

Briefing for the Petitions Committee

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 11 Hydref 2016
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Research Briefing: January A and AS level exams

Petition number: [P5-05-704](#)

Petition title: Bring back January exams for AS/A level students

Text of petition:

This petition aims to raise the issue that AS/A level students do not have the opportunities they need to achieve what they are capable of. This petition is to bring January exams back for AS/A level students.

Background

A levels are usually taken as two-year courses during Year 12 (age 16 at start of year) and Year 13 (age 17 at start of year).

AS levels can be taken as a stand-alone qualification, or as the first part of an A level course. In Wales, they are usually completed at the end of Year 12. 'A2' exams and coursework are added on to an AS level at the end of Year 13, making up a full A level qualification.

January examinations were most commonly used for **AS level resits** during Year 13. They were **discontinued in Wales after January 2014**. The last year students had the opportunity to take them in England was January 2013.

The main reason for their discontinuation was to limit the number of opportunities candidates have to re-sit AS level examinations to one (in the summer of Year 13) and address what some people have termed '**a resitting culture**'.

Decision to end January exams

Decision in England

In November 2012, following a [consultation](#) on A and AS level reform, the qualifications regulator in England, [Ofqual](#), [announced](#) that from September 2013 students in England would no longer be able to sit A or AS level exams in January. Ofqual said this would '**address recent concerns over how many times students can sit their exams** by reducing resit

opportunities'. The changes applied to students who had already started their A and AS level courses in September 2012, who were therefore not allowed to resit AS level examinations in January 2014 (which they had originally taken at the end of Year 12 in summer 2013).

Policy in Wales

Following the developments in England, the Welsh Government [decided in 2013](#) that the opportunity to sit exams for A and AS level courses qualifications in January should also not be available in Wales and that this would take effect for the **cohort of students starting courses in September 2013**. However, students who started A level courses in September 2012 and were in Year 13 at the time of January 2014 were offered January examinations.

A decision in [Northern Ireland](#) adopted a similar position to Wales.

Retention of 'coupled' A and AS levels

The current position in each of Wales, England and Northern Ireland is that no January examinations are offered for A or AS level. However, a key difference is that in Wales and Northern Ireland, an AS qualification is still awarded after Year 12 (and still counts towards the A level), whereas **in England A and AS levels have been 'decoupled'** and are now separate qualifications, both awarded at the end of Year 13.

Therefore, for applicants from Wales and Northern Ireland, universities consider the actual AS level grades of **applicants to higher education** during the applications process that takes place during Year 13 rather than projected grades as they must now do in England.

Rationale for abolishing January exams

Most of the changes the Welsh Government has made to qualifications in Wales follow [Huw Evans' Review of qualifications for 14 to 19 year olds in Wales](#), published in November 2012.

On the specific issue of January examinations, Huw Evans' review found mixed views but recommended the Welsh Government:

- retain the AS/A2 structure
- allow **only one resit opportunity**, with the higher mark counting
- recognise the **range of views expressed by stakeholders** about the continued use of units within AS and A2 and **January assessment opportunities**. (Recommendation 25) [my emphasis]

The [statement in June 2013](#) from the then Minister for Education and Skills, Leighton Andrews, which announced the changes, said:

The removal of January assessments will **reduce the amount of time spent on assessment rather than learning**; will make the system **simpler** and more **cost effective**; and will **reduce the examination burden** for teachers and learners. (...)

Whilst the removal of the January assessment window will significantly reduce the opportunities for learners to resit modules, **limiting re-sits to one per module**, as is currently the case for GCSEs, will

also be consistent with the recommendations of the Review of Qualifications – as are all these announcements.

The then Minister added that the Welsh Government sought stakeholder views on January assessment opportunities, holding a **six week online survey in late 2012 / early 2013**.

Reducing opportunities to resit AS level examinations

The literature accompanying/supporting the decision to discontinue January exams in England was relatively more explicit about the objective to limit resit opportunities than the Welsh Government's.

Ofqual's 2012 consultation document said

56. Our national research found that **students do not always treat exams seriously if they know that they have the opportunity to resit.** (...) With only one resit allowed, continuous resitting will be eliminated, so we think that it is reasonable to allow students to count the highest mark when they resit. [my emphasis]

Similarly, Ofqual's *Impact assessment of A-level reforms: A study commissioned by Ofqual* said:

Currently, students are able to re-sit exams multiple times, with between two-thirds and three-quarters of students re-sitting at least one unit. There is concern that the ability to do so results in a **reduction of the prestige associated with A-levels**, as students can just 'get over the finish line' by re-sitting multiple times. It may also contribute to **grade inflation** – for example the percentage of students who gain a grade A at AS (where re-sitting is much more common) is always higher than the percentage achieving a grade A at A2 level. [my emphasis]

Several years earlier in 2007, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in England published *A level resitting: a summary of research findings* which reported:

It is first important to note that **nearly all GCE resitting activity relates to AS units.**

The percentage of students achieving a grade A at AS is, across all centre types and subjects, always higher than the percentage achieving an A at A2 or at A level, a reflection perhaps of the resitting patterns of candidates.

The resitting of AS units during year 2 has a noticeable impact on students' A level grades. The percentage receiving an A grade in a nominal A level result based on year 1 AS results is lower than the actual percentage of A grades achieved by the same candidates at the end of year 2. **It appears that the AS resitting in year 2 is boosting their grades.** [my emphasis]

Other views

A [petition against the decision in England](#) to abolish January exams was submitted to the UK Parliament in 2012/13. The UK Government said the decision was a matter for the qualifications regulator in England, Ofqual, but said 'there are **no plans to reverse and allow January assessments**' in England. [Ofqual's summary of the consultation it held in 2012](#) (PDF 1.82MB), which preceded the decision in England, reported:

There was ... strong support for removing the January assessment window, as assessments in January were generally considered to disrupt teaching and learning. Some stakeholders, however, proposed that the **January assessment window should be maintained in special circumstances**, with many commenting that it was important for some protected groups, including students with special educational needs (SEN) or a disability. [my emphasis]

During the Ofqual consultation, the [Russell Group](#), comprising 24 'leading universities' in the UK, commented:

The proposed reduction in the number of re-sits that students are allowed to do would be a step in the right direction. We think it's fair that people are given a second chance if they have good reasons for under-performing in an exam, but more recently **students have been allowed to do re-sits too frequently**. Our universities are concerned that many of the students who don't get the grades first or second time around don't go on to do as well in their chosen degree course. [my emphasis]

However, the Council for Independent Education (CfIE), which is the professional body for sixth form colleges in England provided [information on the groups of students affected](#) by the abolition of January exams. This includes:

- Students **retaking A levels** who now have to wait until June rather than January to resit examinations, potentially causing them to have a **gap before they prepare again** for the exam and leaving them less time to plan for university.
- **One-year A-level students** compressing an A level into one year for a variety of reasons: rather than taking the AS exams in January and then using the final six months to focus on A2, they must now take all exams at the same time, in the summer
- Some schools entered **Year 12 students** for AS exams in January rather than June, primarily to gain exam experience but also to generate a sense of urgency. CfIE acknowledge 'it was always a somewhat questionable practice in terms of broader educational objectives'.
- Students **resitting AS exams in Year 13**: not only to improve a poor result but often to bump up a good AS grade to an excellent one. Such students **must now wait until the summer**, and retake AS units alongside A2.

The [National Union of Students \(NUS\)](#) (PDF 144KB) published the outcome of joint research with the awarding body, OCR, based on a survey of further and higher education students between January and March 2014. The NUS said:

There was also considerable opposition to the reduction in the opportunity to re-sit, as January exams are removed under the new format. Eighty-nine per cent said that this will **unfairly penalise students** who have faced significant upheaval in their education and need a second chance. [my emphasis]

Qualifications Wales

In her response, the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Kirsty Williams, states this is a matter for [Qualifications Wales](#).

Qualifications Wales was established in September 2015 by the [Qualifications Wales Act 2015](#), which transferred the **functions of qualifications regulation** away from the Welsh Government to the new independent organisation. The 2015 Act requires that Qualifications Wales exercises its functions in line with the following two principal aims:

- a) Ensuring that qualifications, and the Welsh qualifications system, are **effective for meeting the reasonable needs of learners** in Wales.
- b) **Promoting public confidence** in qualifications and in the Welsh qualifications system.

Members will note from Qualifications Wales' response, that it believes 'the reintroduction of January examinations would **weaken public confidence** in qualifications taken by Welsh learners and threaten portability'. It is its 'regulatory opinion' that the **current position 'continues to be in the best interests of learners in Wales'**.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.