

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES 2022 – 2027

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Summary

We want learners in Wales to take the qualifications they need to help them progress in life, learning and work.

The key themes that will underpin our work:

- a **Made-for-Wales** focus – including securing a sustainable offer of high-quality bilingual qualifications
- taking a **dynamic evolutionary approach** to qualifications so that they remain up-to-date and relevant to modern society
- undertaking **careful change management and stakeholder engagement** to promote buy-in and deliver successful reforms
- using our influence to promote modern and **innovative assessment** approaches
- having **learner wellbeing** at the centre of our decisions

Over the next five years we will:

- co-create with teachers and specialists a **coherent and inclusive range of qualifications for learners aged 14–16** that reimagine GCSEs and the wider qualifications offer in line with the purposes of the Curriculum for Wales
- work with awarding bodies and other stakeholders to build an effective and sustainable offer of high-quality robust qualifications for learners aged 16–19 and apprentices
- use our powers and influence to encourage awarding bodies to **modernise assessment** approaches and prepare learning providers for increasing amounts of digital assessment
- **support the qualifications system** by focusing our grant scheme in the most effective way to secure bilingual qualifications where they are most needed and ensuring our regulatory approach is effective, proportionate, and appropriate

Foreword

It is now seven years since Qualifications Wales was established and a great deal has changed in that time. We have cemented our position within the education sector in Wales and beyond. Alongside partners and stakeholders, we continue to respond to some of the greatest challenges ever faced by the qualification system.

We have learnt a lot from the pandemic and more generally from our wide-ranging regulatory and reform activities. Now is the time to take stock and look to the future.

We will learn from our formative years, further developing our partnerships and engagement, and thinking carefully and deeply about the future role that general and vocational qualifications play in Wales. We will continue this commitment to learning through the ongoing evaluation of the impact of our work.

It is a crucial period, with important policy developments, including the roll-out of the Curriculum for Wales. There is an increasing focus on skills and the role of vocational qualifications to provide choice and support the economy, along with the opportunities and challenges of digital technologies. We also have a greater awareness of the wellbeing of citizens and the role of qualifications in supporting national priorities such as **Cymraeg 2050**.

We welcome Welsh Government's announcement that it will be working with the new **Commission for Tertiary Education and Research** to develop clear and coherent progression pathways for learners. In addition, we are keen to play a full part in supporting the ambitions set out in the 2021 **Cooperation Agreement**.

This strategy, which has been developed with the support of key stakeholders, presents the longer-term vision for how our work will evolve with partners. It outlines how we will continue to ensure Welsh learners can choose from trusted, valued and globally portable qualifications, that are relevant, fair, flexible and bilingual.

Introduction

Qualifications Wales is now an integral part of the Welsh education and training system, having developed new and innovative ways of fulfilling our duties as a responsible regulator.

Since our formation we have:

- established our core regulatory functions and the framework through which we regulate recognised awarding bodies
- completed work to reform GCSEs, AS and A levels, and overseen the first award of these new qualifications, beginning in 2017 – these reformed qualifications represented the first significant step towards a distinctly Welsh qualifications system
- established a ‘sector review’ approach, including reviews for:
 - Health and Social Care, and Childcare (completed)
 - Construction and the Built Environment (completed)
 - Digital Technology (completed)
 - Engineering, Advanced Manufacturing and Energy (completed)
 - Travel, Tourism, Hospitality and Catering (publishing 2023)
 - Sport and Public Services (completed)
 - Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care (completed)
 - Business, Administration and Retail (underway)
 - Art, Creative and Media (commencing 2023)
 - Hair and Beauty (commencing 2023/24)

As a result of these reviews, we have:

- commissioned new Made-for-Wales qualifications in Health and Social Care, and Childcare, and in Construction and Building Services Engineering
- overseen the development of a new GCSE and AS/A level in Digital Technology
- shared valuable stakeholder feedback to awarding bodies, which they have used to update, add to or replace their qualifications, and make more qualifications available bilingually

Alongside this work we have commenced a major programme of work to reimagine GCSEs and establish a coherent range of inclusive qualifications for 14 to 16-year-olds, in line with the purposes of the Curriculum for Wales.

We have learnt much from this work and have identified **five** key themes that will underpin our work in the future:

Made-for-Wales

We recognise that Wales has unique characteristics that require careful consideration in all our work, including:

- the roll-out of the Curriculum for Wales
- the need for an active offer of bilingual qualifications
- stability in the range of qualifications that are available to learners, particularly considering emerging policy changes elsewhere in the UK
- a demand for a wide range of vocational qualifications, including many with low numbers of learners
- separate legislative requirements in devolved matters

Dynamic approach

Qualifications play an important role in education and must remain up-to-date and relevant to modern society. The process of reforming qualifications has historically been one of periodic major reforms, often with long pauses between iterations. This can lead to qualifications becoming outdated or at odds with expectations.

We believe in a dynamic approach, where qualifications can adapt and change over time to reflect new opportunities or needs as they arise. We also recognise that it may not always be manageable for all ambitions to be met in one leap, so a process of evolution will be necessary to make changes that work for all involved.

Managing change

We have now led the reform of many qualifications and learned how important it is for the system to engage with the design and development of qualifications in a process of co-construction, and prepare for and commit to qualification change.

Successful change requires the education and training system to come together collaboratively and communicate effectively. We are committed to playing our part in that collaboration and building the relationships required for all to successfully play their part in change.

Innovative assessment

Modernising assessment has been a topic of discussion in the UK for many years, but progress has been slow. Wales has a unique opportunity to build the digital infrastructure needed to support new and innovative forms of assessment, which can be used to broaden assessment approaches to address a wider range of learners' abilities and aptitudes.

We recognise that there are constraints and anxieties in moving to more digital forms of assessment, but with a sector-wide approach to change, we can support the journey to assessments that align with an increasingly digital society.

Learner wellbeing

Qualifications are important and their value must be protected for the learners that they seek to serve. The wellbeing of learners is at the centre of our decision making. To help achieve this we directly involve and engage with learners when making decisions. We recognise that high stakes qualifications can be stressful and challenging, and also that they motivate learning and build resilience.

Our purpose

As the national body responsible for regulating qualifications, we have two principal aims upon which all our work must be focused:

- ensuring that qualifications and the Welsh qualifications system are effective for meeting the reasonable needs of learners
- promoting confidence in qualifications and in the Welsh qualifications system

We are committed to placing learners at the heart of everything we do.

The Qualifications Wales Act 2015 sets out eight ‘matters’ which we must consider when fulfilling our role.

These relate to:

Promoting sustainable growth in the Welsh economy	Promoting and facilitating the use of Cymraeg	The range and nature of qualifications, and how they are assessed	The requirements of employers, higher education institutions and professions
The currency of qualifications	The comparability of qualifications with those taken in other nations	The efficiency and value for money of qualifications	The relative roles of awarding bodies, learning providers, Qualifications Wales itself and Welsh Government

Our ways of working

Our work is underpinned by several key duties, policies and approaches:

- we operate within the policy framework set out by the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, working collaboratively and taking a **long-term and preventative approach to sustainability**
- we embed our public sector **equalities** duties as we plan and make decisions
- we operate within our own **regulatory approach**, and strive to be proportionate, consistent, accountable, transparent and targeted in our action
- through our **Choice for All** strategy, we aim to increase the availability of Welsh-medium qualifications to support Welsh Government's Cymraeg 2050 ambitions
- our collaborative and dynamic approach to **communications and engagement** underpins our responsibility to ensure public confidence
- we **work with partners** across the education and training system to gain their views on change and promote cohesion in progression pathways
- we value and nurture our employees as set out in our **corporate strategies**

In setting our strategic priorities for the next five years we recognise that some of our work is mandatory and not at our discretion. This includes, for example, our duties related to regulation of the qualifications system as set out in the Qualifications Wales Act and our Welsh Government framework agreement, or our commitments as a responsible employer. So, with this in mind, this strategy focuses on our work to review and reform qualifications.

Our vision

Our vision is that learners in Wales can take the qualifications they need to help them progress in life, learning and work.

We want to see a qualifications system which incorporates:

An inclusive and sustainable range of relevant qualifications	Modern and robust learner-focused assessment	Opportunities for the delivery of quality learning experiences
Assessment in Cymraeg and English	Meaningful and fair recording of achievement	An expert, integrated, efficient and inclusive infrastructure

Our external context

As we work towards our vision, we are fully aware of the external influences that will affect our work – both as opportunities that can be seized and constraints that we may need to work within.

COVID-19 pandemic

Along with so much of our modern way of life, the education and qualifications system has been profoundly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The world of qualifications and assessment has been the subject of national protest and wide debate. The events of 2020 and 2021 brought into stark relief the fragility of elements of our established systems and the need for increased resilience in the way national qualifications are assessed.

The impacts of the pandemic on the qualifications system have been many and far-reaching. In needing to assess learners directly, the teaching profession has faced unprecedented pressure. Awarding bodies have incurred extraordinary financial pressures in the face of additional costs and often reduced income, and the regulatory burden involved in making appropriate adaptations has been challenging. Above all else, young people have lived through hugely disruptive periods during a crucial period in their personal and education development.

It will take time for the system to recover, and we need to recognise that during the period of this strategy.

Welsh-medium

As Welsh-medium education continues to expand there is an increasing demand for qualifications assessed in Cymraeg. We will actively support Welsh Government's **Cymraeg 2050** strategy and enable learners to have an equal opportunity to take qualifications in their preferred language. Where qualifications are Made-for-Wales they will be available bilingually from the outset.

As we continue with our reform agenda, the proportion of qualifications available bilingually will grow. Where the numbers of learners taking a qualification are low this is more challenging, but we will continue to build on our success in actively encouraging and supporting awarding bodies, including via grant funding, to make their qualifications available in Cymraeg. We set out our work in this area in more detail in **Choice for All**, our separate strategy for Cymraeg.

We have established a new strategic partnership with Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, which will build a stronger sector-wide approach to developing Cymraeg-medium qualifications and promote synergies in both organisations' work.

Curriculum for Wales

Schools have now begun teaching the Curriculum for Wales, launched after several years of intensive work, led by Welsh Government. The first learners following the new curriculum in secondary schools will finish compulsory education in 2027.

Our **Qualified for the Future** project represents the biggest opportunity for more than a generation to reshape and reimagine the qualifications that young people take at 16 – not only GCSEs but also the wider range of qualifications taken in schools and other settings.

There are many different and often conflicting views on how these qualifications can change, but we are committed to working collaboratively and our co-creation approach is helping to build a consensus on how best to proceed. This is an exciting opportunity to be forward thinking.

Post-16 offer

The post-16 qualifications offer for Wales is complex. There are several qualifications that have been designed exclusively to meet the needs of Welsh learners, including AS/A levels and vocational qualifications that arose from our programme of sector reviews.

However, we have historically been dependent on qualifications that are available throughout the UK – but principally developed to meet the needs of learners in England. Where appropriate, we regulate these qualifications together with our peer regulators – Ofqual in England and CCEA Regulation in Northern Ireland.

Approaches to education and qualifications are becoming increasingly diverse across UK jurisdictions. We engage regularly with awarding bodies to discuss the potential impact of any policy decisions on provision in Wales.

Post-16 vocational qualifications in England are currently in the middle of a programme of extensive reform. We are actively monitoring the implications of English policy decisions on the continued availability of qualifications to learners in Wales and, where it is necessary to do so, we are committed to using the regulatory levers available to us to secure suitable provision.

Awarding bodies have reacted to the changes in policy in England by assuring us that they are committed to finding solutions to meet the needs of Welsh learners. Where qualifications may be being withdrawn, we will need to ensure that there are others to replace them.

Our programme of review and reform has shown that there are a variety of ways to secure an appropriate range of vocational qualifications for Wales. Where it is viable for an awarding body to develop a bespoke Made-for-Wales qualification, we will consider using our commissioning powers to secure an awarding body to do so and communicate change effectively so that learners can make the progression steps that they choose. Sometimes we need to think more flexibly about how to find the right solution. We remain fully committed to ensuring that a complete and coherent offer of vocational qualifications is provided for Welsh learners.

In 2023, Welsh Government intends to establish a new **Commission for Tertiary Education and Research**. We look forward to the opportunity to form a constructive and collaborative relationship with the new body. We will be keen to establish clear parameters for our respective responsibilities and to identify how we will work together most effectively in areas of mutual interest such as post-16 education and apprenticeships.

Digital delivery

Before the pandemic, in our **Delivering Digital** sector review (published), we observed that: *“It is difficult to imagine a world without digital technology. A powerful presence in people’s lives, it evolves continually and rapidly.”*

Lockdowns have magnified the pace of change. Teachers and learners have become more adept in using technology for learning, yet much of the world of qualifications remains paper based.

It is hard to envisage this remaining the case in the longer-term, so we are determined to work with the education and training system to overcome the challenges and realise the benefits of broader robust and manageable assessment approaches that digital capabilities offer.

Our delivery approach

Our vision is ambitious and will require focus to deliver. We have identified four strategic priorities for the coming years, all of which will be underpinned by our professional workforce maintaining a focus on working collaboratively across the education sector and informed by research evidence.

A coherent and inclusive pre-16 offer

We are making good progress with our Qualified for the Future project as we work towards the introduction, from 2025 onwards, of new qualifications for 14 to 16-year-olds, to complement the Curriculum for Wales. We are working co-constructively with teachers and specialists to reimagine GCSEs and to reshape the wider qualifications offer.

This is a significant programme of reform and there is much still to be done. We are working closely with Welsh Government, WJEC and others to plan a substantial programme of change management so that everyone in the system can play their part effectively.

Over the next five years we will:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• work with WJEC, practitioners and stakeholders to co-construct the design of a new Made-for-Wales suite of qualifications to replace the existing range of GCSEs (2022-2023)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ensure that a coherent and inclusive offer of qualifications is available to meet the needs of all learners in this age group (2027)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• following our strategic themes of innovation and evolution, initiate a national conversation to develop a longer-term vision for the next generation of qualifications taken by learners aged 14–16 (2024-2025)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• promote modern and innovative approaches to assessment (ongoing)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• create space and time for quality learning experiences by ensuring that assessments are proportionate, appropriate and manageable, and promote opportunities for positive learning experiences that support learners' wellbeing and future aspirations (2022-2025)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ensure that the wider offer of qualifications, as well as GCSEs, is available through the medium of Welsh or English (2027)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• work with Welsh Government to influence its approach to arrangements for school evaluation, improvement and accountability to maximise the effectiveness of the qualifications and support the wider aims of the Curriculum for Wales (2022-2023)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• working with others, oversee the development and implementation of an effective programme of change management to support schools in implementing the new qualifications (ongoing)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• communicate and engage with learners, parents, colleges, work-based learning providers, universities and employers to build awareness of, and confidence in, the new qualifications (ongoing)

A high-quality robust post-16 offer

We have always prioritised the review and reform of vocational qualifications. Since 2015, we have published, and acted upon, four major sector reviews and two lighter-touch rapid sector reviews.

We have completed two major reform programmes in which we commissioned new Made-for-Wales suites of qualifications. We have led the introduction of new A levels in Digital Technology and Built Environment (with supporting GCSEs to underpin them) and have overseen improvements to other existing qualifications in response to our reviews. We will publish our review of Travel, Tourism, Hospitality and Catering early in 2023, including any proposals for reform, and our programme of reviews runs through until 2024.

As we prepare to implement new qualifications for 14 to 16-year-olds, our thoughts will turn, increasingly, to the progression routes for those learners – both in relation to A levels and to the fuller range of qualifications taken by learners post-16.

With the additional challenges to the post-16 qualifications offer presented by changes in other jurisdictions, we need to further strengthen our strategic approach to qualifications for these learners and for those on apprenticeships to ensure that all learners have an appropriate and valuable choice of qualifications with robust assessment arrangements, available in both Cymraeg and English.

We will engage extensively with the post-16 education sector and with awarding bodies to identify a range of routes to best secure a comprehensive and effective range of qualifications for all post-16 learners.

Over the next five years we will:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• complete our programme of sector reviews and begin to evaluate the benefits and impact of our reforms (2022-2024)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• work with Welsh Government, the new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, awarding bodies and others to secure and strengthen a sustainable range of robust qualifications for post-16 learners and apprentices (2022-2024)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• initiate a review of A level qualifications in Wales to ensure that there is a clear relationship between qualifications at 14–16 and progression to higher education (2024-2025)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• complete our review and, as appropriate, reform of Essential Skills Wales qualifications, ensuring that there is a joined-up and robust approach to the assessment of literacy, numeracy and other relevant skills to meet the needs of learners (2026)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• work with awarding bodies to increase the range of qualifications available in both Cymraeg and English so that the number of learners able to access qualifications in either language increases significantly (ongoing)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• promote modern, robust and innovative approaches to assessment (ongoing)

Modernising assessment

Underpinning our approach to delivering our vision is a desire to ensure that Welsh learners benefit from an assessment system that is among the most innovative and modern in the world – making the most of a wide range of assessment techniques and building flexibility in how and when learners are assessed.

Over the next five years we will:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• create a modernising assessment team to champion this priority within the organisation and across Wales (2022)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• identify opportunities for change by analysing existing approaches to assessment and developing an understanding of the potential benefits that innovative approaches to assessment, including the use of digital technology in assessment, can bring (focus 2022-2024, then ongoing)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• work with experts and practitioners in centres and awarding bodies to consider how assessment practices may be updated so that they achieve the best balance between engagement for learners, manageability for centres and the reliability and validity that is expected of a suite of national qualifications (ongoing)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• further develop our knowledge of the critical success factors for the successful use of technology in assessment and work with others to mitigate against the risks and challenges inherent in adopting new systems (focus 2022-2024, then ongoing)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• develop a realistic but ambitious implementation plan for the modernisation of assessments (2023-2024, then ongoing)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• embed our approach to modernising assessment into all reform programmes (ongoing)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• create a regulatory environment where innovation in assessment can be tested and thrive but in which it can also be evaluated so that we and awarding bodies may continually learn about best practice (2023-then ongoing)

Building a sustainable system

Each year we support the qualifications system by awarding grants. Most of this funding subsidises awarding bodies in the provision of Welsh-medium assessment, although we have also provided grants to support the introduction of new and reformed qualifications.

The grants that we award represent a significant portion of our expenditure, so it is important that we review their value for money to ensure that we are securing the best added value for learners, and the qualification system.

In the context of the challenges presented to the qualifications system by the viability of delivering qualifications to small numbers of learners, we need to consider whether our approach to grant funding awarding bodies is sufficient to underpin the need to secure the qualification offer in Wales. We will consider how best to allocate the resources we do have – and whether we need to secure further resources to supplement these if we are to ensure that the qualifications system is truly effective in meeting learners' needs.

Over the next five years we will:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• evaluate the effectiveness of historic spend across our grant portfolio (2023-2024)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• consider how we may achieve best value for money from our grants budget (2023-2024)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• consider, in discussion with Welsh Government, whether our overall grants budget is sufficient to support the work we need others to carry out, in the particular context of qualifications reform and the Welsh language (2022-2024)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• develop and implement a new programme of grant funding to effectively support delivery of and innovation in the qualifications system (2024-2025)

We also support the qualifications system through our core regulatory work and by issuing guidance to awarding bodies on key issues, such as providing an active offer of bilingual qualifications. We will actively monitor the awarding body market to see where interventions can be made using the regulatory tools available to us to enhance the offer available to meet the needs of learners.

We will need to consider and take stock of the impact of fluctuations in national qualification outcomes over the years of the pandemic and determine the extent to which national expectations need further adjustment. We will also need to consider changes that are necessary to our regulatory framework to support qualification reforms.

Although there will be an increase in Made-for-Wales qualifications, there will continue to be UK qualifications that will be part of the Welsh qualification system. We will need to work closely with fellow regulators to ensure regulation evolves to manage the regulatory burden on awarding bodies and protect learners.

Over the next five years we will:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continue to focus on a programme of core regulatory work so that we can achieve the published regulatory outcomes and support our principal aims (ongoing)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • review our regulatory framework and approach to ensure that it continues to be effective for meeting the reasonable needs of learners, promotes confidence in qualifications and the Welsh qualifications system, and does not place any unnecessary barriers (2024-2025)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • review the regulatory expectations placed upon awarding bodies to ensure that they remain proportionate and appropriate (2024-2025)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continue to review the impacts of the pandemic upon qualification outcomes and, for Made-for-Wales qualifications, determine the best approach to take to stabilise those outcomes over time and across centres (2022-2024)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • monitor the introduction of reformed qualifications to ensure their safe delivery and to identify opportunities for awarding bodies to improve practice (ongoing)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continue working closely with fellow regulators to ensure cross jurisdiction regulation evolves to support the Welsh qualifications system and help manage the burden on those we regulate (ongoing)

Conclusion

These strategic priorities, supported by the key themes that underpin our work, will lead to a stronger, more robust and more resilient qualifications system in Wales that meets the needs of our future generations.

We will review our strategic priorities regularly to ensure that they are responsive to emerging needs and remain coherent with education policy priorities set by Welsh Government, including specific initiatives such as Welsh Government's newly launched Vocational Qualifications Review.

During the second half of this decade, we will develop and set out our future strategic priorities for the period 2027-2032. By that time, our existing Qualified for the Future work will be drawing to a conclusion. In addition, the impact of policy changes elsewhere in the UK will be understood fully and action will have been taken to maintain a sustainable offer of qualifications for Welsh learners.

We welcome continuing feedback on this strategy and our wider work.