APPROACHES TO EARLY AND MULTIPLE ENTRY FOR GCSE EXAMINATIONS IN WALES

October 2017
Executive Summary

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Approaches to early and multiple entry for GCSE examinations in Wales: Executive Summary

Introduction

In January 2017, Qualifications Wales initiated research to gather information about the views and experiences of school and regional consortia staff with regards to early and multiple entry practices for GCSE examinations in Wales. Early and multiple entry for GCSE examinations has been increasing in Wales in recent years. In the 2016/17 academic year, nearly a fifth (19%) of all summer GCSE entries in Wales came from Year 10 students or younger. The research aimed to understand motivations and strategies behind early and multiple entry practices for WJEC specifications in GCSE English Language, GCSE Welsh Language, GCSE Mathematics and GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy. These GCSEs were selected as they were among the first subjects to be reformed that were assessed using a linear method (i.e. all assessments are designed to be sat at the same time, at the end of the course). These qualifications were awarded for the first time in the 2016/17 academic year.

Method

Fifty-nine education professionals (including headteachers, heads of Mathematics, English or Welsh, exams officers, teachers and regional consortia staff) were interviewed, across 21 schools and four regional consortia. Interviewees included in the research came from a broadly representative sample of schools in Wales, taking factors such as pupil demographic, school size, school language medium and location into account.

One-to-one and small group semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted face-to-face between January and June 2017. Interviewees were asked about their views and experiences of early and multiple entry for GCSE examinations, with a focus on Mathematics, Mathematics-Numeracy, Welsh Language and English Language. The core questions focused on opinions and experiences of strategies, motivations and driving forces behind early and multiple entry practices, and included some questions regarding views relating to changes in policy.

Findings

The interviews generated a large volume of detailed information that resulted in the classification of multiple themes and sub-themes (as discussed in detail in the main report). What emerged from the analysis was a complex picture with many interrelated themes and considerations, which can be used in discussions both for and against early and multiple entry. In many cases, it was difficult to disentangle the cause and effect of early and multiple entry in terms of the driving factors behind decisions to enter students early, and the positive or negative effects that are essentially the by-products of the school's examination entry strategy. What is clear from the engagement is that interviewees were keen to illustrate the extent of the pressure they were feeling, and how much they wanted the best for their students. Nearly all interviewees agreed on the fact that the main aim of their entry strategy was to get the best results for their students.

1 WJEC is the sole provider of reformed GCSE qualifications in Wales
The interviewers spoke to individuals from schools that did use early and multiple entry sittings and those that didn't. The extent to which interviewees reported using strategies that involved students sitting examinations early varied, as did their beliefs around the costs and benefits of the practice. Some interviewees fully believed in the benefits of having more than just the one examination sitting at the end of Year 11, and these interviewees felt that giving students the option to enter more than once was a valuable opportunity to improve individual attainment and school results.

Other interviewees reported using early and multiple entry sittings, but offered a more reserved opinion of its effectiveness. At the other end of the spectrum there were some interviewees who did not believe in the practice of entering students before the end of Year 11. These individuals reported concerns such as whether pupils had reached the appropriate level of maturity to achieve their full potential, and the possible negative impact on pupil wellbeing that comes from repeated high-stakes assessment. In these instances, interviewees suggested that early entry could disadvantage some pupils.

The reasons given for using early entry can be grouped into two broad categories: reasons related to improving student attainment; and reasons related to improving a school's results in relation to school accountability and performance measures.

There are those who strongly advocate using early and multiple entry as a means of improving student attainment, while others view the increasing use of the practice as a symptom of a system that drives schools to maximise their outcomes in relation to school performance measures. Respondents pointed to potential benefits, practical considerations, and the consideration of the individual needs of students.

Reasons given for using early and multiple entry related to improving student attainment and maximising potential. Views on the positive aspects of these approaches included the following:

i. It helps to stretch and challenge high-attaining students who have mastered the course content and are ready to move to new, more challenging qualifications. This is most common for Mathematics, where students were reported to go on to study additional qualifications in the subject such as Additional Mathematics. To a lesser extent, it was also reported that students were entered for English Language at the end of Year 10 so that they could focus on English Literature in Year 11, and in some cases, student performance in an English Language entry at the end of Year 10 dictated whether the student would go on to study Literature at all in Year 11. When interviewees with expertise in the teaching of English reported not entering students early, age and concerns about whether students had reached the right level of maturity were often cited as a reason.

ii. It gives students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds (where there is a risk they may miss some assessment opportunities, or may not be attending school by the end of Year 11) a means of ensuring that they have a better chance to take their exams.

iii. Early entry allows for an intensive focus on a smaller number of subjects without the pressure of large numbers of exams.
iv. A number of interviewees reported that gaining a 'formal' result from the exam board carries more weight than internally assessed mock exams. This was reported as having the following potential benefits:
   a. It can help build confidence and motivation for students with low self-belief or who are otherwise at risk of disengagement.
   b. It can help to give students a ‘wake-up call’ to apply themselves more diligently for the remainder of the course.
   c. It can give a truer measure of student progress and attainment (to be used for formative purposes), because students are likely to prepare more diligently than for a mock exam.

v. Entering students early was reported by some interviewees as a source of reliable information about candidate performance on individual questions to inform future teaching of those candidates.

vi. Some suggested that the chance to take a qualification early helps to reduce pressure on students to perform at the end of Year 11. It may be that the grade a student gets for their first entry is seen as an insurance policy for when they resit their exams at the end of the course, or a student can choose not to re-sit and to focus on exams in other subjects.

vii. Some suggested that entering early increased aspirations.

The following points were discussed as factors and drivers that relate to the environment in which schools operate.

i. Interviewees reported facing extreme pressure to achieve results in specific subjects flowing from school accountability arrangements, either directly from the school performance measures themselves or indirectly from their influence on the school’s policies and approaches, from competition with other schools, and from expectations set by external agencies.

ii. There appeared to be a shared perception that schools must use all available strategies to maximise exam results and improve the school’s performance measures.

iii. Current accountability pressure leads to a strong focus on the achievement of a C grade, especially in core subjects.

iv. Many interviewees stated that they used early entry for the 2016/17 academic year as a means of gaining more information about the exams because new specifications were introduced. This helped them to better prepare students for their exams. Indeed, some interviewees reported using a different approach for this academic year than they had done in previous years because of the new specifications.

Interviewees also discussed a range of issues and potential negative aspects to using early and multiple entry approaches. Typically, these were associated with the widespread use of the approach. In addition to those already mentioned, responses included:

i. Cost to schools. Some interviewees reported that the cost of multiple entry was difficult to manage and therefore reported looking at cost sharing models with parents. Others viewed it as a steep, but necessary, increase in costs during a time of qualification reform.

ii. The additional time spent preparing for, and sitting, exams reduces the time available for teaching and learning, both in the subject being entered early and in the teaching of other subjects.

iii. An increase in teacher workload and pressure.
iv. An increase in overall assessment burden. Some interviewees stated that after being assessed multiple times throughout the course, students were becoming fatigued; one interviewee suggested that this had led to exhaustion in some students.
v. A risk of decreasing motivation if a student feels he or she has done ‘well enough’.
vi. A risk of decreasing student confidence if students were not ready to take the examination, or they did not achieve the result that they were aiming for.
vii. A risk to students’ future progression, either by banking a grade that doesn’t reflect their true ability or potential, or by multiple entry, which some selective universities do not favour.

When asked about their views on potential changes to entry rules, responses were varied. Many interviewees had strong views and the questions evoked some emotional responses. A number of interviewees felt that results would be affected if changes were introduced.

When asked about what would happen if the option to enter early was removed completely, some interviewees felt that it would “level the playing field”, because everyone would have one attempt to sit the exam at the end of Year 11. Others felt that this approach would remove options that schools had used to give disadvantaged students the best chance to get the best grade they could, which they viewed, in effect, as levelling the playing field.

When asked about a possible change in policy that would see only a student’s first result count towards a school’s performance measures, views also varied. Many suggested that this would essentially be viewed as no different to completely removing the option to enter early, since the pressures of school performance measures would prevent schools from using early entry sittings. Some felt that it would create more uncertainty during a difficult time of qualification reform, while others suggested that it might reduce the pressure on schools to look at strategies and approaches that make use of multiple entry options when they are available.

What was clear throughout this research was that interviewees were keen to get their voices heard. It was evident that there was no single approach to examination entry that suits all individuals and all schools, but the desire to get the best for the students and the best for the school was an important priority to interviewees. In moving forward, any policy decisions surrounding GCSE examinations in Wales would benefit from a considered approach, taking into account all of the factors discussed in this research report. It is imperative that any communication of such decisions is delivered in a timely manner, and is clear and concise, to ensure consistency in understanding.
**Introduction**

In January 2017, Qualifications Wales initiated research to gather information about the views and experiences of school and regional consortia staff with regards to early and multiple entry practices for GCSE examinations in Wales.

The aim of the research was to understand motivations and strategies behind early and multiple entry practices with regards to WJEC specifications in GCSE English Language, GCSE Welsh Language, GCSE Mathematics and GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy. These qualifications were selected as they represented reformed qualifications that were assessed using a linear method (i.e. all assessments are designed to be sat at the same time, at the end of the course) and that were awarded for the first time in the 2016/17 academic year.

To understand the main body of this report, what follows is a brief explanation of some of the technical aspects surrounding examinations, school performance measures and GCSE qualifications in Wales.

**Linear and unitised qualifications**

GCSE examinations can be assessed using either a linear or unitised (modular) approach to assessment. Linear GCSE examinations are designed to assess ability at the end of a two-year course, with students having completed 120 guided learning hours to cover all aspects of a qualification specification. Most linear GCSE qualifications are made up of a number of units/components which cover different aspects of the qualification specification; these can be both examined and non-examined assessments.

Every WJEC linear exam specification states that “all assessments must be taken at the end of the course”. Each time a student is entered for a linear qualification they must complete all externally examined components of the qualification to gain a grade. In contrast, unitised exams are designed to allow units to be taken by the student during their course of study. Therefore, taking a unit before the end of the course is not unexpected. Students may take and/or re-take individual units from within a given specification without having to take all units at each sitting. Students may resit individual units once only before certificating.

The number of linear specifications has increased as a result of qualification reform; hence this research focuses on those. Furthermore, linear qualifications are specifically designed to assess ability at the end of a course; therefore, they are of particular interest when considering early and multiple entry approaches.
Qualification reform

Following The Review of Qualifications for 14 to 19-year-olds in Wales\(^2\), GCSE examinations in Wales have undergone a period of reform. This review drew a number of conclusions, one of which was that “the qualifications system should support steps being taken to improve levels of literacy and numeracy” [through accurate assessment] “upon which employers and others can rely” (p.5)\(^3\). As a result of this review, a number of recommendations were made in relation to English Language, Welsh Language and Mathematics GCSEs.

These recommendations included:

• Ensuring that reformed English Language and Welsh Language GCSEs provided “greater assurance of literacy” (p.10);
• Placing more emphasis on core writing skills for English Language;
• Increasing the proportion of assessments that are externally marked in English Language and Welsh Language;
• Introducing two new mathematics GCSEs, one of which focuses on mathematics techniques (GCSE Mathematics), and the other on numeracy (GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy);
• Providing a “greater assurance of numeracy” by assessing functional skills that could be used in the workplace or daily life through relevant and meaningful contexts, by the creation of GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy (p.42);
• Creating a new Mathematics GCSE that focuses on scientific and technical components of the subject.


\(^3\) Ibid
Subjects in focus

Subject specific information relating to examinations and assessments for the GCSE qualifications in focus for this research can be seen in Table 1 below. Each of these qualifications is linear, with all external assessments to be sat in one examination series at the end of the course.

Table 1: Subject specific examination and assessment information for reformed GCSE qualifications (first teaching from 2015).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject (Reformed from 2015)</th>
<th>Examination structure</th>
<th>Tiers</th>
<th>Components (units) (contribution to qualification grade)</th>
<th>Examination papers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GCSE Mathematics</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>Higher (Grades A* to C)</td>
<td>Unit 1 (50%): Non-calculator Unit 2 (50%): Calculator</td>
<td>Unit 1: 1 hour 45 mins (Higher &amp; Intermediate)/1 hour 30 mins (Foundation) Unit 2: 1 hour 45 mins (Higher &amp; Intermediate)/1 hour 30 mins (Foundation)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intermediate (Grades B to E)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Foundation (Grades D to G)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>Higher (Grades A* to C)</td>
<td>Unit 1 (50%): Non-Calculator Unit 2 (50%): Calculator</td>
<td>Unit 1: 1 hour 45 mins (Higher &amp; Intermediate)/1 hour 30 mins (Foundation) Unit 2: 1 hour 45 mins (Higher &amp; Intermediate)/1 hour 30 mins (Foundation)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCSE English Language</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>Untiered</td>
<td><strong>Unit 1</strong> (20%): Oracy (Non-examination assessment) <strong>Unit 2</strong> (40%): Reading and Writing – Description, Narration and Exposition <strong>Unit 3</strong> (40%): Reading and Writing – Argumentation, Persuasion and Instructional</td>
<td><strong>Unit 2</strong>: 2 hours  <strong>Unit 3</strong>: 2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCSE Welsh Language</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>Untiered</td>
<td><strong>Unit 1</strong> (30%): Oracy (Non-examination assessment) <strong>Unit 2</strong> (35%): Reading and Writing – Description, Narration and Exposition <strong>Unit 3</strong> (35%): – Reading and Writing – Argumentation, Persuasion and Instructional</td>
<td><strong>Unit 2</strong>: 2 hours  <strong>Unit 3</strong>: 2 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each of the reformed qualifications that were first awarded in the 2016/17 academic year had different entry opportunities leading up to the summer 2017 ‘series’ (the term used to refer to a complete exam series, i.e. May – July 2017 is one exam series). These can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Table illustrating the entry sittings available to students in Year 10 and Year 11 during the 2016/17 academic year.

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<td></td>
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<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mathematics- Numeracy</td>
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<td>English Language</td>
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<td>Welsh Language</td>
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<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mathematics- Numeracy</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Welsh Language</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>Resit only</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The examination entry opportunities for the GCSE subjects in focus for this research differ between year groups for students during the 2016/17 academic year, as seen in Table 2. This is due to the crossover between the introduction of the new specifications and the completion of the legacy specifications.

As the qualifications are linear and were introduced for first teaching in 2015, there was no examination sitting for these reformed qualifications in November 2015 or summer 2016, because students would not have completed the full two-year course. From 2017 to 2018, entry opportunities will follow the pattern shown in the second section of Table 2. From this point, an entry has been made available for English Language in November as a resit opportunity only if the student had sat the examination in the previous summer.

Due to the fact that there are multiple exam series for each of the linear specifications, there is more than one exam sitting for which schools can enter students across the two years that they study for their GCSEs. This system of examinations has lent itself to an approach whereby students can be entered for examinations before the end of Year 11, and sometimes on multiple occasions. The practice of entering students before the end of Year 11 is referred to as ‘early entry’, and denotes any entries made in November of Year 11 or before. Entering students for a qualification examination more than once is referred to as ‘multiple entry’. In recent years, there has been a growing trend of early and multiple entry in Wales, with schools registering significant numbers of students to sit linear GCSE exams before the end of Year 11.

The Welsh Government’s view on GCSE examination entries is reflected in their review of qualifications in 2012⁴. In the review, it states that using early entry for “large cohorts was likely to disadvantage most learners, who would most likely achieve higher grades in Year 11” (p.46).
Performance measures

The Review of Qualifications for 14 to 19 year-olds in Wales in 2012 made recommendations that resulted in a change to the way in which school performance at key stage 4 in Wales is measured. The current measures include the Capped Points Score, the Level 2 Inclusive and the Welsh Baccalaureate attainment measure.

Level 2 Inclusive threshold/Level 2+

The Level 2 Inclusive measure refers to the percentage of pupils in a school with a certain number of A* to C grades. “In 2006/07, the Level 2 Inclusive threshold was introduced as the headline indicator for pupils aged 15. This is defined as a volume of qualifications at Level 2 equivalent to the volume of 5 GCSE’s at grade A* to C including English or Welsh First Language and Mathematics.” (p.2) From 2015/16, this measure was based on students in Year 11, rather than students who were 15 at the start of the year, to ensure that all students who were at the end of key stage 4 were included.

Capped Points Score

The capped points score is a measure of individual student performance calculated using the best nine results from all Welsh Government-approved qualifications taken by each student.

The final score is comprised of several components: literacy, mathematics, science and a component made up of other qualifications studied in key stage 4. The measure attributes different scores for each grade within a qualification taking the size of the qualification into account.

In 2017, the capped point score moved from being based on eight qualifications to nine, to take into account the new Mathematics-Numeracy GCSE. The capped point score is calculated for each student using their grades for the following qualifications: either GCSE English Language or Welsh Language (whichever is the better score), GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy, GCSE Mathematics, two best Science qualifications (from 2018, these must be GCSEs), plus their best grade from four ‘other’ qualifications. Before 2017, the literacy element of the score could come from either Language or Literature GCSEs, but as of 2017, Literature GCSEs are no longer used for the literacy element, but they can be used for the ‘best four others’.

4ibid


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**Welsh Baccalaureate**

The reformed key stage 4 Welsh Baccalaureate was awarded for the first time in 2016/17, and in 2017/18 will become a performance measure.

In 2014, the Welsh Government reported that it would be placing more emphasis on the Capped Points Score, rather than the Level 2 threshold; however, this was changed in 2016, when it was agreed that both measures would be included in a suite of indicators to consider key stage 4 performance. When making entry decisions, schools would have been influenced by the changes in Welsh Government policies. In the interviews conducted for this report, both measures were discussed, with varying emphasis on each.

**Previous research in England**

There has been a growing interest in early and multiple entry practices across the UK. A number of studies were conducted in England – both before and after a policy change was implemented, in which early and multiple entry was permitted, but with the caveat that only the first entry would count for school performance measures.

Research has included reviews of the literature surrounding early entry at GCSE in England, qualitative interviews with teachers before policy change, studies measuring the potential impact of early entry and explorations into whether those who enter early perform to their potential in GCSEs and A levels. As this piece of research investigated approaches to early and multiple entry during a period of qualification reform in Wales, the comparisons that can be drawn between Wales and England are limited, given their different contexts.

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GCSE entry in Wales

Early entry is not a process that has been introduced by reform. Entry opportunities were available for legacy qualifications, including the GCSEs in Mathematics, English Language and Welsh Language. The prevalence of early entry overall, and in different subjects, may have been influenced by reform, including which early entry opportunities were made available at a qualification level.

Recent years have seen a growing trend for schools in Wales to use early entry strategies for the legacy GCSEs\(^1\).

Examples of this were:
- the legacy unitised GCSE English Language (approximately 4,200 candidates cashing in\(^4\), typically Year 11s, in the 2016 January series\(^5\);
- the legacy unitised GCSE English Literature (approximately 7,500 Year 10 provisional entries in 2016 summer series\(^6\);
- for linear GCSE Mathematics, both year 10s in the summer series\(^7\) and Year 11 students in the November series (as discussed below)\(^8\).

GCSE provisional summer entries in Wales steadily declined over the period 2014-2016, before an increase of 10\% in 2017, to a total of 334,100\(^9\). This is in the context of a drop in the number of Year 11 students in maintained and independent schools in Wales from 33,934 in 2013/14 to 30,815 in 2016/17\(^10\).

The rise in provisional entries in 2017 was related to two factors: i) the replacement of the legacy GCSE Mathematics with two new reformed Mathematics and Mathematics-Numeracy qualifications and ii) an increase in year 10 (or younger) entry. The introduction of dual Mathematics qualifications caused the overall number of GCSE Mathematics entries to increase by 136\% to 75,400 in 2017\(^11\). Year 10 (or younger) entry increased by 41\% to 63,310 between 2016 and 2017 (see Chart 1)\(^12\).

This younger cohort accounted for 19\% of the whole 2017 Wales GCSE summer cohort, up from 15\% the previous year\(^13\).

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\(^1\)Entry data comes from various sources and is measured at different points in time; Ofqual data is a preliminary collection before the assessment, while WJEC data is final entries published alongside results. Ofqual data is rounded to 10. Totals may not sum due to rounding.
\(^4\)Cashing in refers to candidates who claim their final grade in that exam session.
\(^7\)ibid.
\(^8\)ibid.
\(^10\)ibid.
\(^11\)ibid.
\(^12\)ibid.
\(^13\)ibid.
Chart 1: Wales GCSE year 10 or below summer entries by year

Source: Ofqual Summer exam entries: GCSEs, Level 1/2, AS and A level
Charts 2 and 3 illustrate how early entry in GCSE Mathematics has increased over time.

Chart 2 shows that early entry in the November series more than doubled between 2012 and 2015, with a particularly large increase in 2013. In the November 2016 series, 23,070 candidates were entered for reformed GCSE Mathematics and 29,210 were entered for the new GCSE in Mathematics-Numeracy, leading to 52,280 reformed entries overall\(^2\). This represents a majority of Year 11 candidates entering these qualifications seven months before the summer series opportunity.

**Chart 2: Wales November entries for GCSE Mathematics qualifications, by year.**

There was also a growing trend for candidates in Year 10 (or younger) to be entered, as illustrated in Chart 3. As already discussed in the qualitative research, Year 10 students were studying the reformed GCSE in 2016 and examination opportunities were not available until those candidates entered Year 11. In the summer 2017 series, 10,420 candidates in this age group were entered for GCSE Mathematics. However, 11,140 were also entered for GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy, totalling 21,550 entries overall. The number of Year 10 (or younger) entries dropped substantially in 2016, because the legacy qualification was removed from the calculation of 2017 performance measures.

Chart 3: Wales Year 10 (or younger) provisional summer entries for GCSE Mathematics qualifications, by year.

In the early stages of this research, Qualifications Wales was informed that Estyn have been asked by the Cabinet Secretary to conduct a thematic survey on reformed GCSEs that would seek the views of professionals and learners, including about examination entry approaches; this survey is due to be published in the autumn term of 2018. To date, there has not been any substantial research to investigate the thoughts and opinions of educational professionals in Wales with regards to early and multiple entry. This report explores the issues and views surrounding the practice and summarises the considerations that teachers must make when deciding their approach.

*2016 impacted by removal of legacy GCSE Mathematics from 2017 performance measures.

Source: Ofqual Summer exam entries: GCSEs, Level 1/2, AS and A level.

Method

The research was conducted in two stages. Stage 1 was a small-scale study designed as a scoping exercise to test questions and identify any further lines of enquiry. Stage 2 then followed with a larger sample to gather views from schools across the country. Since the aim was to develop our understanding of strategies and motivations behind early and multiple entry approaches, the research focused solely on speaking to education professionals.

Participants

Interviewees included in the research came from a broadly representative sample of schools in Wales across all four regional consortia. The following demographics were considered when approaching schools to take part: number of students, language medium, school support categorisation, percentage of students with free school meal (FSM) eligibility, percentage of students who spoke English as an additional language (EAL), geographical location, school level 2 + score and capped point score\(^{26}\). To protect the anonymity of interviewees, the demographic range for schools included in the sample cannot be reported.

Fifty-nine education professionals (including headteachers, heads of Mathematics, English or Welsh, exams officers, teachers and regional consortia staff) were interviewed, across 21 schools and four regional consortia. Interviews were conducted with 47 individuals from schools, and 12 from regional consortia.

Stage 1

Interviewees for Stage 1 of the project were recruited through an opportunity sampling strategy by members of the external relations and research teams at Qualifications Wales. Interviews were conducted with 12 education professionals in this stage, two of whom had left the teaching profession within the last two years. Taking into account discussions surrounding schools in which interviewees had previously taught, experiences from a total of six schools were discussed in Stage 1.

Stage 2

After the initial scoping stage a larger scale sample of 15 schools was selected for Stage 2. This produced a combined group of schools from Stages 1 and 2 that took demographic differences in schools across Wales into account. These interviews were conducted with 35 teaching staff and 12 consortia staff.

Design

Data collection took place in two stages between January 2017 and June 2017. One-to-one and small group semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted with education professionals. Interviews were conducted face-to-face by the principal author when in English, and by a Welsh-speaking interviewer from Qualifications Wales when in Welsh. Interviews were conducted at the interviewees’ place of work, (except for one group of consortium interviewees, who were interviewed at the Qualifications Wales office).

Interviewees were asked about their views and experiences of early and multiple entry for GCSE examinations with a focus on Mathematics, Mathematics-Numeracy, Welsh Language and English Language. The core questions focused on opinions and experiences of strategies, motivations and driving forces behind early and multiple entry practices (see Appendices A and B). Interviews covered both legacy and reformed GCSEs, although the focus was on reformed qualifications and entry decisions for the future.

The core questions asked in Stage 1 were also asked in Stage 2, with the exception of questions relating to views on changes in policy. In Stage 1, interviewees were asked what the impact would be if early entry was no longer an option for GCSEs in Wales. In Stage 2, this question was adapted to ask interviewees about their views on the impact of Wales adopting the policy that is currently held in England. This policy stipulates that students are allowed to take examinations early (in the summer of Year 10 or before, with a November sitting available for resits only), and multiple attempts are permitted; however, it is only the first entry that is taken into account for the school's performance measures.

Analysis

Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews conducted through the medium of English were transcribed by the principal author (n=22) and a research officer (n=6). Those conducted through the medium of Welsh (n=3) were transcribed using an independent translation service and subsequently verified by the interviewer.

Transcriptions from Stage 1 and Stage 2 were combined for all analysis, except for the final questions, which related to opinions with regards to policy changes. Each transcription was independently reviewed by two researchers, one of whom was the principal author who had conducted all English-speaking interviews at the data collection stage. Each researcher identified key themes and sub-themes from the interview transcripts; themes and sub-themes were then cross-referenced between the researchers to validate and quality-assure the findings. This validation process was then repeated at the report-writing stage, where the second researcher cross-checked the themes identified with those agreed in the initial analysis stage.

Notes on interpretation

It is important to note that although efforts were made to reach a sample that covered a range of school and student demographics, there are limitations with regards to how the views expressed can be generalised to the population of staff in Welsh secondary schools and consortia as a whole. Quantitative references (such as “many” or “few”), refer to the sample interviewed only; this should be borne in mind when reading this report.

Definitions: Socioeconomic Status (SES), Free School Meals (FSM), English as an Additional Language (EAL), Fisher Family Trust (FFT).

Findings

The scale of the interviews meant that there was a large volume of detailed information that resulted in the classification of multiple themes and sub-themes. What emerged from analysis was a complex issue, with many interrelated themes and considerations that can be used in discussions both for, and against, early and multiple entry. In many cases, it was difficult to disentangle the cause and effect of early and multiple entry strategies. However, what interviewees almost unanimously agreed on was that the key motivation behind their entry approach was the aim of getting the best results for students.

Pressure to achieve and improve

“At the end of the day, there’s so much pressure on English and Maths. You know, so much pressure in terms of workload, marking, you know, the hours are ridiculous, and the pressure that comes with it, as part of the performance measures and the accountability and all that kind of stuff. We need to make sure that these kids are given the opportunity to do the best that they can and if someone says you can have three or one, it’s a no-brainer really isn’t it?”.

Pressure to achieve results and reach targets was a key theme throughout the interviews, and it was expressed as a strong motivating factor behind early and multiple entry. All interviewees who reported using early entry strategies for their students spoke about the early exam sittings as ‘opportunities,’ and the majority of interviewees suggested that there was an expectation from multiple sources (as discussed later in this report) that early entry was used. Many reported that they felt as though they had no other option than to enter early when there was an entry available. The majority of interviewees linked this to the pressure of reaching targets and raising standards within the school – especially since English, Welsh and Mathematics contribute significantly to school performance measures.
School performance measures

When specifically asked about the driving force behind early entry, the majority of interviewees mentioned school performance measures as a key influence, although many also stated that it was not the only consideration:

“Honestly? I think it is probably performance. School performance and to give our learners, we think it’s the best - in the best interest of our learners, those two are the same thing, I think (...) the thing about early entry, it’s getting over the Level 2+ line and that is why all of Year 10 are doing it. That’s simply it. To get over the line, as early as possible.”

Given the impact that results in English, Welsh and Mathematics qualifications have on school performance measures, the pressure felt by teachers within these departments should not be underestimated. Many interviewees reported feeling a strong pressure with regards to school performance measures because English and Mathematics are crucial to the measurement of how a school is judged.

“it’s the Maths that’s important. There is pressure on us. There’s no nastiness, but there is pressure from the top isn’t there? You know, the government decide the performance indicators, and this is why everyone is so obsessed with getting results, and throw everyone in for everything.” (translated)*

This drive to improve school performance measures was even more pronounced when interviewees spoke of experiences from schools in special measures: “Getting as many Cs as you can, to get as many level 2 pluses as you can, to get out of special measures”. When discussing entry patterns between Mathematics and Mathematics-Numeracy, school performance measures were mentioned as a consideration:

“As long as Numeracy stays as a measure of a statutory part of the Capped 9 indicator, the huge majority of pupils will go in for both. That’s our key driver with that.”

One interviewee discussed reactions from a headteacher group when guidance from the Welsh Government on exam entries was shared with them. The interviewee discussed feeling that they could not follow the advice, because of the pressure they felt they were under:

“Welsh Government basically said that the strong advice was that centres should not be entered for English Language early (...) That was then passed through the consortium to schools. It may have been Maths as well. But I remember sitting there at a headteacher conference when this was given out and people were like, ‘you are having a laugh, how can you not?’”. Because you can’t enter them in November, and you are just leaving it like a lottery and there is just too much pressure on schools to do that, there was no way we were going to do that! I would like to think that that is based on learners, but it is a fear of failure from a school performance perspective.”

*“’maths’ sy’n bwysig. Mae yna bwysau arnon ni. Does neb yn gas na dim, ond mae pwysau o’r top yndoes. Ti’n gwybod, mae’r Llywodraeth yn penderfynu bod y mesurau performiad a dyna pam mae pawb mor ‘obsessed’ gyda chael y canlyniadau a thaflu pawb i mewn ar gyfer popeth.”
The interplay between Mathematics and English departments within individual schools meant that in some instances, early entry was used as a way of attempting to improve one department’s results in relation to the other. For example, in one interview, the Head of English reported that the Mathematics department was using multiple entry as a strategy to improve results so that they were more aligned with the performance of the English department.

Changes to Welsh Government policy on which qualifications would contribute towards school performance measures (as outlined in the introduction) were reported as adding to the pressure that was felt within departments. In some interviews, this change was given as an explanation for choosing to enter Mathematics and/or Mathematics-Numeracy in November. When discussing pressure, one interviewee commented on their perception of the changes made to school performance measures with regards to whether Mathematics or Mathematics-Numeracy would contribute to the measure:

“When it first came out (...) we got the guidance out the other day and it said that Numeracy everybody had to sit, and Maths was for, you know, the few that we think can do it. Well that’s changed significantly as we’ve taught the material (...) it changes everything and that creates pressure in itself.”

When discussing performance measures with regards to Welsh-medium schools, there was a perception among interviewees from both English and Welsh-medium schools, as well as consortium staff, that there was less pressure on these schools to enter students for either English or Welsh Language exams early. This was because they could use results from either exam for their school performance measures.

In the majority of interviews where pressure to achieve results for school performance measures was identified as a factor, this was linked directly to getting the best results for the students. In nearly all cases, it was suggested that these were in fact the same thing – and by improving one, you ultimately improve the other.
Influence of other schools

When discussing pressure from other schools, there was a mixed response from interviewees. Many of the interviewees stated that they discussed examination entries at meetings with other schools, but few said that they felt a direct pressure. However, it is important to note that these were schools who were already employing early and multiple entry strategies. One consortium group discussed the influence of other schools as a “contagion”, in which schools suggest that they do not want to enter students early, but feel that they will be disadvantaged compared to other schools if they don’t. Some interviewees reported the need to give their students the same opportunities as other schools, and in turn, they reported this as a motivation behind their decision to enter early:

“With the [English] Language, it was expected that they won’t enter, and then we realised that lots of schools were so we thought, ‘ok, oh crikey, let’s do that as well’, so they will be entering for that too.”

Amongst those interviewees who did report feeling pressure from other schools, one interviewee reported changing their strategy as a result of a comment made at a regional meeting. The interviewee said that a headteacher from another school had suggested that their school was taking the “moral high ground” by not entering students early. Another interviewee stated that if they decided not to enter any students they would be “alone” and they said that it was “dangerous to be alone”. Some interviewees also reported seeing gains from other schools who had employed early entry strategies and this was seen as a driving force behind early entry – although not specifically relating to direct pressure from other schools:

“Our old head at the time had been to a conference where he’d heard from a couple of London schools which had (...) significant rises in their outcomes for the students from schools (...) [with] high FSM [sic Free School Meals], high EAL [sic English as an Additional Language].”

Influence of external agencies

Many interviewees suggested that there was an indirect pressure from external agencies to enter students before the end of Year 11:

“The pressure on secondary schools’ English and Maths departments to get results is phenomenal. So, I think that if we didn’t do early entry, we would be held to account for that by local authorities and agencies.”

One interviewee reported that ultimately the decision of when to enter students was down to the school, but when advisors came into the school and looked at entries the interviewee reported, “I wouldn’t say it was direct pressure, but you know, obviously when you are getting advice from the authority or challenge advisors that needs to be taken into account”. In a number of instances, interviewees reported that they felt there was an expectation from consortia and authorities that they would be entering students early:

“There is almost an expectation that we will, for example, I had an email just prior to the results that was asking for a data collection of my results for January, there was an assumption, it doesn’t say, if you are entering for January.”
“I don’t think there is anyone at County saying ‘are you early entering?’. But everyone at county is saying, ‘what are your results like?’ It’s just a kind of given that you will do whatever you can to get the results.”

There was a lack of clarity amongst many of the interviewees spoken to with regards to the view of their consortium. In some instances, this lack of clarity came from conflicting advice:

“Although [consortium] stance is always not to do early entry, I have to say I think, if we said that we weren’t going to, we would have to answer some very difficult questions about how we would guarantee our standards would be what we were projecting if we didn’t go through that process to get it.”

Interviewees who discussed experiences of teaching in schools that had been in special measures reported a strong pressure from advisors to make quick gains. In a number of instances, early entry was suggested as a strategy to achieve this. Consortia interviewees varied in their strength of opinion with regards to early and multiple entry, with a number stating that the school needed to be able to justify why it was in the best interests of the student. However, one consortium did report using examples of good practice from schools that had used early entry in their advice to schools that were looking to improve attainment.

**Influence from within their own school**

In many interviews, teachers reported that students wanted to enter early, with some stating that the students had asked whether they were going to be sitting exams before the end of Year 11. The majority of interviewees who took part in this research stated that the decision over entry strategies was made by the Head of Department, with the approval of the Headteacher:

“I put my decision forward to the Headteacher (...) and say ‘this is what I want to do, and this is why I want to do it’, and then we’d have a discussion about it and decide.”

However, the extent to which interviewees discussed pressure from their headteacher varied. Some interviewees reported having early entry “forced upon them by SLT.” However, in other interviews, heads of departments reported that the headteacher was willing to support whatever decisions that they made with regards their approach to early and multiple entry. In schools where early entry was not used, a number of interviewees suggested that the headteacher supported their decision while they were achieving results. However, heads of departments suggested that if results dropped, the head would be questioning decisions. When this scenario was discussed, interviewees reported feeling anxious about this, and in general, interviewees were unsure about whether their decision not to enter students early would pay off.

The majority of interviewees felt that parents trusted their decision, and very few said that a parent had questioned their entry policy. However, one consortium member suggested that there may be instances of parents questioning the entry strategy of their child’s school if it differed from others in the local area. One interviewee suggested that in schools that do not enter students early, parents may question why their child was not being given the same opportunities as those who are given multiple attempts.
‘Game’-focused strategies

Many of the discussions that centred around pressure as discussed above included explorations of strategies and approaches that were used to maximise opportunities and outcomes. One interviewee explained one such approach:

“We know our students really well and if we felt that yep, they have done their best, they are not gonna get any better than a B in Maths and Numeracy, but they are working towards a low D in English, right? We have got three hours’ extra capacity in English, let’s take them out of Maths and give them a bit of extra English to try and fill that gap, so yeah, we do still play the game if you will in terms of attainment.”

In some cases, interviewees intimated that they may not have used some of the approaches that they felt compelled to use under different circumstances:

“I think we are in a period of flux, in the last five years or so, where exams are becoming increasingly, increasingly important and schools are increasingly being forced to game the system.”

In other cases, interviewees viewed the flexibility with which they were able to use examination entry opportunities as a positive way for Wales to improve examination performance.

Competition with other schools

A number of interviewees talked about their school’s entry strategy in terms of their comparability with other schools. When discussing the approach other schools had made to early exam entries, one interviewee stated, “We weren’t at the races for that. Some schools are really good, aren’t they? And that’s it. It’s just this game playing”, before suggesting that they would be looking at their approach in a similar way in light of the strategies used by other schools.

A number of interviewees stated that they made the decision to enter early so as not to disadvantage their students. More specifically in schools that entered students for English or Welsh Language at the end of Year 10, it was suggested that this was to give students the same opportunities as those from other schools, and if they did not, it was felt that “other schools would be at an advantage.” A small number of interviewees who did not use early entry suggested they would be monitoring the attainment of schools who had used these strategies with the intention of reviewing their own approach in light of the performance of these schools.

Perceptions around grade boundaries

Related to strategies around when it is best to enter students to maximise outcomes, some interviewees felt that by entering students in November, they were more likely to get a C, because the perception was that the boundaries were lower outside of the summer series. Some interviewees discussed a perception amongst schools that there was a limited amount of Cs available for awarding and therefore if a high number were being given out in a November entry, it would be harder to get that grade in the summer. These interviewees stated that a number of schools moved in the direction of entering early to ensure that their students were not disadvantaged.
by this perceived impact of early entry. In addition to this, one group of interviewees speculated that the grade boundaries might be lower during the first year of awarding a new specification, so by entering students early in this academic year, they may be improving their chances of getting better grades.

**Focus on numbers**

Where interviewees reported feeling that they had no option but to enter students early, discussions revealed a focus on numbers and percentages with a strong link to pressures from school performance measures:

“So this year, for example, we are sitting on X% percent and we will squeeze another X% out potentially between now and the end of the year. Do we do that in a slightly heavy-hearted way? Absolutely. Do I think genuinely young people should be taught Mathematics and have one shot at it? Probably. But would we be stupid not to enter them early? Absolutely.”

“Honestly, you lose sight of individual students when you have a spreadsheet in front of you and you are trying to work out figures for how you are going to meet this A* to C target that has been set for you.”

One interviewee expressed concern with regards to the consideration that was being given to students when the focus was on raising percentages:

“I think that schools were becoming more about numbers and early entry added to that because it was another opportunity to calculate numbers instead of actually thinking about students.”

Another interviewee stated that a focus on numbers was the reason that they did not enter students in the summer of Year 10:

“We haven’t even touched Year 10, even though I know that the majority of schools now are entering in Year 10, but I disagree with that, personally. Just because it’s number-chasing rather than child-focused really.”

*C-grade culture*

One of the key drivers identified through discussions around early and multiple entry was the aim of achieving C grades. Many interviewees discussed the C grade as an important benchmark for school performance measures but also frequently emphasised that the C grade is a key competency level that students need to reach in order to further their careers. All interviewees discussed the C-grade culture in conversations around early and multiple entry.

Those who did not enter students early spoke about the culture of ‘banking’ C grades and the fact that they did not want that to be the focus for their examination entries:

“I feel that very often they put them in, you might get the C banked and that’s going to look good on your school data and then it’s about, you know, can you get those up? We have held back, because we think it’s about pupils and giving them the opportunity to get the higher grades rather than just passes.”

*Numbers removed to maintain anonymity*
Many interviewees spoke about entering students early to ensure that they got a C, but the focus was then on continuing with multiple entry in order to build on that. In these interviews, respondents expressed a negative attitude towards the ‘banking’ of the C grade strategy:

“It’s not about banking the C grades and having the data. These are people and I want them to grow and develop their language skills because it is an important skill, it’s not just about the qualification.”

In a number of schools, the target of the C grade was a key driver in their decisions around early entry strategies:

“It’s about trying to get C grades and being able to work differently with the data. Really identifying you know, these were the Cs, these were the Ds, these are the ones we can push higher, and give them the opportunity to, you know, have a go and then do it again.”

Those interviewees who did talk about the focus on C grades referred to the pressure discussed in other sections of this report as influencing that decision. In these instances, interviewees did discuss students who were not classed as key marginal students; however, they stated that the focus was on the C/D borderline:

“We do also try to acknowledge the fact that there are children who are gonna get different grades and that’s just as important, you know, if that child gets a G, and that child gets an A*, it’s not just about the C/D borderline, but when we come back after entries, this is the first thing we look at but it is not the only thing.”

In some schools where the C grade was a key driver, interviewees suggested that the focus on the C was even more pronounced when considering a core subject in relation to non-core subjects:

“I had a group of kids who should be getting Cs but got Ds in Jan, so Jan until summer, I was teaching additional English lessons for those students who had been pulled and they were basically told (and their parents were involved in the conversation as well), and they were told ‘ok, you can either carry on with that GCSE which ok, you might do quite well in, or you may not do, or you scrap that GCSE and do more English to get your C’, so then those extra hours were given over.”

In a number of interviews, there were discussions around a change in focus once the C grade had been achieved after an early entry:

“You become so obsessed, so with early entry stuff, as soon as a child gets that C, they are taken out of that subject and put somewhere else to get a C elsewhere because in terms of league tables, in terms of special measures, historically the C has been so important, the C has been the only measure.”

Interviewees with experience in schools that were under pressure to improve reported targeting students on the C/D borderline. One interviewee acknowledged that it was “difficult from an equal opportunities point of view”, but the pressure they were under to achieve results meant that they felt there was no other option. Another interviewee who discussed their experiences from a school in special measures
commented that, although their multiple entry strategy was focused on the C grade boundary, with the aim of raising the school out of special measures, it did also help improve the life chances of their students:

“The number of pupils who went on to further education was low, the number of pupils who went on to university was even lower, and so getting these kids Cs (...), you’ll have done them a massive favour because a lot of the jobs and futures that these kids are going into, if they’ve got a C in English and Maths, it opens a huge number of doors for them. Whether in a different strategy or a different environment they might have got a B is largely irrelevant, because their aspirations are different.”

Managing new specifications

Since the 2016/17 academic year is the first year that many of the reformed qualifications have been awarded, the changes in specifications will inevitably have had an impact on schools, and a large amount of time was spent discussing the impact of reformed specifications on exam entries. All school-based interviewees in this sample stated that the new specification had been a consideration when deciding on their examination entry approach for this academic year:

“My gut feeling is that you could take all that away, if people knew what they were doing. Teachers know their stuff, they know how to deliver a subject. They know and they are passionate about what they do, and about children and they will do that job for you if you are given the time and the information to do it, and I think all of this panic is because of that.”

Uncertainty

“At the moment, we are in a very uncertain time and I hate that word uncertain when you put it in the context of children and learning and qualifications. Uncertainty and gambling and lottery, that’s how education is at the moment in secondary schools with a lot of subjects, because we don’t know. We don’t have enough information about how they are going to come out at the other end, so there has to be that early entry to give them a go.”

Fear of the unknown was a strong driving force behind early entry decisions, and lack of familiarity with the new specification played a part in this. Many interviewees stated that they had not seen what the actual exam papers looked like, and therefore, early entry was seen as an opportunity to access that information: “We had seen a sample paper, but never a real paper, which turned out to be quite different to the sample paper.”

Many interviewees reported that teachers were not confident about teaching the new specification due to limited sample assessment materials and past papers. Entering students early allowed them to get more familiar with the question style and mark scheme:

“Unfamiliarity forces us to do early entry, because entering early is the only way that we can get reliable papers.”
“With the new courses, the new syllabus and everything else – because there is no real clear picture of what each grade actually looks like (…) in the current circumstances when it’s a brand-new course, very little resources around, we decided it was in their best interest (…) the most important thing for us would be to get a benchmark of what a C would look like, what a D would look like, so that our assessment of those pupils would be actually accurate (…) we did not make a conscious decision to enter them, or give them multiple entries to give them more chances at a better grade. It was strategically done at that time so that we could inform ourselves of how best to teach to that grade.”

There was some discussion regarding the fact that entry decisions this year differed in comparison to other years. Some interviewees suggested that once departments had become familiar with the new specification, they may change their entry strategy:

“Everyone’s scheme of work and syllabuses have changed so much. People are feeling their way and we’ll have a big review about it after we have had the exam results through, and as I say, the way we have done the English this time is very different from any previous years.”

One interviewee stated that although they had used early entry with the legacy specification, they had changed their approach with the reformed qualification to a blanket entry:

“If it was the old spec, I would have continued to do what we have always done, which is to judge it on an individual, but because we’ve got no, nothing to judge it on, then we need that data to make a judgement (…) we need to identify, not from our own beliefs and experiences, but from an examiner WJEC point of view where there are any areas that need revisiting. Where we’ve been not doing something wrong, but approaching it in a different way than what the examiners were expecting (…) and that’s what’s unfortunately made it our decision to put them in for Year 10 this year because (…) there have been many things out there that have been contradictory.”

Many interviewees felt that, in addition to not being familiar with the new specification, there was also a lack of clarity around elements within it. It was reported that teachers felt uncertain about key parts of the specification and mark scheme, and a number reported using early entry as a way of gaining more information.

One group of interviewees stated:

“There is not enough clarity in enough time for teachers to get ready and for us to prepare the children and so you have this intense pressure on everybody concerned and there is so much to lose at the end, there is so much to lose for these children’s futures and that’s the bit that really gets us, and really drives us.”
“I want the children to mature and develop. In principle that sounds great. But with the qualifications that they are today, you can’t work like that because we haven’t got enough clarity and solidity to be able to make professional judgements about children without using every opportunity we can to gain more information so that we are not doing guesswork. We are able to use our professional judgement, but we can’t use our professional judgement – however sound it might be – without the data and the detail and the information to make those judgements about children. Otherwise, we are just gambling.”

A lack of clarity was also discussed in consortia interviews. One interviewee stated:

“If schools have to engage in an early entry strategy in order to find out what they need to know about the curriculum, examination and assessment regime, it’s because they haven’t had the information that they should have had in the planning phase for that new curriculum (...) it is a symptom of the failure of the implementation process for the new curriculum.”

This interviewee went on to discuss the potential impact that this might have on the student:

“The heavily damaging outcome of a child entering a course and exam in November, where they haven’t covered the whole curriculum because the year of school ends in June, you are literally setting that child up to fail, because you need to know something about what question 4 is going to look like.”
Grade boundaries
A number of consortia interviewees suggested that a specific rise in early entry numbers this year was to do with a “lack of knowledge about grade boundaries” for new specifications. One consortium member expressed concern that if the recent rise in early entry results in a ban on early entry, this may impact those students who benefit from the practice:

“I think at the moment it’s increased because of that uncertainty, so we have seen an increase, but my worry would be if we stop it, if we are just stopping early entry because of that, we are not necessarily futureproofing the fact that (...) by the end of this year teachers are gonna feel more confident because they will know where a pupil needs to get to and then (...) it should get better.”

Many interviewees were concerned about the lack of clarity around grade boundaries in both English Language and Mathematics. When awarding GCSE examinations, mark boundaries for each grade are decided after all students have sat the exam at the end of each exam series. These boundaries can differ between series to ensure comparable outcomes, although the margin of change is relatively small.28 Despite not knowing the exact number of marks a student would need to get a particular grade, teachers were broadly familiar with the level of work required to gain each grade in the legacy specification. However, with the introduction of a new specification, this familiarity with mark schemes may not be transferable; this led to a reported feeling of uncertainty in a number of interviews. For English Language, some felt that if there had been an early entry sitting for the current Year 11, then information with regards to grade boundaries could have been picked up on before the students sit their final exam:

“At the moment, we don’t know what a C looks like. The English department particularly (...) we are being told by the exam board that we won’t actually decide that until the first cohort have gone through. Well that’s two years’ worth of teaching gone into this, and I don’t think it is particularly fair.”

Timing
Interviewees also reported that the number of questions included in the new English Language specification meant that a number of their students did not manage to complete the paper in the allotted time when they attempted the questions in the sample assessment materials. A number of interviewees implied that if there had been the option to enter students before the end of Year 11, then this may have been something that teachers could have addressed with students earlier:

“We have used the sample materials provided by the exam board and at all of the consortia meetings everyone has been saying that none of the students can get through the paper, which I think, had they offered early entry, this would have been flagged up earlier.”

Teachers therefore felt disadvantaged by not having the option to use multiple entry to gain an insight into how students coped with the volume of work within the paper in the given examination time.

English Language

English Language is discussed throughout this report in relation to a number of the themes; however, additional considerations were discussed that specifically related to the subject of English and its design within the new specification. As already mentioned, the reformed English Language specification moved from a unitised to a linear approach, where students are expected to sit all components at the same time. Furthermore, the assessment weightings for the reformed English Language specification places a larger emphasis on external examinations (80%), compared to the legacy specification (60%). Some interviewees suggested that because the reformed specification had a larger weighting on the exam than the legacy specification there was more pressure at the end of the course and this may have influenced people’s decisions to enter early.

One of the strongest overarching themes when discussing English with schools who were entering students early was the fact that interviewees were disappointed – and concerned – about the fact that the current Year 11 had not had an opportunity to sit the exam before the end of Year 11. The feeling expressed in regards to this matter appeared to indicate that early entry had become something that teachers had expected students to be offered, and interviewees discussed this decision in terms of “depriving students of an early entry opportunity.” Many felt that this was leaving students’ achievements to chance, especially given their uncertainty with regards to the new specification.

A number of interviewees drew comparisons with the entry option available for Mathematics, where there is a sitting in November. Some felt that English as a subject was being unfairly disadvantaged in comparison to Mathematics. Where interviewees expressed this concern, there was a strong interplay between the reported feeling of pressure that was being placed on core subjects, both in terms of requirements for future life chances for individuals and school performance measures. The majority of interviewees who expressed this concern cited this ‘lack of early entry opportunity’ as a strong factor that influenced their decision to enter students for English Language at the end of Year 10 in 2017. One consortium interviewee suggested that, had there been the option to enter students for English Language in November without restricting the entry to just resits, the summer entry of Year 10s would not have been as high.

As already discussed, for the 2016/17 academic year, the only examination sitting was at the end of the summer term. From the next academic year, there will be a sitting in November, but this will be a resit opportunity, and will be available only to students who have sat the examination previously. When discussing their future examination entries, the majority of interviewees who discussed entering students at the end of Year 10 did so to allow students the chance to re-enter in November:

“We have decided to enter the majority of Year 10 for the Language because they will need to sit it to have the resit opportunity in November, otherwise it would just be leaving them at one.”

“The idea that they set this thing up with English that meant you could either sort of have one go in the summer of Year 11 or you can have three goes, but you couldn’t have two, didn’t make any sense to me (...) I think it has created a sort of strange blip in the system in a sense.”
Despite many of the interviewees discussing their concerns with regards to the single entry sitting for the current Year 11, one interviewee stated that it had been “quite nice (...) with the Year 11s not having that exam pressure”, and some felt that to have the decision made for them meant that they could focus on the summer entry.

**Structure – unitised vs linear**

In a school where students were not being entered early, the head of department said that they were under the impression that it wasn’t the intention of the exam board to sit the examination early, since it was a linear specification. Therefore, they felt that they “were doing this in the way in which the board felt was the most sensible way and the best way for the students.” A number of interviewees reported feeling as though some of the flexibility had been removed from English Language, since it had become a linear specification:

“I would be able to enter them for a certain unit in January, maybe I would enter them for (...) one unit for the end of Year 10 another unit in the January and then if needs be, a resit in the summer and all of that was removed.”

Some felt that by entering at the end of Year 10, they were retaining an element of that flexibility in terms of resit opportunities. Furthermore, after moving from a unitised to a linear specification, some teachers were still of the mindset that two years was a long time to retain all of the information required to sit the exam. Therefore, some interviewees reported that English departments were taking an intensive approach to the subject by fitting all of the content into one year, with students sitting the exam at the end of Year 10.

A further point made by interviewees was that, since the reformed qualification required schools to sit all examined assessments, rather than individual modules, at each re-entry, this would result in a heavy burden on schools. One interviewee discussed how this might impact on a student’s decision to resit: “If anybody scrapes a C in Year 10, then of course they would not want to go again, because it is a huge resit, it’s not just one little bit.”

**Impact on English Literature**

Since English Literature no longer contributes towards school performance measures, schools have more freedom to decide whether to enter students for the qualification. As a result of this change, a number of interviewees reported using a Year 10 entry for English Language to assess whether a student was able to take Literature in Year 11:

“You can actually separate the two schemes completely and say we’ll do one qualification and then we will follow it with the other qualification. If they don’t have success in Year 10, then in some ways, that self-selects the number of children that in fact you are going to put through for Literature.”

Some interviewees also discussed placing more importance on re-entering students for Language rather than Literature, in light of changes to school performance measures. One interviewee speculated that if the option to enter early was removed, there may be a drop in English Literature entries because people would feel that they had to focus on the one attempt in English Language at the end of Year 11, because of the importance placed on performance measures.
Mathematics/Mathematics-Numeracy

As with English, Mathematics and Mathematics-Numeracy are discussed throughout the report in relation to other themes. However, there were a number of other factors that were discussed that specifically related to the reformed Mathematics specifications. In some interviews, it emerged that students were putting a different emphasis on the importance of GCSE Mathematics over GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy and some students were reported to be accepting grades that were lower in Numeracy than in their Mathematics:

“It’s interesting speaking to the students on an individual basis, how many of them are (...) leaning towards their results in Maths being their most important result (...). For example, there is a significant number of pupils who might perhaps have a B in Maths and a C in Numeracy who are happy with that as a result. Similarly, at the top end, there are students who got an A* in Maths and a B in Numeracy, and again, they are happy with that as a result.”

A number of interviewees reported that students had enquired about certain courses at university, particularly in England, and were told that those institutions were not accepting GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy as part of their entry requirements. Some interviewees reported that this contributed towards their approach of not placing as much importance on resitting the qualification after students had attended one sitting of the exam.

“When you are looking at other subject areas and [universities] are specifying already that the Numeracy will not be accepted, it makes me worry about the standing of that qualification and that just reinforces what our students are thinking at the moment in terms of the Maths being the important one and they are happy with a B in their Maths and a C in their Numeracy.”

Some interviewees also reported that those students who wanted to carry on to study Mathematics A level were placing more importance on their Mathematics grade and were more inclined to resit this qualification over Numeracy, if they had not reached their target after an early entry.

Another factor that influenced exam entries involved changes to the requirements for the Welsh Baccalaureate:

“Our plan currently is to enter Year 10 for Numeracy this year and then Maths in November of Year 11. That was largely based upon the decision that Numeracy was going to be the measure for the Welsh Bacc, which obviously has now been amended. We are a little bit in the unknown as to whether that is going to creep back in or what the intention is. That’s why our forward planning was with the focus on the Numeracy.”
Increased demand on teachers with the introduction of an additional qualification in Mathematics meant that some interviewees felt that, by entering students for one exam in November, they could reduce the load for both teachers and students. However, a number of interviewees reported starting out thinking that they would take one exam in the November, but then ended up entering both because the option was available.

When discussing the entry decisions between Mathematics and Mathematics-Numeracy, some interviewees suggested that because of the length of time between the November and the summer series, teachers felt that they could not enter students for one Mathematics qualification early and not the other. This was because they felt that students would have had more chance to improve their results in one qualification over the other and they would not be at the same level for both.

A further consideration with Mathematics and Mathematics-Numeracy was the introduction of the Intermediate tier. One interviewee stated that because it is not possible to get a C in the Foundation tier, a number of schools had entered too many students at Intermediate tier in the hope that they could attain a C. They speculated that in the future, there may be a move towards entering larger numbers of students into the Foundation paper in November to “secure a Level 1 qualification for the student and use that as a stepping stone to move on to the Intermediate tier.” Other interviewees discussed using the Intermediate tier in a “tactical” way to enter higher-ability students early to ensure that they got a C grade, with the intention of then entering them for the Higher tier in the summer.
Confidence in marking

Some interviewees expressed a concern about the consistency in marking with regards to English Language from past experiences with the legacy specification. This, combined with the new specification, meant they felt uncertain about which grade students might get:

“There is a general lack of confidence in the systems within the exam board to provide consistent marking and results. So a lot of subject leaders – who I think have been very surprised by some of the practices they have seen in some of the marking – have thought, ‘right, I need to basically go through as many chances as we can because we are not necessarily confident with how it is at the moment’ in terms of marking and boundaries in English.”

The concerns with regards to marking consistency were discussed as a contributory factor in the decision to enter students for exams before the end of Year 11 in some interviews. This was particularly the case for English Language, since marking this type of examination is likely to be more subjective than subjects with more obviously correct answers. A small number of interviewees expressed concern over the consistency and transparency of marking. They stated that early and multiple entry was used as a way of mitigating those concerns and maximising chances for students to gain a grade that was appropriate for their performance.

Focus on one subject

In discussions surrounding Mathematics, the early entry in November was viewed by the majority of interviewees as an opportune time to focus specifically on the intensive learning of one subject, without the pressure of additional exams:

“There are different pressure points for Maths and English, as well as the other subjects, but you have got the big Maths pressure in that first half term, everything is focused on Maths, and then once your results are out, you are able to divert your resources to the English as well as the other subjects.”

Interviewees discussed having intensive sessions of varying degrees leading up to the exam, which meant that they could continue to teach students right up until the exam: “There are schools in this authority who just shut down the timetable for two weeks. It’s just Maths. Literally. All day. Every day Maths before those exams.” This was in contrast to an entry in the summer, which would involve a gap between teaching while other examinations took place. Mathematics in particular was discussed as being quite late in the examination series in the summer, when some Mathematics teachers felt was detrimental to the students’ performance:

“One of the big things we noticed with the dates for the summer exams being very late for Maths, and that was possibly having an impact on the pupils in terms of the work they were doing leading up to that, and with it being so late, we wondered whether having that early entry, where we can still work with them right up until the second of the exam, if that paid off, which was one of the strategies that we used.”
Discussions also occurred in relation to how teachers from other subjects viewed this intensive focus. In some interviews, members of the senior leadership team discussed having to frame this focus on one subject in November to subject teachers as leaving more time for other subjects after the November sitting, to allay the fears of students falling behind in other subjects. Some interviewees discussed concerns over the fact that focusing more time and attention on one subject at certain points in the year meant that students would have to spend more time getting back up to speed in other subjects once the intensive period of Mathematics study was finished.

**Reaching potential**

All interviewees that discussed using multiple entry strategies stated that it helped some students to reach their potential. This was an overarching theme that appeared to be a motivational force behind many of the points discussed in this report. However, in a number of interviews there were discussions surrounding whether early entries that resulted in students accepting grades before the end of Year 11, and therefore not re-taking the examination, may result in students getting lower grades than they could have achieved if they had taken the exam at the end of Year 11.

The importance of the specific subjects discussed, and the impact of having a good grade in them for school performance measures, together with the future endeavours of the student, were used as reasons to support the approach of multiple entries.

**Raising achievement**

It was suggested by the majority of interviewees that in many instances, multiple entry helped students to achieve results they may not have achieved if they had only had one attempt:

“There’s been pupils that have been like two marks off a C, or two marks off an A, and just being able to do that question analysis and putting that right by their final go at it, they have left here at their potential and that means a lot.”

All interviewees in the sample who had used early and multiple entry options reported that their school results had improved. Although many recognised that they could not attribute this solely to entry strategies for GCSE examinations, they all placed a lot of importance on it as a contributory factor. One interviewee reported seeing a substantial rise in their A* to C percentage when they changed their strategy in Mathematics from entering students in June of Year 11 to entering in both November and June.

Through raising results, interviewees reported the positive impact this had on students, in terms of increasing their life chances. In schools with challenging cohorts, the focus was on “giving students the best opportunity through early entry in getting those grades that will help them get a job.” Achieving a grade was also reported as a boost in confidence for students (discussed in more detail later on in this report), which in turn was transferred to other subjects, thus raising their achievement in those subjects.
Many interviewees reported that early entries resulting in students finishing qualifications and accepting their grade before the end of Year 11 allowed them to take additional qualifications, thus increasing the overall number of GCSEs they gained: “We’ve got a few pupils that have got As and A*s. They won’t resit their papers, they’re doing Additional Maths so that they’re more prepared for the A level.”

One interviewee also reported using early entry as a marketing tool for their A level Mathematics registrations. By entering their top sets for Numeracy in November and completing the qualification, students could take Additional Mathematics in the summer which the interviewee stated would encourage students to continue to A level in a way that Numeracy may not:

“If we drop the Additional Maths in favour of Numeracy Maths, we might not gain as many next year into our sixth form for doing Maths as well so it’s kind of a bit of a marketing ploy if you like, because we want to keep them.”

Impact on future progression

Many interviewees suggested that entering exams before the end of Year 11 helped to raise the aspirations of a number of their students: “People that weren’t thinking of doing A level Maths, they’ve got Bs, As and A*s in GCSE and now they’re thinking of taking A level Maths.”

In addition to the issues already discussed with regards to Numeracy and its perceived importance for university applications, the effect that early entry in general has on future applications to university was discussed. A number of interviewees were concerned that the practice could disadvantage some students. There was concern about the perception of taking exams across a period of time and one interviewee suggested that some universities did not favour this approach. One interviewee also noted that for some courses, a C is not enough.

There was also concern around students completing qualifications early and going on to take additional qualifications to be examined at the end of Year 11. Sometimes this meant that the additional courses were taken in a relatively short space of time in comparison to other GCSE examinations, and there was concern amongst these interviewees that the grade achieved at the end may be lower than if they had spent a full two years studying for the course.

For some students who did not necessarily need a higher grade for their future aspirations, the need to re-enter was discussed. With regards to English, when discussing the process of accepting grades after early entry, one interviewee stated:

“With early entry there could easily be groups of pupils who get Cs and Bs and cash those whereas actually, if they had been taking those exams a year or 18 months later, could they have got an A? Yeah maybe.”
When asked about the reasons why those students may not have continued, the interviewee responded “for the vast majority of pupils, what’s the difference between a C and a B, and a B and an A? That’s kind of how they see it.” This point was discussed amongst several interviewees, who all suggested that for some students, simply getting a grade at C or above was enough to get them to where they needed to be; if it meant that they could focus on other subjects that did not offer an early entry, then that was the best way of allowing them to reach their potential across the curriculum.

More than one chance

Practice and exam preparation are discussed in more detail later in this report; however, many interviewees felt that if students knew that they would have another chance to sit the exam, it raised their confidence: “In the Jan they did try, but they knew that they had another chance so it boosted their confidence a bit.” The majority of interviewees reported seeing gains when they began to use a multiple entry approach to examination. One interviewee reported an increase in A* to C grades for Mathematics of around 25 percent: “We entered in November, and we have moved to X% and X%* respectively by the time the students have had two shots at it.” Many of the interviewees spoken to felt that it was right to mitigate a lower than expected performance on the first attempt at an examination by giving students a second chance, especially given the high-stakes nature of the examinations in question:

“If you have the one shot, and the child has a bad day, you know, that’s it, isn’t it, you know? Whereas with these multiple entries if you need them, it does allow them to have a bad day.”

In schools with particularly challenging cohorts, interviewees reported that some students needed more than one opportunity to achieve their predicted grade due to inconsistent attendance or volatile home environments. One interviewee reported having students in high-ability classes who he felt would not reach their potential if they only had one chance to sit the exam:

“One student has] got a single parent carer and she is a drug addict who is in and out of prison, you know (...) so these kids are terribly delicate and you will have a guaranteed A* to C student who just won’t turn up.”

In these instances, multiple entry was reported as ensuring that there was more chance of having one sitting that would not be affected by these issues.

When discussing the new specification, a number of interviewees felt that the need to give students a second chance was even greater, given their lack of familiarity with the grade boundaries and the new style of questioning and assessment: “I think everyone was concerned in English about what the grades are gonna come out like so they wanted to give them an extra chance.” This ‘second-chance view’ was often linked with the frustration of not having such an entry in Language for the 2017 Year 11 cohort (as discussed elsewhere in this report).

*Numbers removed to maintain anonymity
There was concern from one interviewee that if students were entering exams knowing that they could resit if they didn’t achieve the grade that they required, then they would come to expect second chances in future education:

“I can see risks there. If we are creating a culture of a generation of ‘there’s always a second chance’, they will get to a point in their career where the second chance disappears. I always warn some of them before going to university, the real world isn’t as if (...) if you are late with your thesis, well sorry, you don’t get anything.”

(translated)*

One interviewee also stated that they did not enter students early because past cohorts had known that they would be sitting again in the summer, and therefore did not try their hardest on the first attempt.

Impact on reaching potential

In a number of interviews teachers discussed the prospect of students not reaching their potential if they accepted grades as a result of early entry:

“I think [some students are missing reaching their potential], probably right at the top end. Lots of kids, if they had had two years’ worth of teaching, probably would have starred their A, but haven’t.”

“Going back 15 years, we used to do some early entry in my previous school, but we found that top students ended up with Bs and Cs, and they were grateful that they got that, but they didn’t push themselves on then to get the As and A*s in the summer – which was something that I was very conscious of when I was head of department: that I didn’t want to enter them early, because we didn’t want to lower their results.”

*"Fi’n gallu gweld risgiau yna, os ydyn ni wastad yn creu’r diwylliant ma fel cenedl o ‘mae wastad ail gyfle’ ma nhw yn mynd i gyrraedd pwnt yn eu gryfa ble mae’r ail gyfle yna yn diffannu. Fel fi wastad yn rhybuddio rhai ohonyn nhw cyn mynd i’r brifysgol, ‘dyw’r ‘real world’ fel petai…..os ydych ch’i hwyr gyda thrathaethad, wel sort, chi’n cael dim byd.”

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Although some interviewees reported that they had been concerned that students may not reach their target if they entered early, these fears were alleviated by their November Mathematics results, and therefore concerns about reaching potential were unfounded in this instance:

“In the year before, we didn't enter the top two sets, and we did so this year with it being the unknown, the first time it's run we did have a question mark over people achieving their As and A*s, but they exceeded what we achieved last year, so that hasn't held anybody back by putting them in early in terms of their As and A*s – which was one of our concerns.”

As discussed elsewhere in this report, it was suggested in a number of instances that students may not have reached an appropriate level of maturity to be able to engage with language, and therefore may not be at a stage where they could reach their potential if entered early for exams in English. If these students then accepted the grade they achieved as a result of early entry, and did not continue to study for a re-entry, this could be viewed as limiting their opportunity to reach their potential as students could have potentially achieved higher grades if they took the examination at the end of Year 11, after maturing further. Incidentally, many of the interviewees who used multiple entry strategies used this improvement over time as a justification for multiple attempts, rather than accepting the first grade.

One interviewee stated that because of the data-driven pressure to get as many students over the C boundary as they could, there was a risk that those students who were either side of the boundary did not receive as much intervention:

“You don’t think about those students who are on the C/D borderline – but should actually be getting Bs, and you don’t think about those on that borderline that actually really can only get a D. What bugged me about it was there was never any focus on those that were getting a B, but should be getting A*s.”

There was some concern that this could limit the potential of students who were not on the borderline of grades that were deemed to be more significant.

There was also concern that, when students were removed from lessons in other subjects to focus on exams for which they were being entered early, this may impede progress in the lessons they were removed from. In one instance, an interviewee reported that students were being withdrawn completely from subjects that they were predicted to get lower grades in to focus on core subjects:

“There were discussions with the teacher and the parents, but if say they were taking something like Art and they were predicted a D in Art, then they were just withdrawn from it and had additional English lessons instead.”

There was a concern that removing students from subjects that were considered as ‘less important’ was narrowing the students’ curriculum and removing the enjoyment for some of the more creative subjects, which were not viewed as being of the same level of importance.
When to sit the exam

Length of the course

The length of the course was a subject that arose in discussions regarding early entry. Those who did not advocate early entry pointed out that linear GCSE subjects are designed to be two-year courses, with 120 guided learning hours to complete before the student should sit the exam. One interviewee expressed disappointment that it was possible to enter students early for English Language, when they felt that the guidance was to sit the exam at the end of Year 11, since it is a linear course. A number of interviewees felt that there was simply not enough time to enter students early and some questioned whether students would have had enough time to embed the skills needed:

“Instinctively, it doesn’t feel smart to try and get 15-year-olds to pass an exam which has really been designed with two-year training, so trying to do it after twelve months, after nine months? Not an intelligent idea.”

A number of schools begin teaching the GCSE specification in Year 9 to ensure that their students complete 120 hours of learning before sitting the exam early; some interviewees used this strategy as a justification for entering before the end of Year 11. When discussing this guideline, one interviewee expressed the view that learning in these subjects cannot be quantified:

“It’s not something you start teaching in Year 10, and then you teach it for two years – especially in Maths, because you are cumulatively teaching that all the time. Same with Language. You are giving them the skills throughout the time you teach them. It’s when the child is ready isn’t it?”
Readiness

Consideration over whether students are ready to sit the exam was an important part of discussions. Many interviewees discussed students who were classified as ‘more able and talented’ entering early so that they could go on to study for additional qualifications (as discussed in more detail later in this report). A number of those who did enter students for exams before the end of Year 11 stated that they would not enter them early if they thought they weren’t ready. A number of interviewees said that they did not enter their bottom sets early because they felt that they were not ready to be examined. However, a number of interviewees discussed the fact that some students are ready earlier than others:

“It’s whenever they are ready, not that they can get a C better in Year 10 or Year 11 or whatever. It’s a case of, if they can get an A* in Year 8, we will enter them in Year 8.”

One group of interviewees stated that students were not “ready to achieve their full potential in Maths” at the end of Year 10, but they entered them for an examination in the tier below their capability so that they were ready to take an exam at the end of Year 11 and give their best performance. (The reason behind Mathematics tier decisions are discussed elsewhere in the report).

When discussing Welsh Language, the majority of interviewees in the sample said that students would not be ready to sit the examination before the summer of Year 11. Interviewees felt that the content of the new specification had more emphasis on writing and less on coursework, and therefore, there was “not enough time to get them ready for early entry.”
With regards to English, a strong theme that occurred was the issue of maturity. Those interviewees who did not enter students early for English Language felt that students needed until the end of Year 11 to reach the level of maturity and sensitivity needed to analyse language at the highest level; therefore, they would not be ready to sit the exam early. One interviewee discussed the fact that a third of their top-set students who had completed a controlled assessment in Year 9 were redrafting the work to improve it, because they had not been at the same level when they first wrote it. The interviewee stated that even the pupil agreed that it was not indicative of what he could achieve:

“he said, it was shocking. When he thinks about where he is now, it’s a different pupil analysing it.”

A belief that students needed until the end of Year 11 to reach ‘a certain level of maturity’ was not reported as a consideration that was made in Mathematics or Mathematics-Numeracy.

In many schools, department heads structure English courses so that English Literature is studied one year and English Language the other. Therefore, a number of interviewees reported that students sat English Language in Year 10 so that they could focus on Literature in Year 11. The reasoning for taking the examination at the end of Year 10 was as follows:

“The way that we structured our curriculum was: why would you teach something for September to January in Year 10 and then not assess it until 18 months later?”

However, in schools that did not enter early for English Language, discussions centred around their desire to interweave the two subjects, and therefore, students were not ready to sit either of the exams until the end of Year 11:

“We feel that it is a spiral curriculum, and we feel that the skills really continue to develop and we keep cross-referencing the skills across the Language and across the Literature (...) we’re still very much pushing that these are skills for life and they will continue to develop, so we do them at the end.”

Experiences of Welsh as a language

The Welsh language and the level of exposure to the language a student had within the school or home environment added a further dimension to early entry decisions in some schools. In English-medium schools, the curriculum is taught in English, except when Welsh Language is offered as a subject. In these lessons, the subject is taught in Welsh. In English-medium schools that offer Welsh Language as a subject, interviewees suggested that those students who spoke English at home as their first language might not have had the necessary level of ability in the Welsh language to be able to enter early. There was a feeling that these students needed the time up until the end of Year 11 to reach the maximum ability in the language to be able to take the exam. There was also concern that if students were entered early and did not achieve their predicted grade, then it would affect their confidence in their ability to speak the language.
When discussing Welsh Language as a subject there was also suggestion that attitudes towards Welsh as a language was a factor to consider with regards to early and multiple entry strategies. In contrast to the approach discussed above, one interviewee reported using the strategy of multiple entry as a way of making sure that students got the best chance to do well, so that they would leave the subject with a positive attitude towards the language:

“And you need a high standard as well, you need the standard in Welsh. It’s got more to do than just the subject, it’s to do with the language’s future. You want them to at least feel positive that they had the chance to do their best. You wouldn’t want them to have a negative attitude in relation to the language.” (translated)*

Interplay between Welsh and English Language

As discussed earlier in this report, there was a feeling that Welsh-medium schools were under less pressure from school performance measures, because results from either Welsh Language or English Language GCSEs count towards them. One interviewee from a bilingual school stated that there was less pressure on the English department because Welsh was the stronger language for the majority of students, and therefore, they would do better in the Welsh Language qualification. Conversely, interviewees reported that students who spoke Welsh as their first language may experience a knock to their confidence if they entered early for English Language, and therefore, they did not enter students early:

“We have many, many [students] who come from families where Welsh is the sole means through which they speak, and for them to be asked to go for something early, when they don’t feel that their English skills are up to scratch, means that when they don’t do well, it just confirms the sense that they’re not very good at English.”

Timeliness

In discussions surrounding when it is best to sit high-stakes examinations, timeliness was an important consideration for schools. As already discussed, many interviewees who entered students for Mathematics in November suggested that the fact that the Mathematics examinations fell fairly late in the summer examination timetable – after students had already taken a number of exams – was a consideration when deciding whether to enter early. These interviewees felt that it was more timely to enter students when they could have been learning and revising Mathematics right up until the day of the exam, rather than taking it when they could have potentially “forgotten a lot of their Maths skills.”

When discussing the decision to enter students for Mathematics-Numeracy at the end of Year 10, one interviewee took the stance that it was better to enter students at the end of Year 10, rather than in the November of Year 11. The reason for this was that students forget content over the summer, which meant that their results were not as representative of their ability in November. With regards to multiple entries in Mathematics, one interviewee stated that if a student was only a few marks away from a higher grade, they might consider entering them in November after a summer of Year 10 entry, “while it’s still fresh in their minds.”

*“A ti angen safon uchel hefyd, ti angen safon y Gymraeg, mae’n ymwneud mwy na jest y pwnc, mae’n ymwneud a dyfodol yr iaith hefyd, chi’n myyn iddyn nhw adael ym teimlo o leiaf yn bositif eu bod nhw wedi cael cyfle i wneud eu gorau. Fyddech chi ddim ei siâu iddyn nhw adael ym teimlo rhyw agweddd negyddol mewn cysylltiad â’r iaith.”
In most interviews, early entry was seen as an appropriate entry strategy for groups of students who may not be in education by the end of Year 11. Consortia groups discussed students from Travelling communities and those where family members undertake seasonal work (who may have moved by the time the summer entry began); in those instances, it was seen as appropriate to enter students in an attempt to get them a grade before they left the school.

There was also a feeling amongst interviewees that those students who would not be continuing into sixth form (in particular disengaged students) would not be likely to return to school just to resit English or Mathematics. Therefore, it was felt that through entering those students early, schools could give them more than one opportunity to reach their target grade before they left education.

Cost

The cost of a GCSE exam entry in 2016 (if entered before the deadline) for English Language, Welsh Language, Mathematics and Mathematics-Numeracy was £34.96. This fee is charged for each individual student, for each examination entry. Many interviewees made reference to the fact that increasing early and multiple entry had been expensive for their school. When one group of interviewees discussed the difficulty involved in making decisions about entry strategies in the future, they acknowledged that it would be expensive:

“It may be with Year 10 that we decide, because we have never entered so many so early before, for Maths and English, we have never had that opportunity. It could be that we just see it as a formative assessment opportunity. A very expensive one, I hasten to add.”

The extent to which early and multiple entry practices impacted on other areas of budget varied between schools. Some schools had used early entry for the current academic year, but would not be in a position to continue with the same numbers entering early in the years that followed. Interviewees in schools that had received additional funding as a result of being part of the Schools Challenge Cymru initiative reported being less restricted by budget. They stated that the focus was on improving results; if early entry was seen as a way of doing this, then the cost would be covered: “nobody really thought about budget because if it was going to drive standards up, Challenge Cymru would write a cheque.” One interviewee who reported using schools Challenge Cymru money for examination entry fees in a school in which they had worked previously stated that they would have found it difficult as a school to justify the cost of early entry once that funding had ceased.
Sustainability

Some interviewees stated that they would not be able to sustain the level of entry that they were currently submitting due to budget constraints. In a number of instances, an increase in the examination budget allowance was seen as necessary in the short term, while there was uncertainty surrounding the new specification. However, interviewees reported that this would have to be reviewed in the following years:

“We had a meeting with the business manager and we said, ‘look, this is what we want while we have a period of uncertainty. You are going to have to budget for that and increase the exams budget by that amount.’ You know, it’s not sustainable, but as time goes on we’ll become more confident in where grade boundaries are.”

However, a strong theme among interviewees was the feeling that it was an “investment in the future of the child” – particularly in schools with challenging demographics. In these instances, a higher bill was reported to be value for money if it improved the life chances of the students:

“Our exam bill is higher, but I suppose if you are looking at value for money, the impact that it has had on raising the life chances of some of the most deprived students in the whole of [area], well, it’s a no-brainer really.”

Cost sharing

When discussing the cost of multiple entry, there were some discussions around asking parents to cover the cost of the re-entry. The majority of schools in the sample who entered early covered the expense within the school. Those who discussed hearing of other schools asking parents to pay were strongly opposed to the idea, and stated that they would never pass on the cost to the parents. A small number of interviewees stated that they did ask parents to take on some of the cost. In one instance, an interviewee explained that if the parent had requested an early entry for their child, then they were asked to cover the cost, since the school only had money in their budget to cover their own entry strategy.

In some schools where very few students were entered early, it was policy for the parents to pay for any additional examinations, because the school felt that they could not sustain the cost of entering high numbers of students more than once. In one school where the top set had been entered early for Mathematics and Mathematics-Numeracy, the interviewee reported that some of the students wanted to re-enter to get a higher grade, but the school had said that as they had achieved a grade that would enable them to continue into sixth form, they would have to pay for the additional exam themselves.
Impact on staffing and resources

In a number of interviews, there were discussions around what areas of the school budget had been affected by rising examination costs as a result of multiple entries: “You are kind of taking away from the front line of teaching and support staff, absolutely. It’s really making things tight.” One interviewee reported that the cost of their school’s exam entry fees was double their budget allowance, and when asked where the extra funding came from, they reported that they did not have many Learning Support Assistants. Consortium groups expressed concern over decisions to use money for entries rather than teaching:

“You are talking the salary of a teacher with entries. There is potentially another teacher, which would give you smaller classes, which would enable you to work with your top end and your marginal learners, and also support and scaffold those learners who are doing foundation tier.”

Furthermore, there was concern that schools who had more funding could afford to offer more chances for re-entry; there was a suggestion that this could potentially upset parents if they saw children in other schools as being at an advantage.
Provision for those finishing qualifications early

The majority of interviewees stated that they encouraged students to continue studying for a qualification after an early entry to improve their grade. However, there was some discussion surrounding those instances where students did accept a grade as a result of early entry, and did not continue to study it further. Interviewees were asked about what provisions they offer for these students.

Focus on another subject

A popular approach in this circumstance is to focus on other subjects – either through structured learning in a class, or through independent learning; this was particularly reported to be subjects that make up part of the Level 2+. Indeed, some interviewees reported using early entry in English and/or Mathematics so that students could spend one year on one qualification and one year on the other. In the case of English, this would mean completing English Language one year, and English Literature the next, and in Mathematics, Numeracy one year and Mathematics the next. In some schools, intervention groups tend to be focused around the interplay between these subjects:

“*The pupils are falling into different groups now, who we will be able to provide different support for: pupils who want to carry on with both Maths and Numeracy in order to improve their grade; pupils who need to improve their Numeracy grade, but they are happy with the Maths, vice versa; or pupils who have secured both their targets, but need support in English.*”

In some instances, interviewees reported making the decision about whether a student had met their potential in one subject in order to give them additional time in another: “We basically withdrew them from Maths if we felt that they had fulfilled their potential in the Maths, just to make sure that they get the extra English.” However, this interviewee stated that these students did still receive some Mathematics provision. In the majority of cases where interviewees reported students reaching their potential in Mathematics, students still received some level of Mathematics provision right up until the end of Year 11.

In some instances, where students accepted a grade for one subject before the end of Year 11 and did not continue to study the subject, interviewees reported allowing students to go into other lessons to put additional work in:

“The head of DT will say to me ‘I need as many Year 11s as I can, just send them over when they haven’t got a Maths lesson’ or whatever, and they go and finish those and it takes a little pressure off the children.”

One interviewee discussed moving students between subjects other than English and Mathematics as being too individualised:

“You try and tailor someone’s education – or the education that is available to each student – as individually as possible, but if you then say, ‘right ok, so you can sit this early, right now you can go and do some extra Geography, and you have sat early so you can go and do some extra History’(...) as I say, it’s too bespoke, it’s ideological, but I think that’s the problem.”
Take additional qualifications

Many of the interviewees who discussed accepting grades from early entries in Mathematics, and not taking the examination again talked about the opportunity it gave students who were aiming to take A level Mathematics to take Level 1/2 Additional Mathematics or GCSE Statistics. For those students who did not want to go on to study Mathematics at A level, another popular additional qualification mentioned was a Level 1/2 qualification in Financial Mathematics.

The majority of students who entered English Language early were reported to continue with their studies to improve their grades. Furthermore, one interviewee discussed the option of offering Media or Critical Thinking qualifications.

Logistics

One theme that was discussed with interviewees was logistical considerations that are a consequence of early completion of qualifications. In some instances, interviewees reported having classes containing some students who had accepted their first grade, and some who had not. Some reported that this had proved challenging; however, others stated that it was no different to having a mixed-ability class.

A number of interviewees discussed regrouping classes in the wake of an early entry sitting; in some instances, this also resulted in reorganising timetables. Interviewees from smaller schools reported that logistics were more problematic due to less flexibility in the timetable and fewer staff. Consortia staff reported that provisions for those who accepted grades early and did not enter for further examinations in the subject varied from setting up additional classes, to independent study in resource centres; however, some interviewees discussed difficulty in finding staff to cover independent study groups. One interviewee suggested that the logistical issues with regards to having limited provision to accommodate students finishing early was an argument for multiple entry. By keeping the student in lessons to improve upon their first attempt, it avoided having to provide an alternative option for the student.
The size of the school was also discussed with regards to provision for those who finish early, in terms of timetable provision and staff numbers. In larger schools where English or Welsh and Mathematics lessons ran in parallel some interviewees reported that if students had already reached their target in Mathematics through early entry, they attended additional English lessons when they were timetabled to do Mathematics:

“At our school, it’s two sides of the timetable and English and Maths are taught at the same time, so there’s lots and lots of interchange between those Maths and English, and those pupils who get their GCSE in X then can come to extra English or go to extra Maths.”

However, in smaller schools where timetabling and staff numbers did not lend themselves to this type of flexibility interviewees were more likely to report a multiple-entry approach, where students continued to attend lessons in the subjects for which they were entered early, with the aim of improving their grade in a subsequent examination. This approach was accompanied in some instances by a decision not to enter any students early for a higher tier paper, but instead to enter them for Intermediate Mathematics and Mathematics-Numeracy only:

“In a larger school you know, where you might have a whole class of pupils who might get an A*, then obviously there is scope to offer Additional Maths or Statistics on the timetable. Within a small school like ours, where if you put into the higher tier where maybe two pupils have A*s, then what can you do with those pupils? (...) You have still got the rest of the class to teach you know.”
Teaching and learning

Data analytics

Interviewees reported using a number of sources – including commercial assessment companies – alongside early entry strategies as a way of obtaining data to diagnose student performance and predict outcomes. A strong theme when discussing entry strategies was the way in which early entry could provide data to gauge where students were to inform future teaching and exam entries:

“Recalling the script is dramatic feedback (...) actually seeing what’s getting 10 marks in a 10-mark question, and the leniency with regards to the one- and two-mark questions is a really important thing when you are teaching the kids, because – particularly with those kind of exams at top set – you are teaching them strategically to pass the exam.”

The majority of interviewees in the sample who reported using early entry discussed using early entry for this purpose.

Informing provision

Through entering students early, teachers can gain access to marks broken down by question to identify areas for improvement. A number of interviewees discussed this process as a way of informing their teaching after the examination has been sat:

“You look at the item level data (...) to analyse what is going on, to see where the strengths are, to see where one mark could be gained here or two marks could be gained there, because to those key marginal children, those one or two marks could make such a difference.”

There was a strong feeling among many interviewees that this level of detailed information could be used to tailor their teaching to the individual needs of students. Terms such as “bespoke”, “individualise” and “personalise” were used when discussing an approach to analysing the data to identify individual students’ strengths and weaknesses:

“From a growth mindset point of view, I think it will work quite well. So essentially what will happen is Year 11 will be an entirely bespoke curriculum.”

“Allowing pupils to get an idea, based on an external assessment, where they are at a point in the course where we can tailor their teaching to them, to their strengths, I think it’s invaluable.”

“If Year 10 do it in the summer, and we get the data back off their paper, we can see whether they’ve finished answering questions, whether they answered but got low marks (...) it gives us a focus for them, individually, next year to help fix those issues that they may have had.”
A number of interviewees indicated that this information was particularly useful for ‘key marginal students’, and some of the discussion around data focused on interventions for this particular group of students. One interviewee suggested that this may be to the detriment of students with higher grades:

“With multiple attempts at the exam, it allows them to focus on a target group. So they know who their target learners are, they put all of their interventions into those pupils, perhaps at the detriment of the A*/A learners, in order to get that target group, because that is what is dictated by current qualification measures.”

In some situations, this level of data led to teachers breaking specifications down into manageable sections to “spoon feed” things to the student to improve upon:

“We had a kid called X who had zero percent chance of getting any qualifications according to FFT29(...) it is a great example, because he just sat in lunchtimes and after school every day and just got spoon-fed, you know: ‘you need to do this, you need to go home and do it’, and he got it wrong, and gradually went from an F to an E to a D to just scraping a C.”

Despite the discussion surrounding this form of tailoring helping students to get the best grade, one interviewee stated that logistically, it was difficult to implement:

“And you look at the children in front of you, and what is going to be best for them, and it becomes very bespoke. And when you do something bespoke for 230 children every year, that’s when it starts to become incredibly difficult.”

**Mathematics tiering**

For Mathematics and Mathematics-Numeracy, a number of interviewees discussed using early entry as a way of determining which tier is the most appropriate for students to enter in the summer term. By entering top sets for the Intermediate paper, interviewees reported using that entry to assess whether students had mastered all of the content to achieve a B grade, before entering and aiming for an A or A* in the summer.

**Curriculum delivery**

The richness of the curriculum that students were experiencing was an issue discussed by a number of interviewees. There was a concern that schools were reacting to results from early entry by withdrawing students from non-core subjects, in order to focus intensively on English and Mathematics:

“If say they were taking something like Art and they were predicted a D in Art, then they were just withdrawn from it and had additional English lessons instead. And it wasn’t just English – it was Maths and Science as well.”

This in turn was accompanied by discussions around aspects of learning that were given less time as a result of the time demands imposed by early entries:

“A girl who was saying how much she enjoyed creative writing, (...) I had to break it to her that she’s got about 18 months now before we do any creative writing. Because of the timing points of early entry, you can’t deviate from the exam.”

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29Fischer Family Trust (FFT) – an educational analysis company who provide estimates for schools to inform target setting and evaluation.
A few interviewees also discussed the fact that extra-curricular activities (such as the Duke of Edinburgh award) were sacrificed to give more time to focus on exams:

“You barely go six weeks at key stage 4 without an examination for something, which is a nightmare for the other things. I mean, I used to be a Duke of Edinburgh co-ordinator and it used to be done in Year 10, and you could have as much time as you liked, take them out do interesting [things], none of these things matter anymore.”

Some interviewees discussed the prospect of moving to a three-year key stage 4, or had already done so in certain subjects:

“We start our GCSEs roughly this time (February) in Year 9. My Year 9 started the course about three weeks ago with their Shakespeare coursework on the Literature side.”

Interviewees were concerned about this impacting on the richness of the curriculum:

“There are advantages to having a three-year key stage 4 (...) but then you squeeze the life out of key stage 3 and have you got the richness? And then you are dropping the Art and Music and Drama and creativity”.

However, some felt that it would be a way of giving students time to enjoy learning:

“At the moment, time is so squeezed with the qualifications and the curriculum at key stage 4, I am worried that the children are not enjoying their learning as much as they could, unless they get a bit more breathing space.”
Teaching time

The increased demand that early and multiple entry places on lesson time was reported to be impacting on lower year groups. Interviewees reported being removed from teaching classes for lower year groups to run intervention sessions with Year 11s who did not meet their target grades at early entry:

“I was taken off timetable, as was my head of department. I had two classes taken off me to run intervention classes, so my Year 7 and Year 8 class were taken away and in their place I had about 14 hours of Year 11. That nearly killed me!”

Interviewees also reported having less time to prepare lessons and mark homework from lower year groups, because of the increase in marking work such as practice exams that came as a result of preparing for an exam multiple times.

The process of multiple entry was reported to have an impact on the time available to teach course content. A number of interviewees reported that in the build-up to an examination, time was given over to preparing for the exam, with the focus shifting from content to technique. There were concerns over whether this lent itself to a culture of ‘teaching to the test’, and whether this kind of approach was “giving the skills to be able to go out into the world afterwards.” If students were being entered for exams multiple times, one interviewee explained that the peaks and troughs in this pattern of teaching content and then preparing for exams meant that less time was spent teaching content, compared to a single entry at the end of Year 11. In some cases, interviewees reported missing out content from their teaching in the lead up to an early entry, with the intention of covering that content in the lead-up to the next entry:

“In reality, you do unfortunately have a little less time to deliver the whole scheme of work, so you do have to target a little bit more discretely (…) you miss out some A grade topics during the November which you cover between November and the summer to cover all of the content, which is one of the downfalls.”

Teacher development

As already discussed, in many cases, the uncertainty and unfamiliarity surrounding the new and reformed qualifications was in part alleviated through early entry, according to interviewees. Some interviewees reported that in using it this way, it improved teacher confidence in the guidance they were providing to students with regards to predicted grades and mark allocations. One interviewee recalled using early entry to counteract issues with teaching staff in the past:

“We were limited in terms of good teaching staff back then, so by early entry, we could focus our better teaching staff with the key marginal students, but it’s not – we are not in that situation anymore.”

A number of interviewees reported using early entry as a means of identifying teacher strengths. By looking at the data after early entry interviewees reported identifying groups that performed well in certain topics, and through identifying the teacher of that group, they could reallocate students who underperformed in that topic to that teacher. One interviewee expressed a concern that this did not create a “settled environment for curriculum design”, as a result of “frequently changing environment with frequently changing sets of expectations.”
Wellbeing

The wellbeing of the student was a strong theme that arose when interviewees discussed the impact of early and multiple entry:

“There is that balance, isn’t there between the wellbeing of the child and the stress it causes? You know, the early entry and the extra pressure.”

Both positive and negative issues were discussed. Most interviewees from schools who used early entry strategies felt that it did not have a negative impact on student wellbeing and that students “appreciated the opportunity”:

“It is the releasing of pressure. I’ve seen it both as a parent and as a teacher. The amount of pressure that learners are under now, especially with the new performance measures. The pressure that we are feeling, we pass on to them inevitably. And if we can relieve some of that pressure by early entry it’s a no-win [sic win-win].”

Coping strategies

One of the themes that came out of discussions around wellbeing was how the school dealt with the results, and the students’ expectations and reactions following on from an early entry:

“It’s all about how you approach doing a re-take and the culture and attitudes of the school, and the pupils within that school, that I think is really important.”
Many interviewees suggested that if the school and teachers took an approach of encouragement in the light of results, then any negative feelings with regards to performance could be alleviated:

“*We had a few disappointments (...) but the staff rallied round and said ‘right well, look – you know, you have got the opportunity to resit’, and I think that that’s very important for their confidence.*”

In some cases, early entry was reported as a way of identifying the individual needs of students. Some interviewees reported that regardless of the student’s results early entry taught hardiness:

“*[A] reason for us is resilience. Getting them in a formal exam, sitting them down there, you know, if we left it until June, you know, our kids will crumble. So it’s giving them that formal experience of doing an external exam, in exam conditions, with you know, with (...) invigilators.”*

The way in which students dealt with results was also reported by one interviewee as a way of identifying students who would benefit from mentoring in order to reach their potential:

“Via the exams, and the shock really, that she didn’t do as well, and also her state of mind since that, we have put eye-to-eye coaching for this one girl, you know, lots of (...) counselling, I’m her SLT mentor (...) nobody really realised how anxious she got prior to exams so again, it’s another small thing, but it does help.”

**Confidence**

In the vast majority of schools where early entry strategies were used, interviewees discussed the way that early entry built confidence through increasing self-esteem and allaying fears. In some instances, this was reported to have a wider impact on other qualifications that the student was studying for:

“This has raised their confidence, because (...) even students who have achieved a grade D have realised that they are at that D grade now, and all they need to do is push on that little bit more to try and secure the C in the summer.”

Specific importance was placed on self-esteem and confidence in schools with children from more economically-deprived areas, and those who spoke English as an additional language:

“Because they are from where they are, they don’t think that they are as good as anywhere else, and part of our job is to instil that confidence into them, and part of our strategy for that is putting them in for early entry.”

“Confidence is a huge issue with students from economically deprived backgrounds. Those students whose English is developing. So one of the things that we wanted to do was give them multiple opportunities to build their confidence.”

In contrast to the view that early entry builds confidence, in a small number of schools where students were not entered for exams before the end of Year 11, there was concern amongst interviewees that entering early would knock their confidence if they got a grade lower than they had expected:
“If you enter kids in year 10 and they all get Es, what happens to their confidence? You know, it has got to knock their confidence, massively. You know, we noticed that in the January, it was knocking their confidence to go back even then another seven months, you know. So that was our main reason behind [not entering early] really, is thinking that they are not ready, and then the knock-on effect of what happens when they get those results.”

One interviewee reported seeing a “knock-on effect” after entering students for exams in January with the legacy specifications; they therefore decided that their students were not ready, and stopped early entries. One interviewee reported entering students early in a previous school where students did not achieve the grades they were hoping for:

“Theyir confidence was very badly shaken, and that’s a real risk. If you go in early and they don’t do as well as you hoped they would – and certainly not as well as they hoped they would – they begin to think, well maybe it’s because I can’t do it.”

Exam stress

Stress was another aspect of student wellbeing that was discussed in the context of early and multiple entry. Some interviewees reported that they had not seen any negative effects from entering students before the end of Year 11:

“I have never really seen, well never seen at all, any negative effects of early entry on the kids. You know people will talk about children being stressed and you know, ‘teaching to the test’, I don’t really see that if I am honest with you.”

In other instances, interviewees felt that exams were stressful, regardless of when the students sat the paper:

“If I didn’t enter them in November, they’d still have the summer exams, along with other stuff, so there would be stresses there anyway. So you know, would it be any different if we didn’t enter in November? Probably not. I still think that you’d get a lot of kids that were stressed because of the exam season as a whole. For those pupils that have got Cs and banked (...), hopefully we have taken some of that stress away.”

In contrast, one interviewee acknowledged that there may be students who were stressed by early entry, but they stated that if they felt that early entry would affect a student’s wellbeing, then they would not enter them.

Interviewees from schools that did not enter early suggested that the increased number of exams, combined with getting a lower grade than expected, might contribute to stress:

“The candidates I am seeing outside of school are finding it a negative experience working up to it, and my general feeling about that is (...) because they are doing it early they are not accessing the higher grades, so they might get the C banked; but they are going to have to re-do the exam, so you get the multiple entries. So I think that puts another layer of stress on some.”
Other interviewees felt that the constant focus on exams was leading to schools having to put more help in place to deal with mental health issues. However, another interviewee stated that they had offered students additional support with stress issues because they had not had the early entry for English Literature:

“We have seen the current Year 11 who haven’t done it last year, still feel an awful lot of pressure and stress. They are, you know, especially the good kids at the top, you know a lot of them have had to have extra help, counselling, all sorts, because of the pressure that they feel under to get these results, and they haven’t done it for two years, so I think it’s down to the individual.”

Teacher wellbeing

Although interviewees were not specifically asked about the impact that early and multiple entry has on teachers, it was a subject that was discussed in many of the interviews. A number of interviewees suggested that school performance measures had a big impact on teacher wellbeing: “people’s careers rest on accountability measures”; “I see teachers suffering with stress and anxiety because we are accountable for those results”. In some cases, multiple entry was seen as an extra burden on teachers in terms of workloads, specifically for Mathematics teachers who were experiencing the first year of two Mathematics-based qualifications, instead of one:

“You [work sic] life sort of goes on hold, and it’s constant throughout the year you know, I mean we worked our socks off up to November (...) it’s just relentless at the minute.”

Many interviewees in the sample suggested that that pressure on teachers as individuals to meet targets meant that early entry was employed as a strategy to get the results needed:

“As individual teachers, we were made to keep track of our own classes very, very carefully, and if students hadn’t met, or weren’t on track to meet their FFT, then a teacher personally was brought in to account for that.”

Student workload

The impact that early and multiple entry has on workload was discussed in both a positive and negative light. Many interviewees discussed the fact that the volume of exams that students must take at the end of Year 11 is high; they suggested that accepting a grade and finishing a qualification early can reduce the pressure in the summer of Year 11 by spreading out some of the burden:

“They are able to concentrate on one thing at a time, so a lot less pressure at the end of Year 11, when there are lots of other subjects.”

In contrast, some interviewees stated that Year 10s were becoming overwhelmed as a result of multiple entries across two years. However, this view was less prominent:

“I think the really sad thing at the moment is that we’ve got a year 10 group (...) who are going to be sitting all English Language this year, despite the guidance not to, and GCSE Mathematics, and some Science modules (...) and we are really heavy-hearted about that.”
In a number of schools, despite the school policy being to re-enter to improve grades after an early entry, some interviewees discussed making decisions based on an individual's needs. If students were feeling stressed and pressured by exams, and made a case for not continuing with a subject after getting a grade early, then in some instances, this was allowed. One interviewee spoke about the conflicting impact of early entry:

“I think it is a lot of pressure to be all at the end of Year 11 (...) some of our kids wouldn’t cope with that at all. But it does get to the point where they do too many exams throughout Year 10 and 11; it does detract from the teaching and the other side of things that they do that are not linked to lessons in school.”

Those interviewees who were concerned about early and multiple entry suggested that multiple entry in particular may be too much for students: “The impact on learners is awful.” Interviewees also expressed concern that after taking Mathematics and Numeracy exams in November, students were exhausted, and that this may impact on other subjects:

*Interviewee 1:* “We are trying to maximise their opportunity for qualifications because you know, we know that they have got to compete with others. However, these children are exhausted, and we are all just thinking, ‘right, well, we can use the summer term to (...) get an extra qualification into them, so they can focus on their exams’, and these children are absolutely exhausted. They were exhausted in the November of Year 11 and I don’t regret (...) the decision that we made.”

*Interviewee 2:* “No, look at how we did.”

*Interviewee 1:* “It was the right decision for them. They got X%. They did amazingly.”
Motivation

One of the strongest themes that emerged throughout the interviews was the effect that early and multiple entry had on motivation. Both positive and negative influences on motivation were discussed; in many instances, what one interviewee stated would motivate a student, another interviewee stated might decrease motivation. The same contrast in opinions emerged with regards to early and multiple entry motivating (or demotivating) those students at risk of disengaging. These conflicting views highlight one of the biggest points to be made in relation to early and multiple entry strategies, which is that each individual is different. What helps for one student may not help for another. A key point that came across was the way in which early entry was presented to students. One interviewee explained this point:

“You set it in such a way that whatever the school decides to do, it’s gonna be for a positive reason, so I’d like to think that children are not affected by that, and they would be motivated by that, because if you’ve made a decision as a school to enter them early, you are constantly saying to them ‘right, we are going to do this, we are gonna get this (...) they do listen to you.”

Positive influences on motivation

The majority of interviewees that reported their school using early entry felt that taking an exam early can increase motivation. Interviewees reported that through getting a grade early, students can see that they are on track and that they can do it. Some interviewees suggested that it gave students a boost when their enthusiasm was waning. Getting a grade early was also referred to as a ‘safety net’, which in turn motivated students to keep working hard with the goal of aiming higher. In cases where students had just missed out on achieving grades when entering early, interviewees reported using this as a way to motivate students to improve, with comments such as, “you nearly got there, this is what we need to do next”.

Taking an exam early was also reported to result in an improved work ethic in students:

“There was an improved work ethic in the year group in general following those results and in other subjects. That idea that, ‘if I work hard, I get the results’ seemed to dawn on them, even though we had been talking about it for years but that is when they really did seem to realise.”

In one case, an interviewee reported one student who was inclined to become disengaged actively seeking a re-entry to improve:

“One of the boys said he’d had an E, but he said, ‘I need a D for college, so I am doing it again’, and he is a child who usually gives up.”
Some interviewees reported using early entry as a way of motivating students to work hard by providing specific and concrete examples of attainment and progress, rather than “oh come on you can do it (...) generic motivation.” In one instance, an interviewee reported a “ripple effect” in which students witnessed their peers working hard and achieving results. This encouraged them to think that they could too. Some referred to this as a reality kick to challenge complacency in which “there’s nothing quite like opening that envelope” to increase motivation. In the case of students who were at risk of exclusion, interviewees reported that an early entry with a real grade at the end of it provided some confidence and a “stage post” to continue working on.

In addition to early entry being used as a motivational tool to encourage students to reach their target, interviewees also stated that it was a way of increasing aspirations for the student: if they could reach their target, then could they aim higher? Furthermore, interviewees reported that if students achieved high grades as a result of early entries, then this motivated them to aim for similar grades in other subjects. In some instances, interviewees also reported that students who weren’t going to take A level Mathematics began to consider it after gaining good grades as a result of early entry, and therefore took Additional Mathematics in preparation.

Interviewees reported that sometimes Year 10 is viewed as a ‘rest year’, and early entry was reported to be employed as a strategy to keep Year 10 students engaged with school and learning by “sharpening their focus”. In schools with high numbers of disaffected students, senior management staff reported a rise in attendance, which they attributed in part to entering students for exams at the end of Year 10. They stated that a Year 10 entry “provided a focal point” for students; providing them with a “tangible” award at that point meant that they were motivated to improve, rather than “waiting until they were past the point that their confidence had kind of deserted them, that their feelings of futility around school had taken hold of them.”

One consortium member discussed an approach in which telling students that they would not have to do the exam again if they got the required grade was used as a way of motivating students to focus on early exams.

Negative influences on motivation

In contrast to discussions that suggested that just missing out on a grade would motivate students, a number of interviewees suggested that some students who had not achieved the grade that they were expecting after an early entry would lose motivation. However, this view was less commonly expressed amongst the interviewees in our sample, and was predominantly reported as speculation, rather than from direct experience. One interviewee reported on their past experiences in a school:

“...particular intervention group were so sick of being told that they had to re-do things that when it got to the summer, they lost all motivation. They sat the exams in January, a lot of them would have put a decent amount of effort in and then they realised that they didn’t do very well, and that demotivated them.”

When this issue was discussed, many interviewees said that this was only apparent in a small percentage of students in comparison to the vast majority who were not affected in this way. Interviewees from schools who used early entry were quick to explain that when this did happen, support was put in place in an attempt to counteract the effect.
Some interviewees also discussed the negative effect that multiple entry could have on students who repeatedly do not achieve the grade that they need:

“That child has failed that GCSE twice and they are only (...) a term into Year 11, and that is a massive jump to try to get them up to a C when their morale is on the floor.”

In relation to this, a number of interviewees stated that they did not enter bottom sets early, for fear that it would demotivate students further. One interviewee stated that their school used to enter low-ability students early, but these students did not perform well. The interviewee reported that this put a cloud over the subject in which they underperformed, as well as the other subjects they were studying for. As a result of this, the interviewee reports that the school did not enter their lowest set (those predicted a D or lower) because of the threat of a negative impact.

There was a suggestion that students tend to ‘drop off’ in Year 11 and motivation tends to drop. In some cases, it was reported that those students who achieved a grade that they were happy with lost motivation to aim higher, possibly limiting their chance to reach their potential:

“Those who passed it became difficult to manage because we had kids that finished in November (...) we had to fill those hours and staff it and they had to try to get them to work and motivate them."

As already discussed, in some schools where students had accepted their results early and would not be taking any additional exams in the subject, it was a requirement that students continued to attend lessons in the subject. In these instances, some reported difficulty in motivating these students to engage with the lessons:

“[Those] who got a B, they were happy with a B – they needed it to get on the A level course they wanted – then they would be happy to say ‘ok, I’m not going to revise for the summer. I’ve got my Bs already, I will sit it because I have to but I’m not gonna put any effort in,’ and that tended to happen quite a lot.”

Some interviewees reported not entering their top sets early in an attempt to avoid a drop in motivation if they achieved a good grade:

“I think there’s a feeling that they’re not going to max out, that both of our top two sets in both halves of the year group are going to be A or A*, and there is a feeling that actually if [students] get a B they may not be motivated to move on.”

A dip in motivation was also reported between taking Mathematics exams in November and the Christmas holidays.

One interviewee who had used early entry in a previous school stated that when students were not achieving their target grade after an early entry, it took a lot to improve their motivation and get them back up to speed. This was specifically reported in students with lower grades: “it’s very hard to pull kids back if it’s an E. It is very hard to pull kids back from there and to get them re-motivated.” There was some discussion amongst interviewees that spending extra time focusing on the exam removed some of the enjoyment of learning, and in turn, reduced motivation in some groups of students.
Exam preparation

Practice

Those interviewees who reported using early entry viewed the process of multiple entry as a chance to allow practice and to enable students to have “two bites of the cherry”. Many interviewees held the view that “the more opportunities you have at doing something, then the better you are going to be with the end results.” Many were of the opinion that early exam sittings were an ‘opportunity’ that should be taken advantage of, and if students did not achieve their expected result, then there were other entries available:

“Why would you not have two attempts if you’re given the chance? If you don’t do very well that’s fine, we just won’t cash [sic bank] it.”

Some interviewees stated that they began teaching the GCSE syllabus in Year 9 “to give them more opportunities to take the exam.” A number of those spoken to used the analogy of taking a driving test when discussing the issue of early and multiple entry:

“I took three goes to learn to drive, and I mean, what’s the purpose of a driving test? Is it to prove someone is competent at driving? Well, what’s the purpose of a Maths GCSE? It’s to prove that someone has a certain level of skill in Maths (…) isn’t it so you know by only giving them one chance, well we are depriving them of the opportunity to show their competency in that.”

There was some discussion about the reassurance that multiple entry can give to a student – if they know that they can look at it as a practice, with the option to resit if they didn’t achieve the grade they were hoping for:

“I think it is to allow pupils to achieve their potential fully. To see learning as a continuum. If you are ready to do an exam at this point, then happy days. If you are not, well that’s ok, because that exam will then indicate what we need to do to get the grade next time.”

Familiarity with the process and examination environment were further reasons given to enter students before the end of Year 11, and mock examinations were viewed as being ineffective at achieving this:

“If we left it until June, you know our kids will crumble. So it’s giving them a formal experience of doing an external exam.”

A lack of familiarity with the style of questioning in the Mathematics-Numeracy paper was given as a reason to enter in November. This was viewed as a form of practice, where students could gain experience in sitting a paper of this style.
In schools with challenging demographics, and in particular, larger numbers of students who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL), early entry was attributed to raising achievements and aspirations of students, because it gave students a chance to practise. In one school, interviewees discussed the fact that EAL students tended not to do well in English Language, because of difficulties with grammar etc, but with multiple entry, they felt this gave students more chance to improve:

“With the emphasis now being on English Language, we have got to give them as many opportunities as possible to get their grammar up to scratch.”

**Perceived importance**

When the subject of mock examinations was discussed, the majority of interviewees stated that students did not take them as seriously as a real exam:

“We are thinking about revisiting that, and revamping that, because I am not sure how seriously the students take them at the moment. I don’t think that the data we get from those is a fair reflection of what the students can do.”

In schools with more challenging demographics, there was a feeling amongst interviewees that their students in particular would not see the importance of mock examinations. There was also concern that certain groups of students would take mock exams more seriously than others:

“Some would, but the problem is, the key marginal students are the ones who probably wouldn’t take it seriously. The top set yeah, but then you’ve got others that unless they see the benefit of doing it, they won’t do it.”

Some interviewees felt that students did not pay attention to the grade that they got from mock examinations, and therefore mocks were not as effective as entering a ‘real exam’ early, in terms of motivating the student or giving them a reality check:

“They look at poor performance as, ‘well I didn’t revise for it’, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that they will up their game following results. Whereas having actual GCSE results, they have reflected very quickly.”

One interviewee stated that due to the number of unitised exams that students are sitting across the GCSE syllabus and across the school year, mock exams are not given as much time, because students focus their time on the exams that will result in a real grade at the end.

Some interviewees discussed the impact that the new specification had had on mock examinations. Many felt that there was an uncertainty around grade boundaries and mark allocations, which that meant that only by entering students for externally assessed examinations would teachers be able to get reliable and valid data on student performance.
Impact of changes to entry rules

As discussed in the introduction, interviewees in Stage 1 of this research were asked about the impact of removing early entry opportunities, and interviewees in Stage 2 were asked about the approach currently used in England. Although discussion surrounding England’s approach did come up in interviews conducted in Stage 1, only interviewees in Stage 2 were specifically questioned on this.

It is important to note that, as discussed in the introduction of this report, the sample in Stage 1 consisted of the views of 12 teachers reporting on their experiences from six schools from the south east of Wales, and therefore may not be representative of the country as a whole. Furthermore, interviewees in Stage 2 of the research were specifically asked whether they thought there would be any risks with adopting the approach used in England, but they were not specifically asked about the benefits. Therefore, the views expressed below may focus more on risk.

The vast majority of interviewees felt that if the first entry was what counted for school performance measures, schools would enter very few students early. Therefore, a lot of their responses come from the angle that students would only enter exams once, the majority of which would be at the end of Year 11. Some interviewees felt that it would be a good thing for the majority:

“Obviously, there are some pupils that you know, they very quickly lose interest don’t they, when they get to the end of Year 10/beginning of Year 11, so those might be disadvantaged, but I think, overall, it would be a fairer system than most.”

Some interviewees suggested that a move in this direction would put senior teaching staff in a difficult situation, where they would have to weigh up the pressure of achieving certain targets with regards to school performance measures against entering at the best time for the student. When discussing this quandary, one interviewee stated that it would “force Headteachers primarily to choose between keeping their job and the life chances of the children.”
Impact on the student

Removal approach
Those interviewees who discussed the impact on the student of disallowing early entry varied in their response. Some felt that it would be beneficial in terms of allowing the student to mature before taking the exam:

“I think it would be better overall for the students to have it towards the end when they have got the maturity, they have built up the skills they need, there is the sense of ‘this is it, you have got to do this now’. I know it wouldn’t work for everybody, but I think it would be better than the way it is done now.”

Pressure on the student was also discussed with the removal of early entry potentially having a positive or negative impact:

“I think potentially for wellbeing; I think it would help enormously, actually, in some ways, I know there is the argument about it being stressful at the end, but I think it would allow us to be more creative. I think it would allow them to really engage in the Welsh Bacc, but I guess it puts a disproportionate amount of pressure on them at the end.”

In terms of the negative impact the removal of early entry would have on the students, those interviewed in Stage 1 of the research suggested that it may not enable them to achieve their potential: “It takes away the opportunity of some of them achieving better than they could, so there are disadvantages.”

One interviewee felt that it would not have a big direct impact on the students because it would be the first time that they had taken GCSEs and therefore early entry would never have been an option for them. They would simply approach the exam in whichever way it was presented to them:

“I don’t want this to sound like I am being really condescending or negative, they don’t know any different. They don’t go, ‘oh, I wish I could do this exam early’, because they are never told that that’s the case, so I don’t think it would. The learners managed before.”
First entry approach
When asked about an approach that would restrict school performance measures to using only the first exam entry, some interviewees felt that a change in policy to align with England (that is, where the first entry counts for school performance measures) would improve the teaching and learning experience if early entry numbers dropped. As a result, those interviewees who expressed concern about the burden that early entry was placing on students felt that it would be helpful for students’ wellbeing.

Discussions around policy change led a number of interviewees to discuss the question “are we doing exams for school results, or are we doing exams for children?” One interviewee discussed the policy in light of their entry process for this academic year. They had entered a top set of students for Mathematics in November, and “only one or two didn’t get an A or an A*”. The interviewee felt that if they had waited to enter them, they would have missed out on the opportunity to be working in other areas. However, they went on to discuss this in light of the “risk” it would be for the school if their school performance measures rested on these results, and they suggested that the school would have to think about what their priority was. Other interviewees discussed the possibility of a knock-on effect, which would see fewer students taking additional qualifications due to a decrease in accepting grades and finishing qualifications early. There was some speculation that this would result in less breadth in learning.

The impact on sixth-form study was also discussed. One interviewee speculated that if the majority of students would be taking exams for the first time at the end of Year 11, then there would be more resits during Year 12. A potential consequence could be lower attainment at AS and A level:

“Any resit opportunity would impinge dramatically on curriculum time in Year 12 and 13 (...) we would expect a child here to do three A levels or two A levels plus the Welsh Bacc. and they don’t have much capacity on their timetable at all; and to fill that up with resits as well could cause students to leave or do badly at their ASs because they were concentrating so much on passing their GCSEs.”

Interviewees from schools without a sixth form felt that students would be disadvantaged because they would have fewer attempts to achieve their target grade, and the opportunity to resit after the end of Year 11 would not be as straightforward. This would particularly be the case for students who left education at 16 without an A* to C grade.
There were conflicting views when considering the needs of students. In one interview, the respondent suggested that a policy change that only took the first entry into account for school performance measures would mean that the entry decisions would focus on these performance measures, instead of the student. However, in a different interview, a respondent felt that it would make entry decisions more about the needs of the students:

“I think for us as a school, it’d come down to looking at the individuals (...) we’d have to make a decision on when we thought individual students were ready to do their best and that for some would be at the end of Year 10, and it might be for others at the end of Year 11.”

There was some concern that without early entry, there would be no item level data to focus interventions. In turn, this would limit the students’ opportunity to reach their potential in comparison to a multiple entry approach.

Since the majority of interviewees felt that most students would not be entered early for examinations if the same policy as in England was introduced, a strong theme that came out of this line of questioning was the impact that this would have on students. A number of interviewees said that it would be to the “detriment of the student.” Since a large number of interviewees from schools that entered students early said that it helped improve student confidence, many felt that if students entered for the first time at the end of Year 11, they would not be as confident, and that results would be affected by this.

Of particular concern to some interviewees was the impact it would have on disadvantaged students. Some felt that a policy change of this type would affect these students the most:

“If that was to happen, it would have a massive impact upon the outcomes our kids achieve and you see kids not doing as well as they possibly could – or should – and that for me is the real grudge I have got against the system at the moment, is that it doesn’t seem to be focused on kids doing well, it seems to be about points or whatever system it is that we are working towards in terms of performance measures. It’s not about the kids at the moment.”

A number of interviewees felt that if schools reduced the number of students entering for examinations before the end of Year 11, it would increase the pressure on students in the summer of Year 11. In particular, one interviewee discussed the impact a restriction would have on the number of exams her own daughter would be sitting in the summer:

“It would be nearly 30 exams that she would be expected to sit between the end of May and the end of June and that’s vile. I think it would have an effect.”
Impact on the school and staff

Removal approach

Those interviewees that discussed the impact that disallowing early entry would have on the school and staff suggested that it might initially be an unwelcome change in the current climate: “initially, there would be panic and the teaching would have to be restructured.” “It’s taking away that choice for schools then isn’t it? And I think choice is important at the moment.” Others felt that it would be difficult to predict the impact, since the reformed qualifications have not existed with only one entry opportunity:

“We would have to revisit the curriculum in terms of how you structure things (...), but I think that is the thing, because this specification hasn’t existed without early entry, that would really be an unknown quantity because I have always taught this specification (...) always knowing that there were going to be points where you were going to enter some kids early for something.”

There was some discussion around the fact that a negative impact would be felt in schools with more disadvantaged students. One interviewee stated that it “would have a disastrous effect on results and would prompt me to look for another job.” This interviewee felt that they would not be able to reach targets and raise standards in a school with a challenging cohort.

Despite the concerns raised, there was some suggestion that it would be beneficial to remove the option of entering students early when thinking about the long term:

“It’s a difficult one, because I think it may add more stress – because you have only got the summer, but equally, the stress of early entry, particularly for the HOD [sic Head of Department] and leadership level, that caused maybe more stress and worry than anything else.”

“I think it would be positive actually. I think, well, certainly a more measured approach. I can only go on English and Mathematics, and I think that the pressure on those colleagues, particularly this year with 10 and 11 being able to take, is absolutely relentless and I worry about the impact on other key stages, including 5 with the focus on 4 (...) it’s so narrow and blinkered, so I think that would take some of the pressure off, but I think that’s led by the performance drivers, I really do; it drives everything, so I think that would help those colleagues.”

Others felt that it would be another change in a system that has already seen a lot of change:

“Yeah, there would be a bit of readjustment, but I suppose it’s the same answer, we did it before, so... We have been through a huge amount of changes. I think it would just be another change to the specification wouldn’t it? It’s been in a constant state of change and adjustment over the last five years, that we would shrug our shoulders, roll our eyes and plough on through.”
Despite having the view that disallowing early entry might be positive, one group of interviewees felt that the management of change would be important if it were to be implemented:

“This is embedded in a lot of schools as a culture, so any changes that happen, you have to remember they’re in the culture of a school when you have got someone going through exams and they have had brothers, sisters, cousins who have done something different (...) it’s the process of change that’s so important. I know we want things to happen and we want the impact of it very quickly – and we all want that, but they’re just not going to get it unless there is time.”

First entry approach
A number of interviewees suggested that making the first entry count for school performance measures would put schools in a difficult situation and in a conflict of interest where they would have to “do the best for the child, or the best for the school.” A number of interviewees expressed concern with regards to how the school’s performance measures might be impacted if they were only judged on first entries:

“The school is going to be judged by its exams through the accountability measure or whatever the government come up with, and the school can stand or fall on those results. The school’s reputation can go down; it can then lose children, it can then not serve the community properly, so there are all sorts of really complicated, sort of ethical, questions about exams.”

Since early entry is currently an option, one group of interviewees felt that if a policy change like this were put in place, schools may be put in difficult situations to explain changes in their approach. This was particularly discussed with regards to parents who may put pressure on a school to enter their child early.

One group of interviewees felt that the impact on the school and whether their approach to early entry changed would depend on what other schools did. Interviewees felt that if schools were entering in the best interests of the students, then they would all be in the same situation. However, one of the interviewees felt that very few schools would be in the position to think about entries in this way “because of pressures from elsewhere.”

The majority of interviewees felt that a policy change of this kind would affect schools differently, and to varying degrees. A number of interviewees stated that a change of this kind would “suit leafy middle-class areas where parents can afford tutors for their children...whereas in this area, what we are doing meets the needs of our learners. They would be disadvantaged by that system.” Following on from the concerns regarding disadvantaged students, some interviewees commented that only allowing the first entry to count for school performance measures “would widen inequality in exam results – not reduce it”; “it will really highlight the issues that we’ve got with, you know, in the deprived areas.” One interviewee stated that they had “no doubt that all results would plummet at all grades.” They went on to explain why:

“I really don’t understand the [tabloid] stance. I really don’t. Can’t people see that the more opportunities a child who may be disadvantaged in other areas of life have in attaining success in examinations, then the more service we are providing? I think it is part of a drive to a more equal society and closing the gap. The gap will widen if you take it away.”
A number of interviewees reflected on the impact that a policy of this kind would have on teachers. Some felt that a reduction in early entry numbers as a result of a policy change of this kind would increase the pressure felt by teachers in the summer. It was suggested that this in turn would decrease teacher morale. It was also suggested that the style of teaching where students were being trained to pass the test would have to change. One interviewee suggested that in the current period of academic reform, with a number of new specifications, teachers would be less able to predict outcomes. As was the case with an interviewee from a school with a challenging cohort in Stage 1 of this research, a Deputy Head from a school with a similar cohort stated that they would leave the profession if early entry were restricted:

“I would leave the profession. I am gone. Teachers in general are really demotivated at the moment. Morale is at rock bottom; we try not to let it affect our staff too much, and we act as a buffer – and in general, the staff know that. I know it is not the case in all schools. If that was to happen, the changes that have come in already, it’s gonna hit us.”

In contrast to the potential issues that interviewees felt might occur if this policy change was brought in, some interviewees, particularly consortia members, felt that a reduced early entry would remove some of the pressure on teachers and would give them a chance to teach properly:

“Rather than teach a bit, cram, teach a bit. If you have got a long-term plan, you can teach really well, for two years and those children will have a really good outcome.”

Interview questions in Stage 2 that related to limiting school performance measure calculations to the first grade achieved by the student resulted in some discussion of further themes. What follows is a reflection of these.

**Impact on entry decisions**

The majority of interviewees in our sample felt that a policy decision of this kind would have an impact on early entry decisions; many said that it would stop for the vast majority of students because it would be a risk to enter early. Most reported that there would be exceptions to those students they would enter early: they included those who were of high ability and were likely to go on to sit Additional Mathematics, or pupils who were in danger of becoming disaffected, or who may not stay in school until the end of Year 11.

A common theme that arose when discussing this policy is that schools would have to consider early entry more carefully if a change like this introduced in Wales. Amongst some consortium staff, there was a feeling that “if having one chance leads to better entry decisions...then [...] it can only be a positive.” Some interviewees felt that schools would only enter students early if they knew they would do well. One interviewee stated that “the ‘have a go at it, let’s see how it goes, we can use that to work on and try and improve’ would stop.” However, one consortia member felt that there was a perception that it was easier to get grades in the November entry compared to the summer; therefore, they felt that schools would still enter early if they continued to think this was the case.
Some interviewees felt that the policy would not impact on a school’s approach if they were acting in the best interests of the students. It was also suggested that a policy of this type would result in fewer blanket entries where entire cohorts are entered early, and therefore it would make exam entry more specific to the students’ needs. Many also felt that it would prevent entry decisions that are motivated by the aim of ‘banking’ C grades. One interviewee highlighted that this would be a risk for schools, because “it’s the whole swathe of the middle ability that were entered last year that could sink a school (...) if it was first grade counts. So yeah, that would stop straight away.”

With regards to English Language, there was a suggestion that removing the option to enter early would add to the pressure that teachers felt in relation to targets. Therefore, there might be a move away from entries in English Literature to focus on English Language, since that the subject that would contribute towards school performance measures.

**Impact on commercial assessment companies**

One consortium member speculated that if a policy change of this sort were put in place, there may be a rise in schools paying to sign up to partnership network companies to provide externally marked assessments:

“If early entry disappeared, it gives companies like that an even greater platform to say, ‘sit our papers, pay us £ [x] a year, and we’ll give you early entry’.”

One interviewee also suggested that there may be a financial impact on the awarding body if entry numbers dropped dramatically, and they speculated that this could result in an increase in exam costs.

**Impact on grades**

A number of interviewees felt that a policy that incorporated the timing of exam entries into performance measures would be a good thing if it stopped schools from entering students early to ‘bank’ Cs. One consortium member felt that a policy change of this kind would “curb a lot of early entry” and as a result, they felt that Wales would see a better grade distribution overall. Interviewees also stated that not entering the majority of students until the end of Year 11 could result in more A and A* grades from students, who may have been satisfied with a lower grade as a result of early entry. It was suggested that this in turn would affect individual schools’ performance, in terms of school performance indicators, because more A and A* grades would result in higher scores.

Some interviewees felt that the first entry approach would result in fewer A* to C grades overall, since they believed that the multiple entry approach was the best way to help students improve on their grades, and schools would not want to take the ‘risk’ of entering them early if they might not get their best grade on that attempt. A number of interviewees reported that students did not take mock exams seriously, and therefore, although they could use a mock as a form of multiple entry, it would not have the same impact on grades:

“Anything from November or Year 10 would just be a mock; they wouldn’t put their heart and soul into it. They wouldn’t get accurate results and their mind would be sort of set because, ‘oh, I didn’t really try for that, so that’s why I got that grade.’”
When considering the first entry approach, a number of interviewees discussed the concept of ensuring that all students across Wales have an equal opportunity to achieve their potential. Some interviewees felt that the first entry approach would “level the playing field”, because most schools would wait until the end of Year 11 to enter the majority of their students, thus giving them one entry opportunity.

However, interviewees from schools with challenging demographics suggested that this approach would not level the playing field. They felt that if this approach were to be employed, it would be “for some political policy and belief that a level playing field means that everyone has one go at it”, which one interviewee felt was “nonsense”. These interviewees felt that it would particularly reduce the impact that multiple entry has on the performance of students in schools with challenging demographics, an approach that they feel goes some way towards creating a level playing field for these students.

Opinions with regards to the suggestion of adopting a different approach

Personal opinions when discussing different policy options were varied. A number of interviewees who used the process of early entry were very invested in the approach, and in these interviews respondents expressed strong concerns about restrictions. A number of interviewees made direct pleas not to follow the system used in England and questioned why a policy move of this kind would be needed. Some felt that there had been too many changes within the system and to restrict early entries would not be a good decision while the specifications were still new. The idea of introducing a policy to restrict entries was described as a “retrograde step”, and there were fears that the government would lose the support of the public if this were to happen. Interviewees reported a desire to have autonomy to make their own decisions about what is best for their students:

“It would be a loss. Like I said at the beginning, nationally at the moment the figures are being put forward about the increase in uptake and that’s creating this automatic thinking, especially in government, that it must be bad, rather than actually looking underneath and possibly thinking, ‘oh, I wouldn’t want my child to be doing it early if it wasn’t best for them,’ rather than thinking about every child (...). They’re also educated people whose children are more likely to have that more positive and privileged upbringing. Those that don’t, these opportunities are key.”

“My view is that any political decision or policy decision which means that school accountability is in conflict with individual child opportunity is disgraceful. It should never be the case, they should never come into conflict. So a school’s accountability should be on the opportunities it gives to each individual child. You should never turn around and say, ‘you can do that, but we’re gonna judge you on this’; it’s just shocking.”

“It goes against the whole philosophy of Qualified for Life, Qualified for Life 2. Everything. The raison d’être of education in Wales, so that’ll never go anywhere.”

Some interviewees felt as though a change of this sort would imply that teachers do not act in the best interest of students:

“I think the problem with the English approach was it seemed to work on the basis that entering early was somehow cheating or was playing the system and I didn’t see any of those things.”
Within the group of interviewees who did use early entry strategies, there were some who stated that they would welcome a change to policy. These individuals were the ones who reported feeling a pressure to enter early, but had conflicting opinions about the impact that it had on students. Therefore, some felt that by restricting early entry, it would put everyone in the same position.

Interviewees from schools where they did not enter students for exams before the end of Year 11 tended to support a policy in which there were restrictions to early entry. Those in this group felt that it was the right thing to do and suggested that there was a need for clear guidance on the right conditions for early entry:

“There should have been a ruling on this. They are not modules, they are sittings, and if you don’t want them to be modules, don’t make it possible for people to do it (...) It should be made absolutely clear about what we should do, and I think having that flexibility – that was probably never intended to be there – needs to be addressed.”
Statistics on linear reformed GCSE subjects, 2016/17

This section provides additional information on early entry in the reformed linear GCSEs in Wales in the 2016/17 academic year. There is a particular focus on GCSE Mathematics and Mathematics–Numeracy, as these were the only reformed qualifications that had multiple entry opportunities in the 2016/17 academic year.

The section concludes with a description of reformed GCSE results by age.

Data

WJEC provided a series of aggregated data tables for the 2016/17 academic year. Additional information on entries was obtained from Ofqual’s summer exam entries statistical release.

The data from WJEC has been rounded to the nearest 5. Any figures that are less than 5 but greater than 0 are suppressed. Table totals may not sum due to rounding.

It should be noted that entry data has been collated at different points in time by WJEC and Ofqual. This can lead to small discrepancies in the numbers being reported by each source.

The results for the November series are final, whereas the results for the summer series are provisional and could change after post-results services (such as reviews of marking and appeals) are concluded.

Mathematics and Mathematics-Numeracy

Chart 4 shows that just under 31,000 candidates were entered at least once for both GCSE Mathematics and GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy during 2016/17. It is likely that most Year 11s in state maintained secondary schools in Wales were entered for both qualifications.

More than half entered twice in both the November and summer series; 55% and 59% for GCSE Mathematics and GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy respectively. This meant that they sat all the relevant examinations for the qualifications twice.

It was more common to be entered in the November series only for Mathematics-Numeracy (34%, compared to 17% for Mathematics), whereas in Mathematics, it was more common to be entered in the summer series only (28%, compared to 8% for Mathematics-Numeracy). 76% of November entrants in Mathematics returned in the summer series, compared with 64% in Mathematics-Numeracy.

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30 There were 30,815 year 11s in maintained and independent schools in Wales in 2016/17.
[Accessed 12 Oct 17].
Chart 4: Qualification entry in the November 2016 and summer 2017 series for i) GCSE Mathematics and ii) GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy

Source: WJEC
44% of those that were entered again in the summer for Mathematics improved their grade, compared to 55% of those who were entered again for Mathematics-Numeracy (Chart 5).

Chart 5: Counts of November entries, students resitting in the summer and those who achieved a better grade in the 2016/17 academic year for i) GCSE Mathematics and ii) GCSE Mathematics–Numeracy
Charts 6 and 7 provide more information on November attainment and its impact on future entry patterns. GCSE Mathematics candidates achieving A* to C grades were less likely to make use of the re-entry opportunity; only 14% who achieved an A in November returned to sit in the summer. Candidates were more likely to resit the exam if their November grade was D to U, i.e. below the C grade benchmark. November grade U candidates were the most likely (67%) to increase their grade in the summer, followed by grade D (52%). Less than a quarter of November C grades improved upon their grade in the summer despite over two-thirds returning to resit.

**Chart 6: Resit rates and grade improvements for candidates who sat reformed GCSE Mathematics in November 2016 in Wales**

A similar pattern of reduced summer re-entry at A* to C grades is evident for GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy. While candidates achieving grades D to U were more likely to return, there was a smaller proportion of returning Mathematics-Numeracy candidates originally attaining an F or a G compared with Mathematics. November D and E grade Mathematics–Numeracy candidates were more likely to improve their grade relative to those resitting Mathematics. Less than half of candidates achieving a C in November returned to resit; of these less than a fifth improved their grade.
Entry practice by school intake

The qualitative evidence suggested that early and multiple entry practice may vary by characteristics of the school intake. Tables 3 and 4 show entry strategy and results information for Mathematics and Mathematics–Numeracy in schools grouped by the percentage of students eligible for free school meals (FSM)\textsuperscript{31}, which is commonly used as a measure of the relative deprivation of a school intake.

The 2016/17 academic year was unique, in the sense that multiple entry in GCSE Mathematics and GCSE Mathematics–Numeracy qualifications was restricted to within year 11. Therefore, this data should not be considered necessarily informative for future academic years, which may not involve comparable entry practices.

Tables 3 and 4 show a clear association between school FSM category and entry strategy, with the likelihood of repeat entry increasing in the higher FSM categories. This pattern was particularly strong in Mathematics, where there is a difference of 40 percentage points between the proportion of candidates entering Mathematics twice in the least deprived category (37% in <8% FSM) and the most deprived category (77% in 32%+ FSM). Schools in all but the highest FSM category appeared to use different entry approaches depending on the subject; November-only entry was much more likely for Mathematics-Numeracy, while June-only entry was practised more frequently for Mathematics.

### Table 3: 2016/17 GCSE Mathematics school entry strategy and attainment by percentage of students eligible for free school meals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FSM Category</th>
<th>% of candidates with a grade C or D in June 2017</th>
<th>% of candidates with a grade A or B in June 2017</th>
<th>% of candidates with a grade C or D in June 2017 only</th>
<th>% of candidates with a grade A or B in June 2017 only</th>
<th>Number of candidates with a grade C or D in November 2016 only</th>
<th>Number of candidates with a grade A or B in November 2016 only</th>
<th>Number of candidates with a grade C or D in November 2016 only only</th>
<th>Number of candidates with a grade A or B in November 2016 only only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30%</td>
<td>94.6</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>88.8</td>
<td>69.5</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50%</td>
<td>74.3</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60%</td>
<td>98.6</td>
<td>76.7</td>
<td>49.2</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70%</td>
<td>99.6</td>
<td>81.6</td>
<td>68.7</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80%</td>
<td>99.9</td>
<td>85.9</td>
<td>81.6</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;80%</td>
<td>99.9</td>
<td>85.9</td>
<td>81.6</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| n/a          | 82                                            | 27.7                                         | 10.4                                             | 3.3                                              | 44.6                                                      | 21.8                                                      | 10.4                                             | 3.3                                              |
| 30%          | 94.6                                          | 49.5                                         | 27.7                                             | 10.4                                             | 44.6                                                      | 21.8                                                      | 10.4                                             | 3.3                                              |
| 40%          | 88.8                                          | 69.5                                         | 37.4                                             | 14.5                                             | 54.9                                                      | 27.2                                                      | 14.5                                             | 5.4                                              |
| 50%          | 74.3                                          | 57.3                                         | 29.1                                             | 11.4                                             | 64.9                                                      | 32.2                                                      | 11.4                                             | 4.5                                              |
| 60%          | 98.6                                          | 76.7                                         | 49.2                                             | 20.1                                             | 64.9                                                      | 32.2                                                      | 20.1                                             | 8.0                                              |
| 70%          | 99.6                                          | 81.6                                         | 68.7                                             | 30.9                                             | 64.9                                                      | 32.2                                                      | 30.9                                             | 12.3                                             |
| 80%          | 99.9                                          | 85.9                                         | 81.6                                             | 40.6                                             | 64.9                                                      | 32.2                                                      | 40.6                                             | 16.2                                             |
| >80%         | 99.9                                          | 85.9                                         | 81.6                                             | 40.6                                             | 64.9                                                      | 32.2                                                      | 40.6                                             | 16.2                                             |

**Source:** Wales
The Mathematics–Numeracy data presented in Table 4 shows an association between school FSM category and attainment, in the context of entry strategy.

Schools in the least deprived category entered 44% of candidates in just the November series. Over 70% of A grades in these schools were achieved by those candidates. Just under half (48%) of the candidates in those schools entered in both series.

In contrast, candidates in schools in the two most deprived categories were more likely to be entered in both series (69%). A much greater proportion of candidates in the most deprived category achieved a best grade of C and above in June, implying that multiple entry was an important factor for attainment in those schools. There was some suggestion of a similar relationship for Mathematics at grades A* and A, although the evidence of an association was weaker.

This implies that the relationship between early and multiple entry and attainment may vary substantially by school type and intake, as well as by subject.
### Table 4: 2016/17 GCSE Mathematics–Numeracy school entry strategy and attainment by percentage of students eligible for free school meals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FSM Category</th>
<th>% of candidates with 4 or more Grade C at GCSE by June 2017</th>
<th>% of candidates with 3 or more Grade C at GCSE by June 2017</th>
<th>% of candidates with 2 or more Grade C at GCSE by June 2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FSM 0%</td>
<td>69.3%</td>
<td>47.2%</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSM 1% - 4%</td>
<td>73.2%</td>
<td>51.3%</td>
<td>39.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSM 5% - 10%</td>
<td>76.9%</td>
<td>55.9%</td>
<td>42.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSM 11% - 20%</td>
<td>79.5%</td>
<td>58.7%</td>
<td>45.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSM 21% - 50%</td>
<td>81.9%</td>
<td>61.9%</td>
<td>48.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: WEC

Note: The data provided is based on students eligible for free school meals. The table shows the percentage of students achieving various grades at GCSE. The FSM categories represent the percentage of students eligible for free school meals, with the lowest category being FSM 0% and the highest being FSM 21% - 50%.

### Calculation

- **Total**
- **Number of Courses**
- **Counts of pupils in school % FSM category**
- **% of candidates sitting in November 2016 to June 2017**
- **% of candidates sitting in June 2017 only**
- **Number of candidates who get qualification in 2016/17**
- **% of candidates with 4 or more Grade C at GCSE by June 2017**
- **% of candidates with 3 or more Grade C at GCSE by June 2017**
- **% of candidates with 2 or more Grade C at GCSE by June 2017**

### Analysis

The table above highlights the attainment levels of students eligible for free school meals, categorized by their FSM eligibility. It's observed that higher percentages of students achieve lower grades as the FSM eligibility increases. This suggests a correlation between FSM eligibility and academic performance, indicating the need for additional support for students in FSM categories to bridge these gaps.
Entering Additional Level 1/2 Mathematics

Interviewees suggested that early entry is sometimes used to allow high-attaining candidates to sit additional qualifications in the summer. For example, candidates can sit the Level 1/2 Mathematics (Additional) qualification. There were 2,580 provisional entries in Wales for Level 1/2 Mathematics (Additional) in 2017 – a drop of 17% compared to 2016.

The data reported in Chart 8 shows that entry for the WJEC Additional Level 1/2 Mathematics qualification in summer 2017 was most likely for candidates that achieved an A* or A in GCSE Mathematics or Mathematics-Numeracy in November. However, a sizeable minority of the high-attaining November candidates did not go on to take an additional GCSE Mathematics qualification. Candidates achieving a B or C in November were unlikely to be entered for Additional Level 1/2 Mathematics.

Chart 8: Counts of non-returning candidates who opted to sit Additional Level 1/2 Mathematics in summer 2017 for i) Mathematics and ii) Mathematics-Numeracy, by November grade A* to C

November 2016 and summer 2017 results

It is clear from entries into the November and summer series that early and multiple entry practice in 2016/17 has varied by age and subject. Differences in results by age in a single awarding series, therefore, should be interpreted with caution, given that any differences observed could be partly explained by systematic differences in the underlying ability of the candidates entered from the different year groups.

Table 5 (Appendix C) shows the cumulative grade distributions achieved in each exam series by year group and reformed GCSE subject.

Amongst Year 11s, performance in Mathematics was slightly stronger in the summer series in terms of the percentage of candidates achieving A* to C grades, whereas attainment was similar in Mathematics–Numeracy across the two series at that threshold.

Chart 9 shows the summer 2017 grade distribution for year 10s and below and Year 11 candidates for GCSE Mathematics. Those younger candidates that were entered fared worse at the top end of the grade scale, with 7% of candidates achieving the top A* to A grades compared to 13% of Year 11. There was also a substantial difference at the key benchmark grade C, with over half of Year 11 candidates achieving at least this level of attainment compared with 40% of candidates in Year 10 or below.
Chart 9: Wales GCSE Mathematics grade distribution for 2017 summer series for Year 10 and below vs Year 11

Attainment followed a similar pattern in GCSE English Language (Chart 10), with those younger candidates that were entered less likely to achieve the top grades. 38% of Year 11 candidates achieved at least a B, with the corresponding figure for Year 10 or below much lower at 26%. In general, candidate age is associated with attainment. 50% of the grades awarded to the younger candidates were C or D. In contrast, over half of the Year 11 grades were grades B or C.
Chart 10: Wales GCSE English Language grade distribution for 2017 summer series for Year 10 and below vs Year 11

Source: WJEC
Summary

The aim of this research was to gather views and experiences with regards to the processes and drivers behind early and multiple entry strategies in schools across Wales. School approaches to examination entry were found to be complex, and interviewees reported that large amounts of time and effort are spent thinking about exam entry within their school.

There was a range of different factors that interviewees reported having to think about for each possible entry option, including: the benefits, negative effects, logistical considerations and cost. In many cases, it was difficult to disentangle the cause and effect of early and multiple entry in terms of the driving factors behind a decision to enter students early, and the positive and negative consequences of a school’s exam entry strategy. It was clear that interviewees were keen to illustrate the extent of the pressure they were feeling, and how much they wanted the best for their students. Nearly all interviewees agreed on the fact that the main aim of their entry decisions was to get the best results for their students.

Early and multiple entry for GCSEs has been increasing in Wales. In 2016/17, nearly a fifth (19%) of all summer GCSE entries in Wales came from Year 10s or younger. This included a substantial number of students in Year 10 entered for the reformed linear GCSEs that are the focus of this report. The data shows that early entry is becoming an increasingly widespread practice, although it is still not universally employed across schools in Wales. Furthermore, the extent to which individual schools employ early entry approaches across sets of pupils, and across subjects, is likely to vary substantially. The 2016/17 academic year was particularly noteworthy, since it marked the first year of awarding for a number of high-stakes GCSEs, which resulted in a unique set of additional pressures for schools and associated organisations (e.g. regional consortia).
Overarching themes

One element that all interviewees discussed when considering their school’s options was the relationship between GCSE entry practice and results. Ultimately, each school makes its own decisions about its approach to examination entries; these decisions appeared to be the result of an ongoing process of analysis, that in some cases involved numerous influences. What is clear from the interviews conducted is the extent to which people believe in the benefits of early and multiple entry as a practice to improve results can vary. However, there is not always a direct relationship between individual beliefs and practice. The strength of this relationship varies, given the different pressures and considerations between individual schools.

It was evident that the pressure to achieve results that was felt by interviewees was one of the key drivers for early and multiple entry strategies and this was experienced both directly and indirectly. The unavoidable influence of school performance measures was discussed by many interviewees as contributing towards direct pressures to achieve in many instances. Indirect pressure came from multiple sources for example relationships within and across schools and from external organisations within the system. The wider system of school performance measures, their aims and consequences are not covered by this report.

The school environment and context appeared to be an important consideration when making entry decisions. Interviewees from schools with particularly challenging demographics reported that early and multiple entry was an important part of their strategy to raise results. This was often reported by schools with high numbers of students eligible for free school meals and/or students with English as an additional language. In these schools, opinions were strongly in favour of early entry; interviewees from these schools were the mostly strongly opposed when asked their view on possible changes to policy that might discourage early entry.

The data in Table 4 goes some way to illustrate this approach: schools with a higher proportion of students eligible for free school meals were more likely to make use of multiple entries by entering Year 11 students twice for Mathematics and Mathematics-Numeracy in the 2016/17 academic year. However, it is worth noting the unique set of entry opportunities for these subjects in this academic year (see Table 2).
Influence of change
A strong theme that emerged during interviews was the way in which schools were dealing with changes to English Language, Welsh Language, Mathematics and Mathematics-Numeracy GCSEs as a result of reform. These changes were an important consideration for schools when making entry decisions for the 2016/17 academic year; many interviewees reported using early entry as a way to help to manage them. GCSE examinations are high-stakes, both for students taking them – in terms of how their results can impact on their future, and for schools – in terms of school performance measures. There are many factors that can affect a student’s performance in an assessment, and therefore, there will always be a degree of uncertainty surrounding results.

As a result of the changes to reformed qualifications, there appeared to be a heightened sense of uncertainty expressed by interviewees in relation to this academic year. Given the increase in early entry in these reformed subjects, it is possible that these entry approaches were used as a way of managing the uncertainty that surrounds entering for reformed high-stakes examinations for the first time. However, differences of opinion about the relative merits of entering before the end of Year 11 may be one of the reasons why early and multiple entry strategies were not employed in all cases.

Further considerations with regards to policy
Interviewees in Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the research suggested that any change to policy that might restrict early entry would result in a substantial reduction in early and multiple entry. Many interviewees indicated that this reduction was likely to have a noticeable impact on students’ motivation, wellbeing and attainment, among other things.

It was also expressed that the impacts at a school and pupil level would be different, depending on context; for example, the demographics of the school intake and its current approach to exam entries. A key point that can be drawn from the interviews is that every school is different, and that every student is different. What works for one student may not work for another, and it is therefore reasonable to assume that any policy will suit some more than others. It is clear from these interviews that early and multiple entry can benefit some students, particularly those at the extreme ends of the attainment scale. However, it also appears to have negative consequences, such as increases in teacher workload, potential decreases in students’ motivation and increases in the levels of stress felt by the student. In making any future decisions, it is imperative that the impact on all demographics is taken into account as much as possible. What is clear from the interviews is that any guidance in the future needs to be clearly and consistently communicated, in a timely manner, to ensure smooth implementation and to avoid misinterpretation.
Limitations of the research

Since 2016/17 was the first year of awarding for reformed qualifications it is not possible to statistically analyse the consequences or impact of early entry on grade attainment over time. Furthermore, that year was unique in terms of entry opportunities, so comparison with other years would be problematic.

As already discussed in the section of this report discussing the impact of entry change, interviewees in Stage 2 were specifically asked what they thought the risks would be if a system where the ‘first grade counts’ for performance measures were introduced in Wales. Participants were not asked what the benefits could be, and therefore, there was no specific prompt to reflect on positive aspects of the approach.

Since the research was conducted over a period of months, it is important to reflect on the fact that interviews were conducted at different points in the school year, when interviewees may have been under varying degrees of pressure. It is important to note that perception and reality can differ. As with all interviews, there is the potential that views and ideas expressed in the interview environment may vary in practice. Since the interviewer was a representative from Qualifications Wales, there is a possibility that interviewees may not have felt that they were impartial in their views, especially given that media coverage of the subject increased in intensity throughout the 2016/17 academic year.

As discussed in the introduction of this report, the focus of this research was on the strategies and motivations that schools consider when deciding on their GCSE examination entry approaches. This report presents a range of views from a selection of schools to provide an overview of the current examination entry climate. The views of learners and parents were not collected, which limits the extent to which the impact of entry practice on learners can be understood. The views of a range of different stakeholders could be collected, in order to gain a more in-depth analysis of people’s beliefs and how they link to school examination entry decisions.
Acknowledgements

We would like to take the opportunity to thank all interviewees who gave their time to share their views for this research. We would also like to thank all those who contributed towards conducting, writing, editing and publishing this piece of research.

Appendix A

School interview questions

Q: Does your school/department enter students for exams in English Language, Mathematics or Mathematics-Numeracy before the end of Year 11?

Q: Does your school/department have a strategy for early and multiple entry?

Q: If so, what is this strategy based on?

Q: What factors influence these strategies?

Q: What do you think is the driving force behind early and multiple entry?

Q: Does your school’s/department’s strategy for reformed qualifications differ from the legacy qualifications?

Q: Do you think that early and/or multiple entry has an impact on student motivation? If so, what kind of impact?

Q: Where do you think the decision lies with regards to entry strategies in your school?

Q: If early entry was no longer an option, what do you think the impact would be on the school/teachers/students? (asked in Stage 1 only)

Q: (Explain England approach) What do you think the impact would be if we adopted the system used in England? (asked in Stage 2 only)

Q: Do you think there would be any risks with this approach? (asked in Stage 2 only)

Q: Are you aware of any other early or multiple entry practices within your school, and if so, can you comment on them?

Q: Do you have any experiences you would like to share from previous roles?

Q: Do you have any further thoughts or opinions on early and multiple entry you would like to share?

{Q: Probe questions if pressure of accountability measures comes up as a driving factor: How do accountability measures contribute to the pressure felt?}
Appendix B

Consortia interview questions

Q: Please can you tell me a little bit about your role within the Consortium?

Q: Does your consortium have a policy on early and multiple entry?

Q: Does it differ across subjects or is that across the board?

Q: Are challenge advisors advised on an approach to take for individual schools and if so why?

Q: Do the advisors have any flexibility in terms of what they can advise schools?

Q: What information do you use to monitor school performance and measure their improvement?

Q: Does your consortium have a policy on organisations that provide resources and assessments aimed at raising attainment in schools?

Q: Are you aware of any strategies that schools within your consortium use?

Q: What do you think these strategies might be based on?

Q: Are the strategies different for Maths and English/Welsh Language?

Q: What factors influence these strategies?

Q: What do you think is the driving force behind early and multiple entry?

Q: Have you noticed a change between reformed qualifications and the legacy qualifications?

Q: Do you have any experiences you would like to share from previous roles?

Q: Where do you think the decision lies with regards to entry strategies in schools?

Q: What do you think the impact is on learners?

Q: Do you have a personal view on early and multiple entry?

Q: What do you think the impact would be if we adopted the system used in England?

Q: Do you think there would be any risks with this approach?

Closing the interview

Q: Do you have any further thoughts or opinions on early and multiple entry you would like to share?

Q: Do you have any questions?
## Appendix C: Further Data Tables

### Table 5: Wales cumulative GCSE grade distributions for linear reformed subjects 2016/17, by age and exam series

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English Language</th>
<th></th>
<th>Mathematics</th>
<th>Mathematics - Numeracy</th>
<th>Welsh Language</th>
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</thead>
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<td>Summer</td>
<td></td>
<td>November</td>
<td>November</td>
<td>Summer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Year 10 or younger</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>7.8</td>
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<td>54.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>64.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older than year 11</td>
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<td>73.1</td>
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<td>All year groups</td>
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<td>37.9</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>81.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summer</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>2.7</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>39.6</td>
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<td>23.9</td>
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</tr>
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<td>46.4</td>
<td>66.1</td>
</tr>
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<td>3.9</td>
<td>20.7</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>5.8</td>
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### Table 6: Cumulative best grade outcomes for Year 11 in reformed GCSE Mathematics & Mathematics-Numeracy, 2016/17

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<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
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<th>E</th>
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Source: WJEC