

## QWB72.02a Qualifications Wales Board

### Confirmed Minutes of Qualifications Wales Board meeting held on 25 January 2024

<b>Members in Attendance:</b>	
David Jones (DBJ)	Qualifications Wales Board Chair
Philip Blaker (PB)	Chief Executive
Julie Brannan (JB)	Board Member
Michael Griffiths (MG)	Board Member
John Latham (JL)	Board Member
Douglas Blackstock (DB)	Board Member
Graham Hudson (GH)	Board Member
Jayne Woods (JW)	Board Member
Sharron Lusher	Board Member

<b>Also in Attendance:</b>	
Ravi Pawar (RP)	Special Advisor to the Board
Alison Standfast (AS)	Executive Director Corporate Resources
Jo Richards (JR)	Executive Director Regulation
Cassy Taylor (CT)	Executive Director of Qualification Policy and Reform
Ashok Ahir (AA)	Director of Communications and Engagement
Catherine English (CE)	Head of Corporate Governance
Kate Welsher (KW)	Head of HR (Agenda items 5 and 6)
Kerry Price (KP)	Head of Finance (Agenda item 9)
Mike Keoghane (MK)	Head of Qualifications Wales Sponsorship Unit – Welsh Government (Observer)

<b>Apologies:</b>	
Hannah Rowan (HR)	Board Member
Anne-Marie Duffy (AMD)	Board Member

### 1. Welcome

- 1.1. The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.
- 1.2. A quorum was confirmed as present, and the Chair noted the apologies.
- 1.3. Under declarations of interest, it was confirmed that the Chair had been appointed to Chair the panel tasked with reviewing FET practitioner roles for the Department for FE HE Research Innovation and Skills (DFHERIS), of the Irish Government.
- 1.4. It was also confirmed that John Latham had been appointed to the Challenge Review Panel as part of the independent review of the Office for Students (OFS) being led by Sir David Behan.
- 1.5. No other declarations of interest were received.

1.6. The Board noted the information paper QWB71.13. There were no matters arising.

## **2. Minutes of the Qualifications Wales Board held on 29 and 30 November 2023 and Actions Update**

2.1. The November Board minutes were received and confirmed as an accurate record of the meeting.

2.2. The Board reviewed the action log noting there were no outstanding actions.

2.3. Under matters arising it was confirmed that the Full Offer decisions report would be published on the 30 January 2024. It was explained that several concerns relating to the Full Offer decisions had been expressed by colleges during briefing sessions and in response, the Chair had asked the Chair of ColegauCymru to write to him setting out colleges' concerns. Following a written exchange, the Chair and Chief Executive met with ColegauCymru on the 19 January to discuss matters further. The Chair outlined the main concerns expressed by colleges. Some resulted from misconceptions, but it was noted that colleges had raised some appropriate queries, and it would be important to work with them to address their concerns and encourage them to be involved in the development of VCSEs.

2.4. The Board considered colleges' concerns relating to the VCSE title and the potential expectations learners may have around automatic progression between qualification levels. The Board noted that the VCSE title had been agreed partly in response to colleges concerns that the title 'pre-vocational' could imply the qualifications were not on a par with GCSEs. It was confirmed that there were a range of views being expressed in relation to the VCSE title, with schools welcoming VCSEs as a sister brand to GCSEs, and that Qualifications Wales was confident the VCSE brand was the right one.

2.5. It was highlighted that not all colleges held the same view on some of the issues and that a programme of stakeholder engagement was underway to address any misunderstandings and to emphasise Qualifications Wales's commitment to engagement.

2.6. It was confirmed that an introductory workshop for each of the VCSE subject areas would be held with awarding bodies and representatives from schools and colleges to give participants the opportunity to raise any concerns/issues they feel need to be considered by Qualifications Wales and awarding bodies. Board noted the importance of schools and colleges being able to plan ahead.

2.7. It was explained that colleges had been particularly concerned that VCSEs would displace the larger technical qualifications delivered through school and college partnerships. It was confirmed that colleges had been advised this was not the case and that exception criteria would allow those qualifications to still be delivered under those arrangements.

- 2.8. It was noted that it would be difficult to build a sense of parity between general and vocational qualifications unless there was a common title to bring together what is otherwise a disparate range of vocational qualifications. Using the VCSE titling as a sister brand to GCSE aimed to build that sense of cohesion and parity and give confidence to parents.
- 2.9. The Board discussed the importance of schools and colleges working in partnership to deliver the new qualifications and considered the issue of progression routes between VCSEs and level 3 qualifications, noting the difference between progressing to academic qualifications, requiring evidence of a level of literacy and numeracy, as opposed to practitioner qualifications. The board stressed the importance of working with schools and colleges to ensure there was clear guidance available to learners on progression routes.
- 2.10. The Board discussed any potential duplication of content between VCSEs and post-16 study. It was confirmed Qualifications Wales would work closely with awarding bodies to understand how VCSE qualifications provided appropriate transition to post-16 study.
- 2.11. Board noted the importance of communication and ensuring stakeholders understand the new qualifications and the progression routes available to learners, in order to realise the benefits and improvements that are anticipated through the introduction of VCSEs, and the Full Offer more generally.

**Resolved: The Board approved the minutes from the meeting held on 29 and 30 November 2023 and noted the action log.**

### **3. Chair's Report**

- 3.1. The Board received an oral update.
- 3.2. It was confirmed that the Chair and Chief Executive had presented the 2023/24 Annual Report to the Children, Young People and Education Committee on the 14 December and that the session had gone well.
- 3.3. The Chair provided an update on the establishment of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, confirming the new body would not become operational until August 2024.
- 3.4. It was confirmed that the PISA results had been published in December and the Board noted Wales's position in relation to other UK jurisdictions. The Board considered the implications of the PISA results and discussed qualifications outcomes and the results from the Welsh Government personalised tests. The Board discussed loss of learning resulting from the COVID pandemic and the impact on educational attainment, noting that 2025 would be the first year when historic attainment standards would be fully implemented. Qualifications Wales senior staff

had been invited to join wider education policy meetings with Welsh Government and the Board asked to be kept updated.

**Resolved: The Board noted the Chair's Report.**

#### **4. Chief Executive's Report**

- 4.1. The Board received the report.
- 4.2. PB provided an update on the approach to reform of the Hospitality and Catering qualifications following the recent sector review. It was confirmed that discussions with the main awarding body offering Hospitality and Catering qualifications had progressed well and Qualifications Wales was confident it would be able to secure a market response without the need to restrict and commission. It was confirmed a further report would be provided to the Board in March.
- 4.3. The Board raised the matter of school's accountability arrangements and the uncertainty over Welsh Government's plans. It was confirmed Qualifications Wales had written to Welsh Government outlining the potential impact of uncertainty about performance measures on our reforms, in particular the potential impact on schools' current curriculum decisions. The Chair confirmed that he had also flagged the concerns with the Minister.
- 4.4. The Board received an update on the implementation of the new finance system, and it was confirmed a lessons learned exercise had been undertaken and the outcome of that review would be considered by the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee in March.
- 4.5. The Board received an update on how the Oxford Report had been received. It was confirmed that targeted engagement with specific stakeholders was being planned to increase the profile and understanding of the research.

**Resolved: The Board noted the Chief Executive's Report.**

#### **5. People Survey**

- 5.1. The Board received the report which shared the outcomes of the 2023 employee survey and outlined the proposed actions.
- 5.2. Introducing the report, KW confirmed that the survey was launched on 9 October 2023 for a period of three weeks and the results were published to staff on 27 November. It was confirmed that a whole organisation report had been drafted along with reports tailored to each of the directorates.
- 5.3. It was confirmed that 99 returns were received which equated to a 93% response rate. It was noted that this was equal to the 2022 response rate, which was higher than 2021 (89%) but in line with 2020 (94%). The engagement index remained the

same, 76% in 2023 and 2022 as compared with 75% in 2021, 77% in 2020 and 76% in 2019.

- 5.4. The Board were pleased to note the overall positive response and considered the key areas of change.
- 5.5. The Board noted the variation in results in relation to cross-team working across directorates. It was confirmed that there were some good practices already in place which brought teams together and allowed cross-functional collaboration and working.
- 5.6. It was confirmed that there had been a small number of negative responses linked to career progression again this year. It was explained that over the past year 10% of staff had been promoted and a further 10% had received development opportunities, but that the size of the organisation sometimes meant opportunities for career progression among the higher bands, and within corporate resources were less frequent. It was noted that HR were working with members of the Senior Leadership Group to ensure career progression and personal development opportunities were being discussed in staff one to ones.
- 5.7. The Board noted that several respondents had reported poor mental health or musculoskeletal problems and considered the ongoing work to support staff with physical impairments and mental wellbeing.
- 5.8. The Board noted the positive responses in relation to leadership and management and it was agreed a copy of the organisational chart would be shared with the Board. The Board considered the actions that would be taken in response to the survey results and agreed it was important all staff shared responsibility for implementing the desired changes. The Board also suggested considering additional use of pulse surveys more regularly.

**Resolved: The Board noted the report for information and agreed a copy of the organisational chart would be shared with the Board for information.**

## **6. Values, Behaviours and Board Culture**

- 6.1. The Board received the report which presented the organisation's updated values and behaviours.
- 6.2. Introducing the report, KW explained that the organisation's values had been in place since 2016 and had been supported by a series of exemplar behaviours. As the organisation had grown and matured, there had been a need to reflect on the values and consider whether they were still representative of the organisation.
- 6.3. Feedback from staff engagement suggested that the organisation's commitment to inclusion and diversity could be better articulated as a behaviour across the values

and that 'learning' was a behaviour that would better sit under a wider 'innovative' value.

- 6.4. The Board considered the revised values and noted that behaviours linked to inclusion featured more prominently. The Board were supportive of the revised values and discussed the work planned to communicate and embed them.
- 6.5. The Chair initiated a discussion on Board culture in response to reports of significant governance failures in several high-profile organisations that had recently been reported in the press. It was explained that systemic failures in the leadership, culture and behaviour of these organisations had resulted in missed opportunities to identify and address significant issues with strategic and operational management.
- 6.6. The Board noted that clarity of purpose and accountability, separation of roles, and a willingness to speak up and act were important element of good governance. The Board considered its central role within the corporate governance process and how board dynamics could influence an organisation's strategic management. The Board noted that while the relationship between the Chair and Chief Executive was an important one, it was crucial that the Board were collectively responsible for ensuring there were effective relationships between the Chair, Chief Executive, Executive and Non-executive.
- 6.7. The Board considered the importance of ensuring robust governance processes were in place, especially in relation to whistleblowing and managing conflicts. It was agreed there was a need to ensure the process for managing conflicts between senior officers was documented and signposted in the Board Terms of Reference.
- 6.8. The Board expressed its confidence in the existing governance processes and organisational culture but recognised the dangers associated with complacency and the importance of remaining vigilant.

**Resolved: The Board noted the revised values and behaviours for information.**

## **7. Qualified for the Future (QFF) Update**

- 7.1. The Board received the QFF dashboard.
- 7.2. Providing a brief overview of the dashboard, CT confirmed that the project was reporting green overall with good progress made across all of the workstreams. It was confirmed that where workstreams were reporting amber, the reasons for this had been identified and steps taken to address the specific issues.
- 7.3. It was explained that over the past month the focus had been on bringing the two teams within the QPR directorate together under one leader. It was also noted that the new Projects Manager had taken up post and was making good progress on drawing together the documentation and organisational aspects of the QFF project.

- 7.4. It was confirmed that the GCSE British Sign Language workstream was now reporting green as the timeline had been extended.
- 7.5. It was noted that the Full Offer decisions report was undergoing final review and would be published on the 30 January.
- 7.6. The Board considered the work being planned on change management. It was confirmed that change management would focus on the manageability of new qualifications, ensuring stakeholders were engaged in the development process and well prepared in terms of delivery.
- 7.7. The Board asked what the issues were in relation to the transition plan and the designation of 9 to 1 GCSEs for post-16 learners. It was explained that this related to those exceptions to the national 14-16 qualifications offer that may be permitted to be delivered in schools under the Designation policy. It was confirmed that work was underway to consult on the revised Designation policy, including the criteria that would be applied to identify qualifications not in the Approved suite of qualifications that could be designated and, therefore, be eligible for public funding.
- 7.8. It was noted that conversations were being held with further education colleges on the impact of the new GCSEs and how they could manage resits for post-16 learners and also whether the range of existing provision for English, Mathematics and Science adequately met the needs of post-16 learners.

**Resolved: The Board noted the QFF dashboard**

## **8. 2024/2025 Operational Priorities Overview**

- 8.1. The Board received the report which provided the Board with an overview of the organisation's proposed 2024/25 operational priorities.
- 8.2. Introducing the report, AS explained that as the organisation had structured its work under the requirements of the Well-being of Future Generations Act, there was a need to revise the business plan format and review the existing Strategic Priorities document. For this reason, the draft business plan would be circulated to the Board with further information on the development of the 2024/25 business plan ex-committee during early March.
- 8.3. In the meantime, the report aimed to provide the Board with a high-level overview of the priorities that had been identified by the 2024/25 operational planning process and which would form the basis of the 2024/25 business plan. The report also highlighted contingency planning showing what the organisation would scale back or defer if necessary.
- 8.4. It was explained that the organisation still had a lot of work to do, despite the finance challenges facing the public sector, and there was a need to plan effectively to ensure the best use of organisational resources. It was confirmed that this year, teams had

been asked to identify those tasks which must be done and those tasks which could be delayed or stopped during the year if necessary and so the Board may notice more sub-priorities reported as amber or red as plans were adjusted to meet any in-year challenges that arise.

- 8.5. It was confirmed that the organisation had been working closely with the union on the resource planning this year in response to the requirements of the Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Act 2023.
- 8.6. Board considered the priorities, and it was noted that the British Sign Language GCSE would be progressed during 2024/25 and that there would be a consultation on the design principles during the year. It was noted that while the decision to develop a BSL GCSE had been included in a previous decisions report considered by the Board, the consultation had been delayed.

**Resolved: The Board were content with the priorities and discretionary activities outlined in the report and noted the report for information.**

## **9. Operational Plan and Finance Report 2023/24**

- 9.1. The Board received the report which provided an update on progress against the Operational Plan to the end of December 2023.
- 9.2. It was confirmed that at the end of December 2023, all five of the Operational Priorities were rated Green, while one sub-priority was rated red and two sub-priorities were rated Amber. It was noted that an overview of the red and amber rated areas could be found in Appendix 3.
- 9.3. The Board considered the report. It was noted that there was some inconsistency in how staff used the report ratings and that this would be addressed during the March reporting cycle.
- 9.4. Introducing the Finance Report, KP explained that it provided an update on the 2023/24 budget.
- 9.5. It was confirmed that as at the end of October, the organisation had continued to tighten and review budgets and spend forecasts and was currently forecasting a revenue spend of approximately £10.103m against a budget of £10.048m.
- 9.6. It was noted that while revenue forecast has further reduced by approximately £48k since October, this would still result in an overspend of £55k. However, this would be offset by additional funding assurance of up to £70k from Welsh Government, linked to the grants overcommitments.
- 9.7. It was explained that £90k of the remaining £3m spend was variable, and the expected revenue outturn position was between the £10.048m budget and the



current forecast of £10.103m; within the funding range underwritten by Welsh Government's commitment to support the Welsh medium grant scheme.

- 9.8. It was confirmed that the organisation would not deliver the anticipated level of staff turnover savings this year and the figures would be adjusted in the 2024/25 budget.
- 9.9. The Board received an update on the 2024/25 budget, and it was confirmed that the Welsh Government budget published on the 19 December confirmed a flat line revenue budget allocation for Qualifications Wales for 2024-25.
- 9.10. The Board considered the pay spend, noting that during 2024/25 it was likely to account for 76% of the organisation's total spend. It was explained that the ability to fund higher pay awards was limited in circumstances where the pay to non-pay budget ratio was higher and that, factoring in ongoing pay cost pressures, there was an increasing need to review and revise the operating model over the next few years.
- 9.11. It was noted that, following discussions with WJEC, Qualifications Wales had confirmed the tapering off of the £410k Welsh language support grant over two years, releasing £205k next year, and a further £205k in 2025-26.
- 9.12. It was confirmed the operational plan priorities for 2024-25 would be finalised over the coming weeks, and that generally budget holder requirements were in line with reduced budget allocations for 2023-24. It was explained that revised funding needs for 2024-25 was anticipated to be in line with funding available and that the position would be considered in more detail by Resources Committee, ARAC and the Board, in March

#### **Resolved: The Board**

- **noted the Operational Plan Update Report for information.**
- **noted the Finance Update Report for information.**
- **noted the current position in relation to the 2023-24 cost pressures, budget reductions, outturn forecast and risks.**
- **noted the process underway, and the issues being considered, in the development of the 2024-25 budget to accompany and deliver the Operational Plan priorities.**

## **10. Risk Management Report and Organisational Risk Register**

- 10.1. The Board received the report.
- 10.2. Introducing the report, CE explained it provided the Board with an overview of the organisation's risks that currently had a residual risk score of 12 and above. It was confirmed that there were 40 open risks in the full organisational risk register, 10 of which had a score of 12 and above. Of the 10 risks included in the report to Board, two were rated red and eight were rated amber.

10.3. It was confirmed that since the last report, the residual risk score of one risk had reduced, no risks had increased in score, no risks which had previously met the Board reporting threshold had been closed and one new risk had been added to the register.

10.4. The Board considered the report and noted the risk register for information. It was confirmed that a full review of the reform risks would be undertaken ahead of the next reporting period and consideration would be given as to whether the risks associated with resourcing the national 14-16 qualifications was adequately captured either at project level or in the organisational risk register.

**Resolved: The Board noted the latest organisational risk register for information.**

## **11. Committee Reports**

11.1. It was confirmed that no committee meetings had been held since the last meeting of the Board.

## **12. Close**

12.1. The Chair thanked everyone for attending and the staff who had prepared and presented papers.

12.2. There was no other business for discussion.