

# Overview of the alternative arrangements for general qualifications in summer 2021



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<sup>1</sup> Reissued 12 August to include results information relevant to GCSE, KS4 Skills Challenge Certificate and selected level 1/2 and level 2 vocational qualifications outcomes

## Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has had a significant impact on the delivery of general qualifications (GQs), which includes GCSEs, AS and A levels. It led to the closure of school and college (centre) sites and the cancellation of exams across the UK for the 2020 and 2021 exam series.

In Wales, approved qualifications<sup>2</sup> are provided by the exam board, WJEC. These include GCSEs, AS and A levels and the Welsh Baccalaureate Skills Challenge Certificate. Where there is a subject with no approved qualification, maintained schools in Wales can use qualifications designed for England. The independent sector in Wales can take England or Wales designed qualifications. WJEC also deliver qualifications to learners outside of Wales through their Eduqas brand.

General qualifications aid progression to learning in further education (FE) or higher education (HE). Our approach sought to minimise the impact of the pandemic on learners due to complete their qualifications in summer 2021 and, wherever possible, enable learners to progress to the next stage of their learning or career.

## 1. Background

As the regulator of these qualifications in Wales, our role is to set requirements for awarding bodies. We work with Welsh Government, which sets education policy and oversee the education system in Wales. Welsh Ministers can direct us on matters of policy, to which we have a legal duty to pay regard.

To mitigate the disruption to teaching and learning caused by the pandemic in early 2020, adaptations to assessments were put in place by WJEC, according to our regulatory requirements, shortly before the start of the 2021 academic year.

Contingency planning for summer 2021 began in April 2020 and has included a range of approaches. Ultimately, due to the continued impact of COVID-19 on education during the 2020/21 academic year, the approach has been for centres to determine grades within a flexible model, using assessment evidence to inform professional judgement about the grades to be awarded.

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<sup>2</sup> Approved qualifications have met qualification-specific approval criteria that ensure they meet the needs of learners in Wales.

## 2. Planning for 2021

Most learners taking GCSEs, AS or A levels in Wales study Wales-only approved qualifications awarded by WJEC. There are 32 GCSEs, 29 AS levels, 29 A levels, two Welsh Baccalaureate Skills Challenge Certificates and a number of legacy qualifications<sup>3</sup>.

A small number of general qualifications are awarded by other awarding bodies which operate outside Wales. Whilst we regulate those qualifications, Ofqual set the requirements and is the lead regulator for these jointly regulated qualifications designed for England.

From as early as April 2020, it was clear that COVID-19 would continue to have a substantial impact on education and assessment and that we needed to plan for this. We knew that learners who would be sitting qualifications in summer 2021 had experienced sustained disruption to their learning from March 2020, so worked with WJEC to consider the steps that could be taken to minimise the ongoing impact into summer 2021. We knew the risk of further disruption to teaching and assessment was high and that qualifications that included the assessment of practical skills may be more challenging to deliver if there were further lockdowns or public health restrictions.

From May 2020, we started contingency planning. It was crucial that we were pro-actively and simultaneously planning for various scenarios as the impact of the pandemic unfolded so that we could be as prepared as possible at any given point. One early option was to adapt assessments to mitigate lost teaching and learning time. This approach was agreed by Welsh Government, and we started to explore how this might work with WJEC colleagues. As a regulator we have a duty to consider the burden we place on the awarding bodies we regulate. Therefore, in planning for, and agreeing, arrangements for summer 2021, we worked closely with WJEC to ensure as far as possible that our decisions were manageable and deliverable to enable learners to receive grades on Results Days<sup>4</sup>.

The events of summer 2020 resulted in the qualifications system in Wales coming under intense scrutiny; this was also true across the whole of the UK. Qualifications Wales, Welsh Government and WJEC were publicly criticised for decisions made regarding the arrangements for awarding grades and this had a negative impact on public confidence in the qualifications system. On 28 August 2020, Welsh Government announced the establishment of an [Independent Review of the summer 2020 summer arrangements for awarding grades, and considerations for 2021](#). An [interim report](#) was published on 29 October 2020, and a [final report](#) on 22 January 2021. Both reports contained lessons learnt from 2020 and recommendations for 2021, including that an advisory group be established to develop workable proposals which could deliver the Minister for Education's policy on qualifications in 2021. In November, the [Design and Delivery Advisory Group](#) was established by the Minister to carry out this function.

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<sup>3</sup> WJEC Level 1/Level 2 GCSE in Information and Communication Technology, WJEC Level 1/Level 2 GCSE in Information and Communication Technology (Short Course), WJEC Level 1/Level 2 GCSE in Health and Social Care, WJEC Level 1/Level 2 GCSE in Health and Social Care (Double Award), WJEC Level 1/Level 2 GCSE in Home Economics: Child Development, WJEC Level 3 Advanced GCE in Applied ICT, WJEC Level 3 Advanced GCE in ICT, WJEC Level 3 Advanced Subsidiary GCE in Applied ICT, WJEC Level 3 Advanced Subsidiary GCE in ICT, WJEC Level 3 Advanced Subsidiary GCE in Health and Social Care (Double Award), WJEC Level 3 Advanced GCE in Health and Social Care (Double Award), WJEC Level 3 Advanced Subsidiary GCE in Health and Social Care and WJEC Level 3 Advanced GCE in Health and Social Care.

<sup>4</sup> Results Days are earlier this year; 10 August for Level 3 qualifications, including AS and A level, and 12 August for Level 2 qualifications, including GCSEs.

## 2.1 Adaptations to assessments

We structured our regulatory approach for adaptations to the assessment requirements for summer 2021 around a set of overarching principles that WJEC should apply when adapting assessments, and more detailed requirements that WJEC had to comply with when making those adaptations. WJEC put together their proposals in line with our [Requirements for Adapting Assessments for GQ Qualifications in 2021](#) and [Special Conditions for Adapting Assessments for GQ Qualifications in 2021](#), that we published on 15 July 2020. In June 2020, WJEC began consulting with centres on their proposals for adaptations to assessments for 2021, should they be needed.

The adaptations sought to mitigate lost teaching and learning time through reducing the pressure of assessment whilst maintaining the development of knowledge, understanding and skills across a broad and suitable curriculum. It was important that the adaptations did not disadvantage or advantage learners relative to their peers taking other types of qualifications, or in different jurisdictions, and did not undermine the validity, reliability and credibility of the qualifications in Wales and outside Wales. WJEC's proposed adaptations generally received broad support.

On 3 July 2020, the Education Minister for Wales issued us with a [Direction](#) regarding considerations for general qualifications for 2021; to prepare for examinations in 2021 to go ahead as normal, albeit with some modifications to take account of any loss of learning time. The same day, we wrote a [letter](#) to centres that adaptations would be made to GCSEs, AS, A levels and the Skills Challenge Certificate qualifications in Wales. On 15 July, we wrote a [letter](#) to centres which included more detail about the adaptations.

WJEC provided detailed information and guidance to centres about the final adaptations, on an individual qualification basis, for GCSEs on 21 July 2020 and for AS and A levels on 6 August 2020. WJEC also made adaptations to the Skills Challenge Certificate qualifications and communicated these to centres in August 2020.

In November 2020, WJEC published further mitigations for non-examination assessment (NEA).

## 2.2 Further contingency planning – a changing situation and timeline of events

In the Autumn Term, the scale of disruption caused by the pandemic continued to be significant. On 16 October, we sent [advice](#) to the Minister recommending that grades should be awarded through a combination of exams and in-class assessment in addition to mitigations provided by the published adaptations to assessments. Cancelling exams was an option we had analysed but was not our preferred approach at this time because it introduced potential risks considerable workload for teachers and lecturers and could exacerbate the impact of the ongoing disruption on learner wellbeing. In particular, we were of the view that approved GCSEs, AS and A levels had been designed to be assessed wholly or partly via examination<sup>5</sup>, and we did not consider we were yet at the point where the impact of the pandemic would have made timetabled assessments impossible.

However, due to the ongoing impact of the pandemic, and following further consideration, the Minister for Education took the [decision](#) on 10 November to cancel the summer 2021 exams. Subsequently, Welsh Government [directed](#) Qualifications Wales to this effect, whilst acknowledging that the final decision regarding arrangements for the summer examination series and any alternative assessment arrangements would be for us to take and implement.

The Design and Delivery Group was established by Welsh Government in November 2020 to develop workable proposals that could deliver the Minister for Education's policy on qualifications in 2021. The group fulfil an advisory function to Welsh Ministers and do not have any formal decision-making role, nor impact on any other organisation's accountability arrangements or statutory responsibilities. They have, however, been a key contributor in the establishment of alternative assessment arrangements. More information can be found in the [Terms of Reference up to January 20 2021](#) and [Terms of Reference from 20 January 2021](#).

On 16 December, the Design and Delivery Advisory Group shared reflections and areas of [consensus](#) with the Minister, which proposed, in the absence of an exam series, a three pillared approach to assessment: NEA (where applicable), internally managed assessments and externally set and marked assessments. We provided technical advice to the Design and Delivery Advisory Group as they developed these proposals.

In late December 2020, the second wave of COVID-19 infections accelerated quickly, and an [alert level 4](#) lockdown was introduced in Wales over the Christmas period.



<sup>5</sup> Exception – approved GCSE, AS and A levels in Art which are all via non-examination assessment.

On 4 January 2021, the Minister for Education announced that centres would not reopen for face-to-face teaching following the Christmas holidays.

Alongside Welsh Government, the Design and Delivery Advisory Group, WJEC and other key stakeholder groups, we worked together, at pace, to develop an alternative approach to allow learners in Wales to be awarded GCSE, AS and A level qualifications in summer 2021 so that they could progress to further learning or into employment. The Design and Delivery Advisory Group's [letter](#) to the Minister offered advice on the alternative assessment arrangements which, if accepted by the Minister, would form a direction to us. On 18 and 19 January 2021, the Qualifications Wales Board considered the Minister's anticipated policy direction based on this advice.

On 20 January 2021, the Minister for Education [announced](#) the policy position that learners undertaking approved GCSE, AS and A levels would have their qualifications awarded through a Centre Determined Grade model, meaning that grades would be determined by centres using holistic professional judgement based on their assessment of learner work. Following this announcement, and the anticipated Direction that would follow, Qualifications Wales publicly committed to:

1. Change regulations for approved GCSE, AS and A levels in Wales to allow for Centre Determined Grades.
2. Work with WJEC and the Design and Delivery Advisory Group to put in place an assessment framework to support centres.

In addition, WJEC would develop and operate a quality assurance process to establish that centres put in place appropriate procedures. As the primary purpose of the adaptations to assessment, explained in the section above, was to mitigate lost teaching and learning time, they remained in place.

On 19 February, we received the final policy Direction in a [letter](#). This included the Minister's intention that, whilst there would not be any moderation, profiles of grades submitted may be reviewed and any atypical profiles discussed with centres. The Minister also confirmed that arrangements to support professional dialogue between centres were to be developed but clarified that this was not for us or WJEC to design or deliver and was to sit outside of our regulatory framework. On 23 February, we [responded](#) to the Direction setting out the limitations of and risks associated with the proposed approach.

Whilst the fact that there would be no moderation was included in our guidance from the outset, we later clarified that the absence of any external moderation would mean that it was not possible for WJEC to change any of the grades submitted. In version three of our guidance, we confirmed 'WJEC will not intervene to alter overall centre outcomes but may ask centres to revisit their results if the pattern of results is not justified by the rationale presented.' We further highlighted this information in the final version.

JAN

Centres remain closed

DDAG [letter](#) to Minister offering advice

Minister [announced](#) the CDG model

We committed to change regulations & to work with WJEC to put in place an assessment framework

FEB

We formally received the [Direction](#)

### 3. Developing and implementing the Centre Determined Grades approach

Centres and learners wanted to know as much as possible about the alternative assessment arrangements that would be put in place. Whilst conscious of this need for clarity, the alternative approaches had to be developed in detail and agreed before they could be communicated. We worked at pace and closely with the Design and Delivery Advisory Group to develop and agree the overall approach, which was then discussed with other stakeholders<sup>6</sup> before being widely communicated.

Subsequently, WJEC developed detailed operational guidance for centres with input from the Design and Delivery Advisory Group to consider manageability. This order of working meant that the overall guidance and WJEC's detailed operational guidance to support centres could not all be published at the same time. A plan to release information in stages, according to a planned timeline was agreed, with the information being prioritised in terms of what centres and learners would need to know first. This timeline was included in our overall guidance, so that there was clarity for centres and learners on what information would be available and when.

Early stakeholder engagement indicated that there needed to be a high degree of flexibility in the alternative assessment arrangements, to reflect the different levels of disruption experienced at a centre, regional and even learner level. Even within WJEC's previously released adaptations, centres needed the flexibility to go further to be able to award grades based only on what learners had been taught. Though some stakeholders understood the benefits of there being some control and prescription in the approach to be as fair as possible to learners, some stakeholders had concerns that prescribing too much detail could make the approach undeliverable. Finding a compromise position that met the reasonable, but often conflicting, needs of all stakeholders as well as aiming to preserve as far as possible the validity, reliability and credibility of the qualifications we regulate, was central to all our decision-making for summer 2021.

In addition, we held regular discussions with qualifications regulators<sup>7</sup> in other UK jurisdictions to stay informed about and understand decisions being made outside of Wales.

#### 3.1 Working with the Design and Delivery Advisory Group

The main meetings with the [Design and Delivery Advisory Group](#) took place weekly from 13 November 2020 until the end of May, and as required after that time. We and WJEC observed the Design and Delivery Advisory Group meetings and provided technical advice, when appropriate. The group provided advice on the manageability of arrangements and reviewed key policy and operational guidance.

To develop the alternative assessment arrangements at the necessary pace, the Design and Delivery Advisory Group members formed sub-groups to focus on key areas of the process, and to provide feedback to us and WJEC about some of the more detailed aspects of the Centre Determined Grades approach. The four sub-groups were:

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<sup>6</sup> Other stakeholders not named in this section are listed in section 9

<sup>7</sup> Ofqual, CCEA and SQA.



- Appeals
- Assessment Framework and Internal Quality Assurance
- Equalities and Learner Voice
- Professional Learning and Workforce Matters

These groups focussed on the key aspects and met separately to the main meeting, sometimes more than once a week, from the start of the new year. The Chairs of these groups then provided updates at the main group meetings.

### 3.2 Our guidance for centres on alternative assessment arrangements in summer 2021

In our first published [guidance on alternative arrangements in summer 2021](#) we set out that Summer 2021 Centre Determined Grades must be awarded on the basis of demonstrated attainment in areas of the qualification content that a learner had covered. The approach to producing the Centre Determined Grades relied upon the holistic, professional judgement of teachers and lecturers, underpinned by sufficient evidence of demonstrated attainment across key themes and skills.

The guidance explained that more detail about operational procedures would be released by WJEC and included a timeline to show when information would be provided for centres, as well as what training and professional support would be provided and when. Our aim was to provide as much information as early as possible and as different aspects of the arrangements were finalised following consultation with the Design and Delivery Advisory Group, we updated our guidance accordingly and clearly identified the new information.

In total, we published four versions of our guidance between 9 February and 17 May, updated each time according to progress in the development of the approach and refined based on feedback received. Each time, we wrote a letter informing centres about the updated publication and highlighted new information to make it quicker for readers to find.

As well as the need to provide high levels of flexibility to meet a wide range of individual circumstances, other key features of the Centre Determined Grade approach were:

- **Holistic, best-fit judgements needed to be based on individual learner evidence of attainment**, not potential, in the adapted specification content. This was so that grades were as objective as possible in the circumstances and so that evidence of actual attainment could support any appeal about a grade judgement if required, whereas predictions of a learner's potential would always be subjective and open to challenge.
- **A range of suitable evidence could be used**, depending on local contexts – the quality of assessment was more important than quantity.
- **Centres were urged to ensure that assessment evidence was sufficiently authentic**, to allow good judgements. In the absence of exams, no fixed requirements were put in place and centres were allowed

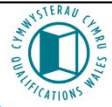
to exercise a high degree of discretion as to what assessments to use.

- **Centres were allowed to exercise discretion** as to the conditions of the assessments taken, ranging from, for example, under controlled conditions at the centre to unsupervised completion at home, and this could be taken into account when making judgements.
- **Centres needed to develop internal quality assurance** processes to improve consistency in approaches within the centre.
- **Centres needed to have processes in place to consistently document the rationale** for grade decisions for each learner, including any access arrangements and special considerations applied. Decision making records needed to provide clarity for learners and parents/carers and be able to support the appeals process.
- **Centres needed to submit a Head of Centre declaration** to WJEC, along with their centre grades, which confirmed that the grades had been determined by the centre appropriately.
- **Centres would be supported to discuss their process, application of process, and outcomes, with other centres across Wales** (this fell outside of WJEC's quality assurance processes and outside of Qualifications Wales' regulatory framework).
- **WJEC would implement a programme of external quality assurance** processes of the relevant policies put in place and procedures undertaken at centres. This did not include quality assurance or moderation of the grades determined by centres.

Lots of information was released to centres over a relatively short period of time, especially in late Spring, as approaches were developed at pace. As information was released, we responded to stakeholder feedback and held additional sessions with various groups as necessary, such as regional groups of headteachers and college leaders and trade union representative groups. We also clarified important information about the arrangements, such as our [8 key facts](#) published March 2021.

**FOR SCHOOLS & COLLEGES**

**KEY FACTS FOR 2021**

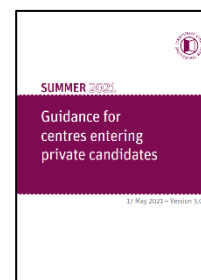


- 1 Schools and colleges will be deciding learners' grades this summer using a wide variety of evidence
- 2 Schools and colleges need to collect evidence so that they can make sound judgements about the grades their learners are awarded
- 3 Learners should only be assessed on what schools and colleges have taught
- 4 Evidence generated during the course, at home or at school or college can be used, as long as it's the learner's own work and is representative of their attainment at the end of the course
- 5 Schools and colleges can design their own tasks and/or use WJEC assessment materials and decide how to deliver them including integrating them into teaching plans
- 6 The approach allows a great deal of flexibility - the quality of evidence is more important than the quantity
- 7 The approach balances flexibility and well-being with promoting consistency and supporting learner progression
- 8 We want to avoid unnecessary workload for teachers and lecturers, and emphasise the flexibility that's available

In all correspondence and publications, we aimed to emphasise that the centre determined grade approach sought to balance flexibility for centres with requirements to provide as much consistency as possible in the circumstances across Wales. In our [response](#) to the Welsh Parliament Petitions Committee<sup>8</sup> on 26 March 2021, we stated that ultimately, the exceptional arrangements put in place for the summer needed a 'system-wide commitment to valid and credible outcomes that allow learners to have confidence in their results and progress onto their next stages.'

### 3.3 Private Candidates

This summer, there were 469 private candidate entries, flagged as such by the centre that entered them, for WJEC qualifications in Wales. Ensuring private candidates were able to be awarded grades was a priority, and we developed an approach that was as comparable as possible to the approach for other learners.



[Click here](#)

The Equalities sub-group of the Design and Delivery Advisory Group considered various options. The final approach consisted of two possible routes that private candidates could take. Route A involved centres assessing private candidates and, where this route was not appropriate, private candidates could take route B, in which a centre hosted the private candidate, but WJEC took responsibility for determining the grade, as follows:

Route A – Centre-assessed route	Route B – Centre-hosted route
<p>If they knew a centre that had already agreed to enter them for a qualification and carry out assessment of their work, this continued as planned.</p>	<p>If they did not know a centre, they could find one willing to enter private candidates in their region of Wales on a <a href="#">list published by Welsh Government</a>. They were able to approach these centres directly.</p>
<p>Their Centre Determined Grade(s) was produced in the same way as for learners who attended the centre.</p>	<p>They could go to the centre site to complete some of the required assessments and could submit a portfolio of work which could include work already completed. WJEC’s examiners marked their work, following the same guidance used by centres, to produce their grade.</p>
<p>They were able to request a centre review of grades, if required.</p>	<p>They were able to request a review of grades, if required. WJEC carried out this review.</p>

<sup>8</sup> [Petitions Committee \(senedd.wales\)](https://www.senedd.wales)

Involvement of WJEC in direct assessment in this way is not a feature of the arrangements put in place for the majority of learners this summer, but it was felt to be the best solution in the extraordinary circumstances.

Once the approach was agreed, Welsh Government worked with local authorities to ensure there were centres that would accommodate private candidates, and that these were available and accessible across Wales and we worked with WJEC to agree final arrangements. In March, we published specific arrangements for [centres entering private candidates](#).

Private candidates represent a diverse group of learners, and their individual needs vary significantly. For specific information regarding our equalities considerations in relation to private candidates see [Equalities: Managing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the awarding of qualifications](#), published June 2021.

### **3.4 Atypical Results**

In the policy [Direction](#) from the Minister there was a requirement for a final step in the process to safeguard credibility of results for learners in Wales in summer 2021. This was that, in the absence of moderation, atypical centre outcome profiles would be discussed with centres. Due to the different nature of the assessment arrangements for this summer compared to previous years, there was no simple, ideal way to identify what outcomes might be considered to be atypical, but centres needed to know how they would be identified. An approach was developed to guide and provide transparency for centres and to inform WJEC's identification of centres where further discussion about the overall pattern of results may be needed.

This aspect of the arrangements was one of the final details to be put in place, though advance notice of it was included from the outset in the Direction and in our overarching guidance. It proved challenging and raised a number of concerns from stakeholders. These included concerns about the burden of providing centre rationales for centre outcomes, concerns about ambiguity over outcome comparisons that would be made and the potential impact on a centre if their outcomes were considered atypical.

Through extensive discussion with the Design and Delivery Advisory Group and other stakeholders, it was agreed that all centres would be expected to produce a rationale for their overall centre results for each qualification type (GCSE, AS or A level) and tolerances would be used to guide the level of rationale and whether it should be submitted to WJEC. We confirmed how tolerances would be used, and gave examples of this, on pages 6-7 of our [guidance](#) as follows:

'The tolerances will be applied to the best year's results of the overall centre results from the 2017, 2018 and 2019 outcomes for each qualification type (GCSE, AS or A level).

- The tolerances do not set a cap on the centre's results, nor do they set targets to aim for, they have been established to provide transparency for centres about results that will trigger different levels of scrutiny of the pattern of results at a centre level.

- The tolerance scale will be based on +3 percentage points to +7 percentage point differences at key grades for the best year's results of the overall centre outcomes from 2017, 2018 and 2019. The tolerances do not relate to Welsh Government performance point measures.
- For example, if a centre's overall outcomes are no more than 3 percentage points above their best result in those years, then only a very high level rationale is needed and it doesn't need to be submitted to WJEC.
- If a centre's overall outcomes are 7 percentage points or more above the best of the overall centre outcomes from 2017, 2018 and 2019, then a more detailed rationale would be needed and should be submitted to WJEC.'

### 3.5 Centre Reviews and Appeals

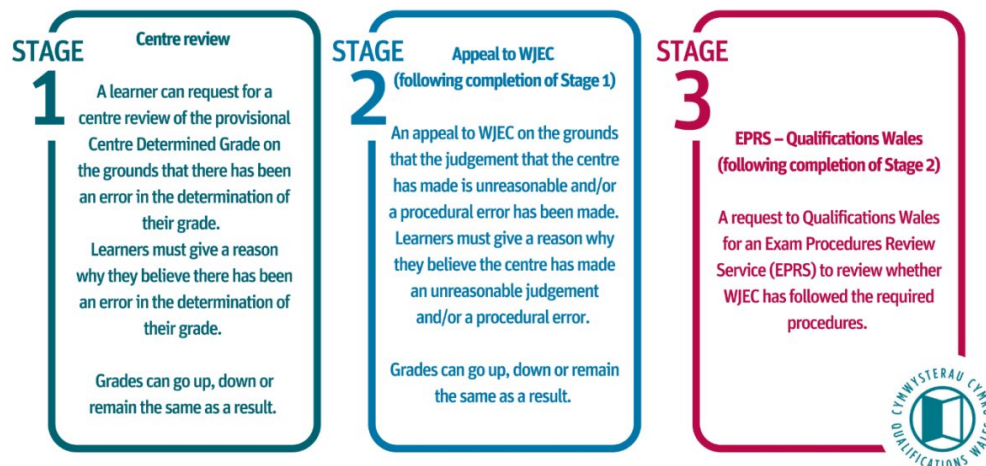
In summer 2020, there were limitations on what a learner could appeal in relation to their grades. One of the recommendations of the [Independent Review](#) was, therefore, that an effective, workable and fair appeals process must be available.

The Centre Determined Grade approach put teachers, lecturers and centre leaders at the heart of delivering a system that enabled learners to progress. It also meant they had a key role to play in making sure every learner had access to fair review and appeals processes this year, something that was included as part of the Minister for Education's [Direction](#).

This aspect of the arrangements proved to be one of the most challenging to finalise, mainly because of concerns raised by stakeholders about the workload and burden it presented for centres. Some of the issues focussed on the need for a Decision-Making Record for each grade decision, whether they should be released and when, and a learner's right to access evidence used to make grade decisions.

Through extensive discussion with the Design and Delivery Advisory Group Appeals Sub-Group and main group, and other stakeholders, including Trade Union representative groups and the Children's Commissioner for Wales, we sought to balance the workload implications for centres with the need to provide a fair and meaningful appeals process for all learners. As we drew close to finalising the process, the strength of feedback from stakeholder groups meant we took the decision to delay the publication of guidance on the process, so that we could revisit some of the more difficult areas. During this two-week period, we reconsidered the arrangements to check if there were any adjustments that would achieve a better balance between the key aspects. Eventually we arrived at a slightly amended position which received wider support, though there were still some concerns about the process.

Qualifications Wales set the overall requirements that WJEC needed to follow in delivering the appeals process. Our final version of our [Guidance on alternative arrangements for assessment in summer 2021](#) published late May included final guidance on the process explained in the infographic below.



We provided guidance to centres on the reasonable minimum timescales for requesting centre reviews and appeals so that learners and their parents and/or carers could make reasoned decisions, with appropriate support from centres. In May 2021, we published our [Information for centres on centre reviews and appeals in summer 2021](#).

### 3.6 Additional guidance and support

In addition to our overarching guidance, we required WJEC to provide the following detailed guidance to support centres in implementing the centre determined grade approach:

- **Qualification Assessment Frameworks (including grade descriptors)** - which set out the subject specific requirements in terms of what should be assessed to produce Centre Determined Grades for each qualification.
- **Grading guidance for Centres** – which provided detailed advice to centres about the requirements for assessment policies, the decision-making record and Head of Centre declaration and included more detailed guidance on the Quality Assurance processes. This guidance was updated and re-issued as later details of the process were finalised.
- **Guidance on Centre policy on assessment and Quality Assurance processes** – which provided an overview of WJEC’s quality assurance processes including checking centre assessment policies, entries, and atypical results

In addition, WJEC produced:

- Guidance for centres hosting route B private candidates
- Assessment creation guidance
- Guidance on correcting grade errors
- Guidance on Centre Reviews and Appeals
- A range of subject specific support materials:
  - Adapted assessment materials
  - Training and guidance on marking assessment including exemplar material

- Grading guidance and exemplars
- A report for each centre outlining their historical data
- An optional regular report for centres containing aggregated Centre Determined Grades to aid their grades analysis
- Student guides

Between March and May, WJEC also ran a comprehensive programme of professional learning, to further support successful implementation of the centre determined grades approach. The key areas were:

- Foundations and creation of assessment
- Centre approach to assessment and quality assurance of grading decisions
- Unconscious bias and objectivity
- Good practice in making final grading decisions and quality assurance
- Submitting Centre Determined Grades
- Live question and answer sessions

### 3.7 Information tailored to learners and parents/carers

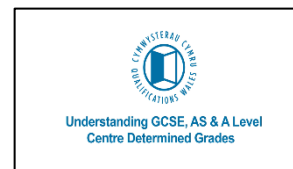
We created a dedicated [Summer 2021 qualifications](#) area on our website in which there is a section specifically for learners where we published explainers and more accessible versions of guidance. For example, [All you need to know](#), [Understanding AS, A level and GCSE centre determined grades](#) and [Reviews and appeals guidance](#).



[Click here](#)

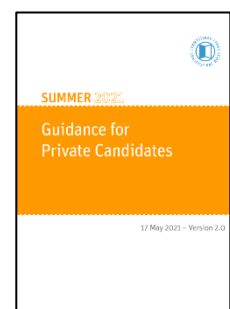


[Click here](#)



[Click here](#)

In April, we published guidance specifically for [private candidates](#) to support their access to qualifications this year. We worked with Elective Home Education Wales to ensure that, as far as possible, this information reached private candidates and their parents/carers/tutors via their networks. We also ran a 'Pay Per Click' campaign, to improve distribution of the information to learners and their parents/carers. This meant that this guidance was shown 5,280 times in Google search results.



[Click here](#)

However, learners and parents who wanted the level of detail provided in the main guidance publications were able to access these on our website and/or via centres.

## 4. Entries

Despite the unique circumstances around the summer 2021 exam series caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, provisional entries data were collected as normal and published as [Official statistics](#). In a normal year, these figures are useful indicators of potential changes in results due to fluctuations in entry. In a normal year, entries data helps us to understand differences between outcomes in other years. However, in this extraordinary year, so much is different about the approach to assessment that outcomes are likely to be different for many other reasons, not just changes to entries. As a result of changes in assessment arrangements, entries deadline and data reporting date, the entries figures for summer 2021 may not be on the exact same basis as figures for previous years, but they remain broadly comparable, as follows:

### GCSEs

- 335,780 GCSE entries were made for summer 2021. This is up by 9.0% compared to GCSE entries for summer 2020.
- The increase in total GCSE entries this summer compared to the previous summer was a result of increases in Year 10 and Year 11 entries.
- Year 11 entries increased by 7.1% this summer compared to summer 2020.
- There were 27,750 entries from Year 10 learners in summer 2021. This is an increase on summer 2020 when 16,315 entries were from Year 10 learners.
- Year 12 or above entries decreased this summer, making up 4.2% of total GCSE entries.

### AS level

- There were 43,670 AS level entries in summer 2021 in Wales, 2.9% more than in summer 2020.
- There were 40,425 entries from Year 12 learners, accounting for 92.6% of all entries. This is a much larger share than previous years.
- Entries from Year 13 learners decreased by 72.8%.

### A level

- There were 36,140 A level entries for summer 2021, 16.2% more than in summer 2020.
- This reverses the consistent annual decreases in A level entries in recent years and is the highest number of A level entries seen in Wales since 2016.
- The majority of the increase was a result of entries from Year 13 learners, which increased by 19.1% compared to last summer, accounting for 88.7% of all A level entries this summer.
- Entries from Year 12 learners also increased, but entries from other year groups decreased.

## 5. Results

Given all the changes to the way grades were awarded this year, we expected that national outcomes this year would be different to previous outcomes. We wrote a [blog](#) outlining why differences might be expected this year. A follow up blog will outline some of the detailed reasons for this.



We published a [Summary of provisional results](#) of A level, AS, Advanced Skills Challenge Certificate, and selected level 3 vocational qualifications outcomes on 10 August 2021. The report includes an initial analysis of qualification results.

Overall A level results are higher at grade A and above compared to 2020 (48.3% in 2021 compared with 41.8% in 2020, and 27.0% in 2019).

Similar patterns in outcomes at grade A and above are seen in England (44.3% in 2021 compared with 38.1% in 2020, and 25.2% in 2019) and Northern Ireland (50.8% in 2021 compared with 43.3% in 2020, and 30.9% in 2019<sup>9</sup>).

We published an equivalent [Summary of provisional results](#) for GCSE, KS4 Skills Challenge Certificate and selected level 1/2 and level 2 vocational qualifications outcomes on 12 August 2021.

The results in Wales for GCSEs show that 28.7% achieved at least A/7 (compared with 25.5% in 2020 and 18.4% in 2019), 73.6% achieved at least C/4 (compared with 73.8% in 2020 and 62.8% in 2019) and 98.5% achieved at least G/1 (compared with 99.6% in 2020 and 97.2% in 2019).

Broadly similar patterns in results are seen in England<sup>10</sup> and Northern Ireland: in England at grade A/7 and above (28.5% in 2021 compared with 25.9% in 2020, and 20.7% in 2019) and at grade C/4 and above (76.9% in 2021 compared with 75.9% in 2020, and 67.1% in 2019); and in Northern Ireland at grade A/7 and above (39.9% in 2021 compared with 36.3% in 2020, and 30.5% in 2019) and at grade C/4 and above (89.6% in 2021 compared with 89.8% in 2020, and 82.2% in 2019).

## 6. Learner wellbeing

Disruption to teaching, learning and assessment including centre closures, the sudden switch to remote and blended learning and alternative assessment arrangements for a second time has impacted on the wellbeing of learners. Some were happy with the Centre Determined Grade approach and some would have preferred to have exams. Ultimately, the Centre Determined Grade approach allowed learners to receive grades this year so that they could still progress to further study or employment. Access to these life opportunities, despite the pandemic, has been important for wellbeing in the longer term.

Throughout the development of the centre determined grade approach, supporting learner wellbeing was at the forefront of decision making. For example:

- Flexibility in the approach was intended to minimise pressure on learners and meant that a learner's assessment evidence could be selected by their teacher from a range of assessment evidence, and potentially completed at any time in the academic year.

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<sup>9</sup> Data for NI in 2020 and 2021 includes Health and Social Care (single and double award)

<sup>10</sup> England has a different grading system, running from 9-1, with 9-7 equivalent to A\*-A, 9-4 equivalent to A\*-C and 9-1 equivalent to A\*-G.

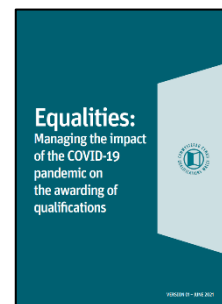
- Learners were able to complete assessments at home, as long as it could be authenticated as their own work. This was important in cases where learners might experience ongoing periods of isolation beyond the national lock down.
- Teachers were able to take account of individual learner circumstances in making their grade judgements.
- Learners were able to request a centre review of their grade if they wished, with the intention of reducing the potential for anxiety around fairness of results.

Following the events of summer 2020, feedback received suggested that more direct communication with learners and their parents/carers would have been helpful. As a result, this year we have engaged directly with learners to a much greater extent to alleviate any uncertainty surrounding how their grades would be awarded. More information about this can be found in section 3.2 and section 9 of this document.

## 7. Equalities

Even though the Centre Determined Grade approach had been put forward in exceptional circumstances to protect the interests of all learners in Wales, there was the risk that the impact of this approach would be different for some groups. However, our analyses of impacts on equalities suggested that the risks related more to wider system issues, such as engagement in learning, home support for learning and access to resources, than directly to the alternative arrangements. Qualifications cannot mitigate inequalities or unfairness in the education system, or in society more widely, which might affect, for example, learners' preparedness to engage with qualifications.

In March 2021, we finished an Integrated Impact Assessment, which included an Equalities Impact Assessment specific to the Centre Determined Grades approach. The Integrated Impact Assessment also considered the potential impact of the Centre Determined Grade approach on relevant articles from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). We published this Equalities Impact Assessment as an appendix to [Equalities: Managing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the awarding of qualifications](#).



[Click here](#)

As part of our analysis of the impact of the more detailed arrangements for summer 2021 we purposefully engaged with equalities organisations so that we could understand the potential effect of our planned approaches (these are listed in section 9 of this document). These organisations provided us with information about the inequalities facing certain groups of learners that they feel had been exacerbated since the beginning of the pandemic. They shared concerns about the extent to which learners' mental health has been affected by the pandemic and issues they faced in relation to remote learning. They also discussed the additional difficulties faced by certain groups of learners who may share more than one relevant protected characteristic. These difficulties may have impacted on the level of access to, or engagement these learners and their parents or carers may have had with, our information about the Centre Determined Grade approach.

Stakeholders raised concerns about the impact of digital exclusion on learning opportunity, differential learning loss, whether reasonable adjustments were being applied throughout the learning experience, the availability of accessible communications to learners, parents and carers, and the potential for bias to influence Centre Determined Grades for those learners who share particular protected characteristics such as race, disability, gender, religion and belief, and those learners from a socio-economic disadvantaged background.

While some of the concerns raised were outside the scope of qualifications, we worked to address them as far as possible. We secured support from EHRC Wales, which produced guidance to support teachers and centres to comply with the Public Sector Equalities Duty (PSED). We worked with WJEC and Diverse Cymru, a Welsh charity committed to supporting people faced with inequality and discrimination because of particular protected characteristics, to support training for teachers on avoiding bias when producing Centre Determined Grades. Support on avoiding unconscious bias was planned into WJEC's comprehensive programme of professional learning and we published information about the equalities-related training available in our [guidance on alternative assessment arrangements in summer 2021](#).

More detail about our equalities related work, including the equalities related work we will do going forwards, is provided in our [Equalities: Managing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the awarding of qualifications](#), published June 2021.

## 8. Oversight of summer 2021

### 8.1 Our regulatory approach

On 22 June 2021 we published a [General Qualifications Alternative Awarding Framework](#) for Wales (GQAAPW) for summer 2021. This sets out our regulatory requirements for general qualifications during summer 2021. Alongside this, we published our [Exam Procedures Review Service](#) for 2021 as well as accompanying guidance. These documents outline what we required WJEC to put in place to implement the alternative arrangements for summer 2021.

As already outlined in section 2.1, we also produced [Requirements for Adapting Assessments for GQ Qualifications in 2021](#) and [Special Conditions for Adapting Assessments for GQ Qualifications in 2021](#) in summer 2020 which WJEC was required to comply with when making adaptations to their assessments.

### 8.2 Monitoring of the summer series

Our monitoring of this year's Centre Determined Grade approach is very different to what we do as part of a normal exam series. We regulate WJEC, not centres and, as much of the work was carried out at a centre level this summer, there was less that could be monitored directly by us. Whilst we can require WJEC to monitor important aspects linked to qualifications, we needed to consider the scale of any monitoring required this summer. We needed to be mindful of WJEC's capacity to carry out further monitoring and the potential burden on centres of this; detailed monitoring undertaken by WJEC would have had a direct impact on the manageability of arrangements for centres. This means we do not have a full overall picture of some aspects of the approach.

As part of our monitoring of WJEC's compliance against the alternative awarding framework for summer 2021 and how the alternative arrangements were implemented in centres we monitored WJEC's processes and procedures. This monitoring required WJEC to report key data to us ahead of results days, as well as after. Some of this data was also required for our official statistics publications. This included:

- Entry data
- Data on sampling processes and feedback provided as part of the external quality assurance processes
- Data on numbers of centres identified as having atypical results
- Final qualification outcomes
- Data on centre review requests and appeals, and their outcomes.

Centres were required by WJEC to implement internal quality assurance processes to promote consistency in grade decisions across the centre (within subjects and across subjects). WJEC published details about, and implemented, their own programme of external centre quality assurance processes. We set out requirements for WJEC to provide updates on their external quality assurance processes, such as submission of centre assessment policies for checking and submission of the Head of Centre declarations (which required centres to confirm their own compliance with the PSED). We also confirmed the completion of other actions, such as delivery of planned training events. However, the nature of the alternative arrangements for summer 2021 and the various factors that had to be balanced meant that it was not possible to monitor the impact of the arrangements as they were implemented.

## **8.2.1 WJEC External Quality Assurance**

### **8.2.1.1 Centre policies**

Centres were required to submit centre policies on assessment arrangements for summer 2021 to WJEC by 25 March. Policies were reviewed by WJEC and further information was requested for 73% of policies submitted by the initial deadline. By 26 April, 93% of policies had been accepted. The remaining submissions were accepted by 20 May.

### **8.2.1.2 Learner decision making records**

WJEC required each centre to submit a maximum of 25 learner decision making records. WJEC sampled 100% of the learner decision making records submitted to check that the process followed by centres aligned to their policies. A sample of learner decision making records were reviewed for every centre.

### **8.2.1.3 Qualification outcomes**

Once grades were submitted, we required WJEC to share Centre Determined Grade results data with us according to the timeline published in [Wales Summer 2021 Data Exchange Requirements](#). We also agreed a programme of meetings where WJEC briefed us on the

outcomes, including further analyses, such as high-level analysis of attainment gaps. In a series of three Results Briefings at the end of July, WJEC updated us on outcomes and their analyses.

#### **8.2.1.4 Centres identified as having atypical results**

WJEC updated us with progress for the atypical results process (see section 3.4 for details). In summary, 61% of centres were identified as being over seven percentage points above their best results at two key grades from results in the three years 2017, 2018 or 2019. Following a review of centres' grade profiles, rationales, and learner decision making records, a sample of learner evidence was reviewed from 11% of centres. As set out in Welsh Government policy, WJEC did not act to change results via this process, which this year relied upon the exercise of professional judgement within centres. No centre outcomes were changed by WJEC as a result of this process.

As we were briefed on results by WJEC, we provided a series of updates to Welsh Government officials and to the Minister for Education directly. Any emerging issues were discussed and supporting actions were considered as necessary.

We also joined discussions with regulators in other jurisdictions to consider any UK wide implications of the emerging outcomes and effective communications on results days.

#### **8.2.1.5 Centre Review information**

On our behalf, WJEC collected data from centres on the number and outcomes of centre reviews at an aggregate level to provide information on how many learners made use of the process put in place this summer. Centre reviews were made per learner per qualification.

There was no established mechanism for collecting this data and we were conscious of the need to avoid adding unnecessary burden to centres at a particularly intensive period. Centres were asked by WJEC to submit aggregate data before the end of term. 43% of centres submitted data by the end of term and for those centres just over 2,500 centre reviews had been requested, across GCSEs, AS and A levels and Skills Challenge Certificate qualifications. Nearly 88% of those reviews resulted in no change in grades, 12% resulted in an increase in grades and less than 0.05% led to a decrease in grades.

We have not listed all figures since the data is incomplete and therefore care should be taken interpreting this data. We will also not publish data on small counts to protect the confidentiality of individuals. WJEC will follow up with those centres who have not submitted data in September but have avoided further requests until after the school holiday period. We will publish further data in the autumn term.

As the arrangements to support professional dialogue between centres regarding their grade decisions were not for us or WJEC to design or deliver, we did not undertake monitoring of this aspect of the process.

## 9. How we communicated

As the disruption caused by the pandemic continued, we knew that all stakeholders, especially learners and centres, would need to know what arrangements would be put in place for qualifications in summer 2021, as quickly as possible. Sharing the right information at the right times has been challenging because of the ever-changing position. We needed to strike a balance between publishing accurate and appropriate information and getting information out as soon as possible – developing the process from scratch and in collaboration with many different stakeholders made this a challenge. We sought to strike a balance throughout all our work to ensure qualifications were awarded this summer.

We set up a joint working group with Welsh Government and WJEC to plan and coordinate relevant communications and met weekly. This group helped develop a Strategic Communications Plan to ensure that there was a 'joined up' approach to sharing information about the arrangements, especially in relation to centres and learners. Regular updates from this group were provided to the Design and Delivery Advisory Group.

One of the key areas of focus in our work was to improve communications with learners. We had direct feedback from the Welsh Youth Parliament and our Learner Advisory Group that they needed to have more information more quickly and more often. This year we introduced learner letters which were sent to learners via a number of channels, mainly centres and Local Authorities. In these letters we tried to clarify key aspects of the approaches that were relevant at that time. We had useful advice and support from the Children's Commissioner for Wales in respect to this approach and the content of these letters.

The Independent Review recommended that we engage more effectively with learners in preparation for summer 2021. In response to this recommendation, we established a [Learner Advisory Group](#) in April 2021. Whilst this group was not established in time to have input into the approach for summer 2021, it will contribute to our contingency planning for summer 2022. We have also received feedback from the group which has informed our communications and some final details of the processes for summer 2021.

Work to further involve the learner voice in our work has included the launch of our [Instagram](#) account in April 2021. We have engaged in wider reach dialogue with learners and launched a feedback questionnaire for learners to share their views with us, which has helped us improve our communication and engagement activity. In addition, we published more accessible versions of our guidance specifically for learners (and their parents/carers) as outlined in section 3.6 above.

We created a dedicated [Summer 2021 qualifications](#) area on our website and kept it updated to provide current information on all developments. The published information included:

- blogs
- video content
- letters and information to schools and colleges
- Qualifications Wales statements and
- frequently asked questions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an increase in traffic to our website. From September 2020 to June 2021, our dedicated 'Awarding in 2021' webpages earned 10,943 visits and, overall, our website was accessed 18,818 times via our social media platforms. We launched a new [Instagram](#) account in April to strengthen our engagement with learners and deliver key messages regarding summer 2021. The page currently has 217 followers with the content frequently being shared by stakeholders. In this same period, our [Twitter](#) page earned 1,202,400 impressions (number of times our content was displayed). This is a slight decrease of 8.6% from the previous year where we had 1,310,800 impressions but we remain at more than double the number of impressions from before the pandemic. We had 47,320 engagements from September 2020 to June 2021, compared to 80,090 in the previous year. Our total number of tweets in this period was 396. Our External Relations Team has responded to over more than 244 direct emails and telephone calls from a range of stakeholders this academic year.

In addition to partnership work outlined previously, we engaged with the following key stakeholders on developments to provide updates and/or to discuss their concerns and the impact on delivery:

- Our Head Teacher Reference Group (HTRG)
- Regional Education Consortia
- Association of Directors Education Wales (ADEW)
- Trade Union Representative Organisations (TURO)
- Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA)
- Careers Wales
- Welsh Youth Parliament; Children and Young People Committee members
- Minority representative and parent representative groups and
- Estyn.

We also engaged with representatives from the following equalities organisations who had significant input into our Equalities Impact Assessment of the Centre Determined Grades approach:

- EHRC Wales
- Muslim Council for Wales, Race Council for Wales, Citizens Wales
- Cytûn (Churches together in Wales)
- Welsh Refugee Council
- Show Racism the Red Card
- Travelling Ahead
- Diverse Cymru
- Samaritans Cymru.

More information on our engagement with specific equalities groups, particularly in the development of the alternative approach taken this year, is in [Equalities: Managing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the awarding of qualifications](#).

Approaching results days, we created a dedicated [Results](#) section on the website with the aim of providing supporting information for all stakeholders related to results for summer 2021.

## 10. What next? – Approach to 2021/2022

### 10.1 November 2021 exam series

We have already announced that the November 2021 exam series will go ahead, subject to there being no further widespread centre closures caused by COVID-19, and communicated this to centres in a [letter](#) in May followed by an [update](#) in July. GCSEs in English Language, Mathematics, Mathematics-Numeracy and Welsh Language will be available, as usual. The assessments in this series will be subject to the original adaptations to assessments for 2021, as published by WJEC in July 2020.

### 10.2 Summer 2022 exam series

Learners experienced significant disruption to their face-to-face learning in 2020 and 2021 due to the impact of the pandemic. Despite their return to centres and the easing of public health restrictions, learners continue to be affected by factors such as social distancing, smaller class sizes and the looming possibility of further centre closures should a new variant of coronavirus increase the infection rate.

To mitigate lost teaching and learning time, we confirmed in March 2021 that adaptations will be made to assessments for 2022. Adaptations have been proposed by WJEC for assessment requirements for Approved general qualifications in Wales, in accordance with our new Regulatory documents; [Requirements for adapting assessment for GQ qualifications in 2022](#) and [Special Conditions for Adapting assessments in 2021/2022](#). Following consultation on their proposed adaptations, WJEC published final adaptations on their secure website, in July 2021, where centres can access the details, and will publish them on their public website in August 2021.

Currently, we fully expect there to be a full exam series in summer 2022 and the adapted assessment requirements already put in place will mitigate some of the disruption experienced during the pandemic. Since the public health situation is improving, there is arguably increased likelihood of the exams being able to go ahead in summer 2022 than there was at this same time last year. For the same reason, there is increased chance of public support for those exams going ahead than this same time last year. However, it is impossible to know what the public health situation will be over the next year and we need to plan for scenarios where we may not be able to rely on a full exam series to award grades, should there be a substantial period of national disruption to face-to-face teaching and learning or that the public health situation prevents the running of the full exam series in summer 2022. We do not know what the impact of the pandemic will be going forwards. Therefore, we are exploring the contingency options available to us should we need to implement alternative assessment arrangements for a third time in summer 2022.