



**Exploring  
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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**Authors:** Philip Wilson, Michael Dodd, Louise Starks and Einir Burrows

York Consulting LLP  
Smithfield House  
92 North Street  
LEEDS  
LS2 7PN

**Tel:** 0113 2223545

**Fax:** 0113 2223540

**Email:** [philip.wilson@yorkconsulting.co.uk](mailto:philip.wilson@yorkconsulting.co.uk)

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

- 1.1 In April 2015, the Welsh Government commissioned York Consulting to carry out a four-and-a-half year study to explore stakeholder views and confidence in qualifications and the qualification system in Wales.
- 1.2 This report is the third of a three-phase study, the first phase being conducted from October to December 2015, with a report published in May 2016<sup>1</sup>. The second phase was conducted from September to December 2017, with a report published in October 2018<sup>2</sup>.
- 1.3 Qualifications Wales 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.
- 1.4 The objectives of this study were to:
  - Explore current levels of confidence in the qualification system in Wales amongst stakeholders.
  - Identify the key strengths of Qualification Wales in promoting confidence in qualifications and in the Welsh qualification system and identify any constraints and issues impeding effectiveness.
  - Identify priorities for improving public confidence in qualifications and the qualification system in Wales.
- 1.5 During interviews participants referred to a broad range of issues. Hence, this report contains findings relevant to Qualifications Wales and to other organisations including the Welsh Government and WJEC.

### **Background**

- 1.6 A number of significant changes have taken place in Wales since the publication in 2011 of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results which showed lower than average performance in Wales compared to the rest of the UK and many European countries.
- 1.7 A series of key recommendations were made in the OECD report Improving Schools in Wales<sup>3</sup>, including setting high expectations, assessment and ensuring expertise and capacity of teachers to meet the learning needs of all learners.

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<sup>1</sup><https://qualificationswales.org/english/publications/confidence-in-qualifications-and-the-qualification-system-in-wales-2017/>

<sup>2</sup><https://qualificationswales.org/english/publications/exploring-confidence/>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.oecd.org/education/Improving-schools-in-Wales.pdf>

- 1.8 To raise performance, the Welsh Government embarked on a large-scale improvement reform which included:
- reviewing and revising qualifications,
  - establishing a new qualification system, and
  - design and piloting of a new curriculum from ages 3 to 16.

### **Review and reform of qualifications**

- 1.9 In 2012 the Welsh Government published the findings and recommendations of a review of qualifications for 14 to 19-year-olds in Wales<sup>4</sup>. This review concluded that there was a need to design a high-quality, robust and distinctive national qualification system for 14 to 19-year-olds in Wales and to support divergence between Wales and other parts of the UK, where this was in the interests of learners in Wales.
- 1.10 The reform of qualifications<sup>5</sup> included a phased introduction of new GCSE, AS, A level and Welsh Bacc qualifications for first teaching between September 2015 and September 2017. WJEC has worked with a wide range of key stakeholders to update qualification specifications and assessments across GCSEs and A level qualifications.
- 1.11 Reform of vocational qualifications is currently underway. Health and Social Care including Childcare qualification reforms are near completion with the first set of qualifications due to be made available for first teaching in the academic year 2019-2020; Qualifications Wales's sector review report detailing what needs to change was published in July 2016<sup>6</sup>. A contract was awarded to a consortium of City and Guilds and WJEC to deliver the Health and Social Care including Childcare qualifications.
- 1.12 Qualifications Wales's report on the sector review for the Construction and Built Environment Industry was published<sup>7</sup> in February 2018, along with a consultation on the response to the findings. It is planned that the first batch of the revised qualifications will be available for first teaching in September 2021. A review of the qualifications in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector<sup>8</sup> was published in December 2018. A review of

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<sup>4</sup> Welsh Government (2012) Review of Qualifications for 14-19-year-olds in Wales. Final Report and Recommendations.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.qualificationswales.org/english/qualifications/gcses-and-a-levels/gq-reform/>

<sup>6</sup> Qualifications Wales (2016) Sector Review of Qualifications and the Qualification system in Wales including child care and play work. <http://qualificationswales.org/media/1904/hsc-report-2016-e.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> [www.qualificationswales.org/english/qualifications/vocational-qualifications/sector-reviews/construction-and-the-built-environment/](http://www.qualificationswales.org/english/qualifications/vocational-qualifications/sector-reviews/construction-and-the-built-environment/)

<sup>8</sup> [www.qualificationswales.org/english/qualifications/vocational-qualifications/sector-reviews/information-and-communications-technology/](http://www.qualificationswales.org/english/qualifications/vocational-qualifications/sector-reviews/information-and-communications-technology/)

qualifications in the Engineering, Advanced Manufacturing and Energy sector is ongoing<sup>9</sup>.

### **A new qualification system**

1.13 The Review<sup>10</sup> recommended that a single body should be established to regulate, approve and assure the quality of qualifications (below degree level) available in Wales. In 2015 Qualifications Wales was established with the aim of bringing in a stronger more transparent approach to qualifications regulation and to promote public confidence in qualifications and the Welsh qualification system.

1.14 Qualifications Wales 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.

1.15 WJEC is the main awarding body supplying the new GCSEs and A level qualifications in Wales because following an invitation to other awarding bodies to develop reformed GCSEs and A level qualifications in Wales, WJEC was the only one to commit to doing so.

### **A new school curriculum**

1.16 Recommendations from the Donaldson Review, Successful Futures<sup>11</sup> to develop a new school curriculum were accepted by Welsh Government and Wales is moving to gradually introduce a new curriculum. The proposal is that it will be introduced from nursery to Year 7 in 2022, rolling into Year 8 from 2023 and so on until it is introduced to Year 11 in 2026. The new curriculum will be organised around six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE) (Expressive Arts, Humanities, Health and Wellbeing, Science and Technology, Mathematics and Numeracy, Languages, Literacy and Communication). A network of 'pioneer schools' from across Wales has been supporting the development of the new curriculum across Wales. Qualifications Wales is considering the extent to which qualifications will need to be reformed to reflect the changes to the curriculum.

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<sup>9</sup>[www.qualificationswales.org/english/qualifications/vocational-qualifications/sector-reviews/engineering-advanced-manufacturing-and-energy/](http://www.qualificationswales.org/english/qualifications/vocational-qualifications/sector-reviews/engineering-advanced-manufacturing-and-energy/)

<sup>10</sup> Welsh Government (2012) Review of qualifications for 14-19 year olds in Wales: Final report and recommendations. ISBN 978 0 7504 8267 7

<sup>11</sup> Professor Graham Donaldson (2015) Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales

### **Grade boundary issue**

- 1.17 One issue that arose during 2018 was where grade boundaries had been set for the summer 2018 GCSE English Language exams.
- 1.18 Qualifications Wales was aware of concerns raised mainly among schools in north Wales following results, and that some had seen a drop in results in GCSE English Language. Qualifications Wales wanted to understand why and to check whether the number of marks at certain grade boundaries reflected a shift in the standard expected at certain key grades – particularly grade C. Qualifications Wales undertook a review of the evidence<sup>12</sup> and published a detailed report. Qualifications Wales concluded that key decisions had been taken in the right way. As the independent regulator, they were confident that the standard for 2018 was consistent with the previous year and the grade boundaries were set properly.
- 1.19 A small number of respondents raised this issue frequently. They perceived that some young people had been disadvantaged even though Qualifications Wales's report, referenced above, confirmed that this was not in fact the case.

### **Method**

- 1.20 A total of 67 qualitative face-to-face or telephone interviews were completed with stakeholders from 58 organisations between December 2018 and April 2019. A broad list of stakeholders was agreed with Qualifications Wales. The number of individual stakeholders participating in the fieldwork was higher among school respondents than previous rounds of the work (Table 1.1).
- 1.21 Stakeholders interviewed included school teachers, heads of departments, headteachers from both maintained and independent schools including English Medium and Welsh Medium schools, strategic leads from all four regional consortia, awarding bodies (AB) including WJEC and ABs based in England, further and higher education institutions (FEI/HEI) and key sector representatives. Some employer representatives have been consulted to test their views on reform, mainly of vocational qualifications.
- 1.22 Research participants had varying levels of understanding of current and emerging policy and operational issues in the educational sector. Some of the views expressed were factually incorrect; other views, although correct at the time, are now dated because of intervening policy changes. This is especially the case for views relating to school performance measures, which were changing at the time when respondents were giving their views, and which have changed again since then. Some respondents were either not fully aware of the changes or of how they would be implemented in practice. Where there are inaccuracies expressed within opinions we have kept them in the

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<sup>12</sup> <https://qualificationswales.org/media/3802/qws-review-of-2018-gcse-english-language.pdf>

report to remain true to the language used by respondents; we have not included explanations of all misunderstandings.

**Table 1.1: Stakeholder Groups Interviewed**

27 respondents from schools and school representative bodies
10 respondents from policy organisations including Estyn and 4 Regional Consortia
5 respondents from Further Education (FE) Colleges and Colegau Cymru
6 respondents from Work-Based Learning (WBL) providers and NTFW
7 respondents from Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and sector representatives (including UCAS)
10 respondents from Awarding Bodies (AB) and AB membership bodies
2 respondents from employer representative organisations

1.23 Purposive sampling<sup>13</sup> was used to identify and select interviewees.

1.24 The interview guide was designed to be open and allow stakeholders to discuss any issue pertinent to their role in relation to qualifications, the qualification system and Qualifications Wales. It consisted of the following questions.

- What are stakeholders' views on the qualifications in Wales?
  - What factors do they find encouraging?
  - What factors concern them?
- What are the key strengths in the qualification system in Wales?
- Do stakeholders feel the qualification system could be improved in any way?
- What are stakeholders' views of Qualifications Wales?

## **Acknowledgements**

1.25 The authors would like to thank all the stakeholders across Wales for their support with this work. In particular, stakeholders who made time to engage with researchers and provide their views, across the three waves of research between 2015 and 2019.

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<sup>13</sup> A purposive sample is a non-probability sample selected based on characteristics of a population and the objective of a study



## 2 CONFIDENCE IN THE QUALIFICATION SYSTEM

### Introduction

- 2.1 This section includes information reported by stakeholders regarding their confidence in the qualification system. The qualification system in this context refers to awarding bodies and the regulatory body Qualifications Wales. Many stakeholders spoke more broadly on the topic of education policy, how the qualification system was impacting school performance, teaching capacity and the ongoing curriculum reform. These issues are covered after the main sections. A small amount of overlap exists with the section on qualifications where respondents covered issues broader than individual qualifications.
- 2.2 There was a general sense from stakeholders that the recently introduced reforms of GCSEs and A level qualifications were now becoming embedded and were working as intended. However, a number of respondents mentioned that the embedding has taken time and has had some consequences including additional burden and pressure on teachers.

*“The system is ‘bedding down’, though it had taken a good two years for teachers to acclimatise to the new system.” Secondary School Headteacher*

- 2.3 There was support for a unique Welsh approach to developing qualifications and the qualification system. It was perceived that Wales has been increasingly diverging away from England through having more devolutionary powers.

*“A new ‘made in Wales’ system is being developed and we support this.”  
Policy respondent*

- 2.4 Some stakeholders lacked clarity about the respective roles and responsibilities of Qualifications Wales, WJEC, Welsh Government and regional consortia. This was felt to be an area for improvement, with key organisations needing to do more to explain their respective roles.

*“Everyone has a role to play, the local consortia, WJEC and Qualifications Wales to deliver a greater level of understanding of their roles. So that everyone understands the relationship.” Policy respondent*

### Qualifications Wales

- 2.5 In general, Qualifications Wales was regarded well and was perceived to have built a solid and transparent reputation (we note issues such as communication, leadership and transparency under headings below). Qualifications Wales’s staff were generally thought to be responsive, very skilled and of high calibre. However, there were some specific criticisms related to the handling of the GCSE English language grade boundary review, independence and Welsh resources and content.

2.6 Positive views expressed by policy stakeholders included:

- A general perspective that as an organisation Qualifications Wales was fit for purpose.
- Qualifications Wales had driven a positive focus on qualifications in Wales and brought greater rigour to qualifications.
- Qualifications Wales had considered implications of the new school curriculum early, with a perceived ambition to put in place timely arrangements for practitioners.
- Positive views about the Qualifications in Wales (QiW) website and its helpfulness for planning the school curriculum.

2.7 There was a specific mention of more meetings taking place at ‘middle tier level’ involving regional consortia, which was regarded as a positive step forward.

*“There is a huge willingness to work together in Wales.”*  
*Policy respondent*

2.8 There was a perception that Qualifications Wales needed to exercise greater oversight with respect to WJEC.

*“A relationship [between Qualifications Wales and WJEC] that is transparent and truly arms-length is vital for independence.”* Policy respondent

#### *Communication*

2.9 Stakeholders were generally complimentary about Qualifications Wales’s communication, information and consultation mechanisms. For example:

- Staff were helpful and responsive (school, FE respondents).
- Publications available via the website were useful e.g. guidance on malpractice (school, FE respondents).
- The organisation was quick to respond to questions (school, FE, WBL, AB, policy respondents).
- Regular e-mails provide useful information e.g. about curriculum reforms (school, policy respondents).
- Guidance and PowerPoint slides produced on the forthcoming curriculum reform had been clear and informative (school respondent).
- The website has become easier to navigate over the last year or so (school respondent).

- 2.10 One policy respondent felt that Qualifications Wales was trying to share facts to ensure people had confidence in the system and that this was very helpful. A WBL respondent was positive about Qualifications Wales’s engagement and dialogue.

*“My view is they consult widely and are always open to discussion.” WBL respondent*

- 2.11 One FE respondent gave a detailed account of support explaining that when a qualification did not exist on the QiW database of qualifications and they could deliver it, the Qualifications Wales staff were helpful in getting that added to the database.

- 2.12 Confidence in Qualifications Wales was felt by some policy and school respondents to have been undermined in north Wales by its response to the grade boundary review in relation to GCSE English language. Qualifications Wales was perceived to have failed to go back to source evidence to ensure that students were treated fairly. Respondents felt that Qualifications Wales chose to act in the interests of the system rather than those of young people. Feelings about this experience ran very high. School respondents also pointed out that they were the front line of the qualification system as far as parents and pupils were concerned and this was a stressful period for many across north Wales.

- 2.13 One school respondent noted some positive and constructive dialogue that emerged from the GCSE English language grade boundary review in north Wales, despite the frustrations encountered.

- 2.14 Other frustrations regarding communication were as follows:

- Lack of direct contact or regular contact to understand current developments (School, English HEI, AB respondents).
- Independent school sector not feeling a valued part of the educational system with less dialogue and communication about system reforms (School respondent).
- Slow response to queries (School respondent).
- Cardiff-centric view (School respondent).
- Lack of promotion of the Welsh brand outside of Wales (WBL respondent).

- 2.15 Some specific concerns raised by one school respondent were around the Qualifications Wales approach to Welsh language including use of English first in communications and the appointment of non-Welsh-speaking chief executives to lead Qualifications Wales and the WJEC.

- 2.16 One school respondent felt that the QiW database was not always accurate and up to date in terms of information such as the number of guided learning hours needed to complete particular qualifications. This lack of confidence in the QiW database was making them reticent about using it.

#### *Leadership*

- 2.17 Some stakeholders recognised Qualifications Wales’s leadership role and made suggestions for the focus in the future. Others were more critical of Qualifications Wales’s leadership role.
- 2.18 Policy respondents highlighted that Qualifications Wales has had an important role and that public accountability was now clearer than before Qualifications Wales existed.
- 2.19 One school respondent felt that Qualifications Wales’s priority should be focused on getting acceptance of existing qualifications among “*those who use them as a yardstick for selecting students or employees*”, i.e. HEIs and employers, rather than “*continuing to get the product right*”.
- 2.20 Some policy respondents expressed contradictory views, on the one hand, feeling that Qualifications Wales should ensure that standards were consistent from one year to the next, while expressing frustration with perceived changes, as indicated in one quote highlighting a perception held by some stakeholders, that, “*bars [should] not be raised and lowered depending on a single year cohorts’ performance*”.
- 2.21 The production of bilingual teaching materials was particularly important to one school respondent who felt that Qualifications Wales should have more influence on this. They were disappointed about what they perceived to be the lack of focus on Welsh language content.

#### *Transparency and independence*

- 2.22 Most respondents that commented on transparency and independence felt that Qualifications Wales had made improvements compared with the previous arrangements.

*“I think Qualifications Wales have come a long way and I think they deal with things very openly.” Policy respondent*

*“There is a good level of transparency and it’s more obvious than when it was Welsh Government.” Policy respondent*

- 2.23 One policy respondent highlighted Qualifications Wales’s response to a major issue which they felt was handled well and transparently (although it is important to note others were more critical of the handling of the GCSE English grade boundary review in north Wales).

*“Compared to the previous system [prior to Qualifications Wales] there is much more openness and transparency about the examination system. An example of this was how they handled the issues with early entry and grade boundary concerns in English. They came out regularly and met people face to face and talked through their concerns. They interrogated the data for evidence of concerns and issued a report which was published on their website. The team of people are very well regarded and knowledgeable.”*  
*Policy respondent*

- 2.24 One school respondent felt that Qualifications Wales was too closely linked to political decisions and that they should be more independent, for example, relating to the continued implementation of Welsh Government policy, in terms of the Welsh Bacc.
- 2.25 A few policy respondents were more critical and felt that Qualifications Wales was too close to WJEC, which reduced transparency.

*“Qualifications Wales is not sufficiently removed from WJEC in that it sits on WJEC awarding committees, albeit in an observer capacity.”* *Policy respondent*

## **WJEC**

- 2.26 Stakeholders recognised WJEC as a reputable organisation and were confident in WJEC’s ability to design robust and high-quality qualifications. The majority of stakeholders that sought advice from WJEC on particular issues reported that they received a swift response. Respondents felt that WJEC’s subject specialists were of high calibre.
- 2.27 In addition, stakeholders noted the somewhat unusual position that WJEC had found itself, being the single awarding body in Wales. Some stakeholders felt that the Welsh Government had not properly scoped out the potential risks of having only one awarding body.

*“When the Welsh Government asked for exam boards to submit a proposal, all the mainstream awarding bodies declined to be involved. This was because of the commercial rewards. It wasn’t worth their while to invest in a different curriculum where the number of end users is the same size as Birmingham. So, the only awarding body that stuck their hat in the ring, was WJEC and they have a monopoly.”* *Policy respondent*

### *Schools’ ability to exercise choice on behalf of learners*

- 2.28 Schools were perceived by policy respondents and teachers to be constrained by not having a choice of awarding body for GCSEs and A level qualifications. Some accepted this as the price to be paid for having specifically Welsh qualifications, while others were frustrated at a lack of choice.

2.29 Those respondents who were frustrated gave the following reasons and arguments:

- The position of WJEC as the main supplier for GCSEs and A level qualifications was linked, by policy and school stakeholders, to complacency, with a number of them mentioning that they had received a higher quality of support from previous awarding bodies.
- School, policy and AB respondents highlighted that the lack of choice for schools (of exam board) meant that they were less able to meet their pupils' needs by selecting the most appropriate board for their pupils.

*"If you have competition, ABs have to step up their game, they have to produce resources etc. The moment they took the choice away but still ask schools to pay for the service it was a fundamentally flawed system." Policy respondent*

2.30 A few school respondents said there was "enough choice" and that "what's available is generally relevant and robust". They pointed out that qualifications have become slightly more demanding in recent years, primarily because of changes to the way pupils were assessed i.e. a greater emphasis on examination and less on coursework. They understood the rationale behind these changes, in that it helped preserve the reputation of qualifications, and they saw this as a change that needed to be made.

#### *Communication*

2.31 There were highly diverse views on communication between stakeholders regarding WJEC. Some were very positive, others strongly critical.

2.32 The following issues were highlighted by those articulating positive views:

- Helpfulness of subject officers and willingness to listen (School respondents).
- Quick and accurate responses to queries by WJEC staff (School and policy respondents).
- Handling of appeals - which resulted in improved grades (School respondents).

2.33 Two respondents mentioned the most positive aspect was the access that school staff had to subject officers and examinations officers.

*"There is always somebody on the end of the [telephone] line and they are very supportive, these other boards, there is often a queue. I think with WJEC their customer service is much better." School respondent*

*"The quality of support provided by my subject officer and the senior examiners is very good. It is a highly personalised interaction [that] is taking place." Policy respondent*

- 2.34 The following issues were highlighted by those articulating critical views on communications with WJEC:
- Changes to feedback and CPD timetables with examiners' reports and briefings being issued later than previously – November rather than September (School respondent).
  - Webinars used for some subjects were not of the best quality and they did not get through all the content (School respondents).
  - Some subject officers were regarded as “unresponsive” (School respondent).
  - Some respondents felt that other exam boards were more proactive than WJEC (School respondents).
  - Examiner consistency – one respondent described how WJEC had responded to their school that had asked for a review of marking. They had received the response within a day, with no change made. This, they felt, gave the impression of a “*perfunctory*” approach to the review of marking – rather than giving the impression of the WJEC as having an effective and efficient system in place (School respondent).
  - Post-exam briefing days were regarded to be more effective than feedback recordings which WJEC now uses (Policy respondent).
  - The move to online CPD was not as effective as previous face to face approaches (School respondents).
- 2.35 A particular theme in the above points is the effectiveness of digital-based forms of communication, such as webinars and recordings.

#### *Reputation*

- 2.36 WJEC subject experts were perceived to be of high quality. One school respondent particularly noted that WJEC now published its examiners' reports within days of the results being announced in 2018 which brought it in line with other awarding bodies.
- 2.37 Respondents also levelled similar criticisms at WJEC to those made towards Qualifications Wales, linked to the grade boundary review in relation to GCSE English language. A school respondent felt that WJEC had suffered reputational damage as a result of this review. They felt that WJEC had been unwilling to listen to the case made by schools, which they felt had affected many pupils.

#### *Risks and concerns*

- 2.38 The key risks and concerns raised by stakeholders in relation to WJEC's work covered: resources and support, understanding about WJEC's role and its capacity to respond.

- 2.39 Some policy stakeholders perceived that a narrow range of resources were available for teachers and parents to buy for WJEC qualifications. This was felt to be a drawback compared with other awarding bodies where wider ranges of resources were available. One school respondent felt that the quality of support provided to teachers was poor; they highlighted that the cost of some WJEC services had increased substantially between 2012/13 and 2018/19.
- 2.40 The WJEC Question Bank<sup>14</sup> was regarded by one policy stakeholder as not working properly and therefore not fit for purpose. This was contrasted with other databases such as TestBase<sup>15</sup> or ExamPro<sup>16</sup> which were perceived to work well.
- 2.41 Although WJEC was praised for its responsiveness (as referenced previously), there were perceptions of capacity constraints, for example, in relation to the production of Welsh medium qualification materials. One school respondent felt that there was a shortage of staff that was affecting WJEC's ability to respond to enquiries. There was a perception that the Welsh Government would have to 'subsidise' WJEC for certain subjects due to low demand. The low demand was also believed to be leading to rising fees for schools.

### **Other issues raised in relation to the qualification system**

- 2.42 The following points made by respondents help to understand how the qualification system was perceived alongside wider policy developments.

#### **Policy issues**

- 2.43 There was a general sense of frustration among some school respondents that policy in relation to the qualification system had been in continuous change.

*"...successive policy changes emanating from the Welsh Government (WG) [have had a] detrimental effect on schools and the teaching profession....it's hard to read policy direction because they keep chopping and changing".*

*School respondent*

- 2.44 A perception among school respondents was that there is a tendency among policy makers to see everything as a priority which overloads schools and pupils. One policy respondent cautioned against underestimating the magnitude of the task, of continued curriculum and qualification reform, although they felt Qualifications Wales and awarding bodies had the benefit of time. They stressed that the new qualifications and their assessment arrangements will come into being in a matter of a few short years after the 2015-17 changes and that teachers may feel rather overwhelmed by the prospect of yet more changes. They highlighted that careful consideration

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.wjec.co.uk/question-bank/question-search.html>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.testbase.co.uk/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.exampro.co.uk/>



needed to be given to teacher training and the development of bilingual resources well before the launch of the new curriculum and qualifications.

- 2.45 Linked to this, there was a feeling among school stakeholders that tensions inevitably arose from trying to *“fit the policy quart into the timetable pint pot”*. In essence, while schools would love to offer everything, they have to prioritise core subjects (upon which they are measured) within the timetable of around 25 one-hour lessons a week.

*“It is naive to imagine that schools will compromise their capped points scores in order to offer a curriculum that might serve some pupils’ needs better.” School respondent*

- 2.46 There were some specific concerns about equality of the Welsh language and various issues were raised whether students could complete qualifications through the medium of Welsh on an equal footing to English.
- 2.47 Those who would like to see greater equality across the ability range felt that lower ability students were being disadvantaged by recent changes in policy and qualification design (this was a recurring point which is described in more detail within the qualifications section).
- 2.48 Schools and colleges raised concerns about the wider HE policies of unconditional offers and the effect this can have on student performance. This was much wider than a Qualifications Wales’s responsibility and was currently being discussed at UK government level.
- 2.49 Respondents identified the challenge of striking an appropriate balance between qualifications that are sufficiently stretching and challenging for the most able students while being accessible to the full range of learners. However, many respondents felt that the higher standards embodied in the revised qualifications were too demanding.
- 2.50 The reform process was not well understood by most stakeholders; understanding varied among schools, FE and policy stakeholders. Some perceived that the speed of reform limited the time available for schools and teachers to adapt. Others thought that the reforms had taken too long. Both groups felt that the consequence was to place a heavy burden on teachers. One policy stakeholder said that this was starting to settle down but flagged up that it would start again in response to the reform of the curriculum.
- 2.51 In terms of the new qualifications, some respondents expressed concerns about the balance between core and non-core subjects, and frustrations that some GCSE specifications were *“quite full”* in terms of content.
- 2.52 In particular, a few policy and AB respondents felt that school leaders had increased the time for the new core subject qualifications and that this had led

to a narrowing of the range of subjects in many schools. One headteacher stated that some children at their school were being deprived of a more broad-based education, as subjects such as music and languages were ‘crowded out’.

- 2.53 A further related effect, observed by some policy stakeholders, was the reluctance of subject teachers to release pupils to meet careers advisors or to participate in extra-curricular activities, including work experience.
- 2.54 Other policy and employer stakeholders felt that a greater emphasis needed to be placed upon preparing young people for the world of work, both by developing their employability skills and giving them the opportunity to engage in work related experiences whilst still at school.

*“The contraction of time, set aside for careers related activity, within the curriculum over the last few years has been a retrograde step and this needs to be put right.” Policy respondent*

#### **Impact of PISA on assessment**

- 2.55 According to a few policy respondents, the majority of schools had made suitable adaptations to their teaching in response to the ‘PISA style’ questions seen in the new GCSE specifications.
- 2.56 Some school respondents liked the problem-solving PISA style questions at GCSE, which were generally well received, stating that *“it’s making children think and develop their skills as well as knowledge”*.
- 2.57 Another school respondent said that the revisions in English had been clearly influenced by PISA.

*“It was less predictable in terms of question types which is a good thing and was more clearly about the application of skills rather than preparing for question types”. School respondent*

- 2.58 Furthermore, some stakeholders approved of the emphasis on language and oracy. However, they noted that this created practical problems for schools, such as putting a large group of pupils through a recorded oral examination within a certain time window.
- 2.59 This was also noted in relation to other subjects, such as science, where teachers highlighted that more reading time had been built into the exam, which was regarded as beneficial.

*“We are definitely seeing the effects of the focus on PISA rankings, for example, in science, there is a greater focus on scientific literacy rather than recall...[although] its more difficult to teach that way and adding to exam papers makes them more wordy”. School teacher*

- 2.60 However, some school respondents were critical of what they perceived to be a policy and qualification system driven by moving Wales up the PISA rankings. These respondents did not feel this should be the priority for teachers.

### **School performance**

- 2.61 There were concerns raised by policy respondents and school staff that the current qualification system (with its increased content, more demanding exams and PISA style questions) encouraged teachers to *‘teach to the test’* at the expense of a wider curriculum.

*“Teachers will ‘drill’ pupils in a way that prepares them for exams without necessarily developing their broader understanding or helping them become independent, resourceful learners.” Policy respondent*

- 2.62 While this seemed contradictory to the points made earlier - where teachers said they welcomed the PISA style questions and increased content but then said here that it was more difficult to teach - this accurately represented the views of different stakeholders.

- 2.63 Some school respondents felt unclear about how the Welsh Government intended to measure school performance, which as stated above, can result in unintended consequences for teaching, particularly in non-core subjects.

*“There appears to me to be some backtracking in relation to the capped 9 measure, which I had understood would be the sole/lead measure of performance, with the old level 2 plus KPI appearing to be taking precedence. The ambiguity caused by this is compounded by Estyn’s continued reporting against the capped 8 measures”.*

- 2.64 One school respondent said that *“schools game the system so that their performance appears good, sometimes at the expense of what might be best for pupils”*. They went on to explain that their school had been looking at what impact pursuing more vocational qualifications might have on the school’s Capped 9 Points Score performance.

- 2.65 Other respondents felt that school performance arrangements were generally OK but just needed further refinement. Although, one policy respondent stressed that performance indicators need to be compatible with the new curriculum, which they felt might be a further challenge, given the nature of the curriculum’s four purposes and areas of learning experiences. They stressed that performance indicators need to be introduced in a sensible way, with careful consideration given to the potential unintended consequences of their adoption.

### **Capacity and capability**

- 2.66 A number of issues were raised about the capacity and capability within the education and learning system and the impact of the reforms. Some of these issues are covered in more detail in the qualifications section below.
- The training which newly qualified teachers receive needs to catch up with changes to the qualifications.
  - Ongoing continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers was felt to be insufficient, particularly in FE and WBL. One respondent felt that a minimum number of CPD hours should be included in employment contracts. This was felt to be particularly important considering the new curriculum.
  - Cross border movement of teachers coming into Wales. School teachers who have qualified teacher status (QTS) in England and Wales can currently move across borders and be able to work. However, there were some concerns that further divergence between the nations (in terms of assessment routes in QTS), may destabilise this balance.
  - Change was perceived to be “*constant*” by a number of school respondents and one concluded that this “*was making life difficult for Qualifications Wales as well as for schools*”.

### **The new curriculum**

- 2.67 Respondents were aware of the design of the new curriculum for Wales. Some were open-minded, others were concerned about continued change and reform which they felt would put pressure on schools, colleges and WBL providers.
- 2.68 One policy respondent stressed the importance of all stakeholders being involved and engaged in developing the new curriculum to ensure that the outcomes of the development process will be right.
- 2.69 Some schools felt that they had a good, broad understanding that the focus for qualifications based on a revised curriculum would be increasingly about skills with different types of learning and assessment. Some were aware of the six areas of learning and experience within the new curriculum.
- 2.70 Some respondents were cautious about expressing a view until they had seen the output of the reforms in terms of the new curriculum and qualifications. Some school respondents felt that “*it was a huge experiment*” and thought that parents would be resistant to change.
- 2.71 Other school respondents were concerned about how the new curriculum built around broad areas of learning will equip pupils with the knowledge, skills and qualifications necessary to progress onto particular subject-focused degree

courses. Other school respondents felt that there was insufficient clarity about the future curriculum.

- 2.72 One school respondent felt that Qualifications Wales had a clear role to play in regulating the development of assessment arrangements in response to the new curriculum. There was recognition by one policy respondent that Qualifications Wales had already started to engage in forward planning activity to put new arrangements in place in good time.

### **Suggestions for improvements**

- 2.73 Respondents discussed some of the criticisms described in the above chapter and had some suggestions for ways forward:
- It was difficult sometimes for people to engage in consultations about changes to qualifications, particularly teachers, because they were doing more immediate things, so they did not always get involved. AB respondents recognised that one of the lessons to learn was that getting teachers to engage was important.
  - There was felt to be an insufficient understanding of the reform process (among stakeholders), how it was implemented and ongoing annual reviews. Therefore, it was felt that there was a need for a communication project to be undertaken to inform people of the cycle of the process from development through to implementation through to steady state of delivery and the roles of the key players.
  - There was perceived to be an ongoing need to communicate the role of key players in the qualification system such as Qualifications Wales, Welsh Government, WJEC and regional consortia.
  - There was believed to be a need to better understand how WJEC makes adjustments when awarding GCSEs and A levels by setting grade moving boundaries. AB respondents felt that the recent concerns around GCSE English should have been seen as anything new as they related to well established procedures.
- 2.74 Respondents felt that an improved communication strategy was required to address the above issues. Some stakeholders also felt that this needed to include parents who were considered to be missed out of the processes currently. Respondents stressed that misunderstandings had created confusion, for example, the belief that WJEC's role was to provide books and teaching and learning resources, although they were not a publisher of these resources.

### 3 CONFIDENCE IN QUALIFICATIONS IN WALES

#### Introduction

- 3.1 Many stakeholders confirmed that they generally considered qualifications in Wales to be ‘fit for purpose’.
- 3.2 There was general support for the changes made to GCSEs and A levels over the last three years in terms of ‘raising the bar’ within the core subjects and rebalancing the emphasis between course work and examinations. There were high levels of confidence in both GCSEs and A levels, although some specific issues concerned stakeholders.
- 3.3 This section details stakeholders’ views about qualifications in Wales, covering
  - General Certificates in Secondary Education (GCSEs).
  - Advanced level qualifications (AS level and A level).
  - Resources for GCSEs and A level qualifications.
  - Welsh Baccalaureate (Welsh Bacc) / Skills Challenge Certificate (SCC).
  - Vocational qualifications.

#### GCSE qualifications

- 3.4 Reformed GCSEs were being effectively embedded within the current curriculum according to most respondents. There was general support for the additional rigour introduced through reformed qualifications.
- 3.5 Many respondents felt that the qualification specifications were “*about right*”, although some were regarded as teetering on the edge of being “*too full*” in the sense that it was challenging to get through the whole syllabus.
- 3.6 Despite divergence in structure and content, GCSEs in Wales were still thought to be on a par with those in England. Furthermore, the retention of the A\* to G grading system in Wales was considered a positive step because these grades are well understood. It was thought that the 9 to 1 grading system adopted in England has yet to fully bed-down.
- 3.7 It was thought that less academic pupils, in particular, would find examined GCSEs more challenging and the absence of vocational alternatives caused by these qualifications not counting towards school performance measures (for example BTEC science) may disadvantage some learners.
- 3.8 We discuss other GCSE issues and subject specific issues under the following headings:
  - Early entry.

- Assessment and exams.
- Teacher confidence and preparedness to teach to the new specifications.
- The new school curriculum.
- Subject issues: Science, English, Welsh Language, Welsh Literature and Mathematics.

### **Early entry**

- 3.9 There were extensive comments on the advantages and disadvantages of early entry practices.
- 3.10 Many schools had been adopting the practice of entering pupils for GCSE examinations in year 10. The advantages to doing this were argued to be:
- Reduced burden on some pupils by “getting some subjects out of the way early”.
  - Provides pupils with experience of sitting external examinations.
  - Allows pupils to re-sit examinations in Year 11 if it is thought that they could improve their grades by doing so and *“give[s] them more than one bite at the cherry”*.
- 3.11 By the same token, it was argued that there were disadvantages to early entry:
- Pupils may lack the maturity to sit examinations in Year 10
  - Some schools do not re-enter pupils for examinations if pupils achieve their predicted grades, thus depriving pupils of the opportunity to improve on their final grades.
  - Pupils can become fatigued when faced with successive rounds of examinations.
  - Multiple entry is expensive for schools.
- 3.12 Qualifications Wales’s 2017 review of early and multiple entry brought into question the appropriateness of this practice<sup>17</sup> and this led to the Education Minister announcing in 2017 that from 2019, only the results of pupils’ first sitting of GCSE examinations would contribute towards school performance measures. Whilst this does not preclude schools from entering pupils early e.g. where that might be in pupils’ best interests, it was intended to discontinue early entry as a widespread practice.
- 3.13 There had been some confusion felt by respondents related to the Welsh Government advice regarding early entry for GCSE in 2017/18. This was

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.qualificationswales.org/media/2825/approaches-to-early-and-multiple-entry-2017-e.pdf>

perceived as leading to inconsistency across the regions, which led to some frustrations, particularly among policy and school respondents (this was also part of the issue raised in north Wales regarding GCSE English).

### **Assessment and exams**

- 3.14 There were a few issues raised by small numbers of respondents in relation to assessment and exams covering school performance indicators, scheduling of exams, style of assessment and entries at FE college.
- 3.15 There were different views on the Welsh Government's discouragement of multiple entries, through basing school performance measures on the first grades achieved in a subject. Some respondents supported this, while others felt it was reasonable for students who made uncharacteristic errors to re-sit at least once without this impacting on what grade is counted for school performance measures.
- 3.16 The timetabling of many exams over a short space of time was challenging for one school respondent. They felt that maths exams could have been grouped over a shorter period of time to reduce pressure on schools and pupils, rather than spread out over the course of the summer exam period.
- 3.17 A number of school respondents mentioned that in the last few years they had noticed that exams were including a greater number of extended response questions. They felt that this presented a specific challenge to pupils whose reading and comprehension skills were weaker. Other saw this as evidence of increased rigour and challenge in the assessment process.
- 3.18 FE respondents reported that there had been a substantial increase in the number of learners enrolled at FE colleges having to re-sit GCSE English and mathematics. This was believed to put additional pressure on the FE sector to support such students to achieve these qualifications.

### **New school curriculum**

- 3.19 Stakeholders were interested to see the extent to which the Successful Futures recommendations will be implemented. Specific issues raised included:
- The extent to which the new curriculum will be reconciled with the relatively new GCSE framework [Policy and school respondents].
  - Although there is time set aside for implementation, there was a concern that this time might not be sufficient [Policy and school respondents].
- 3.20 From a different perspective, there was a perception, from some policy respondents, that since GCSEs had recently undergone significant reform, that the response may not have been radical enough.



### Teacher confidence and preparedness to teach to the new specifications

3.21 Overall, teachers were perceived, by policy respondents, to be increasingly confident about teaching the content required for GCSE qualifications but there was less confidence in how qualifications were being examined. Some policy respondents felt that more timely teacher guidance was required.

3.22 Some school respondents felt that not enough was done to inform and prepare teachers for the introduction of the new qualifications. They felt that there needed to be a greater focus on developing teaching confidence and pedagogy.

*“Insufficient professional development opportunities were offered, and subject specifications were not made available in sufficient time to allow practitioners to really get to grips with what was expected before teaching pupils who would be expected to sit the new style exams.” School respondent*

3.23 Much of the uncertainty reported, related to teachers’ lack of confidence in terms of the assessment expectations. There were concerns regarding inconsistency in language and question styles which could be interpreted differently by students.

3.24 Regional consortia have recognised a lack of confidence in some of their teachers and were working hard to improve the quality of teaching by reducing a focus on teaching to pass exams.

*“Our teachers need to understand that if they teach high quality lessons and teach students to have an inquiring mind, that the rest will fall into place.” Policy respondent*

3.25 One FE respondent felt that the training which newly qualified teachers received needed to catch up with changes to the qualifications.

3.26 One policy respondent identified that the Welsh Government had funded regional support services to support schools during the transition to the new qualifications. However, they felt that despite this it remained a challenge to engage some practitioners. Other policy respondents felt that there remained *“a huge area of need around quality of teaching in secondary”*, despite the prioritisation of teaching quality and the building of networks to support each other.

*“WJEC have tried to respond to this by bringing teachers and regional consortia together and having a regional approach to the development of resources. However, regional consortia and teachers were not funded to do this and felt they couldn’t respond.” Policy respondent*

## Science

- 3.27 There was extensive feedback on GCSE science. Some respondents felt recent changes were positive (such as reduced workload for teachers), while other respondents were more critical noting the following areas as concerns: the demanding nature of the qualification and the resulting effects of the double award (such as a disincentive to teach three sciences and insufficient time to teach).
- 3.28 Science was regarded, by many school respondents, as being very demanding for pupils. School respondents described the exam paper as being more “wordy” than previous versions. Therefore, in that context, the additional reading time provided was appreciated by school respondents as part of the exam. One school respondent explained the consequence of the more demanding science GCSE was that the C grade boundary in science had been set at, what they regarded as very low.
- 3.29 A number of school respondents mentioned that they previously used the BTEC science and that it has taken longer to get teachers sufficiently prepared to teach the new GCSE science effectively. Most considered that the new science course is better than BTEC, although some say less able pupils struggle. Some schools mentioned that they were considering the re-introduction of BTEC science for lower ability pupils.
- 3.30 The inclusion of two reserved science slots within schools’ Capped 9 Points Score has made it difficult for schools to teach three separate sciences according to some school respondents.

*“Trying to offer three sciences can prove a timetabling nightmare for schools, and smaller schools in particular, so the focus will inevitably be upon the double science award, which is what is measured.” School respondent*

- 3.31 Although, the new Science GCSE double award counts as two GCSEs, there was felt that insufficient time was built within the curriculum for delivery. Some policy respondents also believed there was a skills deficit to teaching the new qualification, with teachers requiring more training.
- 3.32 Teacher workload was felt to be reduced as a result of the current GCSE science double award. This was noted by teachers as helping them to focus on other aspects of the qualification.

*“Previously there was significant coursework, so three pieces in year 10 and one large piece in year 11, all of those being handed in at the beginning of May. So you had hundreds of pieces of work and now we have the practical exam after Christmas and it’s externally marked. That’s a very big positive.” School respondent*

- 3.33 Welsh contextualisation was felt by school stakeholders to have been incorporated effectively in the science curriculum. Although some note they were initially concerned it was too forced, they now regard it as being about right.

*“The Welsh context is palpable within the science syllabus e.g. Wallis is covered as well as Darwin. When the new qualifications were first introduced, however, it had seemed that the Welsh context was too prominent, almost forced. By now, however, teachers have better understood how it is intended that it should be covered, and it has become a more natural and less contrived part of delivering the courses.” School respondent*

### **English**

- 3.34 There was broad support for the revised English language and literature qualifications by teachers. Some issues were raised relating to the new skills focus, removing English Literature from the Capped 9 Points Score in 2018, insufficient preparation for teachers prior to the new specification, selection of poetry linked to a perception of Welsh contextualisation and the GCSE English language grade boundary review.

- 3.35 Changes to English language were not believed to be helpful by one school respondent, as the skills focus risked crowding out other important skills.

*“There has been a focus within the new GCSE English language course upon ‘functional skills’ such as the interpretation of infographics and so forth. Whilst I can see the logic in this cross curricular type approach in terms of preparing young people for real life, it means that there is less time available for more literary and linguistic aspects of the syllabus. As a result, the new GCSE qualification does not help develop pupils’ higher order reading skills to the same extent and does not, therefore, prepare them quite as well to study English at A level.”*

- 3.36 The greater emphasis on English language teaching as a result of English literature qualifications no longer counting towards the core literacy element in the Capped 9 Points Score was a concern for some school respondents.

- 3.37 Particular issues were raised regarding insufficient preparation prior to the introduction of the new style qualifications and lack of clear guidance in aspects such as synthesis in English language.

*“... exemplifying materials on synthesis [were] unclear when they were first published. This meant that teachers were not clear about what was expected and how to go about preparing their pupils.” School respondent*

- 3.38 One school respondent felt that poorer quality poetry by Welsh poets was crowding out a wider, richer range of English literature in the name of Welsh contextualisation.
- 3.39 The issue regarding grade boundaries for GCSE English was perceived to be regrettable and was perceived to be exacerbated by the response of Qualifications Wales which was thought at best, to lack empathy and understanding, and at worst, to be flawed.
- 3.40 There was concern expressed, by one policy respondent, about “*volatility*”, with grade boundaries said to have “*bounced up and down every year*” since the new qualifications were introduced, reflecting “*knee jerk reactions to unforeseen circumstances*” that were in the view of one policy respondent “*absolutely foreseeable to anyone teaching those subjects*”. It was argued that Qualifications Wales and WJEC “*failed to soften the landing*” as new qualifications were introduced and failed to ensure consistency and comparability of grades awarded from one year to the next. It was also argued that, in England, transitional arrangements had been put in place “*to ensure that children did not pay the price [for the changes]*” by being awarded lower grades than they might have been awarded in other years. However, this indicates some misunderstanding as the exact same approaches and arrangements were applied in Wales as was the case in England.
- 3.41 There remained some concern and suspicion among some stakeholders that a grade quota system was in operation, although they recognised it had been denied publicly.

### **Welsh language**

- 3.42 There was support for the qualification revisions in GCSE Welsh language. The key issue regarding Welsh language related to the balance between the two qualifications covering Welsh as a first and as a second language.
- 3.43 The greater reliance on exams to assessing pupils studying Welsh as a first language was welcomed, by school stakeholders, because it was more easily administered by teachers and was considered to represent a more robust test of pupils’ language skills. However, it was felt that the examination-based approach tended to suit more academically able pupils better than it does less academically able pupils.
- 3.44 Currently there is a bar on students entering the second language qualification if they have followed a Welsh-medium education stream up to the end of KS3. It was thought by some respondents (who may or may not have been aware of the bar) that in future, weaker students might be more likely to be entered for the second language qualification in order to attain a better grade, even though they might be capable of securing the more challenging first language qualification, in order to improve school performance measures.

*“The literacy points score for Welsh is confined to pupils studying Welsh as a first language rather than the whole year group. This has the perverse consequence of encouraging schools to enter pupils who might be capable of studying Welsh as a first language onto second language courses, thus depriving pupils the opportunity to study Welsh at a higher level.” School respondent.*

- 3.45 Some school respondents were disappointed that the Welsh Government had not been braver in this regard by introducing a qualification based on a ‘language continuum’ rather than having two separate Welsh language qualifications. As one respondent saw it, this would have challenged schools to *“take the Welsh language more seriously rather than churning out pupils with A\* in Welsh second language who can’t even speak the language”*.
- 3.46 Among teachers there were some contradictory views as to whether changes to GCSEs have brought about greater parity between English and Welsh language qualifications. Some felt they were now on a par with each other, others felt that the Welsh language qualification was easier than the English language qualification.
- 3.47 Several schools struggled to appoint appropriately qualified Welsh teachers to teach Welsh as a second language. This meant that they used Welsh speakers trained to teach other subjects to teach a priority (albeit not core) subject. Given that the reformed Welsh second language GCSE has been made more robust this was seen as a particularly challenging issue and was likely to impact upon some schools’ performance in 2019.

### **Welsh literature**

- 3.48 There was a perception that a lack of parity exists between GCSE Welsh Literature and GCSE English Literature in that the Welsh literature qualification was considered more demanding. For example, one school respondent felt that GCSE Welsh Literature was akin to an AS level and not a GCSE.
- 3.49 One school stakeholder felt that the requirement to study 10 poems for Welsh literature was rather excessive, it was thought that eight would be a more manageable number.

### **Mathematics**

- 3.50 GCSE Mathematics Numeracy is becoming embedded within the curriculum with fewer concerns about either the qualification itself, or delivery of the qualification. Respondents referenced a number of positives such as recognising the importance of maths in the Capped 9 Points Score and improved Welsh contextualisation. Although there were concerns about literacy requirements, excessive numbers of exams, balance of expectations

between foundation and intermediate tiers and the continued challenge of recruiting maths teachers into the profession.

- 3.51 The introduction of the stand-alone Mathematics-Numeracy GCSE which prior to 2019 counted as a separate measure within schools' Capped 9 Points Score was welcomed by one policy respondent.
- 3.52 An employer respondent felt that the mathematics qualifications were working well and preparing young people for science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) apprenticeships.
- 3.53 There was regarded, by many school respondents, to be more reading and understanding in the new Mathematics-Numeracy syllabus. In particular, this was felt to be more challenging for less able pupils with weaker literacy skills.

*"The new Numeracy syllabus has less maths content than previous courses but requires pupils to read and understand questions to a greater extent."*  
*School respondent*

- 3.54 Some school respondents thought that four examinations to cover mathematics and mathematics- numeracy were too many, especially for lower ability pupils.
- 3.55 Welsh contextualisation was regarded as having improved in that the names used were Welsh and the places and maps referred to were in Wales.
- 3.56 A policy respondent felt that the level 2 certificate in additional mathematics was a useful qualification to have for more able pupils.
- 3.57 It was argued that removing the possibility of achieving a C grade for those studying foundation tier maths had encouraged schools to enter those who *"have even a sporting change of a C"* for the intermediate tier (policy, FE and school respondents). This does not necessarily lead to the best experience of maths or numeracy for some pupils. It was suggested that 'exceptional performance' in the foundation tier should be awarded with a C grade, which is currently not the case.
- 3.58 The introduction of the new qualifications coincided with *"a decrease in maths expertise across the board"*, according to one policy respondent. They felt that fewer mathematicians were entering the teaching profession. This situation was believed to be compounded in north west Wales, by the need to attract teachers with the skills needed to teach maths through the medium of Welsh.

### **Other subjects**

- 3.59 Two final issues were raised regarding non-examined assessments (NEA) and the length of time it had taken to revise the information communication technology (ICT) qualification.
- 3.60 Concerns were raised by some schools regarding NEA in geography and computing science. In particular, that NEA was crowding out the rest of the content for the subject.

*“In geography, the NEA is a huge element and takes up too much time, so that there isn’t enough time to teach the rest of the content.” School respondent*

- 3.61 One school respondent felt that it had taken too long to revise the ICT GCSE, such that it was not now fit for purpose due to being out of date.

### **A levels**

- 3.62 There was a general feeling among most stakeholders that the A levels were working well. Examples of positives raised included:
- Qualification specifications were regarded as more balanced.
  - Students received offers from good HEIs.
- 3.63 Many school respondents stressed their confidence in and support for the AS/A2 modular approach, which they felt worked well for students. One school respondent felt that the Welsh model where AS level continues to contribute to the A level grade might be perceived as inferior to the English model as it has not changed, but most respondents felt that it helped differentiate Welsh students to HEIs and employers.
- 3.64 One policy respondent was concerned that fewer pupils were opting for what they termed “non-core” subjects at A level. The corollary according to this stakeholder was that more were opting for maths and science at A level (particularly within higher performing schools) at the expense of the humanities and creative arts.
- 3.65 School stakeholders noted that it remained to be seen what effects changes to GCSEs would have upon pupils’ preparedness for success at A level qualifications.
- 3.66 Some subject specific issues were highlighted as follows:
- Science: there was support for the retention of the practical elements within the grade overall for A level science (school respondents). In particular, this was contrasted with the approach in England where they are separating out the practical element of A level science and assessing it independently of the

knowledge element of the qualification. According to HEI respondents this has meant that to ensure equivalence, different approaches were undertaken for admissions in relation to science-based courses: the non-Welsh universities insist on English Science A level students gaining a pass in their science practical, but they would not expect this of Welsh students as the practical is part of the overall A levels assessment in Wales.

- Mathematics: one FE respondent said that maths teachers found the new qualification challenging to teach, due to its increased rigour. There was a perception that this could lead to an upskilling requirement for maths teachers; especially relating to further maths.
- English Literature: was felt to be very academic and very challenging by one policy respondent.

### **Resources**

3.67 The issue of resources focused on the timely availability of teaching resources and translated materials. There was a recognition that regional level joint working had helped but there remained a general feeling that Welsh students were at a disadvantage since the move to a single awarding body for GCSEs and A level qualifications and the divergence from a wider qualifications market that would be more attractive for publishers of resources.

3.68 There were particular concerns about the lack of available resources at the same time as new qualifications were released for both A levels and GCSEs.

*“The challenges of dealing with changes to the qualifications has been compounded by poor communication from WJEC and a dearth of teaching and learning resources in some subject areas.” Policy respondent*

3.69 One school respondent was under the impression that WJEC had a responsibility to produce textbooks and blamed them for having failed to produce textbooks for maths or further maths at the time of the introduction of the new qualifications.

*“I employed a maths specialist to produce our own resources, at a cost of some £44k per annum. I would be prepared to ‘give it away to them’ in order for other schools to benefit.” School respondent*

3.70 This school respondent felt that it was Qualifications Wales’s responsibility to hold WJEC to account for not having appropriate teaching and learning resources in place to support new courses.

3.71 Another school respondent felt that Qualifications Wales should oblige WJEC to produce a greater number of specimen exam papers in line with new qualifications, given the absence of past papers at this stage to help prepare students.



- 3.72 Many references were made to a perceived under-prioritisation of the Welsh language in respect of resources. There were concerns about GCSE Welsh Language revision resources being published later than English language equivalents. A few school respondents stressed that Welsh medium resources should be published at the same time.
- 3.73 Policy stakeholders and schools felt that for many publishing organisations, it was not financially viable for them to produce resources tailored for students in Wales. Hence, they were concerned that this risked disadvantaging Welsh pupils.
- 3.74 Policy stakeholders felt that there was a lack of recognition and understanding that the impact the lack of resources to support qualifications has on teachers, *“particularly in Wales, there is a dearth of resources”*. It was pointed out that regions and schools come together to try to respond to the need for additional resources, but that there were limits on what could be achieved in this way.

### **Welsh Baccalaureate**

- 3.75 Fewer issues were raised about Welsh Baccalaureate (Welsh Bacc) and the Skills Challenge Certificate (SCC) compared to previous years, suggesting that the qualification was becoming embedded. However, the subject of the Welsh Bacc and SCC did split opinion. We discuss below some general views about the Welsh Bacc and then explore issues specific to SCC separately.
- 3.76 Some school respondents were supportive of SCC and one respondent said they had noticed a change in standards, with teaching and learning raised over recent years. However, many school respondents felt that it was challenging to fit into the curriculum alongside all the other recent changes.
- “We believe in the Welsh Bacc [respondent meaning SCC], we think it’s a great qualification, it’s just fitting it all in.” School respondent*
- 3.77 Some school and college respondents valued aspects such as critical thinking, skills for real life and support for progression from lower levels to level 3.
- 3.78 One policy stakeholder described it as an *“amazing qualification”* and noted that schools in England *“were scrabbling around trying to come up with their own internal diploma ... which is only accredited by the school”*.
- 3.79 Stakeholders had some concerns in the following areas:
- Whether SCC would fit with the new school curriculum and assessment arrangements (Policy respondent).
  - A perception that continued implementation of the Welsh Bacc was the result of a political decision taken by the Welsh Government rather than

Qualifications Wales, but that this challenges the independence of Qualifications Wales (FE respondent).

- A perception that there was too much written work as part of SCC (Policy respondents).
  - Lack of Qualifications Wales’s engagement on feedback suggestions to improve the SCC (FE respondent).
- 3.80 On the question of whether schools and colleges actually commit to the Welsh Bacc, one school respondent pointed out that some schools and colleges actually market themselves as not compelling students to follow SCC (at level 3). One independent school respondent said that they did not think it added anything to GCSEs and A levels, so they did not deliver it. Another school said that their decision about whether to continue with SCC depended on how Estyn reacted to schools not offering it as part of the curriculum.
- 3.81 One school respondent described the level of confusion that had existed, and in some cases continued to exist around the qualification.

*“There has been some confusion over the last couple of years. Parents and students and even teachers are confused at times. Within all this discussion people get the wrong messages. That’s why they have rebranded, so it should be better understood now.” School respondent*

- 3.82 According to one policy stakeholder a majority of pupils were broadly positive about SCC qualification, but they noted that the attitudes of pupils generally reflected the status that schools and school leaders attached to the course. Another policy respondent supported this saying that the quality of SCC experience which young people had depended very much upon their teachers’ attitudes towards the qualification and the teaching skills they possessed, *“to make it interesting and relevant”*.

#### **KS4 SCC studied alongside GCSEs**

- 3.83 There were fewer comments about KS4 SCC compared with the Advanced SCC. At KS4, it was welcomed (by school and policy respondents) that the Skills Challenge Certificate can count towards schools’ Capped 9 Points Score.
- 3.84 However, it was also noted that because it was not among the core ‘subjects’ it was not as high a priority as it might be. Another school respondent also said that very few students fail, therefore it was regarded as *“an easy qualifications to get”*.
- 3.85 A few school respondents felt that the assessment was too great a part of the process. They felt this distracted from pupils’ experience of the qualification.

*“At Level 2 for the GCSE they have four challenges, each one is an assessment. There are 3 or 4 tasks in each assessment. Its less about the experience and more about the assessment.” School respondent*

### **Advanced SCC**

3.86 The Advanced SCC is studied alongside A levels and other level 3 qualifications. There were some powerful endorsements of the Advanced SCC, although there were also some strident criticisms.

3.87 Many respondents valued SCC and thought it was a valuable qualification. One school respondent who was very supportive of SCC at Level 3, highlighted the benefits (identified by others) to students around developing wider life skills and employability skills.

*“Pupils do well at the Advanced Level Welsh Bacc [SCC] and I believe that pupils gain good experiences as a result of pursuing the qualification .... it extends intelligent, conscientious pupils’ horizons ... it stretches those who study maths, physics and chemistry to do different things ... to speak in front of people ... to do things they would not have done were it not for the Welsh Bacc. The extended essay/project helps pupils to develop the kinds of skills needed for study at higher levels. Extended projects also provide pupils with something to discuss when attending university interviews.”  
School respondent*

3.88 Some school respondents were convinced that the experience of doing the Advanced SCC had helped their pupils to secure places at good universities that they might otherwise have struggled to get into. One school respondent explained that their school invests a great deal of staff time in SCC and they felt that teachers were just beginning to understand the power of SCC and its potential for students.

3.89 The fact that the Welsh Bacc ‘core’ has now been replaced by the SCC which is a standalone and graded qualification was regarded by school respondents as a good development and a means of strong candidates demonstrating a higher level of skills. However, some school respondents felt that the assessment arrangements were *“clumsy and burdensome”*. They hoped that assessment and moderation arrangements for SCC would be rationalised in the future, however, they also added that it was not as easy to attain an SCC qualification at level 3 now as it once was.

3.90 The more critical views ranged from educationalists just disagreeing that it was academically valuable, to some who thought that it was too academic, to others who felt students did not value it.

*“It’s not an academic qualification, it’s a brand and it doesn’t have academic rigour.” School respondent*

*“the Welsh Baccalaureate favours more academically able pupils at KS5.”  
School respondent*

*“Some of the pupils find it a bit tedious having to do [SCC] on top of the A-Levels. As they have to take the skills element alongside the A-Levels, they don’t take it as seriously.” School respondent*

- 3.91 FE respondents had a different perspective on the Welsh Bacc. It was perceived that only a minority of FE learners take-up the SCC qualification. One FE respondent explained that they had many students who did not have a grade C in English and maths GCSEs, therefore they felt they needed to prioritise these qualifications over insisting that these students work towards SCC.
- 3.92 One policy respondent identified that some colleges and sixth forms were making a selling point out of not delivering SCC at KS5 and this was believed to be attractive for some students. There was a concern, expressed by one FE respondent, that colleges that do not deliver the advanced SCC at KS5 might be financially penalised in the future.

#### **Perceptions and attitudes of HEIs**

- 3.93 As part of the research we explored the views of HEIs within Wales and outside Wales.
- 3.94 There was a divergence of perceptions among stakeholders about how HEIs considered the Welsh Bacc in the admissions process and how HEIs actually valued the qualification when considering prospective students. Some thought that it was of limited value in the UCAS application process, while others believed that HEIs value it as part of the process.

*“I understand that higher education institutions which traditionally attract large numbers of young people from Wales look favourably upon the advanced level WB, but I don’t believe that all universities accept the Welsh Bacc as an A level equivalent.” Policy respondent*

*“There is no real benefit doing the Welsh Bacc at A level as there is very little evidence that HEs consider this as a useful or equivalent subject and motivation to do this for students is very low.” School respondent*

- 3.95 All HEIs that we spoke to inside and outside of Wales were aware of the Welsh Bacc but not all valued it in the same way. HEIs inside Wales were generally more supportive and recognised the advanced SCC as equivalent to an A level but not for all courses. In HEIs outside of Wales some treated it as equivalent to an A level (particularly post-1992 institutions), some only regarded it as a supporting qualification, (particularly pre-1992 institutions) for others it varied by course and depended on the admissions policy for a given subject.

*“When the Welsh Bacc was introduced, there was an inconsistent approach across the university about whether it was taken into account, or not, as part of the admissions process. There is now a standardised approach.” HEI outside of Wales*

- 3.96 Whilst HEIs adopted different approaches to how they considered the Welsh Bacc as part of their admissions process, they broadly welcomed the qualification, especially the research project element, which they believed helped bridge the gap between A level and HE learning.

*“We have a tariff-based approach to admissions and apply the standard tariff for the Welsh Bacc as per our guidelines i.e. 120 UCAS points. The grading of the Welsh Bacc has been very helpful in distinguishing between weak and strong candidates.” HEI outside of Wales*

*“It is exceedingly rare for a student to apply with two A levels and the Welsh Bacc. We do not consider this a broad enough base to progress and achieve well at HE. Most of our peer HE institutions are adopting a similar approach. There is not sufficient rigour within the Welsh Bacc qualification for it to count as an A level.” HEI outside of Wales*

- 3.97 One FE respondent felt that Qualifications Wales could do more to promote the Welsh Bacc to universities outside of Wales. Although, the HEI respondents that we spoke to said that they had sufficient information about the qualification.

### **Vocational qualifications**

- 3.98 The key areas raised by stakeholders regarding vocational qualifications were sector reviews, development and value of vocational qualifications in schools. Some policy perspectives were also offered by stakeholders.

#### **Sector reviews**

- 3.99 Stakeholders welcomed the sector reviews, some referencing the need for better qualifications.
- 3.100 The pace of reform in terms of sector reviews was regarded as slow, but stakeholders recognised that it was important to get changes right and ensure they were fit for purpose.

*“The postponement of the introduction of social care and childcare qualifications was the right move, they started with the most complicated area to begin with, crossing over many professional boundaries and regulators within the social care arena which made revision complicated.”  
FE respondent*

- 3.101 There was a feeling expressed by policy stakeholders that employers and practitioners in the Health and Social Care including Childcare sector welcomed

the review as they believed the qualifications needed to be improved and that it would give greater status to their profession. One AB respondent perceived a risk of deviation between qualifications in England and Wales and the implications that this might have for mobility across the border.

- 3.102 The changes to the policy landscape with fewer sector skills councils was viewed by policy and WBL respondents as limiting the extent and effectiveness of consultations about changes to qualifications. Although generally the sector reviews were welcomed as providing a distinctly Welsh perspective and being more effective than in England.

*“[WBL providers] are welcoming how Qualifications Wales is approaching the review of vocational qualifications with the Welsh approach instead of that followed by the English.” WBL respondent*

- 3.103 Stakeholders saw both advantages and disadvantages of competition between ABs to respond to new vocational qualifications. One FE respondent re-iterated their surprise at the ABs appointed for the new Health and Social Care qualifications, feeling that they did not have sector expertise.

- 3.104 FE and WBL respondents felt that the pace of change was too slow and that they were expecting more, stating that there has been a lack of information to keep them informed, which may affect their readiness to implement reforms.

*“WBL providers are ready to deliver but the lack of information is causing concern. WBL providers need to make sure that if there are considerable changes that staff are prepared, trained and ready by September.” WBL respondent*

- 3.105 WBL providers and policy respondents pointed out their view that ABs were considering Wales to be a minor and diminishing market. This raised concerns around a lack of competition and input of new ideas. They felt that Qualifications Wales and the Welsh Government must ensure that there were no gaps with respect to vocational qualifications to support achievement of government policy and to provide appropriate career pathways to young people.

### **Vocational qualification issues in schools**

- 3.106 There were a variety of diverse views about the importance of vocational qualifications for less academically oriented pupils, about particular ABs' qualifications and the balance between academic and vocational qualifications.

- 3.107 Vocational qualifications were perceived to be very important, according to many stakeholders, especially for less academic pupils.

*“Vocational qualifications form an important part of the mix of options available to pupils, particularly those ‘who are not academically suited’”  
School respondent*

3.108 There were differing perspectives around particular ABs’ qualifications, highlighted in the examples below:

- One school respondent identified a greater use of some vocational qualifications that did not have externally examined components in schools. They felt that other schools might be doing this to boost their Capped 9 Points Score.
- One policy respondent felt that some qualifications had a stronger reputation than others, where they were regarded as a ‘licence to practice’.
- HEIs had concerns that future vocational qualifications might not be as good as BTECs, since Pearson (developer of BTEC qualifications) were regarded as very effective and communicative: *“The other AOs are not anywhere near as slick as Pearson in terms of communicating the value of their qualifications to HE.”* HEI respondent

3.109 Some policy respondents felt that WJEC and Qualifications Wales should not focus on generating what they termed as *“pseudo vocational qualifications”*, that in their view did not qualify children to go into work. They believed that vocational qualifications for young people aged 14-16 did little more than provide pupils with a taste of, or an overview of, a particular vocational area. It was therefore argued that encouraging pupils to pursue such level 2 vocational courses was a waste of time.

*“Young people are just killing time in their last two years at school ... [before] going to the FE college and doing a level 2 City and Guilds ... so they’re doing two qualifications at exactly the same level ... but one counts for nothing in terms of accelerating their progression post 16 ... it’s just a bit of alternative, diversionary curriculum because GCSEs don’t suit them”.*  
Policy respondent

3.110 Whereas others expressed the view that vocational subjects provided an interesting alternative for those whose interests were less academic.

3.111 The parity of esteem issue between an ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ route qualifications persisted, with a perception that this had not been overcome.

*“Vocational qualifications continue to be seen as something ‘inferior’ to general qualifications by young people, parents and schools. This means that it remains a challenge to promote vocational qualifications and to encourage young people to pursue them.”* Policy respondent

3.112 Contrary to the concerns about vocational qualifications being regarded as lacking rigour, some respondents noted what they termed as the increasingly academic nature of more recent vocational qualifications and the potential impact this might have on learner retention.

*“So, colleges have a challenge where the qualifications have gone more academic yet the learners that choose these courses are not academic. The exams are bigger assignments and externally assessed exams. This affects their attention rates and comparable to other subjects, retention is poor.”*  
FE respondent

3.113 So, for example, in Health and Social Care, one FE respondent felt that the assessment could have included some form of workplace assessment that could have helped young people demonstrate their practical skills.

### **Policy**

3.114 Three policy related points were raised covering the perceived value of national occupational standards (NOS), the importance of monitoring the emergence of T levels in England and how vocational qualifications were valued in the Capped 9 Points Score.

3.115 The continued use of NOS was regarded as important in Wales (compared with England) by an employer respondent, *“it means that they can use these to develop new qualifications”*.

3.116 Some respondents (school and policy) referenced the need to keep a watching brief on the T Levels emerging in England. They felt that if they were successful then Wales would need an equivalent.

*“The development of T-level qualifications in England might help to alleviate this disparity of esteem, but it remains to be seen whether the changes will have a material impact.”* Policy respondent

3.117 Some school and policy respondents felt that a greater range of vocational courses should be recognised in schools Capped 9 Points Score.

*“The City and Guilds level 2 in hairdressing course was valued by pupils but did little for schools in terms of their capped nine measure.”* School respondent

### **Apprenticeships**

3.118 Qualifications Wales’s role is to regulate the qualifications within the apprenticeships. However, comments made on apprenticeships mostly related to the apprenticeships’ frameworks and not the qualifications themselves.



3.119 There remained general support for Welsh apprenticeship frameworks, particularly when contrasted with the development of apprenticeship standards in England and the fact that some new English apprenticeships do not contain qualifications.

3.120 Three broad points were raised by the small number of respondents that discussed apprenticeships.

3.121 First, there was a concern about the availability of frameworks for occupational areas where the frameworks were due to expire. This was linked to the consultation being undertaken in relation to the new apprenticeship governing body in Wales (creating an issuing authority role for Welsh apprenticeship frameworks). This was regarded as having the potential for a major impact on future development of frameworks.

*“This is a development we are watching very carefully.” Employer respondent*

3.122 Second, there was the issue of Essential Skills within the apprenticeship framework (raised by policy, WBL and AB respondents) which was regarded as very difficult to achieve within the timeframe. This was a particular issue for students in a pupil referral units (PRUs) and lower level learners.

3.123 There was also a concern, expressed by an AB respondent, that providers delivering apprenticeships felt that there was insufficient funding from Welsh Government for the delivery of Essential Skills qualifications, given the level of work required.

*“The amount of time that staff have to spend with learners to develop their essential skills, to get through the qualifications is seen as disproportionate to their vocational programme.” WBL respondent*

3.124 Third, one policy respondent suggested that parents were increasingly becoming interested in apprenticeships and that there were more apprenticeship opportunities available these days, particularly for young people aged 18+. The challenge, according to this policy respondent, was to convince young people of the merits of an apprenticeship, particularly where schools were encouraging them down more academic routes.

#### **Professional development for WBL staff**

3.125 Many staff working in WBL environments were not qualified teachers, according to one policy respondent, and the need to invest in this workforce so that they are able to deliver the vocational qualifications was an important priority.

*“Most of the staff are trained and qualified as professionals, they are not teachers or trainers, many of them don’t have formal qualifications as teachers.” Policy respondent*

3.126 One policy respondent felt that more had been put in place recently, but that more needed to be done, particularly around:

- Stretching and challenging learners with effective questioning, coaching and mentoring, and target setting.
- Assessment and learning strategies, using assessments to increase learning opportunities and move away from an assessment and competence model to an assessment and learning model.
- Quality assurance training. Funding from Qualifications Wales to provide training for quality assurance staff has been valuable. This has been rolled out through ‘quality matters’ workshops.
- Developing professional pathways for WBL staff. Linked to a Welsh Government scoping exercise for professional learning in the post-16 and WBL sector.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

### Confidence in the Qualification System

- 4.1 Qualifications Wales was recognised as a strong organisation providing leadership and clarity on regulation and qualifications. It was regarded to have developed good relations with the school sector, employer representatives and awarding bodies. It was credited with a commitment to open and transparent consultation, decision making and regulation.
- 4.2 There was generally positive feedback from stakeholders about communication mechanisms used by Qualifications Wales.
- 4.3 However, some criticisms were evident, particularly in relation to the GCSE English language grade boundary changes perceived to have affected pupils in north Wales (where some schools had seen a drop in GCSE English Language results). There was evidence of a lack of understanding of the roles of Qualifications Wales and WJEC across stakeholder groups. Stakeholders perceived that greater sensitivity could have been shown on this particular issue.
- 4.4 It was perceived by policy stakeholders that the WJEC alone was willing to develop GCSEs and A level qualifications due to the Welsh market being too small to attract other awarding bodies. Some stakeholders liked the idea of 'made in Wales' qualifications, but it seems they did not like one of the consequences of that.
- 4.5 Some stakeholders were positive about WJEC staff, the performance of the organisation and the support they received. Other stakeholders remained concerned about WJEC being the single awarding body for most GCSEs and A level qualifications. Some respondents felt that a lack of competition and a drop in the quality of service were negative results of this. Improved communication was identified as an important priority going forward for WJEC.
- 4.6 Some additional concerns were expressed around the capacity of WJEC to respond to demands from the Welsh qualification system, with examples of late Welsh resources and a lack of sample papers, in the absence of past papers, given the revised qualifications. There were concerns about the effectiveness of the online mechanisms for CPD and post exam briefings.
- 4.7 There were some concerns regarding school performance and teaching practice. Despite general support for the PISA style questions, some respondents said that school teachers were 'teaching to the test', especially for lower level learners due to the volume of content and pressure to achieve.
- 4.8 Many stakeholders understood the challenges faced by Qualifications Wales, particularly in relation to delivering the qualification changes committed to by

the Welsh Government and policy decisions relating to curriculum changes and school performance. There was an acceptance that Wales needed to keep abreast of the changes happening in England and to respond appropriately to ensure equivalence and parity of esteem.

- 4.9 Stakeholders were generally aware of many of the broad school curriculum changes being planned for the future. There was some apprehension among school respondents to a new wave of reforms that will affect day to day teaching and potentially place greater demands on teachers.
- 4.10 There was general support for the sector-by-sector approach to reviewing vocational qualifications. However, there were concerns that developments were slow, for example, Health and Social Care including Childcare qualifications. WBL providers and policy respondents felt that ABs were considering Wales to be a minor and diminishing market - raising concerns around a lack of competition and input of new ideas. There were calls for Qualifications Wales and the Welsh Government to ensure that there were no gaps with respect to vocational qualifications to address government policy and to provide appropriate career pathways to young people.
- 4.11 There were a variety of diverse views about the importance of vocational qualifications for less academically oriented pupils, about particular ABs' qualifications and the continued imbalance between academic and vocational qualifications.

### **Confidence in Qualifications**

- 4.12 GCSEs and A level qualifications retained strong support among stakeholders in Wales. Stakeholders stated that they were a reliable indication of a pupil's knowledge, skills and application to learn.
- 4.13 Many stakeholders agreed that the qualification revisions were needed. Revisions were perceived to have helped ensure that qualifications provide a strong portfolio of learning and assessment for young people in Wales. Respondents had different views about whether reforms had taken too long or were implemented to quickly, however, they agreed that the consequence was additional burden on teachers.
- 4.14 While there was a recognition that GCSE standards had been raised because of the revisions, there were some concerns that less able learners now struggle to achieve a pass. Many stakeholders recognised the alignment with PISA style questions, and most supported this while others were less convinced.
- 4.15 A few school respondents had concerns around the high volume of content in some GCSE qualifications, but it was felt that confidence in teaching had improved over time.

- 4.16 Many stakeholders supported the move towards summative assessment to increase rigour but felt that lower level learners who were less able to perform in exams had been disadvantaged with the removal of some alternative qualifications (e.g. BTEC science) from school performance measures.
- 4.17 Stakeholders recognised the increased Welsh context in qualifications. However, there was disappointment in the delays for some Welsh language resources.
- 4.18 Awareness of the changes to qualifications among parents and employers was perceived by stakeholders to be fairly low.
- 4.19 The decisions to retain the letter grading in GCSEs and to retain the modular approach in A levels continues to be supported. Welsh qualifications were well regarded by HEIs in Wales and those outside of Wales.
- 4.20 The Welsh Bacc continues to split opinion. Some stakeholders were very supportive recognising the benefits of wider skills gained at level 2 and level 3. However, others questioned its value in a narrowing curriculum. There were very different perceptions about how the Welsh Bacc and the advanced SCC was regarded in HEIs and clearly different policies in HEIs about how they consider applications from prospective students with the Welsh Bacc.
- 4.21 The issue of resources focused on the timely availability of teaching resources and translated materials. There was a recognition that regional level joint working had helped but there remained a general feeling that Welsh medium students were at a disadvantage since the move to Wales only qualifications.
- 4.22 The key areas raised by stakeholders regarding vocational qualifications were sector reviews (valued but perceived as slow), development and value of vocational qualifications (including parity of esteem with general qualifications), and some policy perspectives (including value within the school performance system).
- 4.23 There remained general support for Welsh apprenticeship frameworks, particularly when contrasted with the development of apprenticeship standards in England and the fact that some new English apprenticeships do not contain qualifications.
- 4.24 Stakeholders highlighted the need to invest in the work-based learning workforce so that they were able to deliver the vocational qualifications. They recognised that more had been put in place recently, but that more was needed to be done.

## **Final Comments**

- 4.25 Across the three waves of fieldwork since 2015 there has been clear evidence of a distinctly Welsh qualification system becoming established and being positively viewed by stakeholders.
- 4.26 Qualifications Wales was consistently regarded positively across the three waves of fieldwork, despite some criticism in particular areas, such as the grade boundary set for English language in 2018 which was challenged by some stakeholders. Similarly, WJEC was respected and recognised as having the necessary expertise to fulfil its brief, while there remained concerns about the consequences of their main supplier position for general qualifications. This view, in relation to WJEC as the main supplier, was consistently voiced over the three waves of research.
- 4.27 There remain some hot topics that have been raised consistently over the three waves of fieldwork that split opinion such as the Welsh Bacc.
- 4.28 Communication and public understanding of the role of different bodies remains an ongoing priority for Qualifications Wales and the WJEC. This was stronger in the initial two waves of fieldwork, and while there remains strong support around communications, there were some specific areas of critique raised in this third wave of fieldwork.
- 4.29 Despite some specific differences of opinion, overall, there was support for the range of qualifications and recent reforms to them. There was support for the new school curriculum but also some apprehension about the effect on schools, teachers and ultimately pupils.
- 4.30 Priority areas to consider going forwards are:
- Public and stakeholder understanding of the qualification system and the roles of key organisations.
  - Managing any changes to qualifications as a result of the new curriculum for Wales that is being developed.
  - Communication strategy especially with respect to WJEC but including Qualifications Wales.
  - Improved change management for the introduction of qualifications developed as a result of sector reviews.
  - Aiming to increase the availability of Welsh language resources to support qualifications.
- 4.31 There are wider policy messages contained within this report, as inevitably research on public confidence in the qualification system revealed issues that were of relevance to other organisations in that system, including Welsh Government.