

Awarding vocational qualifications in summer 2020

Overview



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Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has had significant impact on vocational qualifications in summer 2020. It led to the closure of schools, colleges and training providers and the cancellation of a range of exams and assessments in vocational qualifications.

The vocational qualifications landscape in the UK is complex, with a large number of qualifications available across a broad range of vocational sectors. Most of the vocational qualifications available in Wales are also available in England and Northern Ireland. Vocational qualifications serve a range of purposes, which include progression to further learning in further or higher education, demonstrating occupational competence or as a licence to enter particular job roles. They are taken by learners across a range of settings, including schools, colleges and work-based learning providers, either as stand-alone qualifications or as part of apprenticeship programmes. Vocational qualifications are available at different levels and sizes. There are currently over 22,000 vocational qualifications regulated by Qualifications Wales, which are awarded by 97 awarding bodies. Over 379,000 certificates were issued for vocational qualifications in Wales in 2019.

Given these factors, it was essential that we took an approach in summer 2020 that recognised the diversity of vocational qualifications, provided some degree of flexibility to awarding bodies to implement appropriate mitigations, and aligned with approaches being taken in England and Northern Ireland.

Our approach sought to minimise the impact of the pandemic on learners due to complete their qualifications in summer 2020 and, wherever possible, enable learners to progress to the next stage of their learning or career.

Background

On 18 March 2020, to help fight the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) the Education Minister for Wales announced the closure of schools and the cancellation of the 2020 summer exam series. On 23 March 2020, a national lockdown was introduced which meant no further face-to-face teaching or assessment could take place at any education or training provider.

We know that many learning providers continued to deliver learning online during the lockdown. However, the impact on assessment of vocational qualifications was significant. Many qualifications require the assessment of practical skills or for assessments to be completed in a controlled environment. These assessments could not continue while centres were closed.

On 24 April 2020, the Education Minister for Wales issued Qualifications Wales with a Direction. This required Qualifications Wales to have regard to:

- The Welsh Government policy that, as far as possible, learners who were due to complete assessments for vocational qualifications between 20 March and 31 July 2020 should be issued with calculated results for these qualifications.
- The Welsh Government policy that learners studying vocational qualifications should be treated fairly, receiving results that reflect the work they have put in and their cumulative attainment on their qualifications.
- The Welsh Government policy that, as far as possible, learners studying vocational qualifications should not be disadvantaged compared to their peers studying A levels and GCSEs, in being able to progress to the next stage of learning and/or employment. It is acknowledged that a “one size fits all” policy will not be appropriate and that approaches may need to be tailored for individual qualifications.
- The Welsh Government policy that, where it is not appropriate to determine a calculated result because a qualification signifies occupational competence including “licence to practise”, a delay will be required so that the learner can complete their learning and assessment. In these cases, health and safety should be the overriding consideration.
- The Welsh Government policy that a fair and robust approach to issuing results to learners studying vocational qualifications is adopted, which includes determining the approach awarding bodies and centres must follow in arriving at judgements of learners’ attainment and ensuring an avenue of recourse is available for those learners who do not believe that the process has been followed correctly in issuing their results.

Our approach

Most of the vocational qualifications we regulate are also regulated by Ofqual (England) and CCEA Regulation (Northern Ireland). These qualifications are awarded by the same awarding bodies, and follow the same assessment arrangements across jurisdictions. The three regulators worked collaboratively throughout summer 2020 to ensure that a consistent approach was taken across the UK. This was important for two key reasons.

Firstly, we wanted to make sure that the approach taken in Wales was consistent with the approach taken for the same qualification in other parts of the UK. We wanted to make sure that learners in Wales were not disadvantaged or advantaged relative to their peers elsewhere.

Secondly, as a regulator, we have a duty to consider the burden we place on the awarding bodies we regulate. Qualifications Wales, CCEA Regulation and Ofqual have established ways of working which seek to reduce the impact of our regulatory activities on awarding bodies and work together where it is the right thing to do. Given the scale and complexity of the issues we faced in summer 2020, it was clear that we should work together and take a common approach wherever possible. Imposing different requirements on awarding bodies would have significantly increased the risk of those awarding bodies not being able to meet the requirements of all three regulators. In addition, many of the adaptations to assessment required input and agreement from relevant sector bodies, which in many cases operate across the UK.

There are a number of vocational qualifications that are only regulated by Qualifications Wales, including the new suite of Health and Social Care and Child Care, and Essential Skills Wales qualifications. We applied the same approaches to these qualifications.

Extraordinary regulatory framework

Given the complexity and diversity of the vocational qualifications landscape, it was not possible to implement a “one-size-fits-all” approach to address the issues we faced in summer 2020. Therefore, we put in place a less prescriptive regulatory approach, which was based on a flexible, principles based extraordinary regulatory framework.

Ofqual held a consultation on a proposed VTQ extraordinary regulatory framework for summer 2020. The final [framework](#), [guidance](#) and [consultation decisions](#) were published by Ofqual on 22 May 2020. We did not consult separately, given that we intended to align approaches with England and Northern Ireland and the Ofqual framework would apply to most vocational qualifications taken in Wales, as they were also Ofqual-regulated. We encouraged centres in Wales to respond to the Ofqual consultations. We published our [Extraordinary Regulatory Framework for Vocational Qualifications](#) and associated guidance on 3 June 2020.

The framework required awarding bodies to place their qualifications into three categories based on the purpose of the qualification:

Category 1 - qualifications used for progression to further or higher education

Category 2 - qualifications serving a mixed purpose

Category 3 - qualifications signalling occupational competence

Having categorised their qualifications, awarding bodies were then required to identify the appropriate mitigation to put in place – to issue calculated results; to adapt the assessments; or to delay assessment.

Calculating results was the starting point for qualifications that are used for progression to further or higher education (Category 1). Most learners taking qualifications in this category will receive a calculated result. The approach taken was similar to that used for GCSEs, AS and A levels and the Welsh Baccalaureate Skills Challenge Certificate. However, given the variety of qualifications available, there is no one overarching statistical standardisation model that is being used as is the case for general qualifications. Awarding bodies developed approaches to issuing calculated grades that made best use of the evidence available for each qualification. This approach allows awarding bodies to prioritise the evidence they have available based on the strength of that evidence.

For some qualifications, calculated results are not appropriate. In general, assessments will be required for qualifications which are used to signal occupational competence, are about having the skills required for the job, or which could have professional or health and safety implications. In these instances, we asked awarding bodies to adapt their assessments, taking into account what adaptations were suitable and practicable under public health restrictions.

Where it was not considered appropriate to issue calculated grades given the purpose of the qualification and the skills that needed to be assessed, awarding bodies considered how best to adapt the qualification while maintaining the validity, reliability and currency of the qualification. Some of the aspects awarding bodies considered were:

- changing how the assessments were delivered, for example using an online rather than paper-based test, or carrying out an assessment remotely rather than face to face;
- changing the assessment method, for example using a practical simulation in place of an observation, or professional discussion in place of a practical demonstration;
- changing invigilation requirements, for example allowing the use of on-line invigilation;
- waiving or adjusting work experience or placement requirements, for example allowing candidates to have undertaken a shorter period of work experience.

There were, unfortunately, some qualifications where a delay to the assessment was required. This was the case where it was not possible to adapt the assessment while also maintaining the validity and reliability of the qualification. Although we wanted to make sure that as many learners as possible received their results this summer, there were cases where to do so would have undermined confidence in the qualifications.

Communicating the approach

Awarding bodies were responsible for providing information to centres on the approach to each qualification. For qualifications that would have calculated results, this included the evidence that should be considered when providing centre assessment grades and the process and timescales to follow to submit the information. For adapted assessments, awarding bodies informed centres of how any changes to the planned assessments should be implemented and the arrangements for quality assurance.

Ofqual also produced [guidance for centres](#) on the awarding of vocational qualifications in summer 2020 which we signposted to centres in Wales.

Our approach to Health and Social Care and Childcare qualifications and Essential Skills Wales qualifications

The suite of new Wales-only qualifications in Health and Social Care and Childcare is only regulated by Qualifications Wales. We worked with WJEC, City & Guilds, Social Care Wales (SCW) and Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW) to find solutions for summer 2020 which minimised the impact on learners but also protected the validity of the qualifications.

There is a range of qualifications available in the suite, with different purposes and progression routes associated with them. These qualifications also have a variety of assessment methods, some of which assess knowledge and understanding of theory, while others confirm practical competence. There was no one single approach that could be applied across the suite of qualifications, so we developed different solutions for the different qualifications. It was essential that we worked closely with the sector bodies to ensure that we had their support for any adaptations made to the assessments and that the qualifications would continue to have the same currency in the workplace. We also listened to the views of centre staff involved in delivering the qualifications.

Calculate – calculated results will be issued for learners on a knowledge-based qualification, Level 2 Health and Social Care: Principles and Contexts.

Adapt – assessments in the Core qualifications were adapted, to enable learners that had completed sufficient assessment prior to 20 March to get results this summer.

Delay – unfortunately, where learners had not completed sufficient assessment for Core qualifications or for practice-based qualifications which require the assessment of practical skills in the workplace, assessments were delayed.

We published our [approach](#) to these qualifications on 24 April.

We also set out our [approach](#) to the suite of Essential Skills Wales qualifications on 20 April 2020. The approach enabled learners who were due to complete their qualifications before 31 July 2020 to receive a calculated grade.

How we communicated

Our role has also been to share the narrative around our work and to bring stakeholders on the journey with us. To help keep people informed, we developed dedicated [COVID-19 webpages](#) and kept them updated throughout the period. The published information included:

- blogs;
- video content;
- letters and information to centres;
- Qualifications Wales statements;
- Ofqual statements; and
- frequently asked questions.

We also used social media channels to share information, which saw a 2,100% increase in engagement across Twitter and Facebook between March and June. Our monthly newsletters also informed stakeholders of all ongoing developments. Our external relations team responded to enquiries from learners, parents, schools and colleges and other relevant stakeholders.

We met with representative groups from both ColegauCymru and NTfW to discuss their concerns and the impact on delivery. Other stakeholders whom we engaged with were the Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB), the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) and other qualifications regulators - Ofqual (England), CCEA Regulation (NI) and SQA Accreditation (Scotland). We also chaired weekly Communications and Engagement meetings with WG and met regularly with Welsh Government officials to share information and intelligence. Broadcast and print media were kept informed of all developments and regular telephone briefings were held.

Monitoring summer 2020

Qualifications Wales were part of a Vocational Qualifications Oversight Board for summer 2020, convened by Ofqual, which met regularly throughout the summer to consider progress and issues. The Board included representatives from key vocational awarding bodies, the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ), the Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB) and UK regulators.

Working with our fellow regulators, we held review meetings with key vocational awarding bodies to understand how they were implementing the extraordinary regulatory framework and to seek assurance on how they were managing risks that might impact on the delivery of this summer's results.

All awarding bodies were required to submit information on their categorisation and mitigations to the regulators. We [published a list of all qualifications](#) that fell within the scope of the framework and associated principal mitigations. Ofqual also developed an [online tool](#) for learners and centres to search for individual qualifications, including all qualifications available to learners in Wales. Awarding bodies were required to notify the regulators of any changes to qualification categories or mitigations or if they were unable to comply with any aspect of the framework.

For qualifications regulated across the three nations, Ofqual took the lead on monitoring the progress of awarding bodies in processing their CAG data in readiness for the issuing of results. We monitored the progress for Wales only qualifications such as Essential Skills Wales and Health and Social Care and Childcare qualifications. We asked awarding bodies to update us on progress in collecting and processing CAGs and sought assurance that results would be issued in a timely manner.

We also required awarding bodies to notify us through our existing event notification process if they were likely to fail to comply with the summer 2020 regulatory requirements in any way, including if they would be unable to issue results.

Results

Our Extraordinary Regulatory Framework sets out the approach that awarding bodies must follow in issuing calculated results this summer. Given the variety of qualification structures and assessment methods in vocational qualifications, there is no overarching statistical standardisation model that is being used as is the case for general qualifications. The framework we have put in place allows awarding bodies to develop an approach that works best for each qualification they offer, depending on the types of evidence that are available to calculate grades. This means that the way a result has been calculated for one qualification, may be different to the way it has been calculated for another.

In calculating results this summer awarding bodies will have:

- gathered evidence such as previously banked assessment results, centre assessment grades, school or college results from recent years;
- quality-assured the evidence that is to be relied upon;
- ensured that the outcomes are not out of line with expectations.

In addition to the evidence requested for the CAG from the centres, awarding bodies will have used relevant evidence it already held to support the process for calculating grades.

This may include:

- Banked marks or grades for completed unit assessment for both external and internal assessments;
- Data from previous series about the relationship between performance on those banked units and performance on units which learners would have taken in summer 2020;
- Historical centre performance and records; and
- Prior attainment data on the cohort of learners, where available.

In some cases, the approach taken by awarding bodies that also offer GCSE, AS and A level qualifications will be the same as that used in those qualifications. This is likely to be the case in qualifications that lead to progression to FE or HE and include external assessments which are series based, in the same way as for general qualifications. This includes many qualifications taken in schools pre-16 and level 3 qualifications which are used for progression to higher education.

Results for most series-based vocational qualifications will be issued on the same day as the equivalent general qualification in summer 2020. Level 3 vocational qualification results will be issued on 13 August, alongside AS and A levels. Level 1 and 2 vocational qualification results will be issued on 20 August, alongside GCSE results. However, some qualifications that do not usually have a set results day may issue results ahead of those dates.

Learners, parents, schools, further and higher education institutions and employers should all have confidence in the qualifications gained by learners this summer.

Appeals

Centres will be able to appeal against results where they feel that the awarding body did not apply procedures consistently or that procedures were not followed properly and fairly. Given the range of vocational qualifications and associated appeals processes across awarding bodies, we have not prescribed an approach that awarding bodies must take.

Awarding bodies are not required to accept appeals submitted by individual learners or their representatives unless that is the only way to secure an effective appeal. Appeals will not be permitted relating to the professional judgements of teachers in relation to calculated grades, so long as those judgements are arrived at in line with the procedure set out by the awarding body. If a learner is concerned that there has been bias or discrimination in how the centre has followed the process, they should submit a complaint to the school, college or training provider in the first instance. Where the learner has credible evidence that grades were not based on objective judgements, resulting in bias or discrimination they can contact the awarding body. Learners with such concerns can also raise these with the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC).

As in previous years, if an appellant is unsatisfied with how the awarding body has dealt with the appeal, they can submit a complaint to Qualifications Wales.

What next – approach to 2020/21

As it became clear that COVID-19 would continue to have an impact on education and assessment into the next academic year, we started to look at what adaptations to qualifications may need to be made to minimise the impact on centres and learners.

We know that learners who have just completed the first year of a two-year course will have had their learning disrupted in summer 2020, and that we need to consider how to minimise the ongoing impact into summer 2021. We also know that there may be further disruption to teaching and assessment in the coming year and that some forms of assessment in certain vocational qualifications may be more challenging for centres to deliver if there are further lockdowns or public health restrictions in place.

We intend to put in place an extended extraordinary regulatory framework for vocational qualifications and guidance for awarding bodies that will enable them to make adaptations to their qualifications in 2020/21. Any changes that are made will seek to maximise the manageability of the assessments, secure consistency between approaches awarding bodies take to similar qualifications and that changes should not disadvantage or advantage vocational learners against their peers taking general qualifications. However, any changes must not undermine the validity and reliability of the qualifications.

Awarding bodies will provide more details to centres on what this means for each qualification.