



# GENERAL QUALIFICATIONS STRATEGIC PLAN

JULY 2017

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# Overview

## General Qualifications Strategic Plan

**This plan sets out our priorities for regulating general qualifications (GCSEs, A levels and the Welsh Baccalaureate) over the next three to five years. It also notes how we will assess progress towards achieving our aims.**

We have structured our plan around five main areas of strategic focus.

We have also identified the key challenges that we expect to face over the next three to five years, which have influenced the development of our strategy.

### **We will focus on:**

1. Securing standards
2. Evaluating change
3. Improving public understanding
4. Increasing availability through the medium of Welsh
5. Adopting an incremental approach to future changes.

### **Our main challenges are:**

1. Moving to GCSEs and A levels designed exclusively for Wales
2. Managing the introduction of new qualifications
3. The changing structure of the general qualifications market
4. The potential impact on qualifications of the new curriculum for Wales.

# Focus area 1 2 3 4 5

## Securing standards

**Learners in Wales should be confident that the qualifications they take are as rigorous and demanding as those taken by their peers in other countries. We want general qualifications in Wales to be recognised widely as a reliable, trusted and fair measure of learner achievement.**

In the short term, we will continue to oversee the process that awarding bodies use to secure fair and appropriate standards from one exam series to the next. In the longer term, we will review this work to make sure that it continues to be relevant and based on the best available information.

We will work closely with other regulators of GCSEs and A levels to agree common standards and ways of working, including methods for securing comparability in grades over time.

Our monitoring work will focus on WJEC as it becomes the sole provider of the most commonly taken GCSEs and A levels in Wales, and of the Welsh Baccalaureate. We will conduct a programme of thematic reviews to understand the detail of its operations, starting with a review focused on confidence in marking. This will allow us to identify areas of potential risk and opportunities for continuous improvement. We will report publicly on findings and any action we take.

# Focus area 1 **2** 3 4 5

## Evaluating change

**There has been a period of significant change to general qualifications. The new qualifications will need to be kept under review to see how they are performing and to evaluate their impact.**

We will establish a research and monitoring programme that will include a focus on:

- non-exam assessment
- early and multiple entry in reformed GCSEs
- the impact of a more functional approach to literacy and numeracy, and
- the inclusion of a Welsh perspective.

We will also look at changing patterns in the range of general qualifications taken.

We will review the design and delivery of the new Welsh Baccalaureate, including the Skills Challenge Certificate qualifications that sit within it. This will include a technical review of the assessment model and qualitative analysis of stakeholders' views, based on their experiences of the new qualifications. We will publicly report on our findings and work with others to consider how the Welsh Baccalaureate could be improved.

We will engage with stakeholders to understand the lessons that can be learned from the experience of reforming general qualifications to shape how future changes are planned and managed.

# Focus area 1 2 **3** 4 5

## Improving public understanding

**An essential part of what we do is to provide accurate and reliable information about qualifications and the qualification system. To have confidence in general qualifications, we believe the public needs to know how they work and how they fit within the education system.**

We will be a trusted source of information and advice for all users of qualifications taken in Wales. We want to explain:

- our approach to regulating the awarding bodies that offer general qualifications;
- how qualifications are designed, assessed and awarded;
- the different roles and responsibilities of organisations involved in the qualification system, including those of Qualifications Wales, awarding bodies, schools and colleges, Welsh Government, regional education consortia and Estyn.

We will use information campaigns to reach our target audiences and raise awareness of our website as an essential source of information.

We will seek out and listen to the views of students and teaching staff to understand their experience of the qualifications system. This will help us to give them the right information and meet their needs.

We will continue to work with universities and bodies such as UCAS to make sure general qualifications taken in Wales are understood and continue to secure access to higher education. We will reflect the views of universities back to those in schools and colleges to help build confidence and tackle misconceptions.

We will also produce information for employers and their representatives about the general qualifications offered in Wales, their value and how they relate to qualifications offered elsewhere.

# Focus area 1 2 3 **4** 5

## Increasing availability through the medium of Welsh

### **We want all general qualifications offered in Wales to be available in Welsh and English.**

This is already the case for GCSEs and A levels developed specifically for Wales, and for the Welsh Baccalaureate, all of which are offered by WJEC. GCSEs and A levels in other subjects that are taken by relatively low numbers of learners in Wales are offered by a range of awarding bodies.

Some – but not all – of these are also offered in both languages. As our work progresses, we will look at ways to increase the number of qualifications offered bilingually.

We will continue to use targeted grant funding to help awarding bodies meet the additional cost of delivering qualifications bilingually. We will offer advice to awarding bodies on how they could develop and quality-assure their Welsh-medium provision.

We will take steps to help awarding bodies identify individuals with the necessary combination of assessment and Welsh-language skills.

To help prioritise our work in this area, we will work with schools and colleges to identify areas of current and future demand.

When making any future changes to general qualifications, we will plan from the outset to secure equal availability of Welsh- and English-medium provision as part of the changes.

## Focus area 1 2 3 4 **5**

# Adopting an incremental approach to future changes

**We want to allow time for newly-reformed qualifications to bed down and for teachers, schools and colleges to adjust to delivering them.**

We believe that the best way to make changes in the future is to take an incremental and evidence-based approach. We will consider the need for changes on a subject-by-subject basis and involve stakeholders in the decision-making and planning process. In making changes, we will seek to retain what works well from existing qualifications. Where possible, we will avoid making a lot of changes at the same time.

This does not mean that we will be complacent about the design and assessment of general qualifications. We will use research to evaluate the effectiveness of existing qualifications, to explore alternative ways of doing things and to decide if change is needed.

The Welsh Government is leading on the development of a new curriculum for Wales. We will involve ourselves closely with this work so that we can understand the potential implications for general qualifications. We will work with others in the system to make sure teachers are equipped and ready to deliver new qualifications when they are introduced. We will plan our research to help inform the development of the new curriculum.

Where change is needed, we will make sure that it is well planned and allows sufficient time for the education system to prepare and adapt.

# Challenge 1 2 3 4

## The move to general qualifications designed for Wales

**Most GCSEs and A levels offered in Wales will be distinct from qualifications offered in England and Northern Ireland, and awarded independently to them.**

This divergence is not in itself problematic, but means that we must:

- make sure that the qualifications we regulate are trusted and secure access to further study and employment;
- work with others to make sure that there are sufficient teaching and learning resources to support the successful introduction of new qualifications;
- maintain a range of GCSE and A level subjects, in both English and Welsh medium, for students to choose from.

## Challenge 1 2 3 4

# The introduction of new qualifications

**Introducing new qualifications can bring opportunities for improvement, but can also create additional pressure in the system. Awarding bodies, schools and colleges must adapt to deliver the new qualifications.**

- Schools and colleges must teach the last group of learners to take the previous qualification alongside the first group to take the new one.
- Awarding bodies must continue to deliver existing qualifications while investing in the development of new ones. They also face the technical challenge of maintaining standards between legacy specifications and the new ones replacing them.
- Our role is to make sure those taking new qualifications are treated fairly and not unduly advantaged or disadvantaged by being the first to sit new exams.

# Challenge 1 2 3 4

## The changing structure of the general qualifications market

**One consequence of the reforms to general qualifications is that GCSEs and A levels designed specifically for Wales are now offered by a single awarding body: WJEC. WJEC is also the only awarding body that offers the Welsh Baccalaureate.**

Greater reliance on one awarding body has its risks. Public confidence may fall if, for example, the absence of competition or effective regulation creates a perception that the quality or value for money of qualifications are reducing over time.

However, there are many advantages to a simpler market model, especially in a system of the size we have in Wales:

- training and support materials can be targeted efficiently and effectively;
- concerns or problems can be addressed quickly;
- standards can be maintained confidently;
- parity between Welsh- and English-medium provision can be secured.

The challenge for us is to ensure that our regulatory approach is effective in realising these benefits.

## Challenge 1 2 3 4

# The potential impact of the new curriculum for Wales on qualifications

**The development of a new national curriculum for Wales is likely to have an impact on general qualifications over the coming years.**

We don't yet know the extent to which existing qualifications will align with the new curriculum and, therefore, how much they may need to change. As the new curriculum takes shape and the answers to these questions become clearer, we will determine and communicate the likely implications for qualifications.

# Measuring progress

We will evaluate each of the focus areas within this strategy to identify the extent to which our activity has been successful in meeting our aims. We will continually seek feedback on our work and consider ways in which we can improve the way in which we do things.

What we want to achieve	Indicators of success
Understanding	We are relied upon as a credible source of information by teachers and other users of general qualifications.
Engagement	We are seen to be an approachable and collaborative organisation responsive to concerns of those in the qualifications system.
Public confidence	General qualifications designed for and taken in Wales are trusted as reliable indicators of achievement by colleges, universities, training providers and employers across the UK and internationally.
Stability	New general qualifications are given time to become established. Before introducing further changes, we agree and communicate the details of the changes, including their timing, and the reason behind them.
Evidence-led	Changes to the design and delivery of general qualifications are based on evidence from research and engagement with stakeholders.

We welcome feedback from any of our stakeholders on the proposals set out in this strategy, together with any further suggestions for improving the work that we carry out.



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