



**Exploring
Confidence in
Qualifications and
the Qualification
System in Wales**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction and Context

- 1 In April 2015, the Welsh Government commissioned York Consulting to carry out a four-and-a-half-year study to explore stakeholder confidence in qualifications and the qualification system in Wales. This report is the second of a three-phase study, the first phase being conducted in the field from October to December 2015 and a report published in June 2017¹. The final report will be completed by January 2020. The contract for the study passed to Qualifications Wales in September 2015 when Qualifications Wales was established.

- 2 Qualifications Wales has two principal aims set out in legislation:
 - to ensure that qualifications and the Welsh qualification system are effective for meeting the reasonable needs of learners.
 - to promote public confidence in qualifications and the Welsh qualification system.

- 3 In 2012, the Review of Qualifications² led to the large-scale reform of GCSEs and A levels over a three-year period from 2015 to 2017. Details of the changes to qualifications can be found on the Qualifications Wales website³. Managing, understanding and teaching the new qualifications specifications and their assessment have been a key feature of stakeholder views, alongside the future direction of travel towards a new curriculum as outlined in Successful Futures⁴.

Method

- 4 The study involved 67 qualitative interviews with a range of stakeholders including school staff and representative bodies from the school sector, policy and representative stakeholders including the four regional consortia, further education providers in Wales, higher education providers (based in Wales and outside of Wales), work-based learning providers, awarding bodies and employer representatives. Sampling for the qualitative research was purposive across all relevant stakeholders identified by Qualifications Wales. The study generated evidence from stakeholders with varying levels of knowledge, understanding and interest on the range of issues relating to qualifications and the qualification system in Wales.

¹ Qualifications Wales (2016) Confidence in Qualifications and the Qualification system in Wales. The executive summary is available [here](#).

² Welsh Government (2012) Review of qualifications for 14-19 year olds in Wales: Final report and recommendations. ISBN 978 0 7504 8267 7

³ <http://qualificationswales.org/qualifications/gcse/?lang=en>

⁴ Donaldson, G. (2015) Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales, ISBN 978 1 4734 3043 3, available here:

KEY FINDINGS

Confidence in Qualifications in Wales

- 5 Stakeholders continued to value the GCSEs and A levels in Wales. This is because they considered them to be a reliable indication of a pupil's knowledge, skills and ability to learn new skills.
- 6 Many stakeholders agreed that the ongoing reforms of GCSEs, AS and A levels in Wales were needed to ensure that qualification standards are maintained and to provide a strong portfolio of learning and assessment for young people in Wales.
- 7 There was a lack of awareness of the extent of revisions to qualifications outside of the school sector. Stakeholders suggested that this lack of awareness was particularly prevalent amongst parents.
- 8 There was a perception that, in some GCSEs, standards have been raised as a result of the revisions; some content is more challenging, and learners have to apply their knowledge in different ways. This is perceived to be the result of a commitment from the Welsh Government and Qualifications Wales to modernise qualifications and align more with PISA⁵ style questions. The increased focus on the application of learning, independence of learning and literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum was welcomed.
- 9 Some stakeholders were concerned that the focus of policy had shifted too much towards climbing up the PISA ranking and consequently, less attention was being paid to innovation in assessment and learning.
- 10 Some teachers had concerns regarding a perceived increase in more difficult/higher order skills content in some qualifications. Some fundamental concerns were expressed around the content of Science GCSEs and their applicability to modern day science; a number thought the content was too traditional and was not adequately preparing learners for higher level learning in science.
- 11 Some stakeholders supported the move towards linear GCSEs (i.e. the assessment being at the end of the qualification) to increase rigour. However, there was disappointment in the mode of assessment with an overreliance on paper examinations (as opposed to testing learners' ability to work in teams or deliver projects). Some stakeholders requested a greater level of innovation in assessment.
- 12 There was support for the increased focus on Welsh context within the qualifications, for example in literature and history.

⁵ Programme for International Student Assessment (<http://www.oecd.org/pisa/>)

- 13 There was disappointment across Welsh medium stakeholders with the delays in providing resources for Welsh medium learners and a seeming lack of capacity within the qualification system to do much about this.
- 14 There was perceived to be considerable demand on schools to teach to the new full Welsh Second Language GCSE and stakeholders were concerned about the resource implications for schools.
- 15 All stakeholders were positive about the retention of A*-G grading in GCSEs in Wales, although there were some concerns about how pupils achieving an A* grade could demonstrate equivalence with English pupils who were awarded a Grade 9 in the reformed 9-1 GCSEs in England.
- 16 Retention of the modular approach in A levels is supported, particularly by higher education providers (HEP) who see AS levels as a reliable indicator of a pupil's potential when making an offer.
- 17 According to stakeholders, the changes in A level content in some subjects, particularly in mathematics, require additional teacher training to ensure teachers can teach, with confidence, to the new specifications.
- 18 Stakeholders reported that the Welsh Baccalaureate (Welsh Bacc) has been improved. In particular, the grading of the Skills Challenge Certificate (SCC) and equivalence with A level UCAS tariff points were considered positive developments. However, there are still concerns regarding the level of bureaucracy related to delivering SCC and of the demands on pupils to complete the qualification, particularly for the Advanced SCC at level 3. The Welsh Government's policy of universal adoption is somewhat unclear and currently there are concerns that universal adoption at level 3 is disadvantaging some pupils applying for higher education. Not all HEPs make an offer on the SCC due to concerns related to subject specific knowledge required for studying at the higher level.

Confidence in the Qualification System

- 19 Qualifications Wales was recognised as a strong organisation providing leadership, consistency and a good level of communication regarding how qualifications in Wales are regulated.
- 20 Stakeholders perceived that the organisation was strong on consultation approaches and operates with an open and transparent approach to decision making. There was perceived to be a clear commitment by Qualifications Wales to working in partnership with the wider sector. There were high levels of support for Qualifications Wales and for the commitment the organisation has brought to improving qualifications and the qualification system; particularly among schools, regional consortia and awarding bodies.

- 21 Many stakeholders felt there were challenges for Qualifications Wales (and other organisations in the system) in delivering qualification reform and future curriculum changes, in the context of ongoing changes to school performance measures. There was a view that Wales must be reactive, to some extent, to changes in England to ensure perceived equivalence in demand of qualifications.
- 22 Related to this were concerns that communications from the Welsh Government, Qualifications Wales and WJEC were not always consistent and that roles among those organisations needed to be agreed and communicated, particularly to the regional consortia.
- 23 The scale and pace of change has posed considerable challenges on WJEC as the awarding body for GCSEs and A levels, on schools and on regional consortia. All the relevant bodies stated they were responding as well as was possible with the capacity available to them. However, there were some examples given that indicated WJEC has been over-stretched: teachers reported delays in some GCSE specifications, some variability in the quality of specifications and late teacher resources which affected schools' ability to prepare for first time teaching in September. Concerns were raised regarding the potential impact of this on pupils.
- 24 This was a particular problem for qualifications delivered through the medium of Welsh. Several stakeholders within the regional consortia and among Welsh medium schools were very disappointed; they perceived a lateness of Welsh language specifications, text books and a general lack of progress in this area.
- 25 There was the perception by school stakeholders that choice had been curtailed, in that schools can no longer select the specification and awarding body most suited to their cohorts of pupils. Of particular concern was the loss of BTEC Science to the school curriculum due to changes in school performance measures. A more general concern was the move away from vocational qualifications in the curriculum and the messages this gives to pupils regarding parity of esteem with general qualifications.
- 26 There were some concerns regarding the move towards the increasing use of exams at the end of a course in vocational qualifications and a perception that learners were being channelled into one mode of assessment. There was a good level of support for a sector by sector approach to the review of vocational qualifications.
- 27 WJEC as an awarding body was recognised as a robust and high performing awarding body. However, some stakeholders were concerned that the move to a single awarding body was a risk and could result in a drop in the quality of service due to a lack of competition.

- 28 A broader concern expressed by several stakeholders, was the impact that Welsh Government's school performance measures were having on schools more generally. Some stakeholders requested a greater focus on progress than on attainment at C grade and above.
- 29 A few stakeholders were looking ahead at the forthcoming curriculum changes and were very excited about the opportunities the changes may bring but were equally concerned about how well Wales is going to manage the transition. Several stakeholders were concerned about the pace and frequency of changes to qualifications as a result of the new curriculum.

1 STUDY BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH METHOD

Introduction

- 1.1 In April 2015, the Welsh Government commissioned York Consulting to carry out a four-and-a-half year study to explore and summarise stakeholder views on, and confidence in, Welsh qualifications and the qualification system.
- 1.2 This report is the second of a three-phase study, the first phase being conducted from October to December 2015, with a report published in May 2016. The final report will be completed by January 2020.

Background

- 1.3 With the coming into force of the Qualifications Wales Act 2015, responsibility for the regulation of the qualification system in Wales transferred to an independent body, Qualifications Wales. Due to the transfer of responsibilities, the contract for this research study passed to Qualifications Wales in September 2015.
- 1.4 Qualifications Wales has two principal aims set out in legislation:
 - to ensure that qualifications and the Welsh qualification system are effective for meeting the reasonable needs of learners.
 - to promote public confidence in qualifications and the Welsh qualification system.

Reform of General Qualifications

- 1.5 In 2012, the Review of Qualifications⁶ led to the large-scale reform of GCSEs and A levels over a three-year period from 2015 to 2017. Details of the changes to qualifications can be found on the Qualifications Wales website⁷.
- 1.6 Revisions to general qualifications (GCSEs and A levels) have been phased in over a three-year period from first-time teaching in September 2015 to September 2017. WJEC is the sole supplier of reformed general qualifications in Wales, as it was the only awarding body that chose to develop qualifications to meet design requirements put in place by Welsh Government and Qualifications Wales. As new qualifications are introduced, legacy qualifications are being withdrawn and most legacy qualifications will cease to be taught after September 2016 with final examination resits in the summer of 2018⁸. For subjects where a reformed qualification has not been developed for Wales, learners can choose from the

⁶ Welsh Government (2012) Review of qualifications for 14-19 year olds in Wales: Final report and recommendations. ISBN 978 0 7504 8267 7

⁷ <http://www.qualificationswales.org/english/qualifications/gcse-and-a-levels/gq-reform/> [accessed 16/3/18]

⁸ A full list of qualification final teaching and exam timetable is available on the Qualifications Wales website, here. <http://qualificationswales.org/media/2080/legacy-gcse-161010.pdf> (accessed 28/12/17)

qualifications that have been reformed for England, as long as they are designated by Qualifications Wales.

Sector Reviews of Vocational Qualifications

- 1.7 Qualifications Wales has also been conducting sector-based reviews of vocational qualifications. The process for reviewing Health and Social Care qualifications has been completed and a sector review report detailing what needs to change was published in July 2016⁹. A contract was awarded to WJEC in partnership with City and Guilds to deliver the Health and Social Care qualifications. The report on the sector review for the construction and built environment industry has also been published along with a consultation on the response to the findings, and a review of the qualifications in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector is ongoing.

Curriculum reform

- 1.8 Professor Graham Donaldson was commissioned by the Minister for Education and Skills to conduct a fundamental review of curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales from Foundation to Key Stage 4. Donaldson's 2015 report, *Successful Futures*¹⁰, proposed wide and radical changes to the curriculum for pupils aged 3-16.
- 1.9 All of the recommendations were accepted by the Minister for Education and Skills which committed Wales to radical changes in teaching and learning.
- 1.10 Both ongoing, and potential future change in the qualification system in Wales is, therefore, considerable. Managing, understanding and teaching the new qualifications have been a key feature of stakeholders' views, alongside the future direction of travel committed to in *Successful Futures*.

Method

- 1.11 67 qualitative face to face or telephone interviews were completed with stakeholders from 61 organisations. A broad list of stakeholders was agreed with Qualifications Wales.
- 1.12 Table 1.1 details the stakeholder groups achieved.

⁹ Qualifications Wales (2016) Sector Review of Qualifications and the Qualifications System in Wales including child care and play work. <http://qualificationswales.org/media/1904/hsc-report-2016-e.pdf> (last viewed 28/12/17)

¹⁰ Donaldson, G. (2015) *Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales*, ISBN 978 1 4734 3043 3, available here: file:///C:/Users/louis/AppData/Regional/Packages/MicrosoftEdge_8wekyb3d8bbwe/TempState/Downloads/Donaldson%20Report%20-%20Successful%20Futures%20-%20Independent%20Review%20of%20Curriculum%20and%20Assessment%20Arrangements%20in%20Wales.pdf

Table 1: Stakeholder Groups Interviewed

20 school staff and school representative bodies
3 Further Education (FE) Colleges and Colegau Cymru
5 Work-Based Learning (WBL) providers and NTFW
12 Higher Education Providers (HEPs) and sector representatives (5 HEPs within Wales)
5 Awarding Bodies and FAB and JCQ
10 wider organisations including Estyn and 4 Regional Consortia
2 Sector Skills Councils and CBI Wales

1.13 Purposive sampling¹¹ was used to identify and select interviewees.

1.14 The interview guide was designed to allow stakeholders to discuss any issue pertinent to their role in relation to qualifications, the qualification system and Qualifications Wales.

- | |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What are stakeholders' views on the qualifications in Wales?<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. What factors do they find encouraging?b. What factors concern them?2. What are the key strengths in the qualification system in Wales?3. Do stakeholders feel the qualification system could be improved in any way?4. What are stakeholders' views of Qualifications Wales? |
|--|

1.15 Summarising the wide range of views from stakeholders was challenging. Stakeholders' views differed across the range of points raised in discussion, and some stakeholders had a greater depth of knowledge on certain matters. This presented challenges when trying to corroborate views. For example, feedback from one or two teachers on certain qualifications have been included as a way of illustrating confidence, or lack of confidence in qualifications.

1.16 It is also important to note that stakeholders expressed strong views about the Welsh education system more broadly than qualifications and sometimes spoke on issues that related to policy regulation and to teaching. Therefore, not all points are pertinent to the roles and responsibilities of Qualification Wales but have remained in the report to reflect the views raised by stakeholders.

1.17 The findings reported here are the views and opinions expressed by stakeholders.

¹¹ A non-probability sample that is selected based on characteristics of a population and the objective of the study

2 CONFIDENCE IN QUALIFICATIONS IN WALES

Introduction

2.1 This section details stakeholders' views about qualifications in Wales. Key points raised related to:

- General Certificates in Secondary Education (GCSEs)
- Advanced level qualifications (AS level and A level)
- Welsh Baccalaureate (Welsh Bacc) / Skills Challenge Certificate (SCC)
- Vocational qualifications.

GCSEs

GCSEs in general

2.2 The value of the GCSE as a qualification currency remains strong among stakeholders interviewed. Stakeholders stated that they are a reliable indication of a pupil's knowledge, skills and ability to learn across a range of subject areas.

"GCSEs in Wales provide a good benchmark of a student's knowledge and everyone understands them. They form a key part of our assessment of skills in young people."

2.3 There was a perception from the school sector that GCSE standards have been raised as a result of the changes to qualifications.

"Young people are asked to apply their thinking to a higher level."

2.4 Stakeholders outside of the school sector had confidence in the changes undertaken and believed that Qualifications Wales is committed to improving things and that this will help raise the standing of Welsh qualifications.

"It's a good thing that we are addressing the issues [perceived lower standards than in England], it can only benefit our young people..."

2.5 Although there was a dip in results at Key Stage 4 in core subjects¹² in 2016/17, there was a general view that the decrease in attainment was probably down to changes in specifications and assessment and that, as teachers become more familiar with the new qualifications, results will improve. There was confidence that going forward, the revisions to the qualifications will lead to pupils who are better equipped to deal with challenges in a modern society.

"These new qualifications require students to be more resilient and independent."

¹² core subjects are English/Welsh first language, mathematics and science

- 2.6 Stakeholders viewed the increase in Welsh context in some qualifications, such as literature and history, as a positive change to the revised specifications.

“It’s such a strength that our young people are learning about the Welsh context... that their understanding is based on our history and our culture.”

- 2.7 The decision by the Welsh Government to retain the A*-G grading system was viewed as a positive decision by centres (schools and colleges) and by wider stakeholders, although there was some concern that Welsh students cannot demonstrate, through their grades, achievement equivalent to the English Grade 9.

“We no longer have equivalence (with England) at the higher end of (pupil) achievement (in GCSEs).”

Support for GCSE

- 2.8 Generally, across the full range of GCSEs, there was support for the changes that had been made to content. Interviews with headteachers and heads of department revealed considerable confidence in the new specifications. There was agreement that the new GCSEs have an increased focus on functionality, encouraging pupils to develop new practical ‘every day’ skills, creating more independent and effective learners.

“The new qualifications are providing a comprehensive suite of skills and knowledge that are moving learners more towards the skills they need in the 21st Century”.

Examples of GCSE subject specific comments from teachers

Mathematics and Mathematics-Numeracy GCSEs received considerable support from a wide range of stakeholders. Many reported the changes as raising the functional/applied mathematics skills of learners. The content builds seamlessly from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4. The Mathematics Numeracy GCSE is particularly welcomed.

“You have to teach pupils to think in problem solving terms and this is a great skill for them to acquire.”

“The higher-grade papers allow learners to demonstrate their ability to reach an A and the intermediate paper is a positive paper for B/C students.”*

- 2.9 In addition, the changes in the Welsh Second Language GCSE are perceived to have had a greater focus on communication and are believed to help ensure pupils develop good functional language skills. The English Language GCSE is perceived to

‘look more like a PISA¹³ paper’ and is considered to be more relevant to what learners need to be able to do.

- 2.10 There was a recognition that the new assessments support the development of literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum.
- 2.11 According to schools, embedding literacy requirements across GCSEs has helped improve pupils’ skills and helped to emphasise the importance of effective and precise language. The increased emphasis on spelling, grammar, and punctuation across all GCSEs had wide spread support.

“This has to be a good thing, to ensure we embed those skills across the curriculum.”

“Teachers have adapted how they teach and mark work in order to challenge pupils about their use of language.”

- 2.12 The National Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF) was recognised as a key framework that has supported schools to embed literacy and numeracy skills.

Concerns with GCSEs

- 2.13 Concerns regarding some GCSEs were also expressed by schools and mainly related to the large amount of content (described below) and the change assessment, with the exception of Science GCSEs. In Science GCSEs there were concerns regarding the suitability of the specification.

Content heavy: some teachers and regional consortia have reported that certain GCSEs are content heavy, for example Religious Studies and Psychology.

“The specification (Religious Studies) is huge and a real challenge.”

Mathematics-Numeracy GCSE: The paper leans heavily on pupils’ literacy skills and will present additional challenges for some learners. The application of numeracy is good, but some schools are struggling to teach to this.

Mathematics GCSE: The tiering of the mathematics papers presents challenges for schools to ensure their pupils are entered for the right paper. There were several stakeholders who were concerned that the foundation paper does not enable a pupil to achieve a C grade [at level 2].

“It’s hard to motivate a child who knows they can’t pass the exam.”

Embedding numeracy: There was less confidence regarding how well numeracy has been embedded across the curriculum with some schools stating that this was more difficult to achieve in particular subject areas.

¹³ Programme for International Student Assessment (<http://www.oecd.org/pisa/>)

"I think this (embedding numeracy across the curriculum) needs attention, there is a dearth of knowledge among teachers as to how to deliver numeracy within some subjects for example History and English or Welsh."

Comparison with reformed Mathematics GCSE in England: There was an opinion expressed that the Mathematics GCSE in England was of a higher standard and demanded more of pupils than the Welsh equivalent. While this is not factually accurate it demonstrates the perception held by stakeholders.

"[In England] four A level topics have dropped down into the GCSE and this is providing the Grade 9 distinction. This hasn't happened in Wales and it worries me...it is unfair on our A student who will be progressing on to A levels and eventually to HE."*

Science GCSE (Double Award): Several stakeholders in the school sector reported the content was too traditional, not preparing learners to think creatively and not encouraging pupils to develop skills for the 21st Century.

"Donaldson is all about the big picture in Science. The new qualification designed by WJEC is not big picture, it is too traditional." (Schools)

There were also concerns with the Science GCSE (Double Award) regarding progression from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4 and a lack of continuity of content.

English GCSE: The sample assessment for GCSE English Language was 'riddled with errors.' There was a view that a lack of clarity existed in the training on how teachers should prepare students for narrative writing and developing synthesis skills.

Grade boundaries: Several stakeholders expressed concerns over low grade boundaries in GCSE Sciences and Mathematics in particular. One example was given in mathematics where pass marks at a C grade were perceived as very low. Stakeholders said they assumed that the grade boundaries had been reset to take account of the increased difficulty. Some stakeholders wondered whether there had been political interference in setting grade boundaries so that the changes in qualifications were not too damning for Wales.

Assessment of GCSEs

- 2.14 Many stakeholders supported the reduction in controlled (non-examined) assessments (conducted in centres) and a move towards assessment through external examinations. There was an acknowledgement from some stakeholders that this change would 'level the playing field'.

"It minimises concerns that schools can have too great an impact on a student's performance (through the use of controlled assessments)."

- 2.15 However, there were stakeholders who wanted to preserve assessment by coursework/controlled assessment in some subject areas, like the practical

assessment retained in Science, and wanted to see some assessment of group work in GCSEs.

*“We need to be much more creative about how we assess our pupils.
Why can’t we include assessments on how well students work as a
group? These skills are so important to employers.”*

- 2.16 Several stakeholders, including regional consortia and teachers, called into question the continued reliance on traditional, paper based examination assessment.

*“Examinations are a compromise...we have a culture of written
examinations which is not altogether positive for our young people and
for their experience of learning.”*

- 2.17 Several stakeholders stated they were disappointed that the system for end-point assessment had not moved on and that there has been a lack of innovation in the development of end-point assessment.

*“Reforms are really boring, examinations drive behaviour in schools and
among pupils and currently this is rewarding an academic route.*

- 2.18 Some stakeholders suggested that what is being assessed in reformed GCSEs in Wales has become more similar to what is assessed in England.

- 2.19 Several stakeholders were concerned with the number of examinations pupils have to sit in a short period of time and the impact on young peoples’ welfare.

*“Many pupils are asked to sit over 20 exam papers in a short few weeks.
Is this really the best method for assessing their talents?”*

General Awareness of Changes to GCSEs

- 2.20 Among Work-Based Learning providers, HEPs and employer representatives, there was limited understanding of the changes to general qualifications and among other representative organisations there was very little awareness of the revisions. When prompted, few people were aware of changes to Mathematics GCSE qualifications and a few stated they were less well informed than they would like to be.

- 2.21 Despite quite detailed information available on the Qualifications Wales website, many stakeholders were not accessing the site for information. Several stakeholders stated that they intended to engage more frequently with the Qualifications Wales website for information in the future.

- 2.22 Most stakeholders agreed there was a need for schools to raise awareness of the changes to qualifications, particularly the Mathematics GCSE qualifications, among parents and the wider community.

GCSE Qualifications in Welsh

- 2.23 According to stakeholders, Qualifications Wales has a good grip on Welsh language-related matters and has made efforts to work with the Welsh Language Commissioner and awarding bodies to address GCSE qualifications in Welsh.
- 2.24 However, there was concern and disappointment among stakeholders regarding the availability of designated Welsh medium qualifications (regulated by Qualifications Wales but not necessarily available through the medium of Welsh). There were also concerns about the range of approved qualifications (that have been reformed for Wales and are required by Qualifications Wales to be offered bilingually) and resources to support their delivery. There were reports of Welsh medium schools having to translate resources themselves before they could teach them, which is a heavy resource commitment for a school. Although there is a Welsh Government grant that awarding bodies can access to develop resources for priority subjects, but not all awarding bodies are using it to offer Welsh medium assessments in all their qualifications. Textbooks are often not available in Welsh, or only become available sometime after English versions have been published. This was seen as a facet of the open market in which textbooks are provided by commercial publishers, who sit beyond the reach of Qualifications Wales' regulatory powers. This may need further attention from the regulator to ensure that pupils studying through the medium of Welsh are not disadvantaged.
- 2.25 According to stakeholders, there are a number of small entry subject qualifications which are not available in Welsh, such as Psychology and this has become a more pressing issue.

"We don't seem to be getting much further on this issue too fast."

- 2.26 Awarding bodies also reported a challenge in recruiting examiners who are capable of working through the medium of Welsh for small entry subjects.

The Welsh Second Language GCSE

- 2.27 The statutory study of Welsh first or second language for all learners until the end of key stage 4 continues to generate varying responses from stakeholders.

"We fully endorse the Welsh Government's position and believe this is a huge step to ensuring our language is a vibrant language used in everyday life."

"Many pupils don't want to learn it and it's not an easy language to learn. Why should they be forced to study it?"

- 2.28 The revisions to the Welsh Second Language GCSE and discontinuation of the short course received a mixed response from stakeholders. Some schools reported they were going to be teaching the new Welsh Second Language GCSE but that not all pupils would be taking the qualification. There were a few that questioned the logic

of having to teach the programme of study for which students were not going to sit an exam.

- 2.29 Within this debate, however, there is a recognition that changes in the Welsh Second Language GCSE are welcomed and it was reported that the qualification should result in improved communication skills. There were practical concerns regarding schools' capacity to teach this GCSE when there are insufficient numbers of Welsh speaking teachers across the network of maintained secondary schools. According to regional consortia, English medium schools are, as a consequence, leaning heavily on the Welsh medium and bi-lingual schools to help them teach the new full course second language qualification.

Advanced Level Qualifications (AS level and A level)

- 2.30 Stakeholders were confident in A level qualifications describing them as being underpinned by rigorous assessment and providing equivalence in standards with England.
- 2.31 HEPs were positive about the retention of the modular approach to AS and A levels in Wales compared to the shift to a linear A level system in England. Retaining the AS qualification is regarded as fully compatible with learning at the higher level. The modular system largely mirrors HEPs' approach to teaching: Almost all university courses are modular 'one year' courses, whereby students have to 'pass' each year before being able to progress to the next.
- 2.32 Teachers also stated that students remain motivated throughout their two-year studies due to the assessment at the end of the first year. Also, students are more able to concentrate on new learning in the second year, having already been examined for the content of the first year of learning.
- 2.33 AS results are also viewed as a useful and reliable predictor of students' likely outcome at A level. In the absence of AS level grades, HEPs stated they have to refer back to GCSE results for an externally marked indicator of an applicant's ability.
- 2.34 There are concerns that English students can take just three A levels to progress to their HEP of choice, but that many Welsh students will sit three A levels alongside the SCC.

"I am concerned that for some of our students, this puts them at a disadvantage."

- 2.35 According to stakeholders some of the reformed A levels have a higher level of expectation on students and as a result, require a higher level of teaching knowledge than in previous years. This was particularly referenced in relation to mathematics, but teachers more generally spoke of the need for a greater level of preparation to teach to the new specifications. Regional Consortia also stated there

was a demand on schools to prepare for the new A level specifications and this had not happened to the extent needed.

- 2.36 Observations of teaching undertaken by specialists in a Regional Consortium apparently revealed teachers' lack of confidence in teaching to the new Mathematics A level specification.
- 2.37 A few teachers, heads of department and regional consortia provided feedback on particular issues relating to A levels.

Progression to A level Science: There were concerns expressed among a few stakeholders regarding pupils' poor attainment at GCSE Sciences which might impact negatively on their performance at A level. Schools have reported a big jump in difficulty from the Science GCSEs to A level Science and there appears to be an acceptance that there will be a national dip in science attainment at A level.

Mathematics A level: There has been a big step-up in Mathematics A levels, and the Mathematics A level is reported as being more challenging. This has an impact on teachers' ability to teach. The A level specification is perceived as vague, and teachers had to contact WJEC to get clarification on the specification. There is only one specimen paper available, so teachers are unsure about the exam in the summer 2018.

Some teachers had concerns that pupils are being asked to cover all areas of mathematics including statistics and mechanics and that this is a real challenge for some pupils who would rather specialise. There are also some concerns that many teachers do not have a sufficient range of skills to teach both areas and that the quality of the teaching may suffer as a result.

AS level German: One teacher felt that the accreditation of the AS German specification was last minute and not well executed. This was due to the approval process taking longer than expected which meant there was only a short time between its approval and the date for first teaching. The teacher thought the specification could have provided more detail and guidance on the topic areas. They compared it with the EDUQAS specification which they considered was more appealing with more choice of films and literature.

Welsh Baccalaureate / Skills Challenge Certificate

- 2.38 In September 2015, a new Welsh Baccalaureate (Welsh Bacc) was introduced to help prepare learners between the ages of 14 and 19 for life and work and for progression to further/higher education. The Welsh Bacc is a framework of qualifications including:
- The Skills Challenge Certificate

- GCSEs in English or Welsh Language and Mathematics or Mathematics-Numeracy. Where appropriate the literacy and numeracy components of the Essential Skills Wales qualifications can be used.
 - A choice of supporting qualifications of a specified size and level
- 2.39 The Welsh Bacc is awarded at three levels:
- Foundation Welsh Bacc (level 1), awarded at key stage 4 or Post-16
 - National Welsh Bacc (level 2), awarded at key stage 4 or Post-16
 - Advanced Welsh Bacc (level 3), awarded at Post-16 only.
- 2.40 All learners at Key Stage 4 follow a National/Foundation Welsh Bacc. Learners achieve either a Foundation (level 1) or National (level 2) Welsh Bacc based on the grades they achieve for each of the contributing qualifications. Post-16 learners are entered for either the Post-16 Foundation, Post-16 National or Advanced Welsh Bacc depending on the level of their main learning programme.
- 2.41 The Skills Challenge Certificate (SCC) is a new and innovative, skills-based qualification. There are four SCC qualifications. Each one follows a common structure that includes four components: the Individual Project, the Enterprise and Employability Challenge, the Global Citizenship Challenge and the Community Challenge. Collectively, the four components aim to enable learners to develop seven skills needed for education, employment and life. Learners' work for each component of the SCC is marked by teachers in schools and FE colleges, and after internal standardisation, a sample of work is moderated by the awarding body.
- 2.42 To be awarded the Welsh Bacc, learners must achieve the SCC and the other qualifications that comprise the Welsh Bacc framework. The Welsh Bacc is graded as pass or fail. The SCC grade is calculated based on the aggregation of the component scores and is graded as follows:
- Foundation – pass* and pass
 - National – A*-C
 - Advanced – A*-E
- 2.43 The SCC is equivalent in size to a GCSE (at levels 1 and 2) or an A level (at level 3). If a learner does not achieve all the required qualifications to be awarded the Welsh Bacc, but has achieved the SCC, the SCC is still awarded.
- 2.44 When the Welsh Government introduced the new Welsh Bacc, it announced a policy of universal adoption. The policy sets targets for schools and FE colleges to gradually increase the proportion of students taking the Welsh Bacc, with the aim that by 2019/20 all eligible learners in Wales would take it as part of their programme of study.

- 2.45 Many interviewees, including representatives from schools and universities, viewed the Welsh Bacc as a reliable measure of a pupil's ability to achieve academically. There was wide recognition of the improvements within the reformed Welsh Bacc at level 3 with the new grading of the SCC and agreement that this award has the potential to be very valuable for learners at both Key Stages 4 and 5.

"I fully support the Welsh BaccaLaureate, it's a very strong qualification, very robust and a great opportunity for young people to show the range of skills they have developed."

- 2.46 Many stakeholders agreed that the SCC encourages learners to work independently and provides them with real life opportunities during their studies. Some stated they thought it helped develop organisational and planning skills and encourages innovation and creativity, many of the skills that are needed in employment.

- 2.47 However, many stakeholders reported that the SCC can be further improved to make it more manageable and to reduce the level of paper work required for completion of the various components. Schools reported that there is still a way to go before everyone is convinced that the time and effort required to deliver the qualification converts in to a reward for the pupil.

"The level 2 qualification (Skills Challenge Certificate) is very challenging qualification, it's a huge workload. It impacts both on the school and the pupil in term of being able to complete this..."

- 2.48 To aid its delivery within schools, some schools have identified a dedicated Welsh Bacc co-ordinator to help organise the delivery of the SCC. Schools reported that this has improved their overall capacity to deliver the qualification.

- 2.49 However, in terms of the workload for learners, a few school staff reported concerns regarding the number of components of the SCC and the time required by learners to complete them. Stakeholders reported that learners have to progress through the elements of the SCC quickly and elements such as the enterprise and employability challenge can be very time consuming.

"I have huge concerns it is a qualification that does not allow for students who move, or are ill, to catch up."

- 2.50 A few staff in FE colleges felt that it was less suitable for learners at Post-16 Foundation and Post-16 National levels as they felt that there was too much of a focus on literacy and numeracy which many of these learners had struggled with at school; this resulted in learners becoming disengaged.

- 2.51 Prior to September 2015, learners studied a different version of the Welsh Bacc which did not include the SCC. This version of the Welsh Bacc was graded as pass or fail. At Advanced level, the grading of the SCC as A*-E has increased confidence among stakeholders regarding its equivalence with A levels. This was corroborated

by HEPs within Wales that noted that the new Welsh Bacc is more credible due to the grading and tariff points awarded for the SCC.

“This puts the qualification on a par with other A levels and is a great way for students to demonstrate their wider set of skills and experience. It gives their application a boost, they have something to talk about other than their studies.”

- 2.52 Many HEPs in Wales and some HEPs outside of Wales noted that they make an offer of a place to a potential student based on their attainment in the SCC and two A levels.
- 2.53 All HEPs interviewed stated that learners who have attained the SCC at level 3 were in a stronger position than those who have not, as it provides a greater level of insight into a student’s capacity for independent learning. Some HEPs that did not include the SCC in an offer noted that if students did not attain the grades in the three A levels required, they consider the attainment of the SCC as the fourth qualification and consider making an offer of admission.
- 2.54 Some schools reported ‘pushing back’ over the recommendation of universal adoption and noted that they do not mandate that learners study the SCC at post-16. There were concerns that this lack of consistency is making it difficult to engage learners and parents in the SCC at post-16.
- 2.55 There were also concerns that learners from Wales are being disadvantaged because they are dedicating time to studying for a qualification that is not accepted by all HEPs. Some stakeholders were particularly concerned that for students applying for certain courses, such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects, medicine or dentistry where offers were often made only on A level grades, having to study the SCC was an additional and unnecessary pressure. However, there are examples of the SCC being part of the entry offer by some HEPs for these subjects.
- 2.56 Several HEPs were unsure about the value and purpose of the Welsh Bacc at Advanced level when only the SCC is graded. Several stakeholders agreed that more communications work needs to be done to raise understanding and to demonstrate the value of the Welsh Bacc and the SCC to certain HEPs, particularly outside of Wales.
- 2.57 Independent schools remain unconvinced of the merits of the Welsh Bacc at level 1/2 or level 3. An observation from an independent school was that Qualifications Wales could do more to communicate with them to raise the brand of Welsh qualifications and the Welsh Bacc.

Vocational Qualifications

2.58 There was a low level of understanding or awareness of the classification of IVETs and CVETs beyond FE colleges and WBL providers, although there was no objection to the classification. Work-Based Learning providers and FE colleges reported that the cleansing of qualifications on the Qualifications in Wales (QiW) database resulted in difficulties in knowing which qualifications can still be delivered in centres.

2.59 Some stakeholders were aware of the changes taking place within vocational qualifications (as a result of policy changes in England) relating to a move towards assessment at the end of the course, as opposed to modular assessments.

“There was definitely gaming going on within schools and this had to be controlled.”

2.60 However, there were some concerns that the move towards assessment at the end of the course is becoming the pervasive form of assessment, at the potential detriment to many learners who perform less well in end of year examinations.

2.61 Most stakeholders agreed that the image of vocational qualifications had been damaged due to schools’ previous widespread use of vocational qualifications over GCSEs, particularly for lower level learners.

2.62 Several stakeholders raised concerns that vocational qualifications are being engineered out of the curriculum, particularly in pre-16 learning and the resulting message this gives to learners who may wish to follow a vocational pathway post 16.

“We have worked hard to engage all our learners and we are concerned that many will become disaffected and disengage from learning, certainly at post-16 as a result of their experiences.”

2.63 GCSEs are, according to some stakeholders, beyond the reach of some learners and in the absence of BTECs or other vocational qualifications, there is a concern that many will leave with few, if any, qualifications.

2.64 Some schools reported not delivering the BTEC Science qualifications due to the changes in school performance measures. Stakeholders outside of the school sector felt this was a positive decision to deter schools from ‘gaming’ performance measures while schools themselves were more concerned that they were unable to choose the most appropriate qualification for the learner.

“Last year I had a learner who progressed from BTEC in Science and went on to do Radiography at University. This pathway is now closed for him as he would not have achieved the dual award.”

Apprenticeships

- 2.65 Although Apprenticeships are not within the remit of Qualifications Wales (although the qualifications used within them are), several stakeholders raised some important points that are worthy of note.
- 2.66 Retaining the Apprenticeship Framework in Wales as opposed to the Apprenticeship Standards in England received support from key stakeholders representing the sector.
- 2.67 Divergence in Apprenticeship frameworks/standards between England and Wales with regards to content and assessment has created challenges for providers and employers. Employers who operate across the borders in England and Wales, wish their apprentices to undertake the same framework/standard for reasons of consistency and parity of achievement. Divergence in apprenticeship structures is an additional challenge for providers delivering apprenticeships to large employers, and providers have to navigate through the different set of requirements.
- 2.68 According to WBL providers, unlike England, where learners have no choice of the learning areas studied, in Wales learners have a choice and can choose particular skills areas they are most interested in. WBL providers suggested that this is their preferred model as it keeps the learning close to a learner's interest.

“The English model seems very much like going back to college and this isn't going to be appropriate for all learners”.

- 2.69 Some WBL providers criticised the rule regarding completing the Essential Skills Wales controlled task/assessment within eight weeks¹⁴. If a learner does not complete the qualification within this timeframe they have to retake the controlled task/assessment.

“This is a barrier to learners, particularly older learners and our retention rates have been affected and our success rates have dropped.”

- 2.70 A further frustration was reported with the Cross-Cutting Themes within the apprenticeship framework and that awarding bodies currently do not provide sufficient support to centres on how the themes can be addressed through the qualifications taken within the apprenticeship. For some apprenticeships, embedding Cross-Cutting Themes such as citizenship can be incongruent with the subject area, for example engineering, making the delivery of these elements difficult.

¹⁴ Qualifications Wales has clarified that academic holiday periods and valid learner absence do not count towards the 8 weeks.

Summary

2.71 There are high levels of confidence in both GCSEs and A levels; standards are perceived to have increased, particularly in GCSEs and the new specifications are perceived to encourage more independent learning. More linear specifications and external exams are considered to be increasing the rigour, although stakeholders feel there is still value in the use of controlled and modular assessment in certain qualifications. The Welsh Bacc has been improved but concerns remain with the administration of it and the real value of the Welsh Bacc at level 3, outside of the SCC, was questioned. Vocational qualifications in secondary schools are an important alternative for some learners and the withdrawal of BTEC Science qualifications from the school curriculum, due to changes in school performance measures, has raised some concern, as has the new GCSE Science specification. There are concerns regarding the divergence of Apprenticeship frameworks in Wales and Apprenticeship standards in England which is leading to a complex landscape for Work-based Learning providers.

3 CONFIDENCE IN THE QUALIFICATION SYSTEM

Introduction

- 3.1 This section includes information reported by stakeholders regarding the qualification system. The qualification system in this research study refers to awarding bodies and the regulatory body Qualifications Wales. However, many stakeholders wanted to speak more broadly on the topic of how the qualification system is impacted by policy including school performance, attention to PISA and what is happening in England.
- 3.2 This section therefore covers stakeholders' views on:
- Confidence in Qualifications Wales and key agencies
 - Single awarding body supplying reformed general qualifications
 - Reviewing vocational qualifications
 - Other areas relating to policy

Confidence in Qualifications Wales and Key Agencies

Providing strong leadership and a high level of transparency

- 3.3 Qualifications Wales was recognised as a strong organisation providing leadership and clarity on regulation and qualifications. Awarding bodies reported good levels of communication and a good level of consistency in the approach to regulation.

“Conditions for recognition of qualifications are consistent over time which helps awarding organisations.”

- 3.4 Qualifications Wales has consulted appropriately with awarding organisations, provided clear and regular updates regarding regulation and the planned changes to qualifications. Their engagement with the sector, through conferences, stakeholder groups and email alerts, is a positive indication of their willingness to work in partnership with the sector. Regular meetings with headteachers help to keep communication channels open and provide the opportunity to talk and share ideas and concerns.
- 3.5 The organisation was credited for having a listening ear, being ‘willing to talk’, ‘open’ and ‘transparent.’ Qualifications Wales was regarded favourably due to this approach.
- 3.6 It was also acknowledged by many stakeholders that Qualifications Wales is operating in a challenging landscape with considerable political influences upon the education system. In particular, time-frames for delivering the revisions in qualifications were regarded as unrealistic, but Qualifications Wales has been credited with managing the planned changes as well as practically possible.

- 3.7 Stakeholders reported that strategies across Qualifications Wales, Welsh Government and Estyn appear coherent, and that there is a common agreement as to where improvements are needed within the wider education system. This has helped engender confidence in the system.

“In Wales, we have the key organisations that are all working together to drive up standards in Wales. They all help to ensure that we move towards the same goals and move at the same pace.”

Roles and responsibilities of Welsh Government, Qualifications Wales and WJEC

- 3.8 Despite the strengths in leadership reported above, according to some interviewees in the regional consortia, confusion remains about the roles and responsibilities across Welsh Government, Qualifications Wales and WJEC.

“I am not totally clear about their role and that of WJEC...where the boundary lies...what one and the other does, and I know this confusion is quite widespread in schools.”

- 3.9 Some concerns were expressed regarding communication flows between Welsh Government, Qualifications Wales and WJEC. It was reported by stakeholders in the regional consortia that the flow of information is not always consistent, and that on occasions, Qualifications Wales could communicate more directly with regional consortia to prevent any confusion.

“Questions can be asked and it’s not unlikely that we will get conflicting answers from across the three organisations.”

- 3.10 A few stakeholders mooted that lack of clarity may be the result of experts transferring from the Welsh Government to Qualifications Wales and taking the policy-related knowledge with them.
- 3.11 A few stakeholders expressed views that Qualifications Wales should be able to push-back sometimes against Welsh Government decisions particularly in relation to the scheduling of the changes and the impact this had on the quality of resources and preparedness for first time teaching in September.

Single awarding body supplying reformed general qualifications

- 3.12 The Welsh Government invited expressions of interest to deliver reformed qualifications in Wales and only WJEC responded. The resulting situation of only one awarding body delivering reformed general qualifications in Wales generated mixed views. Views expressed covered the following areas:

- developing a unique Welsh brand of qualifications
- risk relating to reduced competition
- lack of choice regarding specifications

- schedule of qualification changes

Developing a unique Welsh brand of qualifications

- 3.13 Many stakeholders were positive about the decision to adopt a Welsh brand of qualifications and the opportunity it brings to increase the tailoring of qualifications to the Welsh landscape and the emerging Welsh market.

“Awarding bodies will have to pay more attention to Welsh Government strategies and to what’s happening in Wales when they design qualifications...this has to be a good thing for Wales.”

- 3.14 However, some stakeholders had reservations that it could disadvantage young people receiving their education in Wales.

“There is an inevitable risk that is being taken in this decision to put all our eggs in one basket and that makes me somewhat nervous if we encounter problems.”

- 3.15 WJEC were recognised for being a strong awarding body, having operated in Wales for many years. The decision to work through WJEC has considerable support.

“WJEC are the only awarding body that stepped up to the plate and I believe they deliver strong qualifications and have provided a good service to Wales.”

“There is no reason to expect they won’t deliver to a high standard.”

- 3.16 Several stakeholders stated that having one awarding body will help ensure consistency in standards and engenders confidence in the system. It affords the ability to analyse pupil outcome data at a national level and has the benefit of providing the awarding body with a comprehensive data set on attainment and from which consistent and reliable decisions regarding awards can be made.

Potential risks relating to reduced competition and collaboration

- 3.17 Stakeholders reported feeling a little uneasy regarding the decision to change to a single awarding body and the resulting relationship between WJEC, Qualifications Wales and the Welsh Government. Stakeholders perceive that WJEC are a profit-making organisation (although in fact they are a charity that can make a surplus) and that there needs to be careful consideration of the positioning of WJEC within, what stakeholders termed, ‘the tripartite arrangement’ going forward.

“There is no memorandum of understanding to ensure that boundaries are appropriate.”

- 3.18 Several stakeholders reported concerns with what they saw as a monopoly and the longer-term impact on quality.

*“Is it necessarily the best thing for a market to have a dominant player?
Probably not.”*

*“We need to be mindful of the part that competition plays in the
maintenance of quality.”*

3.19 A few stakeholders were looking at the medium to longer term impact of having a single awarding body. It was mooted that other awarding bodies may retreat from Wales as they find it difficult to make their business viable. Delivering in Wales has the additional Welsh language requirement; as awarding bodies’ business potential is reduced to fewer qualifications, supporting the additional language element becomes more costly.

3.20 Some stakeholders thought the move to a single awarding body limited potential creativity in the design and structure of qualifications in the future.

*“When Awarding Bodies come together, it can result in innovation, and
this move reduces that likelihood.”*

3.21 An example was provided by a stakeholder of how successful the development of Essential Skills Wales Qualifications had been, which involved four awarding bodies who joined together to design very effective qualifications.

3.22 Stakeholders more generally reported needing reassurances that Qualifications Wales will carefully manage the relationship with WJEC and will constantly review the standard of service this awarding body provides to the sector.

Lack of choice regarding specifications

3.23 Prior to the changes, many schools reported using a range of awarding bodies to deliver their choice of qualifications, depending on pupil cohorts and specifications. As a result of moving to one awarding body for reformed general qualifications, concerns were expressed over the lack of choice regarding specifications when the specifications from WJEC were not considered appropriate for their learners nor exciting to teach.

*“We no longer have that choice. If we don’t like the new specification for
a subject, we are stuck with it.”*

*“I don’t think it’s fair to kids to have an all Wales pathway only, I don’t
feel we can select the qualifications that are best for the learner.”*

3.24 For example, the new science specification has ‘not hit the mark’ with schools but schools have no choice but to deliver it. Some schools preferred OCR specifications and were of the view that their enforced change to WJEC was disadvantaging their pupils. Others mentioned issues in relation to mathematics and the flexibility available outside of Wales:

*“In England, there are a number of mathematics papers and the
structure of these are very different, some papers are long question*

papers, and some are shorter. We could choose which to use depending on the strength of the pupils coming through."

- 3.25 Some schools reported feeling at a disadvantage compared to schools in England, stating that English schools have a choice, with more pathways for them to ensure that learners needs are being considered.

Schedule of qualification changes

- 3.26 According to many stakeholders, the timescales for changes to specifications have been too tight. This has not allowed sufficient time for new resources to be developed and for teachers to familiarise themselves with the content and to develop new schemes of work.

- 3.27 Some stakeholders feel that WJEC have had insufficient time to deliver high quality resources and there are concerns that Wales may be disadvantaged when compared to the service perceived to be offered in England.

"Schools in England have a greater level of resources, there are more specialists and practitioners who are able to help".

- 3.28 Although there were some who reported strong specifications and good teacher guidance materials, there were others who reported late specifications, delays in exemplification materials and text books along with errors in sample assessments.

- 3.29 Welsh medium schools reported that the impact of late resources has had a great impact, with some resources being received six months after the English resources had come out, placing additional burdens on teachers to carry out their own translations.

- 3.30 Regarding teachers' preparedness more generally, stakeholders reported that WJEC had engaged well with schools and provided a good level of INSET training. A few stakeholders reported that the quality of support from WJEC subject officers was inconsistent, with some providing excellent support and resources, while others were less helpful.

- 3.31 There were a few concerns regarding the increase in prices for teachers' CPD and resources. According to smaller schools, the cost of training is prohibitively high.

"I don't think they have economies of scale, the cost of entry has gone up and up."

- 3.32 One stakeholder asserted that WJEC needed to work more closely with regional consortia to ensure that support for teachers is timely and of an appropriate quality. WJEC is looking to develop opportunities for greater collaboration. One suggestion was that WJEC could survey schools to gain feedback on their support across subject areas.

Review of vocational qualifications

- 3.33 Fewer stakeholders reported concerns with vocational qualifications as the focus on change had just begun.
- 3.34 However, stakeholders were wanting assurances regarding the next steps with vocational qualifications. Some had concerns that if the approach adopted with General Qualifications, with regards to the move to a single awarding body, were adopted for the development of new vocational qualifications then it would have a detrimental effect on learners and learning pathways into further and higher education. One FE provider stated that Qualifications Wales is becoming too risk averse and is putting up too many barriers to the development of qualifications. They had wanted to deliver a particular qualification but the awarding body could not get this approved.
- 3.35 According to stakeholders, awarding bodies had been asked to be more responsive to employers and had spent some time in mapping skills that related to employer needs.
- 3.36 Considerable change within the vocational qualifications field would, in the view of some stakeholders and providers, cause problems for providers who have budgets assigned to awarding bodies, and that, by having to change awarding bodies, there may be a cost increase (in the form of extra fees) to their business. A statement from Qualifications Wales on how they intend to progress with vocational reforms would be welcomed by stakeholders.
- 3.37 Stakeholders were supportive of the approach taken by Qualifications Wales to reform vocational qualifications: it was agreed that a sector by sector approach will help ensure that centres, employers and employer representatives are fully engaged and consulted on the need for reform and in what direction the reform should take.
- 3.38 Stakeholders stated the Health and Social Care sector review report¹⁵ undertaken by Qualifications Wales evidenced very clearly the need for reviewing the sector's vocational qualifications offer.

“The qualifications have lacked professional integrity and have not been well regarded by the sector...they were content heavy and contained a lot of duplication...the new designs will hopefully streamline content and make it easier to plan units.”

- 3.39 According to one stakeholder, the new suite of qualifications, will move the sector forward towards a new level of professionalism. The contract is a significant step-up and includes the development of 19 new qualifications. This will challenge both

¹⁵ Qualifications Wales (2016) Sector Review of Qualifications and the Qualifications System in Health and Social Care, <http://qualificationswales.org/media/1904/hsc-report-2016-e.pdf>

awarding bodies (City and Guilds and WJEC) to produce 'high quality, highly relevant qualifications'. There will be a new pathway from Level 3 to Level 4 which will provide progression to Level 5 learning, that is missing in the current qualifications.

- 3.40 One work-based learning provider pointed to the lack of Level 1 qualifications in the Health and Social Care qualifications for 16-19 years old and this presents problems for some of their learners.

"Qualifications Wales seem to be forgetting about traineeships."

- 3.41 There were some stakeholders, mainly centres and awarding bodies, who expressed concerns around the extent of change and how this may impact on what qualifications centres will be able to deliver, particularly in relation to childcare.

"The strong sector expertise, particularly in relation to childcare has not been drawn upon in this commissioning process."

- 3.42 Qualifications Wales has since met with lead providers and National Training Federation centres to keep them informed and this has had a positive impact on centres.

- 3.43 Qualifications Wales were also credited for focussing on developing the capacity within the sector to undertake independent quality assurance (IQA). This will help ensure the sector can respond to the increased use of external assessments.

Policy Related Issues

- School performance measures
- Curriculum / PISA

School performance measures

- 3.44 Many stakeholders remained concerned with how Welsh Government's school performance measures are driving a culture of teaching to the test within schools and was affecting the quality of teaching and learning. Despite the changes to qualifications, the pressure is considerable and pupils remain negatively affected by the outside pressures from the system.

"Good teaching should be aligned with good outcomes, but we have a system that encourages teaching to a test, and therefore not encouraging students to develop transferable skills".

- 3.45 There was an acknowledgement that the government had tried to engage the sector in the new performance management system for monitoring school performance and that the new system, although complicated was an improvement on the old system of five A* to C grades. It encourages a shift away from schools focussing too heavily on A-C grades.

- 3.46 Several stakeholders stated that pupil progress should be the measure of success rather than attainment at a Grade C or above. This encourages schools to inspire learners at whatever level they are working. One stakeholder felt that the range of qualifications that pupils are taking is reducing, as schools focus more keenly on achievement across the core subjects.

“There is far too great an emphasis put on schools getting children past the C Grade and this prevents a real focus on stretching those more able and improving those much less able.”

“Progress should be much more important than measuring a C grade for certain pupils...For a child to be taken from a G to and E grade, that is phenomenal.”

“C Grade has bred mediocrity...our position on the PISA table indicates this.”

Curriculum and PISA

- 3.47 There was a sense of optimism and excitement over the new Successful Futures¹⁶ curriculum. There was broad agreement with the announcement to delay the phased introduction from 2022 so the schools sector can be better prepared.
- 3.48 However, there were some stakeholders who were concerned that the current focus on PISA that informed the recent qualification reform has set the country on a path that is at odds with Successful Futures. Several stakeholders expressed concerns that the qualifications and assessment are not going to align to the new curriculum, in particular “how we want our learners to learn and to develop their thinking skills.”
- 3.49 “I am not quite convinced we’ve got the right approach yet.”
- 3.50 There were also concerns that PISA is influencing assessment styles which may be more relevant for the higher achieving learners, but not for all.

“I am concerned about the general direction of travel and whether we are trying to squeeze all learners in to the same mould...many will get left behind.”

- 3.51 Some stakeholders had concerns regarding the direction of travel of the education system, relating to compartmentalising learning and funnelling learners through the same pathways, unlike in Europe, where there is much greater flexibility and in particular, vocational routes are regarded as are much better developed.

¹⁶ Donaldson, G. (2015) Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales

- 3.52 Related to this issue, several stakeholders were concerned that schools are moving too far away from the use of BTECs and other vocational qualifications within their curriculum and that this will disadvantage certain learners.

“The issue had to be addressed regarding the use of BTEC as schools were using this as a route to keeping their school performance. Now we are probably moving to the opposite affect where schools are not offering BTECs as there is less of an advantage and now learners who would have benefited from it, are not being offered that route. This needs watching.”

- 3.53 Some stakeholders emphasised the importance of lessons learnt from qualification reform.

“It is important that Wales learns the lessons from this period of change in qualifications. We are about to move in to an important cycle of change over the next few years and Wales needs to adopt some careful planning to avoid the risks and to fail to grasp the opportunity that is presented in Successful Futures.”

Summary

- 3.54 Qualifications Wales is regarded as a strong organisation, providing good regulation. They are an open and transparent organisation and work in partnership with stakeholders. The vision for change is clear although there were some concerns regarding the position of having a single awarding body supplier of reformed general qualifications. WJEC has support, but there were concerns expressed relating to a lack of competition and WJEC’s capacity to support the sector, particularly through the period of change.
- 3.55 There is support for the sector-based reviews and new qualifications emerging from them. Some centres have concerns if a wide range of vocational qualifications become restricted to being provided by a limited number of awarding bodies.
- 3.56 There is general support for change, but there are also concerns that the current process for measuring school performance is having too great an impact on schools and the learning environment. Looking forward, stakeholders want assurances that lessons will be learned from this exercise and that decisions regarding planned changes, as part of Successful Futures, will be made to ensure that standards and confidence in the system are maintained.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Confidence in Qualifications

- 4.1 The value of the GCSE and A levels as a qualification currency remains strong among stakeholders in Wales. Stakeholders stated that they are a reliable indication of a pupil's knowledge, skills and application to learn.
- 4.2 Many stakeholders agreed that qualification revisions were needed. Revisions have helped ensure that qualifications provide a strong portfolio of learning and assessment for young people in Wales.
- 4.3 There was a recognition that GCSE standards have been raised because of the revisions. Stakeholders supported the increased focus on literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum. There was a recognition that qualifications needed modernising and the increased focus on functionality and independence of learning was welcomed. Many stakeholders recognised the alignment with PISA style questions and some supported this while others considered this limited innovation in learning.
- 4.4 A few teachers had concerns around high levels of content in some qualifications, but it was accepted that confidence in teaching to the new specification will improve over time. There were, however, more fundamental concerns around the specification for Science GCSEs and their applicability to modern day approaches in science.
- 4.5 Many stakeholders supported the move towards end-point assessment to increase rigour, although there was disappointment in the style of assessment and an over-reliance on paper examinations. A few stakeholders requested a greater level of innovation in assessment.
- 4.6 Stakeholders valued the decision to increase the Welsh context in qualifications. However, there was disappointment in the delays in some resources for Welsh medium schools and an ongoing lack of capacity to do much about this. There were concerns regarding the demands on schools, particularly Welsh medium schools to teach to the new full Welsh Second Language GCSE. There were also concerns that many pupils will not achieve a qualification at the end due to not being entered for the exam.
- 4.7 There were low levels of awareness of much of the changes to qualifications outside of schools and were perceived by stakeholders to be particularly low among parents.
- 4.8 Decisions to retain the letter grading and retention of the modular approach in A levels continue to be supported. HEPs, in particular, see AS levels as a reliable indicator of a pupil's potential when making an offer to study in higher education

- 4.9 The changes in some A levels, particularly mathematics, are highlighting training needs among some teachers and regional consortia; schools need to ensure they can respond to this.
- 4.10 The Welsh Bacc has been improved and particularly at Advanced level, the grading of the SCC was viewed as a very positive development. However, concerns remained over the level of bureaucracy required to complete the qualification and with the impact on pupils' workload, particularly at A level. The Welsh Government concept of 'universal adoption' is not well understood and there are concerns that pupils are being disadvantaged by some HEPs who do not make an offer on the Welsh Bacc.
- 4.11 Additional to the concerns on pupil workload was the perception that choice has been curtailed and schools can no longer select the specification and awarding body most suited to their cohorts of pupils. Particular concerns were related to the removal of BTEC Science from school performance measures and the impact this will no doubt have on schools' willingness to offer the qualification. There were concerns this would disadvantage some pupils.
- 4.12 A broader concern expressed by several stakeholders, was the impact that school performance measures are having on schools and pupils more generally. It was acknowledged that the system had improved but some stakeholders requested a greater focus on progress than attainment above a C grade.

Confidence in the Qualification system

- 4.13 Qualifications Wales was recognised as a strong organisation providing leadership and clarity on regulation and qualifications. It appears to have developed good relations with the school sector, employer representatives and awarding bodies. It was credited with a commitment to open and transparent consultation, decision making and regulation.
- 4.14 Several stakeholders were concerned that the move to a single awarding body for general qualifications was a risk, resulting in a lack of competition and a drop in the quality of service. Some additional concerns were expressed around the capacity of the awarding body to respond to demands from the Welsh qualification system, with examples of late resources and poor specifications. Stakeholders wanted reassurances of the nature of the relationship between Welsh Government, Qualifications Wales and WJEC, with clear terms of reference, contract management and quality control procedures.
- 4.15 Concerns were raised regarding Welsh resources and several stakeholders within the regional consortia and among Welsh medium schools were very disappointed; they perceived a lateness of resources and lack of progress. Welsh Government's decision regarding the mandatory teaching of the content for first or second Language Welsh was placing a high demand on schools and teachers.

- 4.16 The contracting process for the award of the new designs in Health and Social Care qualifications raised some concerns among some providers and awarding bodies. However, there was support for the sector-by-sector approach to reviewing vocational qualifications and improving their quality. Reassurances that vocational qualifications will not be restricted, resulting in one or two awarding organisations approved to deliver in Wales, would be welcomed by awarding bodies and other stakeholders.
- 4.17 There were some frustrations that scheduling decisions were being made by the Welsh Government, without due attention to the practicalities of the timeframes. This placed considerable capacity challenges on the awarding body, schools and regional consortia. However, there were some examples where this has caused over-stretch and the quality of provision in both qualification resources and teacher preparedness has been compromised. Some concerns were raised regarding the impact this might have on pupils.
- 4.18 Many stakeholders understood the challenges faced by Qualifications Wales, particularly in relation to delivering the Welsh Government qualification change commitments and policy decisions relating to curriculum changes and school performance. There was a view that Wales needed to be reactive to the changes happening in England and respond appropriately to ensure equivalence. However, there were some concerns, that decisions were not always made to ensure that the quality of teaching and learning was not compromised.
- 4.19 Related to this were concerns that communications from the Welsh Government, Qualifications Wales and WJEC was were not always consistent and that roles among those organisations needed to be agreed and communicated, particularly to the regional consortia. There were also calls for Qualifications Wales to distil information coming out from the Welsh Government on policy and to communicate more directly with regional consortia.
- 4.20 A few stakeholders were looking ahead at the forthcoming curriculum changes and were very excited about the opportunity, but were equally concerned about how well Wales is going to manage the transition.

Final Comments

- 4.21 Interviews conducted in this phase of field work have focussed heavily on the changes to qualifications and assessment, as well as policy related changes. Change, and the management of the change process by the three key organisations, involved in general qualifications, was uppermost on many stakeholders' minds. There was, however, recognisably high levels of support for Qualifications Wales and for the commitment the organisation has brought to improving qualifications and the qualification system. During interviews for this research, this level of commitment seemed equally matched, particularly among schools, regional consortia and

awarding bodies. This, in itself, an indication of the confidence in the current system and the general direction of the travel.