

QUALIFICATIONS WALES STRATEGY – 2018 to 2022



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Introduction

Background

Qualifications Wales regulates qualifications, other than degrees, in Wales. We were established in August 2015 through the Qualifications Wales Act, and assumed our duties and powers in September of that year.

We regulate qualifications that are developed and delivered by the awarding bodies that we recognise. When recognised, an awarding body must comply with the rules that we set.

We are an independent statutory body, funded by the Welsh Government¹. This means that we make our own decisions about qualifications and provide independent expert advice to others. It also means that we oversee the standards to which qualifications are awarded, independent of influence from others.

We are accountable to the people of Wales through the National Assembly for Wales. We report to the Assembly every year on how we have fulfilled our functions, and how we plan to carry them out in the future.

Working with a wide range of stakeholders, we monitor the compliance of awarding bodies, review existing qualifications, oversee the design of new requirements and support the qualification system. Through this work, we ensure that learners, practitioners and the public in Wales can be confident that qualifications, and the qualification system, meet their needs.

Purpose of this document

In this strategy, we set out:

- Our role within the qualification system
- What we want to achieve
- How we work
- Our plans

This document is intended to be a high-level overview and a guide to other more detailed documents.

Our role within the qualification system

First and foremost, we are a regulator, established through legislation. Our core purpose is set out within Part 2 of the Qualifications Wales Act (2015)², which specifies our principal aims and, therefore, our mission:

‘ensuring that qualifications, and the qualification system, are effective for meeting the reasonable needs of learners in Wales;

‘promoting public confidence in qualifications and the Welsh qualification system.’

In doing this we will:

- **Consider the following³:**
 - growth in the economy;
 - the Welsh language;
 - the range and nature of qualifications and their assessment arrangements;
 - the needs of employers, higher education and the professions;
 - whether the content of qualifications (what is learnt) is up-to-date;
 - consistency with qualifications elsewhere;
 - efficiency and value for money;
 - roles and responsibilities of those within the qualification system.

² <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2015/5/section/3/enacted>

³ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2015/5/section/3/enacted>

- **Work in the long-term interests of learners and the public good;**
- **Set priorities that provide the most impact and use our limited resources to best effect;**
- **Act transparently**
- **Be open and accountable for our decisions and actions;**
- **Take proportionate actions, and be aware of the intended – and unintended – consequences of our actions, decisions and advice for the qualification and education system in Wales;**
- **Ensure that our approaches are consistent;**
- **Welcome representations from all stakeholders;**
- **Consider the impact that we have on public confidence;**
- **Be decisive and act when needed.**

Our role is broader than that of a conventional qualifications regulator. For example, we have powers to commission new qualifications and to restrict the range of qualifications offered, and we support Welsh-language assessment and the qualification system through the issue of grants. As we have an interest in the potential for innovation within qualifications and the qualification system to meet future requirements, we both seek opportunities ourselves, and wish to be supportive of awarding bodies when they innovate.

This extended role has many benefits, but when undertaking this type of work, we will always consider the potential impact on our core regulatory role.

What we want to achieve

Our purpose is met when regulated qualifications taken in Wales are trusted and valued by learners, employers and education providers and are recognised throughout the UK and internationally – this is our overarching vision, which is achieved when:

- Regulated qualifications and the qualifications system are responsive to changing needs and circumstances, particularly in regard to the long-term benefit of Wales and its students;
- Regulated qualifications in Wales are inclusive and promote equality of opportunity for students;
- Regulated qualifications taken by students in Wales are valid, reliable and awarded to an appropriate standard;
- Appropriate governance is in place to ensure accountability and regulatory compliance;

- Information reasonably required to deliver consistent and quality-assured regulated qualifications is available and accessible;
- Regulation is proportionate, transparent, consistent and targeted, to support a qualifications system that is sustainable in the long term.

We have chosen to set these aims out as *Regulatory Outcomes*⁴ that we want to achieve. We have consulted on them, and they are shared with the awarding bodies that we regulate.

The need to meet these outcomes informs our strategic priorities and operational activity.

⁴Regulatory Outcomes

How we work

Scope and nature of regulation

All qualifications offered by a recognised awarding body are regulated – unless they have been exempted from regulation, or because recognition for a qualification or qualification type has subsequently been surrendered by an awarding body. Regulated qualifications may be categorised as ‘approved’, ‘designated’ or ‘other regulated’⁵.

Model for regulation

- Awarding bodies seek recognition by meeting certain criteria set by us.
- An awarding body’s recognition is subject to compliance with the *Conditions of Recognition*. This is our principal regulatory document and is supported by additional regulatory documents.
- We monitor for compliance against the *Conditions of Recognition*.
- We use our enforcement and sanctions powers when awarding bodies fail to comply with the *Conditions of Recognition*.
- Where appropriate, we intervene to ensure that the system meets the needs of learners.

Regulatory activity

In undertaking our work, we:

- Set regulatory requirements through our regulatory documents;
- Exercise controls over entry to the regulated market to ensure that organisations have the expertise, governance, controls and financial capacity to deliver valid qualifications;
- Take a risk-based approach to prioritise our work using data, intelligence and expertise;
- Monitor regulated qualifications and the compliance of recognised awarding bodies, and undertake targeted audits;
- Monitor the effectiveness of the qualification system in Wales;
- Set and maintain appropriate standards for qualifications, working with other qualifications regulators to ensure consistency across the UK;
- Investigate potential breaches of our rules and, when necessary, take appropriate enforcement action;

- Use research evidence to guide our decisions, actions and advice;
- Undertake sector and thematic reviews;
- Undertake consultations on potential changes to the qualification system;
- Commission qualifications through an open competitive process where there is a market need;
- Run the QiW database: a comprehensive source of information on approved and designated qualifications awarded in Wales;
- Provide grants to support the qualification system, including support for Welsh-medium assessments.

Our approach is explained more fully in our *Regulatory Framework and Approach*⁶, which summarises the current framework and approach to the regulation of qualifications in Wales. (This document includes links to other more detailed regulatory documents.)

⁶Regulatory Framework Document

Regulatory style

We are outward-looking, so engage, communicate and collaborate to strengthen our ability to promote public confidence in the Welsh qualification system, and to meet the needs of learners in Wales.

- We invite, listen and respond to the views of learners;
- We listen and respond to stakeholder feedback, views and concerns appropriately;
- The way in which we make regulatory decisions and engage with stakeholders is proportionate to the potential impact of the regulatory action;
- Consultations are transparent and meaningful;
- We take a collaborative approach and draw on the knowledge and expertise of stakeholders as appropriate;
- We seek to establish and maintain effective relationships with key stakeholders;

- We produce clear, informative, targeted and timely communications; we review the impact of our communications and seek to find ways to improve our approach;
- We work with other regulators wherever possible, being mindful of the impact on awarding bodies that are regulated by more than one regulator;
- We carry out regulatory impact assessments as appropriate to assess the costs, benefits and risks associated with a policy or course of action.

Our work is underpinned by our values:

- **Collaborative** in the way that we work
- **Thoughtful** in the approaches we take
- **Positive** in our outlook
- **Learning** from experience and others



Our plans

Our plans focus specifically on our work relating to general qualifications and vocational qualifications, and are supported by our corporate strategic plan. The strategic plans are intended to give a three to five-year view of our priorities. As a responsive regulator, we recognise that priorities can change, so these plans will be reviewed for relevance each year and formally reconsidered by the Qualifications Wales Board after three years (sooner if our annual review suggests the need for significant change).

The strategic plans focus our activity and provide a basis for annual planning (including the allocation of our resources) and measuring progress. We measure progress through the fulfilment of operational priorities set out in our business plan, and success measures are described in each strategic plan.

Our strategic plans relate to our purpose, what we want to achieve and our approach, so build on the earlier elements of this strategy.

General Qualifications Strategic Plan

We have structured our plan⁷ around five main areas of strategic focus and the key challenges that we expect to face over the next three to five years.

We will focus on:

- 1. Securing standards.** Learners in Wales should be confident that the qualifications they take are as rigorous and demanding as those taken by their peers in other countries. We want general qualifications in Wales to be recognised widely as a reliable, trusted and fair measure of learner achievement.
- 2. Evaluating change.** There has been a period of significant change to general qualifications. The new qualifications will need to be kept under review to see how they are performing, and to evaluate their impact.
- 3. Improving public understanding.** An essential part of what we do is to provide accurate and reliable information about qualifications and the qualification system. To have confidence in general qualifications, we believe the public needs to know how they work and how they fit within the education system.
- 4. Increasing availability through the medium of Welsh.** We want all general qualifications offered in Wales to be available in Welsh and English.
- 5. Adopting an incremental approach to future changes.** We want to allow time for newly-reformed qualifications to bed down and for teachers, schools and colleges to adjust to delivering them.

The context for this work:

1. **Moving to GCSEs and A levels designed exclusively for Wales.** Most GCSEs and A levels offered in Wales will be distinct from qualifications offered in England and Northern Ireland, and awarded independently to them. This divergence is not in itself problematic, but means that we must:
 - Make sure that the qualifications we regulate are trusted, and secure access to further study and employment;
 - Work with others to make sure that there are sufficient teaching and learning resources to support the successful introduction of new qualifications;
 - Maintain a range of GCSE and A level subjects, through the medium of both English and Welsh, for students to choose from.

2. **Managing the introduction of new qualifications.** Introducing new qualifications can bring opportunities for improvement, but can also create additional pressure in the system. Awarding bodies, schools and colleges must adapt to deliver the new qualifications.
3. **The changing structure of the general qualifications market.** One consequence of the reforms is that GCSEs and A levels designed specifically for Wales are now offered by a single awarding body: WJEC. WJEC is also the only awarding body that offers the Welsh Baccalaureate. Greater reliance on one awarding body has its risks; however, there are many advantages to a simpler market model, especially in a system of the size we have in Wales.
4. **The potential impact on qualifications of the new Curriculum for Wales.** The development of a new national curriculum for Wales is likely to have an impact on general qualifications over the coming years.

Vocational Qualifications Strategic Plan

Our Vocational Strategic Plan, currently articulated in our Vocational Qualifications Strategy, focuses on:

1. **Sector reviews.** Vocational qualifications must reflect the needs of employers – even when they are a preliminary step that does not lead directly into employment. Rather than looking generically at one age, or stage, at a time, we are taking a sectoral approach to qualification review – focusing on the qualifications within employment sectors that have been identified as areas of economic growth.

2. **Implementing the findings of our sector reviews.** Each review is different, and the outcomes of one are not necessarily the same as the next, so we cannot predict the impact that they will have on our work. However, we anticipate that some sector reviews may lead to the commissioning of new qualifications, through our open competitive process, or other regulatory actions.

3. **Targeted monitoring of specific vocational qualifications.** There are many thousands of vocational qualifications, so it is not possible to monitor them all in detail. Therefore, we will use several risk factors to target our interest in specific qualifications or types of qualifications. For example, those that have high entries and certifications, assess areas of work where safety is essential, meet a particular requirement, or a licence, to practise, and have not been included within the scope of a sector review. In identifying areas of interest, we will be mindful of the work being undertaken by fellow qualifications regulators so that collectively we can have the most impact.

The context for this work:

1. **The wide range and large number of vocational qualifications, taken in different settings, for different purposes, and with different forms of assessment.** One size does not fit all for vocational qualifications and they can therefore be challenging to regulate consistently and effectively.

2. **The impact of policy developments in England.** Most vocational qualifications are currently delivered across the UK. Changes in the way that apprenticeships will be assessed and the introduction of T levels in England will therefore have an impact on the vocational qualifications market in both England and Wales. If some vocational qualifications become ineligible for use on publicly funded courses in England, awarding bodies may be unwilling to continue to offer those qualifications in Wales, where the market is relatively small.

3. **The potential impact on qualifications of the new Curriculum for Wales.** As with general qualifications, the introduction of the new Curriculum for Wales could have an impact on the vocational education choices for learners aged 14 to 16.

4. **Availability of vocational qualifications through the medium of Welsh.** Vocational qualifications offered across the UK do not always offer the opportunity for learners to be assessed through the medium of Welsh.

Corporate Capability Strategic Plan

We have a corporate capability strategic plan that outlines five focus areas and four challenges.

We will focus on:

1. **Enabling our regulatory work.** We want our regulatory staff to be supported in their work. We have set out to fulfil our legal obligations and manage public money with probity, without creating bureaucratic processes that delay action or limit our effectiveness. This means having clear policies and processes that are enabling, easy to follow and make best use of technology. We encourage our corporate staff to be accessible and respond quickly to queries. Critically, we train and support regulatory staff, so that they are confident in the corporate responsibilities that are delegated to them.

2. **Making the most of our resources.** We aim to maximise the value that we obtain from our resources – that is our people, our procurement or grant expenditure and our physical assets – and we aim to provide a working environment that supports agile working. This means procurement and grant processes that deliver, IT and people policies that are flexible, and an office space that is welcoming and encourages collaborative working.

3. **Maintaining and using professional skills.** We invest in professional specialist staff in our corporate functions and support them to undergo Continuous Professional Development (CPD). We expect them to understand our powers and duties and encourage them to support regulatory staff in their work.

4. Effective and efficient governance. Good governance is at the heart of ensuring that our organisation is well run. We aim to have the right systems and processes in place that are known and understood by our staff and are underpinned by our values. We want an environment where our staff are empowered and sufficiently informed to carry out their work whilst understanding our system of control, their roles and responsibilities and their delegated authorities.

5. Evaluation, development and continuous improvement. We recognise that continuous improvement relies upon effective performance measurement and evaluation. Learning from regular benchmarking and review is an on-going focus for corporate services.

The context for this work is:

- 1. Qualifications Wales is an organisation of less than 100 staff.** As a small organisation it can be challenging to meet the expectations that are placed on all public bodies, while keeping a proportionate sized corporate function and managing over reliance on individuals. We remain open to working with other bodies, but consider it critical that the core corporate functions are delivered on-site by our own staff since they have such a significant effect on our corporate culture.
- 2. Uncertainty over medium term funding.** We receive an annual grant allocation and do not have certainty over future funding levels. We are conscious that there are many pressures on public funding and that we may have less available to us in the future.

3. **Managing changes to legislation, regulation or policy.** Often, regulations, statutory guidance or Welsh Government policies are aimed at larger organisations who provide services directly to the public. Sometimes these regulations are harder for smaller specialist organisations to implement.
4. **Maintaining our reputation.** As a relatively new organisation, with an important public role, we cannot afford to make mistakes and must build and maintain our reputation and communicate clearly to support public confidence.





Q2 Building,
Pencarn Lane,
Imperial Park,
Newport NP10 8AR

☎ 0333 077 2701

