

# Confidence in Qualifications and the Qualification System in Wales

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**Qualifications Wales**  
**Measuring Confidence in Qualifications and the Qualification System in Wales**

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## **1 STUDY BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Introduction**

- 1.1 In April 2015, the Welsh Government commissioned York Consulting to carry out a four-and-a-half-year study to track the changes in confidence of qualifications and the qualification system in Wales.
- 1.2 This report is the first of three phases of research:
  - Phase 1: Establishing the Baseline (June 2015 - May 2016)
  - Phase 2: Measuring the Change (May 2017 - January 2018)
  - Phase 3: Determining the Impact (May 2019 - January 2020).
- 1.3 The contract for the study passed to Qualifications Wales (QW) in September 2015.

### **Contextual Background**

- 1.4 In 2011, the Minister for Education and Skills and the Deputy Minister for Skills recognised the need for changes in the qualification system. A Review of Qualifications and the qualification system for 14-19 year olds was commissioned in May 2012. This was led by an independent board. Evidence received by the board, and reflected in the consultation document, included:
  - The complexity of qualifications obscuring clear and simple learning pathways for learners and parents.
  - The discrepancy between a qualification system designed to be shared between Wales, England and Northern Ireland and the diverging policies in the 3 countries, which made it increasingly difficult to ensure that a 3 country system could meet the needs of Welsh learners and the Welsh economy.
- 1.5 In 2012, the Review of Qualifications Board submitted their findings and recommendations to ministers, which included the establishment of Qualifications Wales (QW). With the coming into force of the Qualifications Wales Act 2015, responsibility for the regulation and quality assurance of the qualification system in Wales transferred to an independent body, QW, in September 2015. QW has two principal aims set out in legislation:
  - To ensure that qualifications and the Welsh qualification system are effective for meeting the reasonable needs of learners.
  - To promote public confidence in qualifications and the Welsh qualification system.

## **Aims of the Research**

1.6 The research was tasked with:

- Identifying levels of confidence in the qualification system in Wales amongst stakeholders.
- Measuring the impact of QW on levels of confidence in qualifications and in the Welsh qualification system.
- Identifying the key strengths of QW in promoting confidence in qualifications and in the Welsh qualification system and identifying any constraints and issues impeding effectiveness, or opportunities for improvement.
- Making recommendations on how QW can improve public confidence in qualifications and the qualification system in Wales.

## **Method**

1.7 The method designed to address the research priorities, was primarily qualitative but included a quantitative component.

### **Phase 1: Establishing the Baseline**

1.8 The key focus of the fieldwork included:

- a series of 46 qualitative interviews with a range of stakeholders across Wales and external to Wales (in other nations across the UK) undertaken between January 2016 and April 2016.
- a representative survey of 1,005 adults across Wales between 7th - 11th January 2016.

1.9 Having reviewed key documents including the Qualifications Wales Act 2015 and National Assembly for Wales records of relevant debates and Committee discussions (including consultation responses on the draft bill), York Consulting designed and agreed the key questions to be explored in the quantitative and qualitative aspects of research.

### *Qualitative research*

1.10 The key questions (see Appendix A for the topic guide) covered in the qualitative interviews were:

- What is your level of confidence in qualifications and in the qualification system in Wales?

**Qualifications Wales**  
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- To what extent do you believe qualifications and the Welsh qualification system meet the reasonable needs of learners in Wales?
- To what extent do you believe decisions about qualifications in Wales are made independently from Government?
- To what extent are stakeholders engaging in consultations - is there adequate opportunity to express a view regarding proposed changes in qualifications.
- To what extent have stakeholders been kept up-to-date on the changes happening.
- To what extent has the regulation and quality assurance of qualifications in Wales been effective in the past?
- Do you think that QW is well placed to effectively discharge its responsibilities for the regulation and quality assurance of qualifications in Wales?

1.11 The sampling method agreed with QW (Table 1.1) involved:

- a balance between Welsh stakeholders and external stakeholders (in other nations across the UK)
- a balance between individual organisations and representative bodies.

**Table 1.1: Targeted numbers of interviews**

	Individual Organisations	Representative Bodies	Total
Wales	18	16	<b>34</b>
External	5	11	<b>16</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>50</b>

1.12 The sampling criteria were purposive in nature. Many representative bodies were unique to this subject area. Individual organisations were selected based on a combination of data provided by QW (organisations that had been involved in qualification system development) and York Consulting’s knowledge of relevant bodies across Wales. It was decided that random selection would not result in sufficient organisations that had been involved in the developments surrounding the establishment of QW.

1.13 The broad mix of interviewees covered: employers (and employer representative bodies); learning providers (schools, colleges and work-based learning providers, higher education institutions (HEI) and representative bodies); and, policy stakeholders (awarding bodies, regional consortia and other representative organisations).

1.14 Securing interviews with targeted consultees proved difficult in some cases for the following reasons:

- Some organisations felt that commenting might be considered political in nature, despite assurances of confidentiality.

- Some organisations external to Wales did not feel they had sufficient knowledge to participate, despite best efforts to explain the purpose of the study.

**Table 1.2: Achieved numbers of interviews**

	Individual Organisations	Representative Bodies	Total
Wales	16	14	<b>30</b>
External	5	11	<b>16</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>46</b>

1.15 The spread of achieved interviews across three broad thematic categories is indicated in Table 1.3. The main category where fewer responses were achieved, than originally expected, was employers.

**Table 1.3: Achieved numbers of interviews by thematic category**

Thematic categories	Achieved
Employers	4
Learning providers	21
Policy stakeholders	21
<b>Total</b>	<b>46</b>

1.16 Interviews were undertaken by telephone and on the understanding of anonymity for the respondents. Interviews took an average of one hour each; ranging from 30 minutes to two hours depending on the level of knowledge/insight of the respondent.

1.17 Some important things to note about the qualitative responses from the interviews:

- the extent to which a given respondent could reply to all questions depended on their area of interest and knowledge. In particular, many respondents external to Wales had limited understanding of the detail. Although, their limited understanding was in itself a useful finding.
- Some responses contain misunderstandings. These have been reported as valid attitudes and perceptions even though they may be incorrect. Only by understanding misperceptions can strategies be developed to address them.

### *Quantitative research*

1.18 This survey was conducted using an online omnibus<sup>1</sup> interview administered to members of the YouGov panel in Wales<sup>2</sup> (Annex B). Emails were sent to panellists selected at random from the base sample. The email invited them to take part in a

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<sup>1</sup> An omnibus survey is a method of quantitative marketing research where data on a wide variety of subjects is collected during the same interview.

<sup>2</sup> The YouGov Plc GB panel of individuals who have agreed to take part in surveys is over 350,000.

survey and provided a generic survey link. Once a panel member clicks on the link they are sent to the survey that they most closely fit, according to the sample definition and quotas. The sample definition for this study was 'Wales adult population'.

- 1.19 The profile was derived from census data or, if not available from the census, from industry accepted data. The responding sample was weighted to the profile of the sample definition to provide a representative reporting sample<sup>3</sup> (Annex C). The confidence intervals for the whole sample ranged from +/-1.9 to +/-3.1 percentage points (Annex D).
- 1.20 The four questions included in the survey were as follows:
- Generally, I am confident that qualifications in Wales are fit for purpose.
  - The range of qualifications in Wales meets the needs of learners.
  - The qualification system in Wales as a whole is fit for purpose.
  - The qualification system in Wales is improving.
- 1.21 Respondents were offered a range of response options to indicate how far they agreed or disagreed with the quantitative statements: Strongly agree; Tend to agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Tend to disagree; Strongly disagree; Don't know. Unless specified otherwise analysis combines the 'agree' (Strongly agree and Tend to agree) and 'disagree' responses (Strongly disagree and Tend to disagree).

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<sup>3</sup> YouGov plc makes every effort to provide representative information. All results are based on a sample and are therefore subject to statistical errors normally associated with sample-based information.

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## 2 LEVELS OF CONFIDENCE IN QUALIFICATIONS

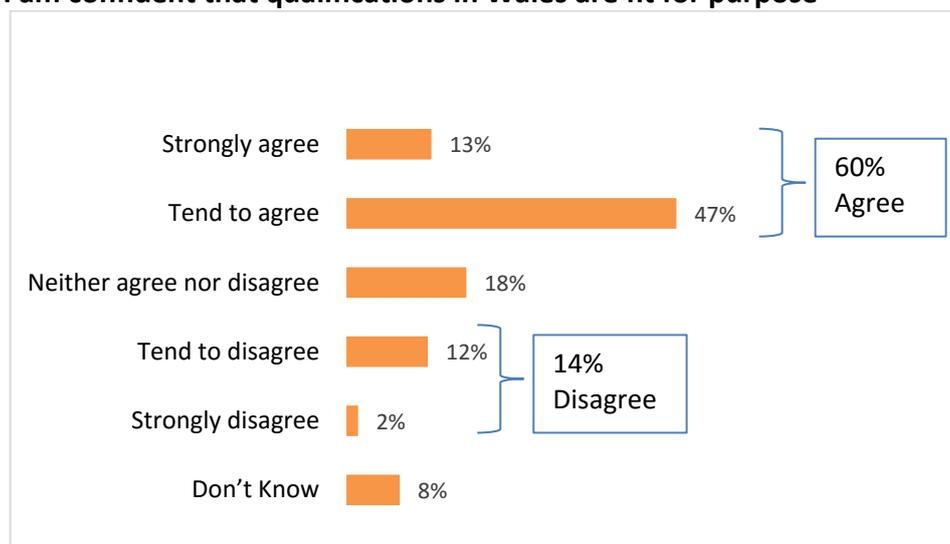
### Introduction

2.1 This section details stakeholders' views about qualifications in Wales. It provides the results from the quantitative survey question regarding confidence in qualifications in Wales. It then draws on stakeholders' views of the qualifications which are shaped in the main by the changes happening to qualifications and the concerns around this. These relate to: the pace and scale of change; the perceived driving force of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA); the risk of divergence from England; and uncertainties in outcome and impact of changes. Specific issues relating to GCSEs, A-Levels, the Welsh Baccaalaureate and vocational qualifications are dealt with in turn, due to the volume of comments. A key theme and concern emerging from the analysis is the uncertainty regarding the changes in the qualifications. This level of uncertainty and extent of confidence more generally will be monitored over the forthcoming years.

### Survey Results for Confidence in Qualifications

2.2 The results of the survey show that three-fifths (60%) of the sample *agreed* with the statement 'generally, I am confident that qualifications in Wales are fit for purpose' (Figure 2.1).

**Figure 2.1: Welsh adults' agreement/disagreement with the statement: Generally, I am confident that qualifications in Wales are fit for purpose**



Source: YouGov Survey of Welsh adults, 2015-16.

Base: 1,005 respondents.

Notes: Fieldwork was undertaken between 7th - 11th January 2016. The survey was carried out online. The figures are representative of all Welsh adults (aged 18+).

2.3 Only 14% *disagreed* with this statement and the remainder were a mixture of *don't know* (8%) or *neither agreeing nor disagreeing* (18%).

## Findings from Stakeholder Interviews

2.4 We interviewed stakeholders on a range of questions relating to confidence in qualification in Wales (see Annex A). Stakeholders' responses covered their views of qualifications generally as well as views regarding the revisions. Responses have been summarised under the following headings:

- Levels of confidence in qualifications currently.
- Concerns and issues regarding the changes and revisions to qualifications.
- Confidence in GCSEs.
- Confidence in A-levels.
- Confidence in Welsh Baccalaureate.
- Confidence in vocational qualifications.

### Levels of confidence in qualifications currently

2.5 Stakeholders were asked to provide initial comment on their confidence in qualifications currently. Many reported confidence in qualifications, (particularly by reference to GCSEs and A-Levels), although some had reservations or felt it was too early to be certain.

*"It's high. On the whole we're very happy with qualifications and the qualification system."*

*"I am generally happy with the quality of qualifications and the abilities of learners."*

*"The confidence is going in the right direction. We haven't yet seen them in operation as the new courses started in last September. We don't know what it's all going to mean."*

2.6 Many stakeholders recognised the need for change and supported QW and the Welsh Government's decision to review qualifications. Many, but not all, stakeholders in Wales agreed that qualifications needed updating, and that the landscape of qualifications had become over complicated.

*"It is important to always refresh qualifications to ensure they are up to date and equip learners with the skills they need to date. I think everyone would agree that we needed to update our English qualifications. I don't have a problem with reviewing the qualifications."*

*"Previous qualifications didn't deliver readiness for everyday use and application in the world of work, the new GCSEs are geared more to these skills."*

*“Rigour is now being brought in and we see it as a good move.”*

*“The overall result is fine and we are quite optimistic that what we will get in the future will be very good. Particularly as in England there seems to be what is reverting to a very academic profile and not giving an idea to vocational routes as being an appropriate thing for a known number of learners.”*

*“The reform process has helped some schools to feel more confident that the new qualifications developed in Wales will be robust and fit for purpose.”*

- 2.7 Stakeholders recognised the need to improve standards, increase rigour and simplify the qualification offer. There was certainly optimism expressed in the interviews around the potential to improve the current system. Although the support was clear, stakeholders, particularly the Welsh stakeholders, expressed a number of concerns or risks relating to the changes and implementation; these are summarised below.

#### **General Concerns Regarding the Changes**

- 2.8 Across all interviews there were a number of common concerns. These included:

- The scale, pace and driver of change.
- The path of qualification reform in relation to curriculum reform.
- The role and capacity of WJEC.
- Concerns over divergence from the UK.

#### *Scale and Scope of Change*

- 2.9 One of the key concerns from stakeholders was the wide scale and fast pace of change and the potential consequences on teachers and schools. A number of stakeholders from Wales raised issues regarding late specifications and insufficient time for teachers to prepare for first teaching in September 2015 and 2016.

*“The current pace of change is so fast that they [schools] cannot keep up.”*

*“The pace of reform is much too much too soon.”*

*“There are concerns regarding the ability of the organisation to respond to the necessary timescales, so the changes happening this year, should have been sorted by last year. This is a combined issue of conflicting agendas, timeframes, resources and competence.”*

*“Specifically, there was a failure to define reasonable timescales for the shift from the 2014-15 system.”*

*“Specifications were published too late and schools are expected to work with them with very little preparation time.”*

### *Path of Qualification Reform*

- 2.10 A number of stakeholders, particularly from the schools and the higher education (HE) sector, raised concerns about the tensions regarding the path of qualification reform and the teacher pedagogy required for teaching when the Donaldson Review<sup>4</sup> curriculum changes are implemented.

*“I am concerned that Wales is embracing short term change without considering the long terms changes connected to the Donaldson review. In terms of morale and workload, there are conflicts. When I came into post, I knew there was going to be one change and now there is going to be two.”*

*“My confidence is undermined somewhat by the speed with which the reforms have been rolled out and I argued that more time was needed, particularly given the recommendations of the Donaldson Review.”*

- 2.11 There were some considerable concerns regarding the move to linear assessments in qualifications and the need for creativity within the curriculum in accordance with recommendations in the Donaldson Review. Stakeholders expressed caution in moving to a system that appeared to be limiting learner choice (due to an increase in GCSEs counting towards school performance measures), and an over reliance on final examinations rather than assessing practical skills.
- 2.12 A small number of stakeholders also stated concerns that the position of Wales in the PISA ranking was driving the changes and that this was impacting negatively on decisions being made by the Welsh Government and ultimately QW.

*“At the moment the obsession seems to be with PISA. I can see that if Wales started to climb up the rankings then this would increase the public confidence in our teaching and qualifications. But this is a very narrow focus.”*

*“The focus on these narrow measures might stifle creativity in teaching and impact adversely upon teachers’ ability to ‘broaden young people’s horizons.”*

### *The Role of WJEC*

- 2.13 There were some uncertainties around the role of WJEC and whether they have the capacity to respond to the timeframes and to the appropriate quality. A few stakeholders mentioned a number of revisions in the Welsh Baccalaureate as examples of how confidence was being eroded.

*“There is always an over commitment and I am concerned about quality. It is not physically possible to do all of this, and something is bound to*

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<sup>4</sup> Successful Futures - Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales, Professor Graham Donaldson CB, February 2015 [http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/22165/2/150225-successful-futures-en\\_Redacted.pdf](http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/22165/2/150225-successful-futures-en_Redacted.pdf)

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*break. I am worried about the perception within the profession, because if we start to lose confidence in the system, it will break."*

#### *Concerns over Divergence from the UK*

- 2.14 Many stakeholders were concerned about the direction of travel and the divergence from England in particular (but also with the rest of the UK). This was particularly in relation to retention of the grading structure, retention of coupled A2 and AS levels and apprenticeship changes in England. Although there was considerable support for the position Wales was adopting in these key areas, the main concerns related to portability of qualifications within HE and employers in particular.

*"A big issue I raised at the time was about there not being too much divergence between England and Wales. Young people need currency across the border and internationally."*

*"My primary concern was that the new Welsh qualifications should be comparable with, and hold their own against, parallel qualifications awarded in England. I'm concerned that it should be easy to compare Welsh A\*-E grades and English 1-9 grades and that claims of equivalence should be robust and reliable."*

*"I think that the divergence of apprenticeship policy in England and Wales is unhelpful and potentially confusing for employers."*

*"I would like to see a UK wide system operating. I am aware of other UK employers in my sector who are concerned about divergence of country systems."*

- 2.15 During the interviews, stakeholders were expressing concerns regarding the potential risks to learners, the potential dip in attainment levels and the public's perception of the Welsh qualification system. This was leading stakeholders to raise what appear to be quite negative viewpoints. However, a lot of the concerns around the changes were borne out of uncertainty of the potential impact of changes, leading stakeholders to scrutinise decisions and direction of travel.

*"No one can answer these questions at the moment as they simply don't know. There is a lot of unknown about the assessment and what marks will equal a certain grade so it is all up in the air."*

*"There is a level of uncertainty among HEIs as to what it all means."*

#### **Confidence in GCSEs**

- 2.16 There was considerable confidence in GCSE qualifications as a valuable method for assessing learning, knowledge and skills acquisition.

*"I have never really doubted the robustness or appropriateness of GCSE courses."*

*"I am confident in GCSEs and feel that Wales has struck the right balance between coursework and exams, more so than exam-based assessments which dominate GCSEs in England."*

2.17 There were a few comments regarding recent events (for example the remarking of English exams) that have eroded a layer of confidence, but in the main, stakeholders were still confident in GCSEs and the regulatory bodies.

2.18 In terms of support for the reforms in GCSEs, there were views expressed by stakeholders involved in delivering the new/revised qualifications (English, Mathematics – Numeracy, Mathematics and Welsh First Language) that they will drive up standards.

*"Learners are required to use greater analytical skills."*

*"Head Teachers are very supportive of the actual changes that have been made to the qualifications in those areas. The skills that are exemplified by the sample assessment materials are the skills that they agree we should be teaching the pupils and the pupils should be leaving school with."*

*"The new specifications in maths and mathematics will develop learners' ability to adapt learning to everyday use."*

2.19 There were a few concerns regarding the introduction of reformed GCSE Maths and GCSE Maths-Numeracy in relation to how both qualifications would operate and whether the teachers were adequately prepared to teach them.

*"The impression I get, is that they (schools) are already looking at a proportion of students and saying that there is no point in entering them because they are not going to be able to do it. I think there is every chance we will end up with everyone doing the numeracy paper but only a proportion doing the Mathematical Techniques."*

*"There are genuine pressures on teachers in schools and they think that more focus on CPD [continuous professional development] is required to support their ability to teach effectively, as qualifications change and develop."*

2.20 There was also concern from HEIs regarding the content of both Maths GCSEs and whether they should be asking students to have acquired both Maths GCSEs before offering a place.

*"Thinking about qualifications reform specifically, in Wales there will be a Numeracy GCSE and a Maths GCSE. We fed back to the regulators that universities were unclear at this point in time about how they would treat those in comparison with the straightforward Maths GCSE in*

*England...They would look at the Welsh Maths GCSE as comparable to the English Maths GCSE, the numeracy one is an additional one."*

- 2.21 There were also concerns expressed on behalf of teachers' regarding how they are going to advise learners on what is a pass, or what is an A grade.

*"If I was a teacher in school now, to track them would be difficult, so I don't know if they were getting a 60% would that be a C or would the 80% we are awarding, would that equate to an A?"*

- 2.22 More generally there were concerns regarding the ability of teachers to teach to the new specifications because of the extent of changes and timeframes. Schools and local authority support teams have compared preparation time available for science with other subjects for first time teaching in September 2016.

*"Science is changing for first teaching from September, however there has been significant funding put into consortia for the past 12 months, because of that, we have been able to start preparing science teachers....It is different when you have a GCSE Geography where 35% of the content is potentially changing. That has only been communicated to schools in March and the cohort has already started the GCSE course...It is things like this that are causing a loss in confidence in the system."*

- 2.23 Although according to local authorities, teachers do understand the specifications and are adapting their teaching methods and resources to fit, there were a number of concerns raised by teachers about the quality of specimen samples and that they may not reflect the assessments. This is leading to teachers feeling under-confident of their ability to guide the necessary learning.

- 2.24 One HEI spoke about considerable teacher training outreach sessions they were offering on quantification.

*"We do lots of outreach work involving teaching teachers to improve how they teach quantification not just for our Science candidates but for Social Scientists. We started an outreach programme 18 months ago and we have been staggered by the demand and we almost can't keep up with the demand of teachers wanting to come to upskill themselves to be able to teach that better."*

- 2.25 There was strong support for literacy and numeracy being embedded in GCSEs, and for being part of the Welsh Baccalaureate, to reduce duplication in learning.

*"The Essential Skills qualifications were difficult to deliver within the curriculum and there was a lot of repetition within the curriculum with these qualifications. Now that it has been embedded in all the GCSE this is a better more rounded approach."*

*“The quality of the teaching and learning was low and there was a lot of repetition. So anything that improves on this, will be better...all teachers having a responsibility for the levels of literacy and numeracy is a positive step.”*

*“I am pleased the Welsh Baccalaureate is including ESW [Essential Skills Wales] qualifications and I think this will improve the all-round learning experience.”*

2.26 There was a comment regarding first language Welsh and first language English being more comparable with regard to assessment which was viewed as a positive step towards equity.

2.27 A few informed stakeholders had reservations about the standard of literacy and numeracy and the ability of colleges to meet learners’ needs. Whilst they accepted that effective learning contextualises essential skills alongside other subject knowledge, there were some reservations about the degree of balance.

*“Lots of young people at colleges found school classroom style learning did not work for them and I am concerned about the over emphasis on essential skills.”*

2.28 There were many concerns expressed by stakeholders regarding the impact of an increase in the number of GCSEs learners need to take, along with the Welsh Baccalaureate becoming universally adopted, the two Maths GCSEs and Religious Studies. This is dealt with in the section on learners (Section Three).

2.29 Stakeholders from schools were concerned about the impact on school performance, and on learners, of the changes in GCSE specification.

*“When you look at those GCSEs, there are variations in terms of how much impact it will have on the school performance measures...I would say at least half will constitute a 35% – 45% change in content. That has a significant impact on the Head of Department in terms of what they need to do to prepare. What they are doing at the moment with their year 10 pupils is not preparing them for their ultimate GCSE.”*

### **Confidence in A levels**

2.30 There were high levels of confidence in A-levels in Wales and a general agreement that Welsh A-levels were comparable to other parts of the UK.

*“General qualifications (GCSEs, AS and A Levels) meet learners’ needs.”*

*“GCSEs and A levels provide a well-trodden path into higher education.”*

2.31 Despite the confidence in A-levels, there was support for the changes in A-levels and an assumption that the new specifications would challenge learners and improve their analytical skills.

*"I think what it will lead to is, hopefully, Welsh learners that are better prepared for that transition into higher education if the government has got it right. We won't know the answer to that for a number of years."*

2.32 Stakeholders were keen to re-iterate the importance of portability in A-levels.

*"The qualifications in Wales need to be of a comparable level to parallel qualifications in other parts of the UK and, therefore, credible currency for individuals applying to university or for jobs."*

2.33 One stakeholder stated that she valued the tri-partite agreement that operated across the UK, and was unaware that this was ending.

2.34 There was considerable support for the decision to retain the coupling of AS to A2 qualifications despite it being a divergence from England. Nobody raised any issue regarding the reduction in AS contribution to final grading from 50% to 40%.

*"We find the AS levels helpful and are happy that the Welsh Government has kept with them. They are a more reliable indicator than schools predicted grades (as different schools approach in different ways and this leads to less consistency)."*

*"Some teachers have been bemoaning the loss of the AS level as part of the A level [in England]. The general feeling of both schools and universities in England is that the Government went too far. Reducing the number of re-sits and getting rid of January exams was good, but the move to de-couple the AS from the A level has created problems and not solved any. I think that Wales remained really engaged with what they were hearing from teachers and universities in a way that the Department for Education [in England] didn't."*

2.35 However, there were some concerns around the grading that could be given to students across England and Wales in Science and English A levels and the impact of changes to HEI admissions policies.

*"There will be learners getting A grades at A level but the learners in England will be coming out with B grades due to them doing the more linear externally assessed A level. All it takes is one year of that difference to come through and universities will possibly lose confidence."*

*"With the Science A level and the English ones no longer including the practical assessment as part of the grade, there are challenges around fairness and how do we decide what is a fair offer in England versus in Wales? This is going to be a big challenge for the entire university sector. At the minute an English student who doesn't do well in their practical assessment can still get an A\* in their A level but a Welsh student almost certainly won't get an A\* because it is penalising them on that main*

*grade. What we, and some other universities are stating for the English one is that you have to pass the practical assessment anyway, which will mitigate it to some extent. That is where there is a substantial difference.”*

- 2.36 The extent to which the changes in qualifications including both GCSEs and A-levels were affecting universities’ admissions teams seemed to vary, depending on the type of university. Two Russell Group<sup>5</sup> universities stated that they would treat A levels the same unless there was perceived to be a grade difference as a result of the changes.

*“During the consultation phases on these things we can get really hung up on the questions ‘will it be slightly better or slightly worse than it was before?’ We are only going to change our entry requirements if it is a full grade different to what it was before. In a sense, it is going to be “business as usual.”*

- 2.37 Two HEIs (non-Russell Group) stated that considerable work needed to be done to make sure that offers were fair.

*“The main impact of changes to A Levels, and in particular the difference between using the AS level or not, is that the university needs to take a look and take view on how they are going to ask for different combinations and grades for admission to different courses.”*

*“Admissions tutors are very aware and concerned about the vast changes across Wales and England and how they are comparable and what their offers will now need to state. We did some mapping that showed that between now and 2020, that every year there will be some new change that we have got to account for in how we advertise what grades we accept.”*

### **Confidence in the Welsh Baccalaureate**

- 2.38 There were mixed views presented from stakeholders on the Welsh Baccalaureate. These fell into the following areas:

- Impact on learners.
- The Welsh Baccalaureate needed improving.
- The limited capacity and expertise among teaching staff to deliver the qualification to a high standard, which affects the quality of learning and outcomes.

#### *Impact on Learners*

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<sup>5</sup> “The Russell Group represents 24 leading UK universities which are committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning” <http://russellgroup.ac.uk/>

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- 2.39 A number of stakeholders reported valuing the Welsh Baccalaureate for the diverse learning opportunities.

*“I think the Welsh Baccalaureate is exactly the sort of thing that our most able students really need because, particularly at A Level...they get focused on a very narrow range of studies that they don’t necessarily pick up the soft skills that they need to succeed, for example working together, communicating, public speaking, presenting to other people.”*

*“I believe that the Welsh Baccalaureate demonstrates a wider knowledge and skills base than other qualifications and I think many HEIs, outside of the Russel Groups will value this.”*

- 2.40 Stakeholders outside of Wales, particularly employers, had very limited recognition of the Welsh Baccalaureate.

*“I have hardly any knowledge of it, I’ve heard of it, but wouldn’t know what it involves.”*

- 2.41 Some HEIs stated they valued the Welsh Baccalaureate as a way of students demonstrating broader skills. One HEI indicated that it might contribute towards the overall grade offer, but very much as a supplementary element rather than as a direct substitute for an A Level.

*“We like the Welsh Baccalaureate. It is only Medicine and Dentistry where we ask for a fourth A Level and potentially the Welsh Baccalaureate could help there. If in the future we were to use it, it would be more in a situation where, if someone was doing three A levels and a Welsh Baccalaureate, we might make them an offer stating that ‘it’s three As in your three A Levels but if you get A or A\* in the Welsh Baccalaureate, then we will take you with AAB.”*

- 2.42 However, a few stakeholders expressed a word of caution that learners needed to be clear about the advantages and potential limitations of taking an A-level Welsh Baccalaureate in place of another A-level.

*“The main thing for HEIs is ensuring that studying the Welsh Baccalaureate doesn’t take away from A-levels that provide better opportunities for a learner in terms of their progression to HE.”*

- 2.43 Many stakeholders were concerned about the impact of making the Welsh Baccalaureate universally adopted and reducing choice. (See Section Three for more detail).

*“It squeezes out choice; 75% of my pupils cannot get 5 GCSE passes and still need to do the Welsh Baccalaureate where as they could be doing something else and get a qualification they are interested in.”*

*“I would argue that for the more aspirational learners, the Welsh Baccalaureate is not appropriate and learners should be focussing their time on getting higher grades.”*

#### *The Welsh Baccalaureate Needed Improving*

- 2.44 A number of stakeholders interviewed recognised the need to improve the Welsh Baccalaureate. In particular, relating to how demanding it was perceived to be, relative to other A Levels. Some of the comments related to the old version of the Welsh Baccalaureate.

*“It depends on how it is taught in schools, but in many cases it’s not demanding enough.”*

*“We had noticed that some of those that were coming in with the automatic A at A level in the Welsh Baccalaureate were not doing as well which made us think we needed to do a little more work. We did an internal audit of the performance of those with a Welsh Baccalaureate and two A levels versus three traditional A levels in order to have an evidence based rather than just anecdote. That research confirmed that the group were not performing as well, needed more support, outcomes were poorer and retention was poorer. It started raising some alarm bells.”*

- 2.45 There was a recognition that the changes being made were an improvement. In particular, stakeholders cited the increased emphasis on project work, increased rigour, use of grading and relevance to the breadth of all learners.

*“I am positive about the changes and feel that stakeholders’ comments have been reflected in its design...I’m pleased with changes to the A\*-G grading. The increase in size of project work is welcomed and it’s generally a much more rigorous qualification.”*

*“It is more appropriate to a broad range of learners and the different types of qualifications they’re doing.”*

*“The challenge is how to make it relevant and robust to the range of students that the Welsh Government has got to take into consideration. We did feel it was a move in the right direction to what was there before.”*

*“I am very pleased that the qualification is now being graded, this makes it more valuable for learners and for HEIs.”*

- 2.46 However, there were a number of criticisms around the introduction of the changes which led some to conclude they had lost confidence in the awarding body and the qualification.

*“Fundamental changes were made to the structure of the qualification as late as September 2015. This meant that messages given to teachers*

*during training events changed and that they, in turn, had to tell learners 'it's not like that now, it's like this'...this undermined learners' confidence in teachers as well as in the qualification itself."*

- 2.47 There was no use of the Welsh Baccalaureate reported by independent schools. They were unsure of the value of the qualification although some offer the International Baccalaureate.

#### *Teacher Capacity and Expertise to Teach the Welsh Baccalaureate*

- 2.48 There were a few stakeholders that reported concerns over the capacity and expertise of teachers to teach the Welsh Baccalaureate.

*"What you tend to get is teachers being levered in to teach the Welsh Baccalaureate with hardly any training and expertise around delivering it. Pupils can see this and over the years there is definitely a loss of value among learners."*

*"Schools have questioned the appropriateness of the emphasis which the Welsh Government has placed upon the Welsh Baccalaureate, particularly in relation to other subjects. Learning providers face short-term problems in balancing the demands of the Welsh Baccalaureate against those of the rest of the curriculum."*

*"There is a pattern that a lot of MFL teachers are delivering the Welsh Bacc. There is no thought as to whether they are the best teachers, the right teachers or the most qualified teachers to deliver that. The impact of that is that pupils don't want to take those subjects because they are well aware that a non-specialist is delivering an option subject. They feel it is not appropriate and that they won't do as well as they might."*

#### **Confidence in Vocational Qualifications**

- 2.49 There was overwhelming support for vocational qualifications. Responses mainly centred around the following key issues:

- The importance of vocational qualifications for learners in Wales.
- The rigour and value of vocational qualifications to GCSEs.
- The need to review the vocational qualifications available to school learners.

#### *Importance of Vocational Qualifications*

- 2.50 Most stakeholders recognised the value of vocational qualifications in Wales.

*"When you look at that (levels of deprivation in Wales) and the needs of a significant number of students in Wales, there is a greater need for vocational qualifications. There is a greater need for qualifications that students can tackle and succeed at, which GCSE doesn't always provide."*

*It is the tailoring of qualifications to the needs of the students within the country that is important.”*

*“I am very confident in the quality of apprenticeships and think they are an excellent framework for learners, better than the English framework.”*

*“Generally speaking there is confidence among employers in England about vocational qualifications in Wales. However, as differences become more apparent between apprenticeship systems, this is likely to become a bigger issue.”*

- 2.51 A number of stakeholders were concerned that vocational qualifications were becoming a neglected area. There was concern about an increasing emphasis on external summative assessment as opposed to learners evidencing learning through their learner portfolios.

#### *The rigour and equivalence of vocational qualifications*

- 2.52 There were a number of stakeholders who were concerned about the rigour and equivalence of vocational qualifications. Stakeholders valued vocational qualifications as an alternative route into further education but gave examples of where some vocational qualifications were not fit for purpose.

*“The BTEC<sup>6</sup> in Science had been instrumental in engaging some pupils who would otherwise be put off by the idea of needing to sit exams at the end of GCSE courses. However, I feel that it was probably too easy to succeed at courses, which were assessed 100% on coursework, with no exam or practical element to them.”*

*“I am pleased that the BTEC Science exam has been scrapped as this was not adequately preparing learners for a career in science but was being used by schools as a method of getting learners through exams.”*

*“I am less confident in the veracity of vocational qualifications, mainly due to the methods of assessment employed.”*

- 2.53 HEIs had reservations regarding the rigour in vocational qualifications and whether they prepared students for the demands of HE.

*“We do have some good students that come through with them [vocational qualifications] but it isn’t necessarily the best preparation for them taking on a very academic course.”*

#### *The need to review the range of vocational qualifications for school learners*

- 2.54 There was a general acceptance of the need to review vocational qualifications due to the large number of awarding bodies delivering the qualifications. It had been

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<sup>6</sup> Business and Technology Education Council: <http://qualifications.pearson.com/en/support/support-topics/understanding-our-qualifications/our-qualifications-explained/about-btecs.html>

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getting increasingly difficult for learning providers to navigate their way through the various pathways.

*“The huge number of awarding bodies makes it more difficult to be absolutely confident across the board.” (Although he did acknowledge there had been no scandals to undermine confidence.)*

- 2.55 There were concerns regarding the lack of a clear policy framework for vocational qualifications and a call to ensure that vocational qualifications are designed in consultation with employers. There were particular concerns that employer engagement has been minimised.

*“I am concerned that the vocational element of qualifications is a neglected area and that as the monopoly on school qualifications is played out, i.e. WJEC delivering qualifications that are steered by Qualifications Wales and the move towards school based qualifications will impact on the range of qualifications.”*

*“Wales needs to build internal capacity to develop vocational qualifications that reflect the Principality’s economic needs, whilst also addressing the Welsh Government’s ambitions.”*

- 2.56 Stakeholders also identified that a reduction in equivalence (to other qualifications) in Welsh Government school performance measures would have serious implications for learners and for school performance.

*“I am concerned about the impact of any changes to vocational qualifications in terms of their equivalence, and the tensions between it affecting school performance indicators but providing pupils with choice.”*

*“Concern for the impact on learners of a reduction in equivalence for learners as schools are compelled to recommend that learners study GCSEs.”*

*“My main concern around this is related to learners who come from deprived backgrounds and under achieve. I have adapted the curriculum for the lower attainers and I am very worried about what the future implications are for the learners if the bar is moved so far.”*

### 3 CONFIDENCE IN THE QUALIFICATION SYSTEM

#### Introduction

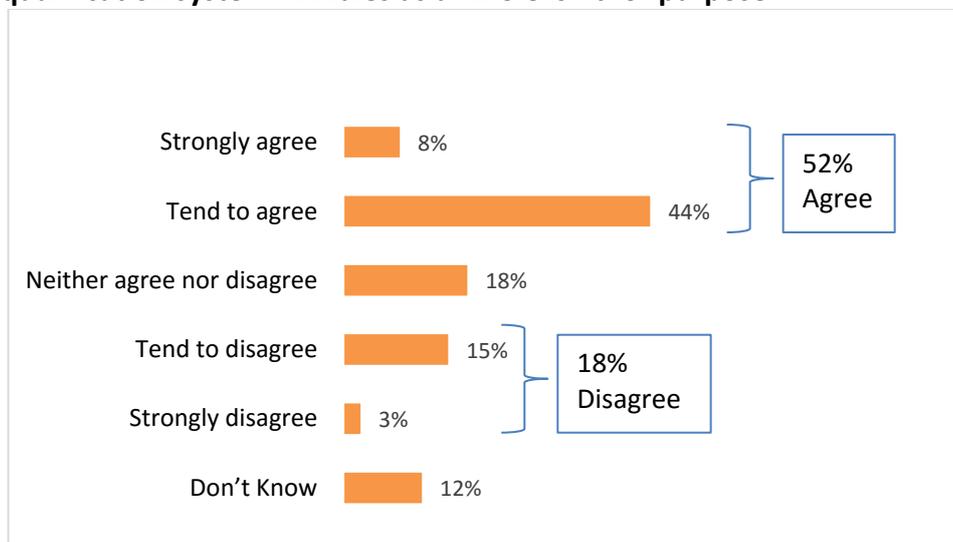
3.1 This section details the views of stakeholders regarding their levels of confidence in the qualification system and their views of the potential benefits and risks of moving to an independent organisation responsible for regulation and quality assurance of qualifications. It presents the results from the quantitative survey of adults in Wales and the views of stakeholders regarding the role of the new regulatory body. The views expressed include opinions that the system had become over complicated; risks associated with a new regulatory body; views of the previous administration carried out by the Welsh Government and opinions about confidence in QW going forward.

#### Survey Results for Confidence in the Qualification System

3.2 Survey respondents were asked about their confidence that the qualifications system in Wales is fit for purpose. The qualifications system was defined as “the roles undertaken by organisations such as Awarding Bodies who design and award qualifications, and QW who check that standards are tough, but reasonable and are consistently applied”.

3.3 Data from the public survey of adults in Wales shows that just over a half (52%) *agreed* that the qualification system was fit for purpose (Figure 3.1). Just under a fifth (18%) *disagreed* with the statement that the qualification system is fit for purpose and 12% of respondents could not answer the question and were recorded with a *don't know*.

**Figure 3.1: Welsh adults' agreement/disagreement with the statement: The qualification system in Wales as a whole is fit for purpose**



Source: YouGov Survey of Welsh adults, 2015-16.

Base: 1,005 respondents.

Notes: Fieldwork was undertaken between 7th - 11th January 2016. The survey was carried out online. The figures are representative of all Welsh adults (aged 18+).

## **Stakeholders' Views of the Qualification System**

### **Confidence in the System**

- 3.4 Stakeholders were asked to comment on their confidence in awarding bodies operating in Wales and whether they provide a secure service and appropriate qualifications. Views regarding the qualification system were mixed, with many stakeholders stating they had faith in the current awarding bodies and the system of regulation but that the system had become over complicated.

*"As a head teacher, I am generally content with the qualification system prior to the reform process."*

*"I am happy with regulation and quality assurance, although I recognise there is an element of the unknown until Qualifications Wales begin a more substantial programme of reform on vocational qualifications."*

*"Yes, I have confidence in WJEC and the support they provide schools and I believe that the system of revisions and consultations and the level of engagement with WJEC has been good."*

*"Generally I am confident that awarding bodies give the right marks."*

### **An Over Complicated System**

- 3.5 However, there was a common view that the qualification system had become over complicated. Schools were not always clear about which qualifications to deliver or which pathways to HE to recommend to learners. There were concerns that learners, employers and parents may struggle to understand the qualification system.

*"There's probably too great a variety of qualifications and providers of qualifications for the system to be easily understood and navigated by learners. Whilst I am in favour of 'plurality', I think it would be easier for learners if there were fewer awarding bodies and qualification choices."*

*"It can be very difficult as an employer and as a parent to advise young people on what courses and qualifications are the best to select."*

*"Historically there has been such a lot of game playing in schools around going with whichever exam board students were likely to get the highest grade at because it suited the league tables. Most people have got a very confused idea because most of our students come with a variety of A levels from a range of different boards."*

*"It seems at a basic level that we have a qualifications framework that is too complicated with too many qualifications...we are in a situation*

*where we have got a qualifications framework which is incredibly difficult for learners to understand as they go into the process. It is difficult for parents/guardians to understand. It is even more difficult for employers or HE/ FE [Further Education] institutions to understand.”*

*“There is no doubt that one of the problems that the Government faced was that schools would pick and choose the ones that they felt suited their learners best. There were some that were easier than others. It is a good thing that we are getting rid of that.”*

As the above quotes indicate, some stakeholders were supportive of moves to simplify the system including reducing the number of qualifications and Awarding Bodies.

### **Risks Associated with A New Regulatory Body**

- 3.6 A few stakeholders were concerned about creating a Welsh system and the ability and willingness of awarding bodies to deliver to different systems across the UK.

*“Awarding bodies have insufficient capacity and insufficient commitment to developing fully vocational qualifications which satisfy employer’s needs.”*

*“The other exam boards are not going to commit to running courses in Wales. It is quite expensive for them, they got to produce the specifications and do all translation into Welsh. The actual volume of students who would sit those exams proportionally is tiny.”*

- 3.7 Although there was a good level of confidence in WJEC, a number of stakeholders were concerned about the increasing role of WJEC and the need to provide structures ensuring accountability and quality.

*“I am less confident in the appropriateness of qualifications...particularly now that the WJEC is gradually becoming the only body awarding general qualifications.”*

*“We need to have Qualifications Wales as a regulator independent of government and separate from the WJEC (the main awarding body)”*

*“There is a need for the independent organisation to challenge WJEC.”*

*“There is room for the WJEC to work with other awarding bodies, drawing upon their technical expertise and adding to the blend of knowledge of Wales and the Welsh Government’s priorities.”*

- 3.8 One stakeholder suggested that they were encouraging QW to consider multiple specifications for qualifications to get around the reduction in choice of qualifications.

*“Two specs might be a really positive thing to help some of the students.”*

- 3.9 Due to the potential reduction in awarding bodies delivering in Wales and a perceived reduction in the value of vocational qualifications, some stakeholders

were concerned about the impact of qualification rationalisation on certain pupils. (This is dealt with in more detail in Section Four).

*“The system is redefining their average pupil by streamlining the system and taking a choice out, catering for fewer people.”*

### **Views of the Qualification System Managed by the Welsh Government**

3.10 A few informed stakeholders stated that the Welsh Government had carried out an effective role, but the majority were critical of the previous arrangement, as ministers were influencing the direction of qualifications and the qualification system.

*“Prior to Qualifications Wales I felt that ministers did get involved in influencing qualifications development.”*

*“Ministers were the decision makers and the regulator ... with advice from officials. However, I have never felt that ministers’ decisions had been inappropriate.”*

*“There was considerable influence and this is what led to a lot of concerns in the past about decisions that were made regarding linguistics, essential skills and the Welsh Baccalaureate.”*

3.11 Some stakeholders thought that ministers had exerted a very strong influence over decisions about qualifications in Wales. One stakeholder provided an example of the decision that every pupil should do two Science GCSEs regardless of their ability or aptitude and this went against the advice from the teaching profession. Whilst recognising that ministers’ ambitions might be to raise standards, there were concerns that some policies set young people up to fail.

3.12 There were other examples provided of the shortcoming with regards to a lack of strategic planning including for Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET) and Continuing Vocational Education and Training (CVET) and the new qualifications for first teaching in September 2015. These problems were assumed to be related to a lack of capacity within the Welsh Government and a historical over reliance on Ofqual<sup>7</sup>.

*“The Welsh Government relied on Ofqual’s expertise rather than developing its own. This became apparent during the period when responsibility for regulation was transferred to Qualifications Wales, with the Welsh Government clearly unable to fill the gap. As a result, key decisions were not taken about general qualifications. For example, the introduction of new GCSEs in English, Welsh and Maths, as well as the new Baccalaureate in September 2015. Decisions were not made about how vocational qualifications would develop in the wake of the*

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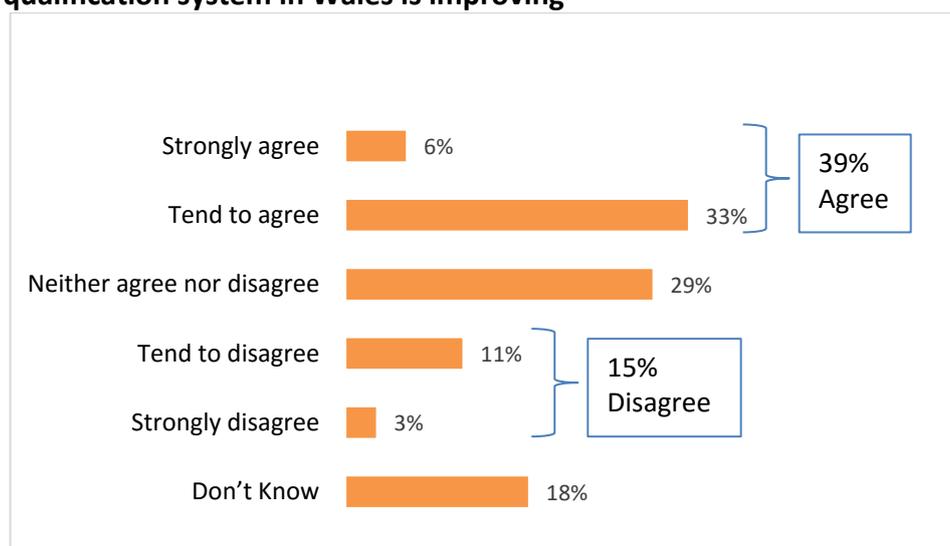
<sup>7</sup> The regulator of qualifications, examinations and assessments in England and vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofqual>

*qualifications review. Specifically, there was a failure to define reasonable timescales for the shift from the 2014-15 system to the implementation of IVET and CVET courses.”*

### Establishing Effective Independent Regulation through QW

3.13 Quantitative results from the survey of adults in Wales, showed that just under two-fifths of Welsh adults (39%) *agreed* that the qualification system in Wales is improving (Figure 3.1). Around one in seven (14%) *disagreed*, but nearly three out of ten (29%) *neither agreed nor disagreed*. Just under a fifth (18%) *did not know*.

**Figure 3.1: Welsh adults’ agreement/disagreement with the statement: The qualification system in Wales is improving**



Source: YouGov Survey of Welsh adults, 2015-16.

Base: 1,005 respondents.

Notes: Fieldwork was undertaken between 7th - 11th January 2016. The survey was carried out online. The figures are representative of all Welsh adults (aged 18+). Percentages do not sum due to rounding.

3.14 Stakeholders were unsure that the qualification system was improving. This view was probably connected to the short time that QW had been operating and the uncertainty of the impact of recent changes, rather than a direct criticism of functioning to date. It may also be that some stakeholders lacked clarity on the scope of the qualification system. There was a high level of recognition that QW was operating with a much greater level of openness and transparency and this was improving confidence in the system.

3.15 There was recognition that QW has strong leadership and a high level of hope and expectation that QW will be able to act independently.

*“It is very important that decisions are made in the interest of education and for learners and not made by ministers looking over their shoulder at England, so in that sense, very important.”*

*“Definitely important, Welsh Government have a particular agenda and that is getting up the PISA rankings. Qualifications Wales needs to be able to mediate between this and the Donaldson review.”*

*“My view would be that independence helps to make clear decisions.”*

*“I think it’s important that decisions about qualifications sit away from government and, therefore, welcomed the establishment of QW as an arm’s length body.”*

- 3.16 There was also a good degree of optimism from those stakeholders that felt able to comment, that QW would be able to act independently.

*“The legal powers bestowed upon Qualifications Wales should equip it to act independently. Indeed, I have been impressed by the degree of independence which the statute grants Qualification Wales.”*

*“Qualifications Wales is well placed to take the lead in ensuring that the qualification system in Wales is purposeful and coordinated in the interests of learners, whilst also ensuring confidence in the qualifications among the full range of stakeholders, including learners, parents, schools, colleges, employers and the higher education sector across the UK.”*

*“I think it’s encouraging that Qualifications Wales has already announced a delay of a year to the introduction of new GCSEs in History and RE.”*

*“I am very optimistic and hope that the qualification system in Wales will improve...I like the way they are going about their work.”*

- 3.17 Informed stakeholders were somewhat ambivalent on the question of independence, or questioned the extent to which QW would or/and should be able to operate independently.

*“Ministers will have an influence over the qualifications as they are paying for them. Ultimately I am not worried about the issue of independence.”*

*“It would be foolish to imagine that they [Qualifications Wales] will be able to ignore politicians after all, who established Qualifications Wales... the Welsh Government is democratically elected to make decisions about the economy and budgets and that it should, therefore, have a voice on how to strengthen education policy.”*

#### *Risks Associated with a New Regulatory Body*

- 3.18 A few stakeholders talked of the risks associated with establishing QW. Given the extent to which stakeholders perceived government ministers to have shaped decisions on qualifications, a small number questioned the extent to which QW could operate independently.

*“We need a clear line of responsibility between Welsh Government, Qualifications Wales and Awarding Bodies.”*

*“Qualifications Wales needs to keep an eye on the balance of expertise within its teams. Specifically, in subject expertise, technical expertise, knowledge of assessment methods, interpreting data and administration.”*

*“I feel the setup of Qualifications Wales is high risk as it has got to work with all the resource that has been invested.”*

- 3.19 Some of the risks were related to comparing the operating functions of Ofqual. Stakeholders were hopeful that QW will take their own position on qualifications but had some reservations, linked to a perception that Ofqual had been influenced by the Westminster Government.

*“It will be interesting to see how that plays out. Whilst Ofqual is meant to be independent, it seems to have done what the English Government wants. I would hope that Qualifications Wales as a regulator would have the confidence to object to some policy change if they felt it wasn’t right.”*

- 3.20 Confidence in the arrangements for quality assurance have been affected by the delays in specification being released for first time teaching in September 2015 and September 2016.

*“There is an issue with the WJEC who are not renowned for speed. I asked one of the officials why the specs were so late, they said they were still revising them and they needed to be translated.”*

*“I have concerns regarding the issues relating to WJEC and need reassuring that there is going to be a good transparent line of communication between WJEC and Qualifications Wales and that they will hold them to account.”*

- 3.21 Informed stakeholders questioned whether QW had sufficient resources to manage the extent of changes effectively.

*“I have concerns regarding the ability of the organisation (Qualifications Wales) to respond to the necessary timescales, so the changes happening this year, should have been sorted by last year. This is a combined issue of conflicting agendas, timeframes and resources.”*

- 3.22 There was a feeling among some key stakeholders that the impact of the changes taking place were not aligning with the philosophy underpinning the Donaldson Review.

*“The Welsh Government have a particular agenda and that is getting up the PISA rankings. Qualifications Wales need to be able to mediate between this and the Donaldson review.”*

- 3.23 There is support for QW operating as a new regulatory body but there was a recognition that a lot of change is taking place ahead of Donaldson which could distract attention from the longer-term vision.

*“It’ll take a decade to respond in a coordinated fashion to Donaldson and I would caution against trying to rush changes through too quickly or tinkering around the edges without getting to grips with the real challenges.”*

## 4 THE RANGE OF QUALIFICATIONS MEETING LEARNERS' NEEDS

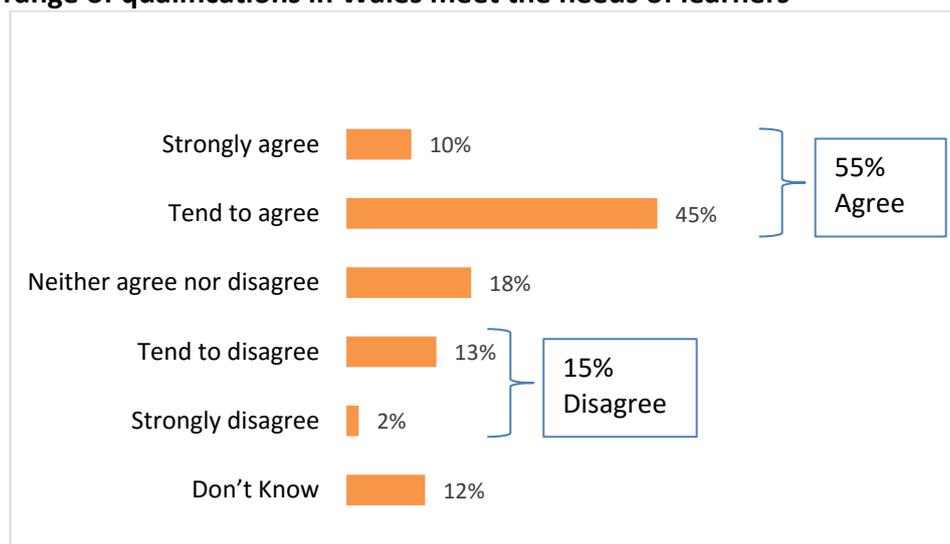
### Introduction

4.1 This section details whether stakeholders considered that the qualifications meet the needs of learners. A number of the concerns already highlighted are given again here in more detail with regards the potential impact on learners. This section details the results of the quantitative survey of adults in Wales and then describes some of the key stakeholder concerns relating to learners. These include the impact of the changes on: learner choice; learner attainment levels; the potential impact on learner pathways to further learning; and, the perceived inequity for first language Welsh learners in a system where Welsh resources and capacity to meet the needs of Welsh Medium learners is challenged.

### Survey Results on Whether Qualifications Meet the Needs of Learners

4.2 The survey of adults in Wales showed that over a half (55%) respondents *agreed* that qualifications met the needs of learners (Figure 4.1). 15% *disagreed* with the statement and 12% stated they *did not know*. 18% could *neither agree nor disagree*.

**Figure 4.1: Welsh adults' agreement/disagreement with the statement: The range of qualifications in Wales meet the needs of learners**



Source: YouGov Survey of Welsh adults, 2015-16.

Base: 1,005 respondents.

Notes: Fieldwork was undertaken between 7th - 11th January 2016. The survey was carried out online. The figures are representative of all Welsh adults (aged 18+). Percentages do not all sum precisely due to rounding.

## Stakeholder Responses on Whether Qualifications Meet the Needs of Learners

- 4.3 Stakeholders made general comments affirming that qualifications met the reasonable needs of learners.

*“Generally I think the Welsh qualification system meets the needs of learners, however, it can be challenging when young people are not clear exactly what career they want to go into.”*

- 4.4 In the main, these comments referred to GCSE qualifications although there was general pessimism around vocational qualifications. Stakeholders from the schools, FE and HE sectors were more concerned about the impact of changes on learner pathways and attainment as they progress from pre-16 to post-16 learning.

- 4.5 Key points raised regarding qualifications meeting the reasonable needs of learners included the following key areas:

- The impact of the qualifications reform on learner choice.
- The impact of the qualifications reform on learner attainment.
- Whether qualifications help prepare learners for work-based learning, higher-education and employment.
- The equity in the learning experience for Welsh medium learners.

### Learner Choice

- 4.6 Stakeholders talked about the impact of the changes on learner choice and how the additional Mathematics - Numeracy, Mathematics, Welsh Language, Welsh Baccalaureate and Religious Studies GCSEs, were limiting choice.

*“We have two maths, the Welsh Baccalaureate and the Welsh and English Language so there is a potential reduction in choice which could be an issue. We need to be careful we are not reducing pupil’s choices too much and forcing them down the academic route.”*

*“What the majority of schools have had to do within the region to meet the performance measures and not disadvantage any learners is go from four option columns to three option columns. That impacts on the number of choices learners can make, there are concerns over the breadth of the curriculum then and the implications of this on choice.”*

*“We are in danger of embracing a monopoly of school based qualification delivered by WJEC and steered by Qualifications Wales which will impact on the range of qualifications.”*

*“There has been a reduction in the number and range of qualifications available in Wales in the wake of developments in England. Whether*

*founded on reality or rumour, in the absence of information, schools perceive that reforms have not given sufficient consideration to the curricular needs of learners across the full range of abilities (14-19)."*

- 4.7 However, there were a number of stakeholders who stated that traditional qualifications are well understood and that learners can make appropriate choices given the right careers information. A few stakeholders made reference to the limited availability of good quality careers guidance in schools, which could mitigate the reduction in choice.

*"Learners need to be well informed to make appropriate qualification choices. More information is needed on equivalency and levels of qualifications needed to support qualification choices. We need more clarity, and better explanation is needed on schools' and colleges' websites on subject information pages."*

*"The difficulty is not with the range of qualifications that are available, but with the information, advice and guidance [IAG] that is available. IAG has been better in Wales than in England but the onus is shifting to HEIs to provide IAG about what subjects to choose. There is a risk that learners choose qualifications at GCSE that narrows their options at HE, without realising this will be the case."*

- 4.8 However, one school stated that navigating through the system is somewhat easier now, due to the changes that have taken place reducing choice.
- 4.9 One stakeholder stressed the importance of considering the impact of specifications on equality of opportunity and the impact of gender stereotyping when learners are choosing their subjects.

*"Among the values that underpin Qualification Wales are having 'learners at the heart of what they do' and representing an 'inclusive' Wales. These should be reflected in the awarding bodies and qualifications they represent, ensuring that equal access to appropriate qualifications is available to all, and that these in turn lead on to meaningful and quality employment opportunities. To do this a thorough understanding of the gender differences that currently exist and methods to address these should be established by Qualifications Wales."*

### **Impact on Attainment**

- 4.10 A number of stakeholders were concerned about the impact of the changes on learners' attainment. This was related to:
- The reduction in equivalence of vocational qualifications within school performance measures set by Welsh Government.
  - The impact of other changes to the performance indicators.

- Impact of the changes in teaching required to meet the new specifications.
- The move from unitised to linear assessments.

4.11 Some stakeholders argued that the changes will impact more on schools that are situated in deprived areas and where the vocational curriculum plays a key part in many learners' school education.

*"I am concerned about the focus on GCSE examinations, particularly around English and Maths, when it may not be appropriate for some learners and the style of tuition which is necessary may not fit their learning style."*

*"I am very concerned about the on-going changes on the availability of a range of qualifications appropriate to learners of various abilities. Awarding bodies have withdrawn vocational qualifications because they don't meet new specifications in England. As a consequence, schools find themselves in a position where they are unclear as to what vocational qualifications they can offer to learners."*

4.12 The consequence of the changes, stakeholders argue, is that schools will focus more on the subjects which are included in the school performance measures, and focus more on getting learners through a limited number of GCSEs with the hope that a C grade will be obtained, rather than focussing on vocational qualifications that have a lower equivalence but which take up quite considerable learning time.

*"The school might say for this pupil 'don't worry about the performance measures, we're going to do what is right for this pupil'. But there is pressure due to categorisation and publication of categorisation and all those associated things, that a school will want to follow the performance indicators, and that means squeezing learners who would be far better taking a vocational route into taking an academic route."*

*"The adoption of particular key performance indicators has serious distortive effects on learning provider behaviour and this can impact adversely on learners...it's difficult to get officials in the Welsh Government to understand this', adding that there needs to be an honest debate about the relative importance of 'learner choice' and 'accountability regimes'."*

4.13 Stakeholders representing the schools sector were concerned that learners in Year 10 would be disadvantaged due to the changes in specifications and assessments, and the unknown, with regards what is going to be a C grade.

*"We need to make sure that learners in Year 10 are not disadvantaged as they may not achieve the grade they were expecting. There will be considerable variability around the teaching effectiveness... teachers are having to teach to two different specifications at the moment, because Year 10s are doing the new specification and Year 11s the old one."*

- 4.14 The move to linear assessments and the impact on lower level attainers was also a feature in some interviews with stakeholders.

*"I have general concerns regarding the direction of travel to an end weighted [linear] assessment system and whether this begins to influence vocational based qualifications. I do think and hope that there is enough understanding of the merits of ongoing assessments within technical based qualifications for this to remain the standard, but this needs to be closely monitored."*

*"Schools fear that current developments are changing or will change the emphasis of qualifications excessively towards paper assessments at the expense of assessing practical aspects... This will impact more sharply on the lower end of the 14-19 cohort, who tend not to be particularly well suited to paper based assessments."*

*"The increase in teaching and assessment time have caused the qualifications, to become unfit for purpose in a work based learning/apprenticeship environment... There is insufficient recognition of prior learning, resulting in employers complaining about wasted time on initial assessments for some learners."*

- 4.15 A small number of stakeholders agreed that vocational qualifications needed improving with regards the rigour of assessments and that there had been too much 'hand holding' of learners in schools which was preventing them from challenging themselves and progressing to further learning.

### **Preparation for work-based learning and higher education**

- 4.16 There was a recognition from across the range of stakeholders that schools endeavour to provide learners with as many options as possible to try to shape choice around learner's ability and aspirations (although some feel post-16 vocational options are not promoted sufficiently). There was a recognition that progression was more easily understood among the more traditional qualifications. However, there were concerns that the current complexity of qualifications was making it difficult for learners to progress into further learning or to choose relevant qualifications for particular career choices.

*"The system can be very complex and schools are not always up to date with what qualifications lead on to what courses. We do considerable work with schools to help them understand clear routes to HE so they can support students with appropriate advice."*

*"There's probably too great a variety of qualifications and providers of qualifications for the system to be easily understood and navigated by learners. Whilst I am in favour of plurality, I think it would be easier for learners if there were fewer awarding bodies and qualification choices."*

*“There needs to be a clearer line of sight or route map for young people and their parents to ensure that choices made at 14 align with broad career aspirations. Beyond 16, learner choices become far more confusing, partly because of the range of vocational qualifications on offer.”*

*“I do not think the same could be said for ‘quasi-vocational routes’, where a range of qualifications exist, but it is not altogether clear how they fit in with learning pathways, including progression from more traditional qualifications. I am unsure whether vocational ‘pathways’ have been mapped in a way that’s helpful to learners’.”*

4.17 A few stakeholders highlighted the low levels of literacy, numeracy and language skills of learners coming out of schools and were supportive of the move to align literacy and numeracy skills within GCSEs. There was very little support for the Essential Skills Qualifications to be taught separately as this was considered to be a duplication of learning for learners.

4.18 A number of stakeholders representing FE colleges or sectors were concerned about the extent to which attainment of a qualification was seen to be equipping learners with the necessary skills to progress on to further education, or work-based learning in particular.

*“We assess learners as they come in and even though they may have a grade C qualification in Maths, we assess them and some of them are Entry Level 3.”*

*“Double Science curriculum and qualifications do not prepare learners to pursue certain science disciplines at a higher level...schools are unable to offer triple science because of the dearth of appropriately qualified teachers...this as a matter of inequity...some young people, particularly those who might be less academically able, get caught on a treadmill of level 2 qualifications which take them nowhere.”*

4.19 However, a few stakeholders stated that the introduction of the Welsh Baccalaureate at both Level 2 and Level 3 would provide a mechanism through which learners can demonstrate acquisition skills and that the revisions had improved the qualification.

*“I believe that it enriches learners’ education because of the non-academic work and community related experiences to which it exposed them.”*

*“I feel quite positive about the changes. I feel that stakeholders’ comments have been reflected in its design and pleased with changes to the A\*-G grading. Increase in size of project work is welcomed and generally a much more rigours qualification.”*

- 4.20 The impact of a reduction in learner choice on higher education routes was a focus of concern for those in HE or representing HE.

*“We have already started to see a lack of uptake in certain subject areas at level 3. Our 14-16 leaders have been looking at the numbers. The impact is already there even though the system at GCSE level has gone into place this year. Already there is a squeeze on some subjects.”*

*“That is a concern. The HE sector reacts slowly. We may see a pipeline of students dwindle that have had exposure to the creative subjects. When this starts to happen, it would be too late. Then any qualifications reform that might reverse that would take years to be implemented.”*

- 4.21 On a more general note regarding progression to higher education, one stakeholder made a comment about learners progressing to Oxbridge<sup>8</sup> from Wales.

*“The numbers of students from Wales going to Oxbridge are dropping year on year. This is something I think that Qualifications Wales needs to be aware of.”*

### **Meeting the needs of Welsh medium learners**

- 4.22 There were very few stakeholders interviewed that could give an informed view as to whether the current qualification system in schools meets the needs of Welsh medium learners. Responses to this questions covered the following areas:

- Current qualifications and assessment provision in the medium of Welsh.
- Demand for learning in Welsh.
- Skills and capacity of providers to delivery through the medium of Welsh.

- 4.23 There was recognition from those involved in delivering to Welsh medium learners that the traditional courses meet the needs of learners. However, there was more pessimism when considering vocational qualifications.

*“Insufficient consideration is given to Welsh language skills in vocational qualifications. Relatively few Welsh medium vocational courses are on offer, they exist by pure chance, often due to the efforts of individual teachers or lecturers... there is no proactive planning done to ensure the existence of Welsh medium provision where it is needed.”*

*“No. The range of vocational qualifications on offer in Welsh is narrower than those available in English... Whilst the courses offered by the WJEC are generally available in Welsh as well as English, it does not offer a sufficiently wide range of vocational options...promises that on-line assessments would be available through the medium of Welsh had not*

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<sup>8</sup> Oxford and Cambridge universities regarded together

*been kept and pupils who studied a BTEC qualification through the medium of Welsh were forced to complete the tests in English."*

4.24 There was an observation by a small number of stakeholders that qualifications do not produce learners with the necessary linguistic skills to operate in Wales.

4.25 A few stakeholders observed that demand for learners wanting to learn through the medium of Welsh is low, particularly in FE or HE and that this affects supply.

*"Welsh Language learning needs to be demand led to ensure the learning provision is fit for purpose. I recognise that learning providers have a responsibility to encourage demand but even as a Welsh speaker, there needs to be a pragmatic approach."*

*"We have some specialist Welsh subjects, but we have had to be selective about where we focus resource because in some areas the demand is so small, it is not cost effective."*

4.26 There was an acknowledgement of a commitment from QW and WJEC to develop qualifications in Welsh, but the contextualisation of subjects appears to be limited and in some cases Welsh resources were not ready for first teaching in September 2015.

*"Time delay for translation means learners studying through medium of Welsh sometimes at a disadvantage."*

*"This was seen when it came to the introduction of the new Maths GCSE specification in September 2015. A series of English medium textbooks were published in October 2015, but Welsh medium textbooks will not be available until May 2016. This clearly places learners, teachers and bilingual Welsh medium schools at a wholly unacceptable disadvantage...The Welsh Government has not taken any meaningful steps to address this problem for the new qualifications to be introduced in 2016, 2017 or 2018."*

*"I have not seen any evidence that changes have contextualised learning for Welsh learners. I fully support the need to change context, but any films suggested or analysis of text in assessments, are very English centric."*

4.27 Most stakeholders perceived this to be a problem with expertise and capacity within the awarding bodies to keep up to pace with the English qualifications, rather than any lack of prioritisation within the Welsh Government or QW.

*"I think the situation is rather more problematic in relation to vocational courses, in large part because awarding bodies are based outside of Wales and do not, therefore, have the same level of commitment to the Welsh language as the WJEC."*

*‘The Welsh Government needs to take Welsh language considerations into account and ensure that they have sufficient numbers of translators in place, as well as robust teams of editors who can check terminology and language levels...The situation in relation to vocational qualifications is even more precarious, partly because of the sheer number of awarding bodies and the modest size of the Welsh market.’*

- 4.28 A few stakeholders highlighted the lack of sufficiently qualified staff among learning providers who could deliver through the medium of Welsh.

*“Providers perennially struggle to find practitioners capable of and willing to teach through the medium of Welsh.”*

*“The biggest challenge for Universities in Wales is recruiting Welsh Speaking academics.”*

- 4.29 Stakeholders with an informed view stated that the Welsh language skills of learners is an area that needs developing but were pessimistic of the extent to which the changes would meet the needs of Welsh medium learners.

*“I feel that the qualification system fails to provide clear progression pathways that address learners’ linguistic as well as wider skills/knowledge needs. In particular, I feel that there is a lack of Welsh medium/bilingual progression opportunities for learners opting for vocational routes post 16.”*

*“I feel that qualifications do not focus sufficiently upon Welsh language skills. It is a lamentable situation whereby health trusts struggle to find doctors and nurses capable of working through the medium of Welsh, despite a number of the individuals employed having learnt Welsh at school.”*

## 5 QW MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION OF THE CHANGE

### Introduction

- 5.1 This section reports on the feedback from stakeholders regarding the process of consultation, management and communication of changes to qualifications and the qualification system.

### Stakeholder Engagement in Consultation

#### Positive Consultation Process

- 5.2 Stakeholders that had been involved in the consultations regarding the revisions of qualifications agreed that the process had been very effective. There was a recognition that it had been an open and transparent process, that had taken their views into account.

*“(Name of organisation) has been involved in the establishment of Qualifications Wales and we are very happy with the opportunities we’ve been given to contribute thus far.”*

*“We have worked very closely and do feel that we have had the opportunity to express our views.”*

*“I feel that communications have been very good, well planned and I have achieved more than I would have expected. I have had ample opportunity to present my views.”*

- 5.3 Some stakeholders have developed strong working relations with the regulators as a result of the work they do.

*“We consult the regulators, including Qualifications Wales and Welsh Government on the content to ensure it is correct. We hold our own conferences where we do presentations with the university sector and separate ones with teachers and advisors...we have a very positive relationship with key people.”*

- 5.4 A number of stakeholders stated they did not get involved in consultation because they had other priorities.

*“Not really, simply because I have a long list of priorities to deal with every day and the Welsh Government’s consultations were not the most pressing of those priorities... If the Welsh Government wants to engage front line practitioners in policy development, it needs to pin us down.”*

*“Practitioners at the chalk-face had probably been aware that the opportunities were there for them, but there was a low number who had chosen to engage in the process and respond to consultations.”*

- 5.5 Decisions made by stakeholders regarding the extent to which they chose to engage in consultation or to become involved in dialogue were evident in a number of interviews.

*“I get things if I need to know, I get things from them, I have spoken to the Chief Executive and there is plenty of opportunity to have a dialogue.”*

- 5.6 Many stakeholders perceive that QW had demonstrated that it was listening and was willing to act on issues that are presented to them. One example was the decision to delay the introduction of the History and Religious Studies GCSEs due to concerns regarding the readiness of teachers to teach it.

- 5.7 There were one or two stakeholders who were unaware of the extent of revisions. One lobbying group stated that they had not been involved in the development of the new specifications but welcomed the opportunity to engage in consultation in the future

*“We see the creation of Qualifications Wales as a central regulatory body as an opportunity to ensure the mainstreaming gender equality is designed into the qualification system, and to ensure that no awards reinforce existing stereotypes or inequalities.”*

- 5.8 Those that had taken part in the Welsh Government Review of Qualifications stakeholder reference group stated it was a highly effective way of hearing from a range of key stakeholders including WBL providers, FE and HE as well as Welsh medium schools.

*“This was a very positive forum and the challenge going forward will be to ensure there is ongoing consultation.”*

### **Concerns Regarding the Level of Consultation**

- 5.9 There were just a few organisations who stated they were not consulted or not consulted early enough.

*“In short, no. There is a feeling that changes happen to schools without giving them a chance to be part of the discussions that lead to decisions being made...it is particularly the case when it comes to developing teaching and learning resources to fit in with the new qualifications and specifications.”*

*“I suspect there were opportunities for me to feed my views in as an employer but I don’t recall it.”*

- 5.10 Issues regarding the late specifications and lateness of resources and in particular Welsh resources was a source of considerable frustration and concern for a number of stakeholders. Local Authorities were keen to have strong and early dialogue around the changes so that they can support schools as early as possible.

*“They really needed to consult with us earlier, they did consult, but it was late in the day and schools have felt ill prepared.”*

- 5.11 One representative organisation was unaware of the full extent of changes but was making an effort to come up to speed following this research study to ensure they could support any queries from those they represent.

*“I am looking on the website now and haven’t quite realised the extent of the changes. I can see that we need to understand these more.”*

- 5.12 There was a number of stakeholders concerned about the lack of consultation regarding the direction of vocational qualifications and the qualifications to include in the priority qualifications list<sup>9</sup>. Two employer representative organisations were calling for increased dialogue. They stated that QW had set out with the right intentions but that they need to plan carefully in order to replace the mechanisms that previously existed for communicating with employers.

*“Qualifications Wales could do better. The plan was to develop relationships with sector partnerships but that this has now been abandoned as it was regarded as too difficult.”*

### **Extent To Which Communication Has Been Effective**

- 5.13 Stakeholders felt reasonably informed of the broad changes and commended QW for the level of communication, both formally in conferences, through various groups and informally through visits.

*“Nobody could complain that we have not been get informed of things happening and had the chance to have an opinion.”*

*“As a collective, Qualifications Wales have come to see us a couple of times over the last two years to make sure that we know what is happening. They have also done a tour around stakeholders where they interviewed me and lots of people and subject specialists.”*

*“Very much so. We know all the officials doing the work.”*

*“Yes, we have been key part of the reform throughout.”*

- 5.14 A number of stakeholders made reference to a consultant who was employed to disseminate information and that this person was very effective at communicating plans and taking on board stakeholders questions and feeding back. Since this person has left, a few stakeholders have noted inconsistencies in information.

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<sup>9</sup> The priority qualifications list (PQL) identifies qualifications for priority approval. All qualifications must be approved or designated by Qualifications Wales before the subjects can receive funding for teaching in schools and colleges. The PQL provides a means by which a planned, structured and scheduled approach to the approval of qualifications can be taken. It is not intended to communicate the relative importance of one qualification or qualification type over another. (<http://qualificationswales.org/news/pql-update-080116/?lang=en>)

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*“I have my regulator KiTs [keep in touch meetings] but it would be better to speak to the same person from part of that group every time I call. It would be helpful if they understand the background so I don’t have to repeat it and they understand where we are all coming from as a group.”*

5.15 Stakeholders, for whom it was relevant, understood the changes, had access to relevant information and could navigate the website. However, as a general observation from interviews with employers and other stakeholders outside of Wales, there was room to improve the level of awareness of the extent of changes in qualifications.

5.16 There were some concerns expressed regarding the level of awareness of the changes among HEIs and employers both within Wales and across the border.

*“Qualifications Wales has quite a lot to do in terms of spreading the message about its brief and what it’s doing.”*

*“Qualifications Wales could do more to communicate their progress and forthcoming plans directly with providers across Wales.”*

*“The understanding and awareness among employers of the Welsh Baccalaureate within England is generally low... I feel that this may risk marginalising students in Wales when they are applying for jobs in England.”*

*“I do ask the regulators ‘how will you demonstrate that you are all equally quality assuring GCSEs and A levels?’... If we can still reassure universities that an A level B grade completed in Wales is the same standard as a B completed in England...If Qualifications Wales wanted to make their mark that would be a key area – to set out and demonstrate the process would be really strong.”*

*“Generally Qualifications Wales has developed well to date. The focus should be on high level communication and engagement with stakeholders to ensure maximum awareness of information and changes to qualifications. In particular engagement with subject specialists is very important.”*

*“No, generally I don’t feel well informed about qualifications and the qualification system in Wales.”*

5.17 Many stakeholders were wanting more information regarding the plans for changes to the vocational qualifications and more information on equivalence between vocational qualifications and GCSEs. One awarding body stated that there were low levels of engagement in the revision of qualifications. One stakeholder made reference to communicating the changes related to the qualifications IT (information technology) system and the migration issues from the previous system.

- 5.18 A number of stakeholders made reference to the difficult position that QW had been put in, as the scheduling of the changes to qualifications appeared to be over ambitious. However, employer/sector representatives were requesting a greater level of dialogue while acknowledging that vocational qualifications were a priority.

*“We have been seeking guidance from Qualification Wales on the content of Essential Skills Wales qualifications but we have had no definitive answer or assistance.”*

*“With regards vocational qualifications, we think that staying with NOS [National Occupational Standards] and the current apprenticeship frameworks is the right thing to do, especially as Trailblazers in England are at risk of becoming a mess. However, we don’t know when the sector reviews are happening and would really welcome some clarity on that.”*

### **Priorities for QW**

- 5.19 Stakeholders were asked what three priorities QW should focus on. Here we have collated their responses into 11 themes that represented each stakeholder group. These are not listed in any priority.

**Table 5.1 Priorities for QW to Consider**

- Allow sufficient time for the revisions and the new qualifications to be developed and implemented to ensure that the specifications are of a high quality and schools have adequate time to prepare.
- Consider the training needs of teachers and review the capacity of local authorities to support teachers to deliver the new qualifications/specifications.
- Prioritise and inform Awarding Bodies of the vocational strategy.
- Ensure there is sufficient choice in the curriculum and monitor the impact on performing arts subjects.
- Ensure parity of opportunity to Welsh medium learners and ensure that Welsh Language resources are ready for use in preparation for the start of term.
- Communicate with the public about the grading structures in GCSEs and A-levels and comparability with the rest of the UK.
- Be brave and develop qualifications that fit the new curriculum development over the next ten years.
- Communicate any changes as soon as possible to the Regional Consortia to allow them sufficient time to provide support to schools.
- Develop a vocational qualification plan and communicate this to sectors with a clear timeframe for review.

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- Consider the risk of Awarding Bodies being squeezed out of the market and, if needed, take measures to protect learners' needs.
- Articulate a clear regulation strategy.

## **6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Confidence in Qualifications in Wales**

- 6.1 The results of the survey of adults in Wales revealed that three-fifths (60%) of the sample agreed with the statement 'generally, I am confident that qualifications in Wales are fit for purpose', while 14% disagreed.
- 6.2 Among stakeholders there was a good level of confidence in GCSEs and A levels which were recognised as providing a secure route into further and higher education.
- 6.3 There was support for the revisions in GCSEs and A-levels and stakeholders stated they believe they will increase the rigour of assessments. Stakeholders with a knowledge of the revisions stated the changes will also improve the analytical skills and application of knowledge for learners.
- 6.4 There was support for the retention of the AS with the A level grading, but there were concerns more generally around the impact of divergence from England specifically with regards to the grading structures, and revisions to qualifications. Some of the concerns were related to not knowing the extent to which the overall grades of learners in 2017 will be affected by the revisions.
- 6.5 There was support for literacy and numeracy learning returning to GCSEs and concerns remain about the standards of literacy and numeracy among students coming in to FE.
- 6.6 Views on the Welsh Baccalaureate were mixed; some stakeholder recognised the value of the qualification in developing a broader understanding among learners; but a number of stakeholders questioned the rigour, the capacity of schools to teach to a high standard, and benefits to learners wishing to progress in to higher education.
- 6.7 There was a high level of commitment to retaining schools' use of vocational qualifications and a general concern regarding the perception of a lack of a clear vocational strategy.
- 6.8 The main elements affecting confidence in qualifications generally, were the scale and scope of change and the timeframe in which the revisions are taking place. Many stakeholder stating it is too rapid and that this has affected the preparedness of teachers to deliver the qualifications for first time teaching in September 2015 and 2016.

### **Confidence in the Qualification System**

- 6.9 Just over a half of the adults surveyed in Wales (52%) agreed that the qualification system was fit for purpose, while 18% disagreed.

- 6.10 The concerns of stakeholders included the complexity of the qualifications offer, in particular in relation to the number of awarding bodies delivering vocational qualifications and the routes from vocational qualifications to further or higher education.
- 6.11 However, stakeholders generally had confidence that awarding bodies were providing a secure service.
- 6.12 In reference to the revisions taking place, there were some concerns regarding the capacity of WJEC to deliver specifications and resources to appropriate timescales to allow schools to prepare. There was a desire to see clear lines of accountability between the Welsh Government, QW and WJEC.
- 6.13 There was a high level of confidence and optimism regarding the ability of QW to undertake effective regulation and quality assurance functions. Stakeholders have welcomed the openness and transparency with which QW have conducted their consultations so far, and asked for a continuation of this.
- 6.14 Just under two-fifths of Welsh adults surveyed (39%) agreed with the statement that the qualification system in Wales is improving.
- 6.15 Providing a commentary on the degree of improvement was more difficult as stakeholders felt unable to comment in any detail, but there were high levels of optimism that things would improve.

#### **Whether Qualifications Meet the Reasonable Needs of Learners**

- 6.16 The survey of adults in Wales showed that over a half of respondents (54%) agreed that qualifications in Wales meet the reasonable needs of learners, while 15% disagreed.
- 6.17 The main concerns of stakeholders related to the perceived impact on learners' choice and their levels of attainment as a result of an increased in compulsory GCSEs and a reduction in the value of school vocational qualifications.
- 6.18 Concerns regarding learner attainment were increased when considering the move to linear assessments.
- 6.19 Stakeholders agreed that the range of qualifications offered in schools is too complex for learners to navigate and to identify an appropriate path in to further and higher education. In this sense, there was support for the rationalisation of qualifications, in particular vocational qualifications where progression pathways were not always clear.
- 6.20 There were a few informed stakeholders who reported insufficient evidence of effective planning for Welsh medium qualifications and resources and this restricted choice Welsh medium learners.

### **QW's Management, Communication and Consultation**

- 6.21 Stakeholders considered QW has had a positive start and operated with openness and transparency.
- 6.22 There were a number of stakeholders who had not participated in consultations; some chose not to and some were unaware of the changes taking place but were interested in the issues going forward. There is evidence of a lack of awareness around the detail of the changes within Wales and low levels of awareness of changes outside of Wales.
- 6.23 The local authority consortia requested early communication of plans and of any changes to allow them to support schools.
- 6.24 Employer representatives requested greater levels of consultation on the priority<sup>10</sup> qualifications list and to understand the plans for revisions in vocational qualifications.
- 6.25 A number of stakeholders stated there needs to be a greater level of communication of the key messages such as the comparability of grades, changes to GCSE maths and a raising of awareness of the Welsh Baccalaureate.

### **Priorities for QW Going Forward**

- 6.26 A list of priorities going forward for QW were suggested by stakeholders.
- 6.27 We have considered these alongside the key messages coming from the research to provide QW with the following recommendations
- Qualification Wales should assess the timescales against which the current qualification revisions are planned and the capacity of WJEC to ensure changes are achievable. In particular, to assess whether schools have adequate time to plan and prepare for first time teaching.
  - Qualification Wales should consult with the regional consortia regarding any changes to plans to enable them to support schools adequately.
  - Qualification Wales should communicate to employers and employer bodies a strategy for reviewing vocational qualifications, including a clear timeframe.
  - Qualification Wales should monitor the impact of the changes, including on learners' choice of qualifications.

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<sup>10</sup> The priority qualifications list (PQL) identifies qualifications for priority approval. All qualifications must be approved or designated by Qualifications Wales before the subjects can receive funding for teaching in schools and colleges. The PQL provides a means by which a planned, structured and scheduled approach to the approval of qualifications can be taken. It is not intended to communicate the relative importance of one qualification or qualification type over another. (<http://qualificationswales.org/news/pql-update-080116/?lang=en>)

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- Qualification Wales should raise public awareness of the changes taking place in qualifications, including the grading structures, the AS and A levels, the two maths GCSEs and the Welsh Baccalaureate.

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## Annex A: Research Topic Guide.

The **purpose of this study** is to inform QW about perceptions of qualifications and the qualification system by the public (through a survey) & stakeholders (through these interviews). Interviews are anonymous.

Definitions: "**qualifications**" all those publicly funded i.e. GCSEs, A Levels and vocational qualifications.

"**qualification system**" roles undertaken by organisations such as awarding bodies who design and award qualifications, and QW who check that standards are tough, but reasonable, and are consistently applied.

**Introduction** – check extent of role and awareness of Welsh Qualifications to establish that they will be able to engage in an effective discussion.

<b>I am going to ask you 4 specific closed questions that we will return to at the end</b>	<b><i>Strongly agree</i></b>	<b><i>Tend to agree</i></b>	<b><i>Neither agree nor disagree</i></b>	<b><i>Tend to disagree</i></b>	<b><i>Strongly disagree</i></b>	<b><i>Don't know</i></b>
Generally, I am confident that <u>qualifications in Wales</u> are fit for purpose						
The range of <u>qualifications in Wales</u> meet the needs of learners						
The <u>qualification system</u> in Wales as a whole is fit for purpose						
The <u>qualification system</u> in Wales is improving						

### 1. Level of confidence in qualifications and in the qualification system in Wales?

- a) Do you feel well informed about qualifications and the qualification system in Wales?
- b) Are you confident that awarding bodies operating in Wales provide a secure service and appropriate qualifications?
- c) How confident are you that awarding bodies give the right marks to learners?
- d) Does your confidence differ when considering qualifications in different routes – i.e. general qualifications or vocational qualifications?
- e) What is your level of confidence in:
  - i. GCSEs in Wales?
  - ii. A levels in Wales?
  - iii. the Welsh Baccalaureate?
  - iv. vocational qualifications in Wales?
- f) Do you think qualifications adequately assess literacy and numeracy skills?
- g) What do you believe are the key factors influencing public confidence in qualifications?

### 2. Extent qualifications and the Welsh qualification system meet reasonable needs of learners

- a) Is the qualification system sufficiently clear and simple to enable learners to make appropriate qualification choices? If not, what could be done to improve this?
  - b) Are qualifications equipping learners for the next level of learning and/or employment?
  - c) Are there sufficient opportunities for learners to progress from each qualification?
  - d) Do you think that qualifications in Wales meet the reasonable needs of learners through the medium of Welsh? What can be done to improve Welsh medium qualifications?
-

### **3. Extent decisions about qualifications in Wales are made independently from Government**

- a) To what extent do you think that, prior to the establishment of Qualifications Wales, decisions about qualifications in Wales were influenced by Ministers?
- b) Do you think that Qualifications Wales will be able to act independently?
- c) How important do you think it is that decisions about qualifications should be independent from Government? Why? What do you think needs to be done to improve things?

### **4. Extent of adequate opportunity to express a view regarding proposed changes in qualifications**

- a) Were you aware of the ways in which you could communicate views to the Welsh Government as it developed new and revised qualifications (GCSEs, A levels, Welsh Baccalaureate) following the Review of Qualifications?
- b) If you were not aware of the Welsh Government's consultations, how do you think you could have been informed?
- c) If you were aware of the Welsh Government's consultations, did you get involved? If not, why not?
- d) If you got involved, how did you find the process?
- e) Do you feel that the Welsh Government took comments from people who were consulted into account in taking forward the development of qualifications?
- f) How do you feel the consultation process could be improved?

### **5. Extent stakeholders have been kept up to date on the changes**

- a) Where do you look for information about changes to qualifications?
- b) Were you aware of information about qualifications reforms on the Welsh Government and Qualified for Life (QfL) websites?
- c) Were the Welsh Government and QfL websites valuable sources of information?
- d) Do you feel that you have sufficient information about the changes that are being implemented this year and in 2016 and 2017?
- e) Has information been communicated in clear and understandable ways?
- f) How do you feel Qualifications Wales should communicate information about changes to qualifications? What other communications channels would be helpful to you?

### **6. Extent of effective regulation and quality assurance of qualifications in Wales**

- a) What is your level of knowledge of the role of Qualifications Wales in the regulation and quality assurance (QA) of qualifications in Wales?
- b) Was the Welsh Government's regulation and QA of qualifications in Wales appropriately: (i) robust, (ii) reliable and (iii) transparent?
- c) How confident are you that arrangements for the regulation and quality assurance of qualifications in Wales are fit for purpose?
- d) What do you consider the 3 top priorities should be for QW in terms of regulation and QA of qualifications in Wales?

#### *Employers:*

- e) How confident are you that regulation and QA ensure that qualifications in Wales demonstrate the extent to which learners have the skills and knowledge that are needed for employment?
  - f) How confident are you that learners' qualifications can be used to identify their relative strengths?
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*Awarding Bodies:*

- g) To what extent has the Welsh Government been clear about their expectations and how it makes decisions?
- h) Are awarding bodies treated in accordance with the principles of proportionality, accountability, consistency, transparency, and targeted action where it is needed?

*Learning providers (FECs, HEIs):*

- i) How confident are you that regulation and QA ensure that qualifications in Wales give learners the skills and knowledge needed for further learning and progression to employment?
  - j) How confident are you that learners' qualifications can be used to identify their relative strengths and suitability for further learning? Are learners clear about the progression opportunities that qualifications can open up?
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## Annex B: E-survey questions

The format of the questions, as they would have been seen by respondents, is presented below:

YouGov

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The following questions are about qualifications in Wales.

By "qualifications", we mean all those that are publicly funded, such as GCSEs, A Levels and vocational qualifications.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement about qualifications in Wales?

**Generally, I am confident that qualifications in Wales are fit for purpose**

Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
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YouGov

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The following questions are about qualifications in Wales.

By "qualifications", we mean all those that are publicly funded, such as GCSEs, A Levels and vocational qualifications.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement about qualifications in Wales?

**The range of qualifications in Wales meet the needs of learners**

Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
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YouGov

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The following questions are about the qualification system in Wales.

By "qualification system", we mean the roles undertaken by organisations such as awarding bodies who design and award qualifications, and Qualifications Wales who check that standards are tough, but reasonable, and are consistently applied.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement about the qualification system in Wales?

**The qualification system in Wales as a whole is fit for purpose**

Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
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YouGov

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The following questions are about the qualification system in Wales.

By "qualification system", we mean the roles undertaken by organisations such as awarding bodies who design and award qualifications, and Qualifications Wales who check that standards are tough, but reasonable, and are consistently applied.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement about the qualification system in Wales?

**The qualification system in Wales is improving**

Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
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## Annex C: Data weights

The following weighting targets were applied by YouGov using the respective datasets:

- Age, gender and social grade were all based on census data from the Office for National Statistics.
- Newspaper readership was based on data from the National Readership Survey.
- Political affiliation was weighted on election results.

<b>Nationally Representative Sample of Wales (aged 18+)</b>	
<b>Region</b>	<b>Weight Targets</b>
Mid and West Wales	19.04%
North Wales	20.72%
Cardiff	11.62%
South Wales Central	10.64%
South Wales East	20.74%
South Wales West	17.24%
<b>Age by Gender</b>	<b>Weight Targets</b>
Male 18-24	6.10%
Male 25-39	11.10%
Male 40-54	13.10%
Male 55+	18.20%
Female 18-24	6.10%
Female 25-39	11.10%
Female 40-54	13.10%
Female 55+	21.20%
<b>Social Grade (personal)</b>	<b>Weight Targets</b>
ABC1	45.00%
C2DE	55.00%
<b>Newspaper Readership</b>	<b>Weight Targets</b>
Express / Mail	13.00%
Sun / Star	15.00%
Mirror / Record	20.00%
Guardian / Independent	2.00%
FT / Times / Telegraph	5.00%
Other paper	30.00%
No Paper	15.00%
<b>Political Affiliation</b>	<b>Weight Targets</b>
Lab (Loyal)	30.00%
Lab (Disloyal)	7.00%
Con	19.50%
Lib Dem	7.00%
SNP/ Plaid Cymru	7.50%
Other	1.70%
None	23.80%
DK	3.50%

**Annex D: Confidence Intervals**

For the full sample (1,005 adult respondents) the confidence intervals at the 95% level of confidence were as follows:

<b>Proportion of the population expressing an opinion as estimated from the survey sample</b>	<b>Interval</b>
10%/90%	<b>+/- 1.9</b>
20%/80%	<b>+/- 2.5</b>
30%/70%	<b>+/- 2.8</b>
40%/60%	<b>+/- 3.0</b>
50%/50%	<b>+/- 3.1</b>