

Qualifications Wales's view on early and multiple entry

This document sets out our views on the practice of entering students for their GCSE exams early, and sometimes more than once, before they reach the end of the academic year in Year 11. We refer to this practice as 'early and multiple entry'. The extent to which this is happening has increased substantially over recent years, particularly in subjects such as English Language, Welsh Language, Mathematics and Mathematics – Numeracy. We have recently completed a research investigation to explore the reasons for this increase.

Below, we summarise our view and the action needed to address the issues we have identified. We then explain in more detail the key factors that have influenced our thinking.

1. Summary

Our research drew on the views and experiences of teachers from schools across Wales. It looked at the reasons why they enter students for their GCSE exams early, and in some cases more than once.

The research focused on the views of headteachers, department heads and teachers in the three subjects under review (Mathematics, English and Welsh). We did not include the views of other key stakeholders such as school governors, students and parents. Nor were we able to undertake further research, which could have provided an additional source of evidence to evaluate the statements made to us by teachers. We recognise that this has limited the breadth of the review; however, it did allow us to explore the views of those who are most influential in the decisions to enter large numbers of students for their GCSEs early.

The picture that emerged is complex. The research identified lots of interconnecting factors that can influence decisions about when, and how many times, students are entered for exams by the end of Year 11. Beliefs about the effectiveness and appropriateness of the practice differed substantially; some were staunchly in favour of the practice and others very much against it. There were strong views both ways about the potential benefits and risks to students' grades, their experience in education, their wellbeing, and their futures.

Some believed that allowing students to sit exams early and more than once during the course helps to improve exam performance. Others were concerned about the educational risks and financial costs involved when large numbers of students sit high-stakes exams, before most of them are ready to perform at their best. Most agreed that the pressure placed on schools through accountability and performance measures was an important factor contributing to the growth of early and multiple entry.

Occasionally, taking exams early can be in the best interest of individual students. However, we are concerned that the extensive and growing use of early and multiple entry is being driven, in large part, by pressure on schools. Pressure to achieve against school performance measures and pressure to compete with other schools.

This summer saw a big increase in the number of Year 10 students entered early for exams in GCSE English Language and GCSE Welsh Language. One of the factors that contributed to the increase in these subjects was a new rule that only students who are resitting their exams can enter for the November exam series. This was intended to discourage large numbers of early entries in November by Year 11 students, while giving post-16 students an early chance to improve on their grades from the summer. The unintended consequence of the rule has been to encourage schools to enter more students for these subjects at the end of Year 10. This then gives them the option of re-sitting either in November of Year 11, or at the end of Year 11.

On balance, we believe the continued widespread use of early and multiple entry at GCSE poses risks to students and to the system, which are not easily justified. The practice also poses significant costs to the system; we estimate more than £3.3m was spent by schools on early entry in the 2016/2017 academic year.

We believe that action should be taken and have identified two changes to remove some of the pressure that's contributing to the increasing use of early entry.

The first action we've identified is for Welsh Government to consider making changes to how school performance measures are calculated, so that only the first grade awarded to a student in any given subject counts towards a school's performance measures. The current policy allows schools to count the best grade from multiple sittings.

This approach would have the following advantages:

- It will allow early entry to continue, but will ensure that decisions are based on the best interest of individual students.
- It ensures consistency of practice across schools, levelling the playing field and putting less pressure on schools to spend time, money and energy on their approaches to early entry.
- It limits the time spent in preparing for and undertaking repeated high-stakes qualifications, allowing more time for teaching and learning. We believe that this will lead to less disruption to school timetables and less exam-related stress and anxiety.

The second action is for us to remove the rule that only resitting students can take GCSE English Language and GCSE Welsh Language exams in November. We will introduce this change for November 2018. This will give schools more flexibility to make exam entry decisions firmly in the best interests of individual students. In these subjects, we know that maturity is an important consideration for teachers when judging whether students are ready to perform at their best. We expect this option to be used for a minority of students only.

In the next section, we explain our assessment of the merits and risks of widespread early entry in more detail. After that, we give more detail about how the changes we propose could help to limit the overuse of early entry.

2. The reasons for our view

2.1 When is early entry in the best interest of students?

Generally, we consider that students should sit their exams when they have studied all the content for the course and are ready to perform at their best. In most cases, we would expect this to be when students reach the end of their compulsory education, at the end of Year 11.

In some cases, it can be in the best interest of individual students to sit their exams early. For example, if a student has mastered the course content and is ready to move on to a more challenging qualification in the same subject. Similarly, it may be in the best interest of some students, especially those with challenging home lives, who may be at risk of not sitting their exams at the end of Year 11. For them, early entry can help reduce the risk that they leave school without a qualification. We agree that in these circumstances there is merit in early entry.

The proportion of students in these circumstances will vary between schools, from one year to the next and across subjects. However, in most schools this is unlikely to be the case for the majority. This rationale for early entry does not explain or justify the scale of the practice that we saw at a national level this year.

2.2 Other reasons for making extensive use of early entry

Pressure from school performance measures

Interviewees reported facing extreme pressure to achieve results in subjects that contribute to school performance measures. This formed a constant backdrop to the interviews. The nature of the pressure varied, it was seen in the form of targets set against performance measures either within the school, by local authorities or by regional consortia. Teachers reported being worried that if their school's reputation suffers, this can have a negative effect on their students' motivation and achievement. The pressure to achieve results in a few key subjects drives decisions about exam entry, timetabling and staffing and feeds a perception that schools must prioritise performance measures above all else. This in turn creates pressure to enter students early as part of strategies for optimising a school's results against performance measures. In this way, we see that schools and teachers can come under pressure to put the interest of the school before those of individual students.

A source of information

Many teachers reported using early entry for the 2016/2017 academic year as a means of gaining more information about changes to exams and qualifications. They did this to gain familiarity with the new style of exam papers and questions to help them better prepare students for their exams. This view is understandable and may explain some of the increase

we have seen in the use of early entry this year. This does not, however, account for the growing trend in the practice that was seen for the previous, well-established specifications

Entering students early was seen by some schools as a source of reliable information about candidate performance on individual questions. We heard some teachers say they use this information to find out which topics students haven't yet grasped and to target their teaching for the remainder of the course.

It is good practice for teachers to test students throughout the course to see how they are progressing, to give students feedback and to tailor their teaching accordingly. This type of assessment for learning is called 'formative' assessment. It's typically done in the classroom, rather than under exam conditions, and is most effective when teachers and students can respond quickly to the results.

This is not what GCSE exams are designed to do. GCSEs are an example of 'summative' assessments. They are designed to assess how well a student has developed their overall knowledge, understanding and skills in a subject at the end of a course of study. The strict conditions that apply when taking these types of large-scale, high-stakes, national assessments mean students must be taken out of their timetabled lessons to sit them. The time required for all the papers to be marked and graded means results aren't published until several weeks after exams are sat. We don't therefore believe GCSEs should be used as formative assessment.

Time for teaching and learning

Some schools said they use early entry to help manage pressure on timetables. For example, by focusing more teaching time on different subjects at different times during the year, or by teaching fewer subjects more intensively over short periods then moving on to other subjects. Others told us that early entry means more time is spent preparing for and sitting exams and the need for more changes to student timetables. This reduces the time available for teaching and learning, both in the subject being entered early and in other subjects.

Overall, we are concerned that the time taken in preparing for and taking GCSEs early has a significant impact upon delivery of the full curriculum. We heard how some schools adapt their timetables to support how they use early entry, for example how they can increase the number of lessons for a subject in the days and weeks before an early exam sitting. This means less teaching time for other subjects during that same period. In the weeks following an early exam sitting, focus on the examined subject may fall, as students catch-up on other subjects while they await their results. Focus and lesson time can then switch again, once the results are known and decisions are made about whether to retake the subject or to continue focussing on others. We're concerned that this type of approach can lead to significant disruption to learner experience and to an overall loss of teaching time.

The national curriculum puts a duty on schools to deliver programmes of learning to their students in a range of subject areas until they reach the end of their statutory education.

Schools must meet these responsibilities regardless of whether or when they enter students for exams. If students who have taken their qualifications early do not continue with that subject, there is an increased risk that schools are not meeting their statutory curriculum responsibilities for all their students.

We are also concerned that multiple entry may lead to excessive focus on specific subjects and present risk to student attainment in other subjects. Separately to our research, further education colleges have expressed concern to us about students' levels of literacy and numeracy when they begin post-16 education. We believe this may in part be an unintended consequence of early entry, which is having an effect of narrowing students' experience of subjects exclusively to exam techniques and to topics most likely to be included in an exam.

Pressure of exams

While some teachers told us that the chance to take a qualification early helps to reduce pressure at the end of Year 11, others said it has the effect of increasing the overall assessment burden throughout the course. This is borne out by our statistical analysis of early entry. We know that, at a national level, early entry equates to an overall increase in the number of exams being sat, which means more students are taking more exams.

Overall, this is concerning because students who retake their exams to improve their results will sit all their exams in a subject twice or more during the course, which doubles the time they will spend preparing for and sitting exams. Some students will feel equally pressured at both exams sittings, regardless of the grade they got the first time around. There is a risk that more students taking more exams leads to more exam stress, anxiety and fatigue among students and teachers alike.

Motivation

Views varied between those who saw the practice as potentially increasing motivation to improve on early results, and others who saw a risk of sapping motivation if a student feels he or she has done 'well enough'. Motivation, and the impact of early entry on motivation, will clearly differ between individual students and, in some cases, there may be benefit from early entry. On balance, we consider this variation means that some students will be demotivated and therefore disadvantaged through the widespread use of early entry as a school strategy.

Exams as preparation

We often heard that gaining a 'formal' result from an exam board carries more weight than an internally assessed mock exam. This was reported as having several benefits, none of which we would consider sufficient to justify the risks and costs of making substantial use of early entry.

While some said it can help build confidence and motivation for students with low self-belief or otherwise at risk of disengagement, others reported that early disappointing results could equally reduce student confidence. Some schools who use early entry to build confidence

said it helps students to experience exam conditions earlier in the course, to help them prepare for exams at the end of the course. We believe there are other ways of building student confidence which are less risky and less costly than entering them for high-stakes, end-of-course exams before they are ready to take them. Using papers from recent exam sittings under strict conditions, for example, would create a similar experience and give quicker feedback on performance.

Some teachers reported that early entry can help to give students a wake-up call to apply themselves more diligently for the remainder of the course. This, we believe, could also be achieved through effective mock exams as outlined above.

Others felt that entering students for their exams early gave a better measure of how those students are doing, because they are likely to prepare more thoroughly than for a mock exam. We do not consider this a strong argument in favour of early entry as there is no certain way of knowing how much a student has prepared for an exam, whether it is a mock or the real thing. We also heard that early and multiple entry can make some students less motivated to prepare, either because they know they'll have another chance, or because they are happy with an earlier grade.

2.3 Cost of early entry

We estimate that the cost of the early GCSE exam entries in the last academic year was more than £3.3m. This figure includes Year 11 and Year 10 students who sat the new GCSE Mathematics and GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy qualifications in November 2016, and entries for Year 10 candidates only in summer 2017 for GCSE Mathematics, GCSE Mathematics – Numeracy, GCSE Welsh Language and GCSE English Language.

The actual cost to schools is likely to be higher than this figure once other costs are factored in. Based on data from previous years, we know that many of the students who sat these exams early will go on to sit them again by the time they reach the end of Year 11.

The cost of doing large scale early entry is therefore significant at both school and system level. The possibility of parents contributing to the cost of multiple exam entry came up as part of our research. This raises significant questions about equity for individual students and the long-term financial sustainability for schools who make extensive use of early and multiple entry. We do not believe that extensive use of early entry is a good use of schools' limited resources.

2.4 Risks of overusing early and multiple entry

There are several risks associated with students routinely taking their GCSEs early and more than once before they reach the end of Year 11.

The practice contributes to an over-emphasis within our education system on the role of exam results as a means of measuring school performance. Its unrestricted availability lends weight to the commonly shared view that schools must use all available strategies to maximise their exam results to improve their school performance measures. It encourages schools to compete, rather than working together to share good practice.

Routine use of early and multiple entry puts a disproportionate emphasis on exams as an end in themselves, rather than a means of measuring and demonstrating learning and ability at a point in time. This encourages 'teaching to the test', which can narrow students' experience of a subject - focusing only on the topics needed to get through the exam, or to gain a specific grade, rather than the whole syllabus.

2.5 Linear and modular GCSEs

Our research looked at early and multiple exam entry in four specific GCSEs: English Language, Welsh Language, Mathematics and Mathematics – Numeracy. These are the qualifications that feature most prominently in school performance measures. The GCSEs in these subjects are all 'linear' qualifications, which means that students must sit their exams all together at the end of the course. The exams are designed to assess all the content studied across the whole course. After sitting their exams students are awarded a grade for the whole qualification. If they want to improve their grade, they must re-enter and take all their exams for that subject again.

Some other GCSEs, including Welsh Literature, English Literature and the Sciences, are modular qualifications. These give students the option of sitting exams either at set points throughout the course, or at the end of the course. Students who sit exams in units earlier on in the course can choose to resit each unit up to once. The exams are designed to assess all the content included in a specific unit.

It's for linear GCSEs that the risks to students and schools associated with widespread early entry are most apparent.

- Students entered early for their exams are tested on the content for the whole qualification. If they retake the qualification, they must sit all their exams again.
- Schools must pay the full entry fee for the whole qualification each time they enter students. If they enter students early in the course and then again at the end, they are paying for the qualification twice.
- Once they are entered for a linear qualification, students will automatically receive a grade for the qualification. This is significant for students who want to go on to university because, when they apply through UCAS, they must declare all the grades they have received in a subject, not only their best result. Some selective universities may place more reliance on a student's earliest grade, rather than their best one.

3. Limiting the overuse of early entry

Our research suggests teachers put a good deal of thought, time and energy in to their decisions about exam entries. They are strongly motivated by a desire to get the best for their students and the best for their school. What is also clear from the research is the

substantial pressure on schools and teachers that comes from the current school performance measures and the behaviours it drives. Schools and teachers must balance a broad range of sometimes competing factors when deciding how to approach decisions about exam entries. They are also under constant pressure to review, refine and defend their approach to exam entries, often in relation to what other departments and schools are doing.

We would like to see action taken to remove some of the drivers that are contributing to the widespread and growing use of early entry. Schools should still have the option to put students in for their exams early, or more than once, when it is in a student's best interest. But they should be relieved from some of the pressure to use early entry as a means of improving their school's performance measures and have more freedom to make decisions based on students' best interests.

Having looked at a range of options, the best way we can see to achieve this would be for Welsh Government to consider changing how it calculates school performance measures. Specifically, by introducing a new rule so that only the first grade awarded to a student in a subject can count towards a school's performance measures. This would still allow schools to use early entry, but only when it is clearly in a student's best interest. The rule would not stop students from retaking a qualification to improve on their results, or from relying on their best result when applying for further study or for jobs. However, only the student's first result would count towards the school's performance measures.

If Welsh Government decides to accept our proposal, it should consider how soon to introduce any changes and undertake its own impact assessment. In reaching a decision, a balance will need to be achieved between taking swift action and allowing schools sufficient time to adjust their current teaching and timetabling plans.

In addition, we will lift the current restriction to the November exam series, which says only students who are resitting can take GCSE English Language or GCSE Welsh Language in that series. This would mean schools could choose to enter students for exams in these subjects in November, even if they have not previously taken the qualification. This would give schools greater freedom to make the right decisions for all their students and discourage early entry in Year 10 as a means of accessing the subsequent November exam series. We expect this option to be used for a minority of students only as we do not expect that most students would be ready to perform at their best in November of Year 11, as opposed to in the following summer exam series.

4. Conclusion

As the independent regulator, our principal aims are to ensure that qualifications, and the qualifications system, are effective for meeting the reasonable needs of learners in Wales and that they command public confidence. Our focus is, therefore, on the best interest of students.

Our view on early entry draws on our research with teachers and staff from regional consortia, as well as wider perspectives that we have heard from other stakeholders. This is a complex matter which elicits strong and divided opinions: some will welcome our view and others will be strongly opposed to it. We have considered the evidence and, on balance, we believe that widespread use of early entry poses significant risks to learners and to the wider qualifications system that are not readily justified by the benefits claimed for it. We therefore believe action is needed to lift some of the pressures on schools to enter large numbers of students early, and to free them up to make decisions that are in the interest of individual students. The actions that we have identified will allow schools to use early entry for those students who will benefit from it most.