



To:

The head teachers and exam officers of all secondary schools in Wales.

12 February 2016

Deferring the introduction of GCSE Religious Studies and GCSE History

Dear Sir / Madam

Following its establishment in September 2015 as the independent regulator, Qualifications Wales has been responsible for overseeing the reform of GCSE qualifications in Wales. In this capacity we have taken the difficult decision to defer the introduction of the new GCSE History and GCSE Religious Studies from September 2016 to September 2017.

In this letter we want to explain our decision and the considerations that have influenced it. We also set out the support that will be available to those schools most affected by the decision.

We believe the benefits of deferring these qualifications outweigh the risks of continuing with the original timetable. Deferring these qualifications will allow more time for schools to prepare for first teaching and the development of bilingual teaching and learning resources. We are aware that it will create difficulties for a small proportion of schools and regret that this is the case.

Reasons for deferring

Our decision is based upon three principal considerations:

1. We do not expect that either of these qualifications will be ready for approval until the summer term has started, which is later than for any other subject being reformed this year. We recognise the need for schools to have sufficient time to prepare for new qualifications, and recognise the challenge that exists for other subjects. We believe that approved specifications and sample

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assessment materials not being published bilingually until well into the summer term creates too much time pressure for schools.

2. The time pressure will be particularly profound for these subjects, as the changes being made to the structure and content of both qualifications will require significant changes to how they are taught. Deferring their introduction will allow more time for teachers to familiarise themselves with these changes and to develop revised teaching plans. The final qualification design for these subjects was only agreed late last year and therefore, only limited information about their new structure and content has been available to schools. This is different from other subjects where draft specifications or sample assessment materials have been published.
3. On current projections, updated teaching and learning resources to support these subjects would not be available until the autumn term.

These three factors together provide a strong argument for deferring the introduction of these qualifications by a year. We recognise that this decision will affect schools differently, depending on whether or not they teach the existing WJEC specification. However, on balance, we consider the benefit of deferring these qualifications for all schools outweighs the difficulty that it will cause for a small number of schools.

Impact on schools

Even with the limited information that is currently available on the new qualifications, we know that many schools will have started preparations for teaching the new qualifications and will now have to change their immediate plans for September. For the clear majority of schools the impact will be relatively small: they will continue with the existing WJEC specifications which will be extended for a year. However, the impact of deferring the new qualifications will be much more significant for those schools who currently use another awarding body's specification.

When reformed GCSE History and GCSE Religious Studies qualifications are introduced in England for first teaching from September 2016, the existing specifications (other than WJEC's) will no longer be available for pupils starting their studies in September 2016. This means that a small proportion of schools who currently take GCSE History or GCSE Religious Studies qualifications with a different awarding body will be affected differently by our decision to defer. State funded schools in this position will have to switch in 2016 from the specification they currently teach to one of the existing specifications offered by WJEC, before switching again in 2017 to the new, reformed qualification.

We estimate that 33 schools will be affected in this way by the decision to defer GCSE Religious Studies and 17 schools by the decision to defer GCSE History. Three schools will be affected by the deferral of both qualifications. Before deciding to defer these qualifications, we wrote to each of these schools to assess the nature of the impact that these decisions would have on them and to seek views on what support could help to manage that impact.

Support for the schools affected

We are working with WJEC, Regional Consortia and the Welsh Government to put in place a package of support to help these schools manage the impact of switching specifications twice in two years. We are writing separately to these schools with more details of the support they can expect, which will include training to familiarise them with the current WJEC specifications. For state-funded schools, we are working with regional consortia to establish peer support from schools already using the WJEC specification and support with procuring teaching and learning resources that will only be needed for a single cohort.

Approval of other GCSEs and A levels for first teaching in 2016

We know our decision to defer GCSE History and GCSE Religious Studies will raise questions about security of the timeline for other qualifications planned for first teaching this September. We appreciate that this timeline is already far from ideal, but it is the combination of factors unique to these two qualifications that have led to our decision. We are, therefore, not considering the deferral of other new qualifications planned for first teaching this year.

There is a timeline on our website showing when we expect to be able to approve new GCSEs and A levels in each subject being reformed for first teaching in September 2016 (<http://qualificationswales.org/development/changes-for-2016/?lang=en>). We are monitoring this timeline carefully and working closely with WJEC to ensure that every effort is being made to adhere to it.

Draft specifications and sample assessment materials are published on the WJEC website and we would encourage you to make the most of them. We will only approve the qualifications when we are content that they meet all of our regulatory requirements, but expect that any changes made will be in points of detail.

We realise that news of this deferral will be welcomed by many, but unwelcome to some. It has not been an easy decision, but we believe that it is the right decision, and in the best interests of learners. We are committed to supporting those schools adversely affected to the maximum.

If you have any questions about this or any other aspect of general qualification reform, please email us at enquiries@qualificationswales.org.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Blaker', is positioned below the 'Yours faithfully' text.

Philip Blaker

Chief Executive
Qualifications Wales