



GCSE and A level reforms – lessons learned

October 2018

Introduction

New GCSE, AS and A level qualifications were introduced in Wales between 2015 and 2017 following a major programme of reform.

As the independent qualifications regulator in Wales, we have looked back over the whole reform programme, to understand what worked well and what worked less well. We tested our conclusions with schools and colleges and to see whether they agreed.¹

This report presents the lessons that we learned, together with the views of the schools and colleges we spoke to².

For those who want to know more about the changes to GCSEs and A levels and why they were introduced, the final section of this report gives a short explanation of the reforms, including why and how they were introduced (section 3).

1. What did we learn?

The key lessons from our review were the importance of:

1. Early engagement – It is important to communicate the changes to qualifications, and why change is needed, as early as possible so that stakeholders³ are informed from the beginning.
2. Early and continuous communication – Schools and colleges need early and continuous communication about planned changes to qualifications, the timeline for their introduction, when they can expect to see draft and final materials, and what training and resources will be available to prepare for the changes.
3. Main design features – Schools and colleges need to know the main features of new qualifications at an early stage. This allows schools and colleges to comment on proposed changes at an early stage and influence the detailed development work that follows.
4. Lead-in time – Schools and colleges need sufficient time to prepare adequately for delivering new qualifications. Relevant materials should be available at least 12 months before courses are due to start.

¹ We commissioned Wavehill Ltd, a social and economic research company, to conduct semi-structured interviews with teachers and senior managers

² It is worth noting that our review concerned the process of reform only; individual qualifications were out of scope.

³ Stakeholders include schools, colleges, subject communities, learners, parents, representative organisations (e.g. teaching unions), awarding bodies etc

5. Teaching and learning resources – Any new teaching and learning resources that teachers and students will require should be considered as part of any planned changes to qualifications
6. Bilingual resources – When making changes to qualifications, the need for all supporting materials to be available simultaneously in both Welsh and English must be factored into plans from the start.

2. What did schools and colleges think?

We tested our key lessons with 21 teachers and senior managers⁴ across 21 schools and colleges and this section gives a summary of what they told us:

Key finding 1 – Early engagement with stakeholders

All teachers agreed that engagement with stakeholders during the early stages of the reform process would be useful. This was considered an effective way of using teacher experience and knowledge to contribute to, and shape, reforms so that they reflect the needs and realities of learners, schools and colleges in Wales:

“Teachers need to be heard as they are the experts. They know in reality how things will work on the ground and how students will be impacted by the changes.”

Key finding 2 – Early and continuous communication

All teachers interviewed stated that it was important for centres to have early and continuous communication about planned changes as well as timelines, to allow them to prepare for the teaching of the new qualifications, and to be confident about delivering them:

“Schools and teachers need to have as much access as possible as early as possible due to the need to prepare and adapt. A new course requires changes to delivery...Also changes to the course at KS4 leads us to change the skills and strategies deployed at KS3 so that the progression into KS4 is easier.”

⁴ 20 interviewees had been teaching for over 10 years, while 11 had been teaching over 20 years

Teachers also highlighted that early and continuous communication needed to be as detailed and accurate as possible:

"Because of the massive upheaval that a change in specification brings to a teacher, in terms of the amount of planning and preparation to teach and deliver two or three hours a week of the spec, it's important that there is guidance on those specifications and time to prepare for those changes."

Key Finding 3 – Main design features

All teachers interviewed agreed that there is a need to explain clearly the high-level features of new qualifications at an early stage. This, they suggested, is because they need to have a clear understanding of any new qualifications' aims, and why this approach has been taken, so that they can explain it to their learners. This is something that some teachers cited as still a challenge for them following the introduction of the new qualifications recently:

"It is important, as we - as teachers - need to be clear why these changes have happened, so that we can better explain them to students....The students felt that the changes had only been introduced to make it harder to get the higher grades and it was difficult to change their viewpoint without more information."

Key finding 4 – Lead-in time

Of the 21 teachers interviewed, 18 stated that they felt it is right that centres need sufficient lead-in time to get to grips with new qualifications, with all relevant materials ready at least 12 months before first delivery. This, they said, would reduce the burden on teachers and it is perceived as fairer for the learners taking the qualifications.

"There has to be a decent amount of time in place to prepare and to become familiar with a new course. It is vital that everything is in place and confirmed before a course starts otherwise teachers are uncertain and it is not fair to expect teachers to have to prepare all the resources at short notice."

The practitioners also highlighted that a lack of lead-in time can disproportionately affect smaller schools, particularly those that only have one teacher per subject as they were unable to share the burden of preparing.

The other three teachers suggested that more than 12 months is needed to be fully prepared for the introduction of new qualifications. One teacher stated:

"There needs to be lot longer lead in time...there needs to be announcement of reform, consultation with schools, a window to prepare resources and then the introduction of the new courses."

Key Finding 5 – Teaching and learning resources

Nearly everyone interviewed stated that considering teaching and learning resources is vital, namely identifying what is needed to successfully deliver new qualifications from the outset:

"It is important that there are high quality resources available from the beginning of the course otherwise the whole resource preparation burden is placed on the teacher."

"...and there needs to be a consideration of the technological resources and the increased time it takes to change them."

Teachers expanded on this matter, explaining that this needs to happen in a way that encompasses all subjects - regardless of popularity - and needs to be considerate of schools' and colleges' different profiles.

One teacher did not agree that this was a key lesson, claiming that schools use different models of teaching and learning and therefore use resources differently. Furthermore, changes to qualifications does not always mean that resources need to change. Teachers explained that the focus should be on providing more guidance for the qualifications and the exams.

Key Finding 6 – Availability of bilingual materials simultaneously from the outset

All teachers teaching bilingually or through Welsh-medium agreed that this is an important lesson to learn.

Teachers agreed that planning for materials to be available bilingually and simultaneously from the outset would negate the disadvantage they perceive Welsh-medium learners to have currently. It was also suggested that the simultaneous availability of bilingual materials would align with the promotion of teaching and learning through the medium of Welsh, as the current situation has, in some cases, disincentivised learners from choosing Welsh language qualifications options.

"Welsh language resources have to be available from the beginning...If this isn't changed and enough time and money is allocated for the preparation of Welsh resources...then students are going to see taking a Welsh language option course as a disadvantage and will choose the English courses instead."

Other comments made by the teachers interviewed

The teachers did not identify any additional lessons. However, many of those interviewed stated that they understood and appreciated the aims of the qualifications reform in Wales, stating that the divergence from qualifications developed for England was positive and important:

"I can see where it's trying to go and think it deserves credit for ambition"

"I think having qualifications in Wales is important and we do need them separate to England"

However, teachers stressed that, in practice, the process needed more time than was allowed and they expressed that identifying these lessons learned gave them more confidence about any future reforms.

3. The story of reform

3.1 Why reform?

In 2011, the Welsh Government commissioned a Review of Qualifications for 14-19-year-olds in Wales⁵ (RoQ) setting out the vision of *'qualifications that are understood and valued and meet the needs of our young people and the Welsh economy.'*

The RoQ concluded that there was a need to *'develop a coherent, high-quality, robust and distinctive national qualifications system for 14 to 19-year-olds in Wales and should support divergence between Wales and other parts of the UK where this is in the interests of learners in Wales'*. This recommendation prompted an extensive programme of general qualifications reform, resulting in new GCSE, AS and A level qualifications being designed specifically for Wales.

At the same time as the Wales general qualifications reform, GCSEs and A levels were also being reformed in England and Northern Ireland. A common timetable was established, where possible, to facilitate a coordinated approach and to not over burden exam boards more than necessary.

At the outset of the reform programme in 2014, the Welsh Government wrote to all awarding bodies that currently offer GCSEs and A levels to invite them to contribute to the development of the reformed GCSEs and A levels. Only WJEC accepted the invitation. As a result, WJEC is the only exam board that currently offers qualifications that have been approved specifically for Wales.

The new GCSEs, AS and A levels were introduced to 14-19-year-olds in Wales between 2015 and 2017 (see section 3.3 for the list of when each subject was introduced).

⁵ [Review of Qualifications for 14-19-year-olds in Wales](#).

3.2. What were the key features of reform?

The devolution of education policy in the UK has resulted in increasing divergence of qualifications between Wales, England and Northern Ireland.

All GCSE and A level qualifications, however, continue to share important common features. In particular, they remain the same size and equally recognise the achievements of the same cohort of learners.

The key similarities and differences between the qualifications developed for Wales, England and Northern Ireland are explained in more detail below.

Changes to AS and A levels

Common features

- Learners' grades are reported as A*-E for A level and A-E for AS.
- The content requirements are broadly similar in most subjects.
- The proportion of non-exam assessment (NEA) has been set at the minimum deemed necessary to assess the essential aspects of the subject that cannot be assessed validly by exam.
- Assessment objectives and their weightings are the same in most subjects.
- The amount of content in AS qualifications continues to be approximately half that of the full A levels.

Key differences

- The AS level qualifications designed for Wales and for Northern Ireland contribute 40% to the full A level, whereas the AS level qualifications designed for England are standalone qualifications and do not contribute to A level results.
- In unitised AS and A levels that are designed for Wales and Northern Ireland, individual units can be retaken by students only once. For AS and A levels that are designed for England, students must retake all of their exams when retaking the qualification.

Changes to GCSEs

There are a greater number of differences at subject level between the new GCSEs offered in England, Wales and Northern Ireland than there are between the new AS and A levels.

Common features:

- The proportion of non-examined assessment (NEA) has been set at the minimum deemed necessary to assess the essential aspects of the subject that cannot be validly assessed by exam. However, the differences in content requirements mean that in some subjects the amount of NEA required in Wales, England and Northern Ireland is different;
- Assessments at GCSE in all subjects require students to draw on knowledge and understanding from across the subject content. In most subjects there is a common requirement for students to produce extended responses.

Key differences:

- There are three different grading scales for GCSEs across Wales, England and Northern Ireland:
 - GCSEs designed for Wales are graded A*-G;
 - GCSEs that are designed England are graded 9-1, with 9;
 - GCSEs designed for Northern Ireland are graded on a nine-point scale A*-G. This includes a new grade C* that CCEA (the regulator in Northern Ireland) has aligned with the grade 5 in England; and CCEA has aligned the A* with the grade 9 in England.
- The content requirements are different in most subjects, though the nature and extent of these differences vary.
- The assessment objectives and their weightings differ in some subjects, reflecting the difference in subject content expectations.
- Some GCSEs designed for Wales and Northern Ireland are linear and others are modular. GCSEs designed for England are linear.
- For linear GCSEs that are designed for Wales or for Northern Ireland, students must retake all of their exams when retaking the qualification. For unitised qualifications each unit can be retaken by students only once. Whereas in England students must retake all of their exams when retaking the qualification. NEA marks can be reused.

Despite the changes that have been introduced, the qualifications regulator⁶ for each country's aim is that the qualifications retain the same value for those who take and rely on them, regardless of the qualification taken. As a result, the regulators continue to work closely to ensure parity across the three countries so that qualifications continue to command public confidence.

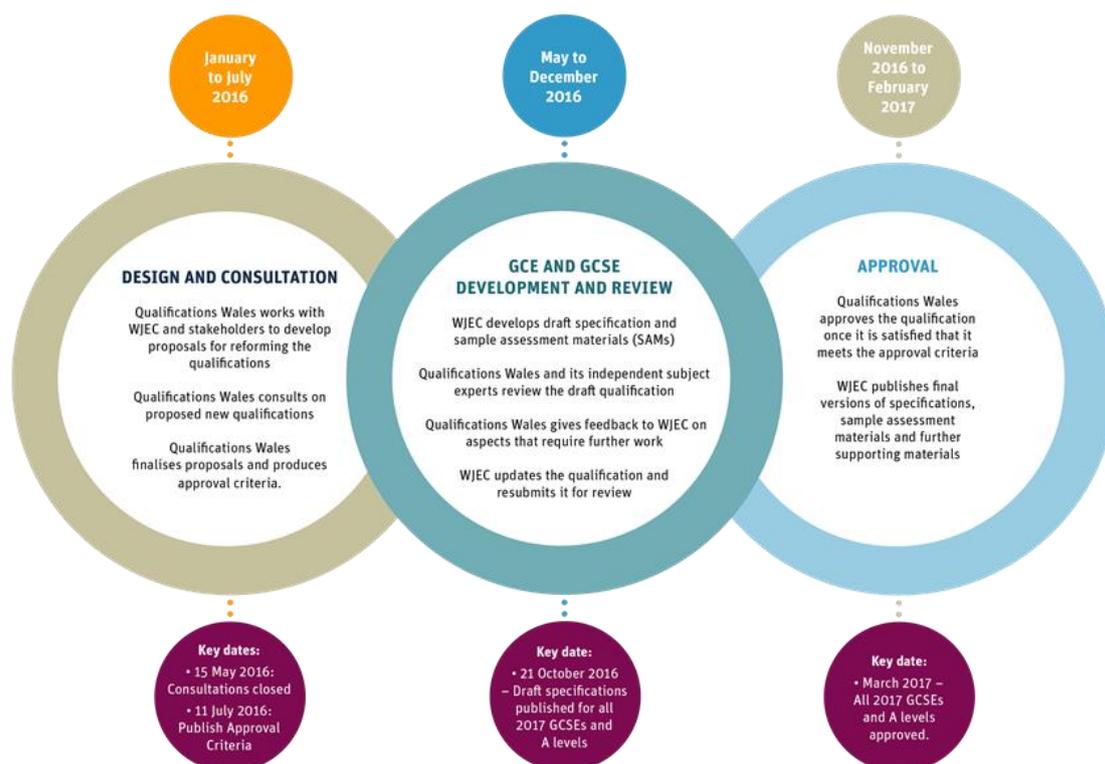
⁶ Further information about Ofqual and its role can be found on its website, [here](#)
Further information about Qualifications Wales and its role can be found on its website, [here](#)
Further information about CCEA and its role can be found on its website, [here](#)

3.3. How did we reform in Wales?

The reformed GCSE, AS and A level qualifications were rolled out over a period of three years between 2015 and 2017.

All the qualifications that were introduced for first teaching from September 2015 were accredited by Welsh Government. When Qualifications Wales was established in September 2015, these qualifications were transferred over to us as approved qualifications⁷. Soon after, there was an opportunity for us to reflect and make changes to the process of developing and approving qualifications for first teaching from September 2017. The main change that we made was that we worked with stakeholders⁸ to inform draft Subject Approval Criteria⁹ (SAC) for each qualification which we then consulted on through a series of roadshows and an online consultation¹⁰.

The following diagram gives an overview of our qualifications approval process, the details of which can be found on our website, [here](#):



⁷ Approved qualifications are developed and approved specifically for Wales. For more information about approved qualifications, please visit our website, [here](#)

⁸ Including subject experts, teaching representatives from schools, colleges and HEIs

⁹ To view our Subject Approval Criteria, please see our website, [here](#)

¹⁰ To view the online consultation for subjects introduced for first teaching in September 2017, please visit our website, [here](#)

This qualifications approval process that we introduced enabled us to include stakeholders - including subject experts - in the process of setting the key features of each qualification.

The tables below show which qualifications were introduced and when.

For first teaching from September 2015

GCSEs approved for award in Wales

Welsh Language
Welsh Literature
English Literature
English Language
Mathematics
Mathematics - Numeracy

A levels approved for award in Wales

Art & Design
Biology
Business
Chemistry
Computer Science
Economics
English Language
English Language and Literature
English Literature
History
Psychology
Physics
Sociology
Welsh Language

For first teaching from September 2016

GCSEs approved for award in Wales

Applied Science Single Award
Applied Science Double Award
Art & Design
Biology
Chemistry
Drama
Food and Nutrition
French
Geography
German
Music
Physical Education (full course)
Physics
Spanish
Science Double Award

A levels approved for award in Wales

Drama
French
Geography
German
Music
Physical education
Religious Studies
Spanish
Welsh Second Language

For first teaching from September 2017

GCSEs approved for award in Wales

Business
Computer Science
Design & Technology
History
Media Studies
Physical Education (short course)
Religious Studies
Welsh Second Language

A levels approved for award in Wales

Design & Technology
Further Mathematics
Government and Politics
Mathematics
Media Studies
Law

Resources and training

As the independent qualifications regulator in Wales, we require awarding bodies to produce sufficient resources to ensure that teachers are able to prepare learners for their examinations¹¹. These typically include the specification and sample assessment materials (SAMs) in English and in Welsh, and these were made available at the same time in both languages for all the qualifications introduced.

However, the availability and timeliness of additional teaching and learning resources, such as textbooks - particularly through the medium of Welsh - were

¹¹ See condition A5 of our Conditions of Recognition which all awarding bodies are required to comply with on our website, [here](#)

identified as an issue during the reform programme. Given that these are, in the main, made available through commercial publishers, and sit beyond our regulatory powers, we do not have direct control over what is made available for teaching and learning purposes.

We have, however, been working with WJEC, Welsh Government and the regional education consortia, to facilitate and clarify the availability of the training and resources offered to support the introduction of the new qualifications.

For each of the qualifications that were introduced in 2017, we produced an overview of the training and resources that we understand are available to help teachers prepare for and teach the new qualifications. This information can be found on our [website](#)

Designation of qualifications not specifically reformed for Wales

There are some subjects in which the likely take up by learners in Wales meant that it was not viable to develop distinct GCSE and A levels exclusively for Wales.

However, so that learners in Wales have access to qualifications in these subjects, state-funded learners are able to choose from the GCSEs and A levels that have been reformed for England where there is no Wales-specific GCSE or A level available – as long as we have designated¹² them as eligible for use on publicly funded learning programmes in Wales.

We only designate a GCSE or A level in a subject that has been reformed for England if it does not have an equivalent approved Wales qualification and it has been accredited by Ofqual.

It is a decision for the awarding bodies offering these qualifications in England whether to apply to have them designated in Wales.

Awarding bodies that choose to make these qualifications available in Wales are required to publish a statement for each qualification confirming whether it is available in Welsh and, if so, explaining how to request Welsh-medium assessment.

¹² For more information about the designation of qualifications, visit our [website](#)