



**By Emyr George, Associate Director, Qualifications Wales**

## **The results are in ....**

Another exam season draws to a close, and as students look forward to their next steps in education and the world of work, it's timely for us to reflect on the past few weeks.

This was certainly a busier year than usual as far as qualifications are concerned. Brand new GCSEs and A levels, designed specifically for Wales, were awarded for the first time in a number of subjects. New versions of the Welsh Bacc were also awarded for the first time. We saw big changes in the mix of students taking GCSEs, which meant overall results looked different to previous years. New GCSEs in Wales are awarded using the well-known A\* to G grades. But new GCSEs in England are awarded using new 9 to 1 grades, which makes it harder to compare results between the two countries.

With so much going on, there's been no shortage of things for the media to talk about. And with all the debate and the headlines, you'd be forgiven for feeling just a little bit confused about what it all means.

The most important message we want to get across is to reassure students, parents and teachers that this year's results have been awarded fairly. We've conducted extensive monitoring of exam boards throughout the exam period. We're confident that students who sat their exams this year have not been disadvantaged by being the first to take the new qualifications. And we're satisfied that the standards of the new qualifications are comparable to those taken in previous years.

Many headlines have focussed on the drop in the overall GCSE results this year. But the figures quoted include results for the record number of Year 10 students who sat their exams early this summer. They also don't include the achievements of Year 11 students who may have taken some GCSEs earlier. Once these factors are taken into



account, the GCSE results for 16-year-old students presents a much more stable picture when compared to recent years.

Students taking GCSEs early has been a big talking point this year, with people asking why so many schools choose to enter their pupils early for exams. This of course is not a new phenomenon, but it is a practice that's become much more common in recent years. This year the number of students taking their exams early jumped to an unprecedented high. In GCSE English Language some 21,000 Year 10 students sat the qualification early; that's around 65% of all Year 10 students in Wales. We also saw big increases in the number of Year 10 students entered for the new maths GCSEs and GCSE Welsh Language.

The new GCSEs have attracted a good deal of attention. Not surprising perhaps, when you consider that different changes are being introduced at the same time here in Wales, in England and in Northern Ireland. To help make sense of it all, we've come up with the top 10 things you need to know about the new GCSEs in Wales.

1. GCSEs are being reformed separately in Wales, England and Northern Ireland.
2. While there are some differences in content and assessment, the value of GCSEs is the same wherever they are taken – all GCSEs offered in Wales, England and Northern Ireland are the same size, taken by students of the same range of ability and assess similar outcomes.
3. GCSE standards are common across Wales, England and Northern Ireland. The regulators in each country are committed to ensuring that it is no harder, or easier, to gain a specific grade than in previous years.
4. In Wales GCSE subject content has been refreshed and assessments have been strengthened.
5. Most subjects are now assessed through exams – coursework has been kept to a minimum.
6. Early entry has had a significant impact on this summer's exam results – with more 15-year-olds sitting exams early and fewer high performing 16-year-olds returning to improve on previous grades.
7. Qualifications Wales is investigating the reasons why schools have entered so many students early, and we will report our findings in October.
8. Wales has chosen to keep the familiar A\* to G grades.
9. Grades A and A\* cover the same attainment as the new grades 7, 8 and 9 in England. It is not true to say that grade 9 in England is harder than A\* as it rewards students of the same ability.

10. Universities and Colleges are aware of the differences between Wales and England, and students will not be disadvantaged.