think of two key aspects of arrangements for summer 2020:

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<sup>8</sup> Qualifications Wales (2020) *A message to learners*

<https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/publications/grades-a-message-to-learners/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://gov.wales/gcse-and-level-cancellations-letter>

<sup>10</sup> <https://qualificationswales.org/english/get-involved/consultations-and-surveys/closed-consultations-and-surveys/consultation-arrangements-for-summer-2020-exam-series/>

- Firstly, the aims which will underpin the statistical standardisation model for the issuing of grades for learners this summer, and
- Secondly, the appeals process for the summer 2020 exam series.

Clearly, there are no perfect solutions and we were conscious that these proposals could be less desirable than the normal arrangements. We remained open to considering alternatives and encouraged those contributions.

4.5 As well as the full consultation document, we provided access to a Young Person’s version, which was produced to specifically encourage young people to respond. We received 4,057 responses in total. We were encouraged that of the total responses, 2,079, more than half (51.3%) of the responses received referred to themselves as learners. (The total adds up to more than 100% because some respondents identified themselves as belonging to more than one category, e.g. teacher and parent.)

| <b>Learner</b> | <b>Education professional</b> | <b>Parent/ carer</b> | <b>All others</b> | <b>Sum</b> | <b>Total respondents</b> | <b>Difference</b> |
|----------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| 2,079          | 803                           | 1,128                | 117               | 4,127      | 4,049                    | 78                |
| 51.3%          | 19.8%                         | 27.9%                | 2.9%              | 101.9%     | 100.0%                   | 1.9%              |

4.6 As part of the consultation document, we produced an Integrated Impact Assessment asking for views on the impact of our proposals, including the impact on groups with protected characteristics, and on the Welsh language.

4.7 We have engaged with specific groups that support young people and those in minority groups. This includes engagement with the Youth Parliament, who highlighted concerns regarding these groups of learners. In addition, several organisations representing vulnerable and disadvantaged young people were invited to attend a consultation webinar to provide an opportunity for them to raise any specific concerns, this included parent groups and those representing minority groups.

4.8 We also engage regularly with higher and further education providers on our thinking and decisions to understand their challenges and ask them to consider the steps that providers could take when making admissions decisions.

- 4.9 We published the findings and decisions of our consultation report on our website alongside an Executive Summary<sup>11</sup>, which highlights the main decisions in relation to each of the two key aspects of the consultation, as referenced earlier in paragraph 4.1.
- 4.10 In relation to proposal 1, the agreed aims that will underpin the statistical standardisation model for the issuing of grades for learners this summer are:
- Aim 1: Learners for whom a qualification-level centre assessment grade and rank order are submitted will receive a grade.
  - Aim 2: National outcomes will be broadly similar to those in previous years to reduce the risk of unfairness for learners over time and maintain public confidence.
  - Aim 3: As far as possible, the process for awarding grades will not systematically advantage or disadvantage learners, including those with characteristics protected by equalities legislation.
  - Aim 4: The statistical standardisation model will use a range of evidence to calculate the likely grades that learners would have achieved, had they been able to complete their assessments.
- 4.11 Decisions on the second proposal about an appeals process for the summer 2020 exam series are also explained and we've created an infographic<sup>12</sup> setting out answers to the key questions about this specific process. If learners or others have concerns about bias, discrimination or any other factor that suggests that a centre did not behave with care or integrity when determining the centre assessment grade and/or rank order information, they should raise these concerns with their centre. We expect such allegations to be rare, but this is an important safeguard for learners and their overall confidence in this year's grading arrangements. More information and detail about the WJEC appeals process will follow.
- 4.12 Both the Executive Summary and appeals infographic are designed to make the decisions information easily accessible and understandable for stakeholders not wanting to read the full findings and decisions reports.
- 4.13 We held a public webinar to outline the findings and decisions of the consultation and this was open to all stakeholders, including learners, parents and carers. Over 300 people attended the webinar, submitting written questions to the QW team. A summary of those questions and responses is available on our website<sup>13</sup>, along with a recording of the webinar.

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<sup>11</sup> Qualifications Wales (2020) *Covid-19 Summer 2020 decisions webpage*

<https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/coronavirus---covid-19/summer-2020-decisions/>

<sup>12</sup> Qualifications Wales (2020) *Appeals process Summer 2020*

<https://www.qualificationswales.org/media/6213/appeals-process-summer-2020.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/coronavirus---covid-19/summer-2020-decisions/>

## 5. Vocational Qualifications - Arrangements for summer 2020

- 5.1 Where vocational and technical qualifications are offered across the UK, it is important that we take a common approach to ensure fairness for all learners. We continue to work closely with our fellow UK regulators to achieve this aim. We signpost any Ofqual developments that directly impact our learners in Wales on our [website](#).
- 5.2 In April, Ofqual announced the principles that will be applied to different groups of vocational qualifications, linked to their purpose and how they are used by learners for progression. To ensure consistency for learners taking these qualifications in Wales, we will be applying the same principles<sup>14</sup>.
- 5.3 The arrangements apply to many of the vocational qualifications taken in schools, colleges, and work-based learning providers in Wales, including BTECs and other key progression qualifications. Given the complexity and diversity of the vocational qualifications landscape, it is not possible to implement a one size fits all approach. Therefore, a less prescriptive regulatory approach is being proposed, which will be based on a flexible, principles based "extraordinary framework", which delegates to awarding bodies the decision-making around how they deliver results to learners. Centres will have a key role in making sure that any new arrangements work effectively and that results, or alternative assessment arrangements, can be provided to learners.
- 5.4 We applied the same principles when making decisions on vocational qualifications designed specifically to meet the needs of learners in Wales. Wherever possible, we will make sure that learners due to complete their qualifications this summer get a result. We announced on 20 April that Essential Skills Wales learners due to complete their qualification before the end of July will receive a calculated result<sup>15</sup>. Our recent work on agreeing the way forward for Health and Social Care and Childcare<sup>16</sup> qualifications is a good example of where we had to balance the desire to issue results this summer with the need to make sure learners have demonstrated the professional competence necessary to work in this important sector.

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<sup>14</sup> Qualifications Wales (2020) *Awarding of vocational qualifications this summer*  
<https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/coronavirus---covid-19/qualifications-wales-statements/awarding-of-vocational-qualifications-this-summer---9-april-2020/>

<sup>15</sup> Qualifications Wales (2020) *Essential Skills Wales Contingency Arrangements*  
<https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/coronavirus---covid-19/qualifications-wales-statements/essential-skills-wales-contingency-arrangements---20-april-2020/>

<sup>16</sup> Qualifications Wales (2020) *Health and social care and childcare qualifications in Wales*  
<https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/coronavirus---covid-19/qualifications-wales-statements/health-and-social-care-and-childcare-qualifications-in-wales/>



## 6. Summer 2021

- 6.1 We are looking forward and planning for summer 2021. To keep stakeholders as informed as possible following the release of the consultation findings, we are currently developing videos and infographics to explain the calculation of grades this summer and have written blogs about the planning for summer 2021. The first blog discusses our early thoughts<sup>17</sup> and the most recent one looks at the various options<sup>18</sup> available.
- 6.2 We keep in regular contact with centres providing updates on summer 2021 planning and have issued two letters<sup>19 20</sup> to centres in July. We have also published a statement in response to Ofqual's position paper regarding Vocational and Technical Qualifications and Assessments 2020-21.<sup>21</sup>

## 7. Next Steps

- 7.1 Clearly, under normal circumstances, our preference would have been for exams to go ahead as planned, so that the worries and concerns of learners and centres could be avoided. We understand how difficult the situation is. We want to do everything we can to support those affected by the current situation and our priority continues to be ensuring fairness for learners and the maintenance of appropriate standards.
- 7.2 As the regulator for qualifications in Wales, we will be monitoring the implementation of the 'exceptional arrangements' over the summer for learners in Wales. We will continue to communicate with stakeholders regularly and proactively, and we will continue to share updates with the CYPE committee and provide future briefings.
- 7.3 We intend to provide a comprehensive analysis of this summer's GCSE, AS and A level results on the relevant results days (13 August for AS and A levels and 20 August for GCSEs). This will include an analysis of the grade information provided by teachers (Centre Assessment Grades), which will show the level of change required by the

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<sup>17</sup> Qualifications Wales (2020) *Looking ahead for those halfway through courses*

<https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/coronavirus---covid-19/blogs/looking-ahead-for-those-halfway-through-courses/>

<sup>18</sup> Qualifications Wales (2020) *Planning the path to next summer's GCSEs, AS and A-levels*

<https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/coronavirus---covid-19/blogs/planning-the-path-to-next-summers-gcses-as-and-a-levels/>

<sup>19</sup> Letter to Centres – 3 July 2020

<https://qualificationswales.org/media/6244/3-july-2020-letter-to-schools-colleges-nov-series-s21-eng.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Letter to Centres – 15 July 2020

<https://qualificationswales.org/media/6269/15-july-letter-to-schools-colleges.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Qualifications Wales (2020) *QW statement on Ofqual position paper*

<https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/coronavirus---covid-19/qualifications-wales-statements/statement-on-ofqual-position-paper-regarding-vocational-and-technical-qualifications-and-assessments-2020-21/>



statistical standardisation model in order to maintain 'broadly similar' results – a key component in maintaining public confidence in this year's results.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'David Jones'.

**David Jones**  
Chair, Qualifications Wales

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Philip Blaker'.

**Philip Blaker**  
Chief Executive, Qualifications Wales