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Research with Further Education Colleges on the GCSE Grade Scale

Main report

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Research with Further Education Colleges on the GCSE Grade Scale:

Informing Analysis of the Option to Consolidate Grades F and G

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Introduction

As part of the process of reimagining qualifications to support the new Curriculum for Wales, Qualifications Wales undertook a review of the GCSE grade scale. There has been some divergence in the approach to grading across the devolved nations. England has transitioned to a 9-1 scale, decreasing the number of level one grades and increasing the number of level two grades. In Northern Ireland, there is the addition of the C* grade and in Scotland, the National 5 qualifications are graded A-D. GCSEs approved against our criteria for Wales are graded using the A*-G model. After an initial exploration, it was decided that the review should focus on the option to reduce the number of level one grades at GCSE. This was further refined to explore the possibility of consolidating grades F and G (in addition to the option of no change).

The decision to explore the consolidation of level one grades was driven by three key reasons:

- A view that differentiating between F and G may no longer be necessary given the high percentage of grades now awarded at F and above (Welsh Government, 2021).
- The possibility that reducing the number of level one grades could increase classification accuracy.
- Concern that level one GCSE grades are misunderstood as failure, rather than as level one pass grades. In this context, it was felt that F would need to be relabelled if it became the final grade on the scale.

Current GCSE Grade Scale

A*	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Level 2				Level 1			

To inform a decision on whether to propose a change to the grade scale, Qualifications Wales' research team were asked to gather evidence on the consolidation of grades F and G. The research focused on how grades F and G might be used (and viewed) by stakeholders in post 16 education. It was felt that more information on the uses of GCSE grades would inform consideration of whether a GCSE grade scale that did not differentiate between grades F and G would still be fit for purpose in the sense of managing transitions to post 16 education.

Due to the limited capacity and time available to conduct this work, the research focused on gathering the views of participants from further education (FE) colleges. It was felt that understanding the views of colleges was important given their role in educating a diverse population of learners on a wide range of courses. Unlike institutions such as school sixth forms, colleges are not familiar with learners when they first enrol. It was felt that colleges may, therefore, rely on grades when managing learner transitions to post 16.

The research team subsequently engaged with the FE sector in order to determine whether consolidation would lead to unintended consequences for colleges across Wales. The following lines of enquiry guided the research:

- How are grades F and G used by colleges?
- How do colleges perceive grades F and G?
- Is a change to the grade scale required?
- What are the perceived impacts of consolidating grades F and G?

This report outlines the approach to the research, including the research design, the data collection process, and the approach to analysis. The findings are then presented according to each line of enquiry.

Research Design

Participant recruitment

The research team attended a Quality and Curriculum Workshop with FE stakeholders which explored the future of GCSEs and the implications for FE delivery. A representative from each college in Wales was in attendance. Qualifications Wales presented the ideas to reform the GCSE grade scale and explained the rationale behind the consolidation of grades F and G. After the discussion, the research team explained their intention to engage with colleges in order to gather their perspectives on consolidation. Attendees were provided with an overview of some of the interview questions and asked whether the research team could contact members to discuss participation in the research. No representative objected to being contacted.

Upon notifying participants of the research, the team obtained the contact details of members who attended the workshop. An email was sent to all colleges on 26 January 2022 requesting participation in an online interview. The email attached the participant information sheet which outlined the project, the topics to be discussed as well as information pertaining to their rights and the use of the information provided. A follow-up email was then sent on 8 February to those who had not yet responded to the initial email.

A staff member from each college (Appendix 1) agreed to participate in the research, resulting in 12 interviews in total. Participants varied in roles and responsibilities, ranging from Vice Principals to Heads of Departments. Interviews were subsequently arranged over a period of three weeks between 7 and 28 February. The interview questions were provided in advance of the interview; this allowed college staff members to consider the questions in greater depth as well as gather the viewpoints of colleagues. The option to be interviewed in English or Welsh was provided, and all participants elected for the discussion to be held in English.

Method

The research utilised semi-structured interviews to ensure focus in relation to the lines of enquiry, while simultaneously allowing for flexibility to pursue themes as they emerged. The interviews gathered detailed information surrounding a complex topic area; interviewees were able to explore the different iterations of consolidation and the associated consequences. All interviewees fully engaged with the questions, producing a wealth of data to inform Qualifications Wales on whether to propose a change to the grade scale.

The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, facilitating participation from across Wales. The number of participants varied for each interview; some interviews had one participant, whereas other interviews included up to four participants. The group interviews assisted with gathering a variety of perspectives. Due to the small number of interviewees, the interviews ran seamlessly with very few interruptions among participants. No one participant appeared to lead the discussion, with each interviewee given the opportunity to share their thoughts. However, participants' answers may have been influenced by those in attendance, particularly as some interviewees included senior leaders.

Each interview followed a topic guide (Appendix 2) which was reviewed by the Head of Research for quality assurance purposes. The guide included four sections:

- The current uses of grades F and G
- Perceptions of grades F and G
- Whether a change to the grading scale is required
- The perceived impacts resulting from consolidation

Given that learners tend to achieve a mixed profile of grades, participants were asked to focus on learners who achieve a majority F or G profile when considering the interview questions. The interviews varied in length, ranging from half an hour to an hour, and were recorded to facilitate partial transcription for subsequent analysis.

Analysis

The data was analysed in iterative phases. To begin with, the researcher attempted to become familiar with the data by reading through the transcripts and noting down initial reflections. The second phase involved coding the answers; a brief description was noted against answers which were considered of analytical relevance (according to the lines of enquiry). These codes were revised over the period of analysis to improve the level of description. The final phase involved discerning patterns among the codes generated; related codes were grouped together to generate broader themes that were inclusive of the reflections noted by participants. Importantly, however, the transcripts were not fully verbatim, meaning that it is possible that certain themes were omitted or misinterpreted.

Ethical considerations

Participants were provided with an information sheet before the interview and were encouraged to speak with the researcher if they had any questions. They were asked to read the information sheet and raise any questions before signing the consent form. Individuals shared their consent forms prior to the interview. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher reiterated the voluntary nature of their participation as well as their rights to confidentiality before confirming their decision to take part. Consent was also obtained to record the interview. All transcripts were anonymised, and identifiable information was removed where possible. Although the necessary steps were taken to protect the anonymity of individuals, the nature of the sample may mean it is possible to infer the identity of a college.

Strengths and limitations of the research

Several strengths and limitations of the research are important to note. For example, the research engaged with stakeholders who manage a high proportion of learners transitioning from compulsory education. Approximately 50% of learners who continued to post-16 education in the year 2021/22 enrolled onto a college programme (Welsh Government, 2022). It was felt that understanding how level one grades are used by colleges to manage the transitions of a large proportion of learners would be particularly important in order to mitigate any unintended consequences of removing grade G.

Although the research was relatively small scale and comprised just 12 interviews, the research included staff members from all colleges in Wales. Participants varied in roles and responsibilities, meaning that a range of perspectives were captured. In addition, some interviewees gathered the perspectives of their colleagues before attending the interview, broadening the viewpoints provided. However, participants' views do not necessarily represent the views of their college as a whole. Furthermore, as some participants requested group interviews, it is possible that the findings could disproportionately reflect the views of respondents from particular centres.

In addition, the research did not include the perspectives of respondents from all centre types who would have a view on the purposes and uses of grades F and G. For example, the sample omitted secondary schools, pupil referral units and special schools. It is possible that the views of respondents from different centres could vary considerably. Finally, the research did not gather the views of learners, which would be important to consider when understanding the impacts of consolidation on recognition of achievement, self-evaluation and motivation to progress.

Main Findings

Current uses of level one grades

Participants were asked to explain the process of assigning learners to qualifications and the typical progression routes for learners with majority F and G grades. Overall, most participants made a distinction between the main element of a learning programme and the skills element of a learning programme. Interviewees reported that learners who achieve grades F and G are grouped together when enrolled onto their main programme. They explained that these learners tend to enrol onto lower-level provision, including entry level programmes, generic or vocational level one programmes, engagement or foundation programmes, a fresh start course, or a collection of smaller courses. Some reported that their college tends to group E grades with F and G grades, and that learners are ordinarily enrolled onto level one provision.

Just one interviewee reported that their college differentiates between F and G grades when assigning learners to their main programme of study. Learners who achieve a profile of G grades enrol onto a vocational preparation course, whereas learners who achieve F grades enrol onto a gateway entry level or level one programme. Notably, the participant emphasised that this decision would depend on the learner's preference pertaining to the course of study,

as well as wider considerations such as whether they have additional learning needs (ALN). They emphasised that assigning learners to pathways is "*person-centred*" at all times.

Learners who achieve majority F and G grades also tend to be grouped together when enrolled onto the skills element of their learning programme. Most participants stressed that regardless of whether learners achieve grades F or G, they would require significant support in building foundation level skills. Pathways recommended by colleges include Agored Cymru courses or Essential Skills Wales (ESW) qualifications. In cases where they resit their GCSEs, they tend to be enrolled onto a three-year programme and entered for the foundation tier for maths (and science, where applicable).

However, a few colleges utilise distinct routes when assigning learners to skills pathways. Learners who achieve primarily F grades enrol onto a two-year GCSE resit programme, whereas learners who achieve G grades enrol onto a three-year programme. The latter group of learners are also allocated study skills advisers and tend to access provision in smaller groups. However, it was reported that often learners enrolled onto a resit programme struggle to progress and typically pursue alternative qualifications, such as an ESW. In another college, learners tend to enrol directly onto alternative provision. Learners who achieve majority F grades are often placed onto a Skills Forward, described as preparation for GCSE. Learners with G grades enrol onto an Agored Cymru course, or access in house literacy and numeracy classes.

Moreover, one interviewee commented that while learners are generally grouped together and placed onto an ESW qualification, there may be differentiation when assigning learners to maths classes. For example, learners who achieve F grades may enrol onto the foundation tier for GCSE maths. However, this would be dependent on the plans and motivation of the learners, as well as potential intervention from parents.

Participants were also asked how these progression routes compare with learners who achieve majority D and E grades. Some reported that – similar to approaches taken towards learners with majority F and G grades – learners are grouped together when assigned to the main element of their learning programme, which is usually a level one or a level two programme. Others reported that learners awarded D grades typically enrol onto a level two programme, whereas learners awarded E grades enrol onto a level one programme. However, most highlighted that this would depend on the overall profile of grades achieved across subjects; where learners achieve more Es than Ds, they tend to be allocated level one provision. Some interviewees reported that this would also depend on the qualification learners want to pursue, as some may have slightly more specific entry criteria. Additionally, the course level would depend on learners' GCSE English and maths grades. Participants commented that these subjects tend to carry greater weight when informing pathway decisions.

When assigning learners to the skills element of their learning programme, some colleges differentiate between E and D grades. E grades typically provide access to a two-year GCSE resit programme, whereas D grades provide access to a one-year resit programme. Other colleges tend to group learners together; learners awarded E grades are grouped with learners who primarily achieve grades F and G. One participant reported that their college assigns learners with D grades to a resit programme, and all learners with grades below D (E, F and G) enrol onto an ESW qualification.

GCSE grades appear to be just one of the indicators used to identify an appropriate programme for learners. For example, many noted that on occasion, scores from initial assessments are used to inform a decision on whether to transfer a learner to a more suitable pathway. Initial assessment outcomes are considered to provide a comparison with GCSE results, as well as identify a learner's "starting base". One interviewee highlighted that the Wales Essential Skills Toolkit (WEST) "informs [them] far better than the F or the G" as the outcomes provide current insight into a learner's ability. Other indicators of perceived importance include ALN, mental health concerns or circumstantial factors.

"F and Gs would need a lot of support, they've obviously got some, potentially some additional learning needs, which is often the case, which stops them accessing the curriculum to get those grades, or they have emotional, or family issues."

The research also attempted to discern whether there are any wider uses of level one grades. Some interviewees concluded that there are no additional uses to note. One participant explained that learners with F and G grades tend to enrol onto programmes that are differentiated; they explained that they "wouldn't worry too much about GCSEs grades" for typical purposes such as planning lessons or tailoring learning.

However, others highlighted additional uses of grades F and G. For example, GCSE grades are used for benchmarking and mapping learners' progression. Learners' outcomes are compared with their grades on entry. In cases where a learner has progressed from a grade G to a grade F, this is considered evidence of development. One interviewee noted that Fs and Gs count towards a learner's overall GCSE score, and that this is used in the process of target setting. However, learners assigned to lower-level vocational programmes, which are not graded, would be given "a pass target anyway".

Grades F and G are also used as evidence to indicate further support may be required. As noted above, one college assigns study skills advisers to learners with majority G grades. Another participant explained that grades F and G may be used by teachers of learners enrolled onto Independent Living Skills (ILS) courses in order to understand their ability and tailor support. However, they noted that ILS courses are not outcome-focused and that they tend to emphasise individual learning plans. As a result, GCSE grades would be one of many indicators; transition work completed in schools, or ALN status would also be important indicators. Finally, one interviewee explained that grades F and G are only used as evidence to refuse learners entry onto courses.

"We use it as evidence when learners come back to us and ask why we're not allowed on this course. We would say a G, which is the lowest possible grade you can get... That's the only way we use that."

Perceptions of grades F and G

To understand the information provided by F and G grades and further anticipate the possible impacts of consolidation, participants were asked how they would describe the difference between learners who achieve majority F grades and learners who achieve majority G grades.

Most interviewees reported that they do not perceive a difference. One person explained that the distinction is so marginal that it is "meaningless".

"I think the feeling is that it's difficult to differentiate between them actually."

Others highlighted that this distinction is not made. It was felt by some that the number of marks required to achieve a grade F is not substantially higher than the marks required to achieve a grade G, and that any difference in ability is marginal. One interviewee commented that *"with the [difference between the] grade boundaries being so small between F and G, we don't make that distinction"*.

Another participant explained that the E grade provides the point of distinction, noting that learners achieving grades below an E would receive a *"tailored approach"*. Similarly, another interviewee explained that they use the C grade to differentiate between learners.

"I'm not sure we would make this distinction. We just wouldn't. We are using that C grade boundary to differentiate the learners."

Nonetheless, some participants highlighted perceptible differences. For example, learners who achieve F grades may have a higher level of skill to successfully engage with a preparation course for GCSE, whereas learners who achieve G grades may need more *"wrap around"* support and assistance with specific areas before attempting preparatory content. It was also reported that learners display particular differences in the subject of maths. Students with F grades may be more willing to engage with mathematical content, although tend to struggle with the topic of algebra. In contrast, students with G grades may have weaker mathematical skills, and their level of literacy tends to impact their understanding of exam questions.

Insight into differences between learners who achieve F grades and learners who achieve G grades may also be evident when reviewing the breakdown of individual results. One interviewee explained that learners who achieve an F may have received a better mark in their coursework, *"but the exam was the thing that let them down"*. They highlighted that this could be relevant when assigning learners to courses as many vocational training programmes assess learners via non-examined assessment. However, they added that this would provide insight into attitude to learning as opposed to academic ability.

Many similarly highlighted that there is little difference between learners achieving grades F and grades G when considering academic capability, but that a G grade may act as a useful indicator of factors other than ability. Differentiating factors may include ALN, attendance, or behavioural issues.

"G grade learners are probably learners who are really used to support, learners who probably schools have to put everything in to get a G grade rather than a U grade... they are probably learners who have been your historic persistent absentee learners, your disengaged learners."

Participants were then asked to what extent grades F and G are valued by colleges. Overall, around half of interviewees commented that grades F and G are not valued. Some reasoned that they are not accepted or considered for many pathways. One interviewee explained that not only are they not valued, but they do a disservice because *"they're demonstrating"*

competency in something where they are below the threshold of level two which is what a GCSE is supposed to be".

Other participants, however, explained that grades F and G are valued. Some commented that they are valued due to their use as entry criteria. For one college, grades G are the minimum requirement for entry onto level one provision. Interviewees highlighted that their use as entry criteria provides the opportunity for learners to progress; learners may begin on a level one programme, but there's the possibility to progress to level three. Notably, however, learners would need to achieve a minimum of four Gs to subsequently enrol onto a level one programme. Furthermore, one person explained that while grades F and G are not typically used as an academic measure, they are used to identify some level of learner commitment. In contrast to some of the views noted above, they explained that grade G is an indication that students were sufficiently dedicated to completing their qualifications.

A further point raised referred to the issue that very little is known about learners when they enrol into college, and that grades F and G provide a starting point in order to gauge a learner's level of ability. Interviewees also reiterated that grades F and G are valued as they provide an indication that additional support may be necessary. It was noted by one participant that identifying and providing such support is crucial if learners are to excel in their chosen pathway.

Participants were also asked how they think learners view F and G grades, to what extent they are valued by learners, and whether these grades are perceived differently. Most interviewees reported that both F and G grades are viewed negatively and that learners associate grades F and G with failure. It was felt that grades F and G are often equated to a U grade, or not receiving a qualification at all.

"Learners would just say, 'oh I haven't got anything'."

Many interviewees reported that only a few grades are considered to have currency. They reiterated the view that the C grade is considered the pass point. Indeed, one person described how learners in a primary school setting seek to benchmark their progress against a C, conveying how such perceptions are deeply ingrained. It was reported by one interviewee that the D grade may be perceived as valuable, but only as this identifies that the learner *"just missed it [a C]"*. Some explained that grades F and G are both equally 'far' from the C threshold, and that the number of grades to attain before achieving a grade C is debilitating for learners.

A few interviewees stated that negative perceptions of level one grades are reinforced by schools, colleges and parents and that changing learners' mindsets would require a concerted effort *"throughout every layer of education"*.

"I think they just see them in terms of fails... it's the language that schools and colleges use which reinforce that as well."

The impacts of receiving grades F and G on learners were also highlighted. Some interviewees explained that learners feel like failures, and that this subsequently impacts their confidence, self-esteem and motivation. A cyclical relationship between poor performance and negative perceptions of self was also reported. One participant explained that a negative self-image

often contributes to poor performance and that receiving grades F and G exacerbates low self-esteem.

However, the extent to which learners perceive grades F and G with discontent also depends on the context. Learners may equate grades F and G with failure if placed in a class where learners achieve level two grades, whereas perceptions could vary if placed in an environment with learners who achieve similar grades. Similarly, receiving a grade F could be viewed favourably if providing evidence of improvement, or if it was an initial attempt at an exam. Notably, interviewees highlighted that learners would not view grades F or G positively if this was their final outcome.

It was felt that F and G grades could also be valued by particular groups of learners, such as those enrolled onto ILS provision. Such learners may perceive grades F and G *“as some sort of achievement”*. Another participant commented that for many learners, G grades provide access to college and are a cause for celebration.

A further point raised highlighted that learners value these grades as they understand the differences between them and therefore what is required to progress.

“They are valued because there is a grade difference between an F and a G. A clear understanding of what a G grade needs to be done to become an F grade learner.”

Finally, learners may view grade F more favourably than grade G. It was reported by two participants that learners may consider the G grade to be of similar value to the U. They explained that a G grade *“doesn’t mean anything”* to learners and that they question whether a G equates to a grade. On the other hand, the F grade is still a topic of conversation and *“considered some type of GCSE”*. Importantly, it should be kept in mind that the responses provided above are from the perspectives of centre staff, rather than learners themselves, and that further work with learners is necessary to fully understand their views.

The impacts of consolidating grades F and G

Impacts on learners

Interviewees were asked whether any impact(s) would result from the consolidation of grades F and G. It was felt by some that consolidation could have a positive impact on learners. For example, incorporating the G grade into the F grade could mean learners, who would typically achieve grades G, may subsequently view their grades more favourably. One staff member noted that *“they could think, well I haven’t got a G, so I’ve done well”*. Similarly, another participant reiterated that achieving an F would be considered of greater value than a G.

Consolidation was also considered to potentially increase learners’ motivation. Participants explained that the scale would reduce, making E the next grade above the consolidated grade. As a result, learners may feel more motivated to progress. Some noted that the consolidated grade would mean that learners perceive they are closer to a grade C (even if the number of marks remain the same), and that this could encourage learners to achieve a level two

qualification. However, one interviewee emphasised that this would also be dependent on the learner's interest in the course, and that without some level of enthusiasm for the subject, consolidation would fail to make a difference.

"A C won't seem as far away because they are not as many letters between them and a C at that point."

An additional point raised highlighted that consolidation would lead to learners being enrolled onto the same pathway. This would subsequently increase the number of students on a given course. As a result, learners would feel less isolated, and more motivated to progress as they would be *"in it together"*.

However, some potential negative consequences of consolidation were reported. In contrast to the view that learners with G grades may view their grade more favourably, one participant noted that learners with F grades may view their result more negatively as they would be brought *"down to the bottom end of the scale"*. Another participant reiterated that consolidation could possibly impact ILS learners, particularly as they may value grades F and G and the ability to measure their progression between the grades. Similarly, one staff member explained that learners would not achieve recognition for their progression. They noted that this is particularly important for learners who have achieved G grades as they *"progress through more stages than an F grade learner, and this should be recognised."*

Furthermore, contrary to the view noted above, one participant explained that enrolling learners onto the same course could mean learners fail to sufficiently progress. Learners with F grades could find the course too easy, whereas learners with G grades could find the course too difficult; *"the level of skill might be too high for a G grade learner to progress comfortably onto a Skills Forward or an ESW programme, or too low for an F grade learner to develop skills well enough to succeed on the Skills Forward programme."* They explained that this could subsequently influence a learner's motivation, leading to diminished confidence, reduced attendance and possibly NEET status (not in education, employment or training).

Impacts on colleges

Some interviewees reported that they did not anticipate any impacts on colleges as a result of consolidation. They reiterated that grades F and G do not provide differential information and that the level of skill indicated by the two grades is very similar. It was felt that the courses available, the process of assigning learners to pathways, and the allocation of support would remain the same.

"I don't think staff would be saying, I need to know which of my learners got Gs because I'm not sure it necessarily tells them anything."

One interviewee noted that consolidating grades F and G could identify the benchmark for a level one threshold, encouraging colleges to reassess their entry criteria to provide an appropriate starting point for learners suited to level one provision.

"It might allow colleges to realign their entry requirements, it would enable us to get that benchmarking and achieve a level one threshold which can be a really good starting point."

However, one participant noted that consolidation could make it difficult to differentiate between learners and assign them to the most appropriate programme. Colleges could subsequently lose learners on the entry level/level one courses available. Similarly, another interviewee explained that consolidation could mean that learners who would usually be differentiated onto separate pathways are grouped together onto the same provision, leading to possible difficulties in staffing. While they would use the initial assessments to tailor the correct courses to learners, they added that they would need to reconsider the initial assessment process as some learners *"rush through it and get an initial assessment that's far lower than their ability"*.

In addition, it was felt that consolidation could make it difficult to compare GCSE outcomes with other qualification outcomes when reviewing a learner's grade profile for entry requirement purposes. One interviewee provided the example of the Welsh Baccalaureate (specifically the Foundation Skills Challenge Certificate). They queried whether a pass would equate to a G, and a pass* would equate to an F, and how consolidation would consequently impact this comparison. They explained that staff would need to understand any change to the grade scale, and how it would align to other models of grading, if they are to provide the correct advice and guidance.

Impacts on teachers and wider stakeholders

As well as the potential consequences felt by learners and colleges, some interviewees highlighted positive impacts for teachers. It was reported that teachers' understanding of the difference between F and G is limited, and that consolidating the grades would increase understanding among centre staff. One participant stated that *"consolidating the bandings on the qualifications might make it more useful."* Similarly, another interviewee commented that if learners with Fs and Gs are enrolled onto the same programme of study, teachers could help learners of a similar ability level as a collective.

"As teachers, you would rather have them all together to help them with everything at that level."

Other comments referred to the possible impacts of changing the scale on stakeholders' understanding. Interviewees explained that consolidation could cause confusion when comparing the scale with the 9-1 model used in England. Notably, participants appeared to have limited knowledge of the 9-1 scale, and the reduced number of level one grades (which would effectively improve comparability).

Positive impacts as a result of relabelling

When discussing the potential consequences of consolidation, participants considered the impact of relabelling grades F and G. Many interviewees explained that relabelling the grades to challenge misperceptions of failure would be welcome. Participants made several suggestions pertaining to the name of the consolidated grade, including:

- Pass
- Entry level pass
- Foundation pass

- Level one pass
- Near grade
- Referral
- F

It was felt by some that relabelling grades F and G could both acknowledge students' learning and lead to learners assigning greater weight to their qualifications. Participants explained that this could encourage learners to progress as they would feel more motivated working towards something that is framed as a 'pass'- as opposed to an F or a G. One interviewee speculated that achieving a 'level one pass' may make learners more motivated to transition to college.

Relabelling grades F and G was also thought to have a potentially positive impact on learners' self-esteem; learners may view the consolidated grade more positively and this may influence how they see themselves. One interviewee conveyed how learners are currently "*demoralised*" and experience "*physical anxiety*", and that reframing F and G could alleviate some of these feelings.

Other comments included that relabelling F and G could clarify a learner's ability; learners would understand that they've passed their GCSE, but at a particular level. One participant explained that renaming grades F and G as a 'level one pass' would indicate the options available to learners; it would point to suitable pathways and appropriate progression points.

"It sharpens the thinking and that awareness as to whether learners are suitable for certain courses."

Some highlighted the positive impacts of relabelling grades F and G on colleges. For example, the relabelled grade could be used as a marketing tool to motivate learners to apply for courses. Naming the consolidated grade a 'level one pass' would also align with the 'levelling scale' used by wider stakeholders (such as employers or higher education institutions) and would facilitate a comparison of learners' abilities across qualifications. Similarly, naming the consolidated grade a 'level one pass' would be useful when reviewing learners' grades against entry criteria.

Moreover, relabelling the consolidated grade a 'level one pass' could increase wider stakeholders' clarity. It was reported that parents, universities and employers may develop a better understanding of a learner's ability level. One interviewee explained that consolidation could lead to a change in mindset among stakeholders; a 'level one pass' could emphasise the value of the qualification achieved, and lead to a shift in perceptions of learners achieving level one grades.

Negative impacts as a result of relabelling

While participants agreed with the sentiment of relabelling F and G to challenge connotations of failure, some noted potential issues. For example, achieving a grade D or E is also viewed as failure. Combining and renaming grades F and G would therefore be insufficient to challenge negative perceptions. Calling the consolidated grade a 'pass' could also mean that learners

achieving E grades would feel they've done comparatively worse than those achieving the consolidated grade.

Some felt that renaming the new consolidated grade a 'pass' could also cause confusion. One person commented that this is because all GCSE grades are considered a pass grade to some degree. Rebranding F/G as a 'pass' could subsequently raise questions as to the grade's meaning or cause confusion when interpreting the grade scale as a whole. It could also prompt confusion among stakeholders who view the C grade as the pass threshold. One member of staff explained that calling the consolidated grade a 'pass' could *"change that perception a little bit"*.

Furthermore, one interviewee highlighted that there would be issues calling the consolidated grade a 'level one pass' as *"it is a level two qualification that they're studying for"*. They continued by explaining that if the consolidated grade were called a 'level one pass', this would assume equivalency with level one vocational qualifications. However, learners enrolled onto the latter programmes *"would possibly be achieving a lot higher than an F or a G."* Some speculated that calling it a 'level one pass' could also mean that learners expect to enrol onto level two provision. Yet learners would still need *"to do a full level one programme"*. One participant stated that they may not be ready for a level two qualification as they would lack the *"analytical, evaluative...literacy and numeracy skills."*

Others commented that while the intention of relabelling grades F and G would be to dispel connotations of failure, deviating away from the alphabetical scale by calling the grade a 'pass' or a 'level one pass' could create a second tier of grades; it could label learners as those *"who couldn't get a GCSE"*. However, utilising the alphabetical scale and retaining the F grade would fail to make a difference to learner and wider stakeholder perceptions. In order to challenge negative perceptions, some argued that a change in the model of grading would be required.

"Like I said, whether it means the whole system needs a change, rather than just that one grade."

"I don't think consolidating will solve it, I think we need to relook at this, the GCSE grading system to make it more beneficial."

Impacts resulting from a change to the grade boundaries

In addition to concerns raised surrounding the name of the new consolidated grade, participants reported the potential consequences of changing the grade boundaries in the mark distribution. For example, if the boundary for a G were increased, participants highlighted that fewer learners would achieve a GCSE. One interviewee explained that this would impact learners' progression as they would not meet the entry criteria for level one provision. Nonetheless, they noted that learners could still progress onto college and enrol onto a programme of study, albeit at entry level.

However, one participant explained that they would not necessarily object to the G boundary being increased. If learners were awarded an unclassified grade, it would convey a message that either they need further support or that they need to improve their commitment to their studies. This could possibly facilitate a change in attitude and motivate learners to improve. They highlighted that if more learners were awarded a U, this could also prompt a conversation

around alternative provision. It was felt that a more accessible suite of qualifications should be made available for learners who will fail to achieve the level two threshold, often perceived as a pass at GCSE.

"So if I'm honest, whilst it may feel like it's disadvantaging people, it could be helpful in terms of forcing an argument of actually we need alternative curriculum pathways for young people who are never going to pass their GCSEs."

They added that increasing the minimum marks required to achieve a grade would also maintain the currency of the F grade, whereas combining the marks and creating a wider boundary would lead to the F grade becoming the new G grade.

"If more people come out with an unclassified, that F would still have the currency it's got now."

Another interviewee commented that increasing the G boundary would impact schools' data; whereas schools may currently report a high percentage of learners passing their GCSEs, this percentage would decrease as the number of learners awarded Us increase. They reported that increasing the G boundary could also impact teaching due to the pressure on schools to improve learners' marks to achieve the minimum required to be awarded the consolidated grade.

"Depending on the number of G grades you got, you would then look at that, and say right then, in my institution, there are 15-20% of learners who are getting a G grade, so my 95% now looks like 75%, so it would have an impact on institutions."

Others explained that it would be important not to increase the threshold for a C, noting that this would become less attainable for many learners. One participant explained that increasing the number of marks between a D and a C would lead to difficulties in differentiating between learners. In addition, there would be an increase in learners attempting to resit their GCSE, and *"still not getting to a C"*. They noted that moving from a D grade to a C grade is a difficult step for many.

Finally, one interviewee reiterated that learner perceptions of their grades could change if grade boundaries are changed; if fewer marks are between a C grade and the consolidated grade, then learners could view their grade more positively.

Disproportionate impacts on learners

In addition to the impacts noted above, participants were asked to consider whether consolidation could impact some learners more than others. Some interviewees explained that they did not foresee any impacts. One person noted that if consolidation did have a disproportionate impact, it wouldn't be negative *"because it would be better for the morale of students who would be awarded a G grade."*

However, some felt that consolidation could disadvantage learners on the cusp of an E. One participant explained that learners who would be close to achieving an E would then be brought to the bottom of the grade scale. Moreover, it was felt that learners who require additional support and a tailored approach to learning could become overlooked as they would be 'lost' in the new consolidated grade.

Other participants commented that the impacts of consolidation would likely be felt by learners with protected characteristics. If consolidation resulted in an increase in the bottom grade boundary, this could lead to some disadvantaged learners achieving fewer GCSEs.

"Depending on what [it] might look like, we've got this group not attaining... so why are black males not achieving their GCSEs?"

Similarly, other participants highlighted that learners from more deprived socio-economic backgrounds would also be more likely to experience the impacts of consolidation as *"they are the people coming out with those grades"*.

One person reiterated that the impacts would possibly be felt by learners with ALN. However, their college intends to move away from advising ALN learners to sit graded qualifications and encourage more experiential learning. As such, these groups of learners may not necessarily experience the possible impacts of consolidation outlined.

Impacts on learners' progression post FE

To determine the impact on learners' future pathways, participants were asked whether consolidation would impact progression post FE. Most interviewees reported that they do not foresee any impacts on learners' progression routes. One participant explained that FE tends to be the only provider that considers grades below the D boundary. It was felt that grades F and G are used as a starting point, with the intention being that learners progress in their chosen area, allowing them to gain the qualifications needed to pursue their next steps.

"If FE have done their job, then learners would have gained the qualifications and skills to enable them to progress."

One staff member commented that the removal of the G grade could positively influence learner progression as grades G are not considered of value by universities or employers. Similarly, it was stated by one interviewee that consolidation *"might help in some ways because employers...might actually see more value in those F grades... I think in some ways it might work in favour."*

Others noted that progression routes would be impacted if learners do not achieve a C grade at GCSE. They highlighted that the C grade is the progression point for many pathways, particularly for higher education (HE) programmes. As such, learners who achieve level one grades at GCSE may be unable to access HE provision. However, participants highlighted that this would not be confined to learners achieving F or G grades. Moreover, they noted that very few learners who achieve an F or a G intend to go on to HE.

"The only time it may affect them is at the level three HE progression point, but to be honest that's not about the F or the G, that's about the C."

Just one interviewee noted impacts of consolidation on progression routes for learners with majority F and G grades. The interviewee re-emphasised that consolidation could mean learners fail to progress sufficiently, and that as a result they would become demotivated and fail to achieve the C grade needed to access certain provision post FE.

Further consolidation to level one grades

This research explored the option of consolidating grades F and G. Further consolidation was not considered given the perceived value of grades D and E among stakeholders. To confirm this, participants were asked whether further consolidation might be something that Qualifications Wales should reconsider. Overall, most participants agreed that further consolidation to grades D and E would not be welcome. They highlighted that there is a clear distinction between D and E grades, and that these grades are used differently. For example, they are used as entry criteria for particular courses and to “*establish the right level of course*” for learners. Grades D and E were also considered essential for identifying learners who should resit their GCSEs, and which resit programme they should be assigned to.

“The D and the E really does help to give learners the opportunity to be put in a resit programme, particularly for literacy and numeracy, whether it’s a one-year or a two-year programme. I wouldn’t like to see those amalgamated or disbanded.”

A few participants noted that while they are still widely used, the impact of alternative arrangements for awarding grades in 2020 and 2021 means that it will take a while for these grades to stabilise.

Only one participant noted that further consolidation would be welcomed. They explained that there is little difference between grades E, F and G and that few marks are required to move from a G to an E. They added that while the E grade should be consolidated, this should not be extended to the D grade given its use in identifying learners “*who are close to the C*”.

Broader change

In addition to exploring the option of consolidating grades F and G, participants were asked whether a broader change to the scale is required. Some participants highlighted that they would not want to see a change to the scale. Reasons included: that the scale in its current form is very clear; the scale is well recognised among stakeholders and perceived to have currency; and the scale is well embedded across the education system. One interviewee stated that introducing a change would likely complicate understanding among employers and pointed to the confusion caused by a change to the grade scale in England as an example.

“England’s scale, the 9-1 or whatever, there’s the grey area of what a C [would be]. Is it a 4 or a 5?”

Reducing the number of GCSE grades

On the other hand, some argued that a broader change to the scale is needed. Interviewees commented that the A*-G scale is too differentiated, with little discernible difference between grades F and G particularly, and that a reduced grade scale would be easier to understand. One participant noted that a reduced scale offers the possibility of introducing a positively labelled grade scale. It was felt that this could improve motivation, as the grades would be considered of greater value.

Others reiterated that grades F and G are considered of minimal value. One person added that given a grade C is perceived as the threshold for a pass, a G grade seems unnecessary as it is such a *"long way off"*. Suggestions ranged from ending the scale at the E grade, to ending the scale at the C grade and keeping the U for those who are unable to achieve this. Conversely, one interviewee noted that the U grade should be removed, highlighting that awarding learners a U is *"harsh"*.

Some felt that the GCSE grade scale should align with other qualifications; one staff member noted that GCSEs *"are kind of out on a limb with A*-G"*. They explained that moving to a 'pass, merit, distinction' model could align with vocational qualifications and the Welsh Baccalaureate. Similarly, two interviewees highlighted that it would be useful to align the GCSE grade scale with the A level scale, namely A*-E. They argued that this would increase understanding of the scale among stakeholders *"because it's all the same."* Moreover, they added that reducing the scale to A*-E would ensure that learners have demonstrated a substantial amount of knowledge and skill in the subject.

"There's something perhaps about streamlining GCSE to A level so we're all working within the same framework."

Maintaining the number of GCSE grades

One participant suggested maintaining the number of grades but relabelling the scale. They recommended retaining the A*-C grades for level two qualifications, but renaming the level one grades in order to enhance perceived value. The level one grades could be relabelled as 'level one pass', 'level one merit' and 'level one distinction'. They noted that this would be easy to comprehend among stakeholders.

Increasing the number of GCSE grades

Another participant commented that the number of level two grades should be increased. They reported that in the case of science, often a B grade is not indicative of secure content knowledge. A greater range of grades at the top of the scale would facilitate differentiation as well as assist learners in making a more informed decision about *"courses that are suitable for them."* Another interviewee agreed, stating that increasing the number of level two grades would increase the rigour of the qualification. In their view, the validity of grades A and A* would be improved if fewer learners achieved them.

Other suggestions

Other suggestions included the development of a unified grade scale across the different levels of qualifications. It was felt that this would facilitate understanding of a learner's ability and the progression required to move up the scale. One participant commented that a unified grade scale would also increase parity between general qualifications and vocational qualifications as they would no longer be separated by the model of grading. However, another interviewee highlighted that the GCSE grade scale is not equivalent to the vocational

model. They commented that performance points between GCSEs and vocational qualifications are not aligned.

"Level one pass is 25 points, that sits somewhere between a grade E at 28 points and a grade F at 22 points."

The participant added that there is limited transparency about what is required to achieve each of the GCSE grades. Conversely, vocational qualifications are considered more transparent as the mark schemes are clear on what is required to achieve each level.

Another suggestion raised included greater consistency in the GCSE grade scale between England and Wales. While not necessarily advocating for the 9-1 model, one participant explained that further divergence away from the GCSE scale used in England would be important to consider given that this could cause confusion among HE institutions and employers. Similarly, one interviewee questioned whether the qualifications in Wales would be valued in the same way, and whether learners from Wales could be disadvantaged.

"I think it would help to have something consistent between England and Wales, I know that Wales, we want to be a bit different, but actually it's not that simple, for employers and for universities."

"I think I sometimes worry, when learners come out of FE and want to go to work outside of Wales, I wonder whether they're appreciated and valued in the same way."

Finally, some noted that the discussion highlighted the need for a different suite of qualifications for learners of a lower ability. One participant emphasised that lower ability learners should not be entered for GCSEs given the limited value of grades F and G, and that an alternative offer should be made available. They explained that enrolling learners onto GCSE qualifications fails to account for their needs.

"To me, that's completely, that's not looking at the needs of that learner at that time. It's shoehorning them into that process, a hoop to jump through, because that's what everyone else is jumping through, but that's not what we should be about."

Conclusion

The following conclusion summarises the key findings from this research. Overall, most interviewees reported that learners with majority F grades and learners with majority G grades are grouped together when assigned to their learning programme. Only a few participants highlighted differentiation when allocating them to the skills element of their learning programme. When asked to compare the process of enrolling learners with D and E grades, the picture was more varied. Notably, most highlighted that learner pathways would depend on the overall profile of grades achieved across subjects. Importantly, interviewees explained that GCSE grades are just one of the indicators used to identify the most suitable programme for learners. Many participants noted that scores from initial assessments (typically taken after enrolment) are also used to assign the most appropriate provision. Other indicators include ALN, mental health concerns or circumstantial factors.

Some additional uses of grades F and G were also noted by participants, including mapping learners' progression and using their grades to calculate their targets. Grades F and G are also used as evidence to indicate that further support may be required.

Upon exploring perceptions of grades F and G, it would appear that most interviewees did not perceive a difference between the two grades. Differentiating factors tend to include ALN, attendance, or behavioural issues, rather than academic ability. Participants were somewhat polarised about the value of grades F and G. Around half of interviewees commented that grades F and G are not valued, noting that they have little currency. Other participants, however, emphasised their use as: entry criteria; an indication of learners' commitment; or reiterated their use as an indication that further support may be required. Notably, most participants reported that grades F and G are viewed negatively by learners. Some emphasised the negative impact such grades have on learners' self-esteem. However, interviewees highlighted that learners' perceptions may vary depending on the context. For example, receiving a grade F could be viewed favourably if providing evidence of progress. ILS learners may also perceive grades F and G favourably. Further work exploring the views of learners could be informative if deciding to propose a change to the scale.

The option of consolidating grades F and G was carefully considered by participants. Interviewees raised several potential impacts. For example, consolidation could have a positive impact on learners' perceptions of their grades, motivating them to progress. Reasons cited include that the new consolidated grade would be closer to the E or C boundary. Moreover, it was felt that if learners were enrolled on the same programme, they would feel less isolated. However, some noted that particular groups of learners may view the change negatively, including those who would achieve an F, or learners pursuing ILS provision. One participant emphasised that consolidation could impact learners' motivation and therefore their progress.

Some interviewees reported that they did not anticipate any impacts on colleges as a result of consolidation. However, those who described differentiated pathways for learners with F or G grades conveyed likely consequences. They highlighted that fewer learners may enrol onto the courses available, or that more learners would enrol onto particular courses, resulting in staffing issues. In addition, one interviewee noted that consolidation could make it difficult to compare learners' outcomes to wider qualifications when reviewing their profile. Another point raised referred to the possible consequences of changing the scale on stakeholders' understanding.

Many participants explored the impacts of relabelling the consolidated grade. Some felt that it could lead to learners assigning greater weight to their qualifications, improving motivation to progress. Others highlighted that relabelling could clarify a learner's ability level and identify the most appropriate pathways. Participants also noted that the grade could be relabelled in a way to facilitate comparison across the qualification offer.

However, some interviewees explained that consolidating grades F and G would be insufficient to challenge negative perceptions because achieving a grade D or E would also be viewed as failure. Others highlighted that calling the new consolidated grade a pass (or similar) could cause confusion among stakeholders. Furthermore, some felt that calling the consolidated

grade a level one pass would assume equivalency with level one vocational qualifications. Others noted that deviating away from the alphabetical scale without making a wider change could create a second tier of grades.

The potential consequences of changing the grade boundaries were also reported, particularly the impact of increasing the number of marks required to achieve a G. Interviewees emphasised that fewer learners would achieve a GCSE and that this would impact schools' performance data. Other concerns raised included amending the threshold for a C or increasing the marks between a D and a C, leading to more learners resitting their GCSEs.

In addition to exploring the proposal to consolidate grades F and G, participants were asked whether there should be further consolidation to level one grades. Most participants agreed that grades D and E should not be consolidated. They highlighted that there is a clear distinction between them, and that grades D and E are used differently. Participants also considered whether a broader change to the GCSE grade scale is needed. While some highlighted that change would be unnecessary, others commented that reforming the scale would be welcome, although in practice, the suggestions made for reform were diverse. Some participants suggested that the scale should be reduced as it is currently too differentiated or because some level one grades are considered of little value. Another participant proposed maintaining the number of grades, but relabelling the level one qualifications using a pass, merit, distinction model. Conversely, one participant commented that the number of level two grades should be increased to further differentiate between learners. Finally, some participants made broader suggestions, such as the development of a unified grade scale to encompass level one to three, or greater consistency between England and Wales. Some concluded that the discussion highlighted the need for an alternative offer in schools as enrolling learners of a lower ability onto GCSEs fails to cater to their needs.

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Appendix 1

College	Region
Coleg Sir Gâr	Carmarthenshire
Cambria College	Flintshire and Wrexham
NPTC Group	Neath Port Talbot, Powys and Swansea
Coleg y Cymoedd	Cardiff, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Caerphilly
Grŵp Llandrillo Menai	Gwynedd and Conwy
St David's Catholic Sixth Form College	Cardiff
Merthyr College	Merthyr Tydfil
Pembrokeshire College	Pembrokeshire
Coleg Gwent	Blaenau Gwent
Gower College Swansea	Swansea
Bridgend College	Bridgend
Cardiff and Vale College	Cardiff

Appendix 2

Discussion on the Use(s) of GCSE Grades F and G with FE Colleges

Interview Questions

Current situation

What are the progression routes for learners with majority F grades? What are the progression routes for G grade students?

How do these progression routes compare with learners with majority D and E grades?

What difference, if any, does an F grade in comparison to a G grade make when assigning learners to courses or qualifications? Does this vary by subject?

Are there any other ways that learner grades, particularly grades F and G, are used in your college?

Perceptions of grades

How would you describe the difference between an F grade and a G grade learner?

How do learners view F grades? How does this compare to their views on G grades?

To what extent are these grades valued by learners?

To what extent are grades F and G valued by colleges?

Change

Is a change to the GCSE grading scale needed? Why?

If yes, what should that change be?

Consolidation approach

What would be the impact(s) of consolidating grades F and G?

In what way could this impact learners' motivation, particularly those likely to achieve level one qualifications?

Could this change disproportionately impact some learners more than others? If yes, in what way(s)?

In what way would consolidating grades F and G impact the process of assigning learners to courses?

Do you foresee any impact on progression post FE when considering entry requirements to further training/courses?

What would you name this new consolidated grade to emphasise its value as a qualification?

Final question

We've assumed that grades D and E are still valued and used by learners and colleges, which is why we have not suggested further consolidation to level one grades. Would this be a fair assumption, or is this something that we might need to reconsider?