

Overview of the alternative arrangements for vocational qualifications in summer 2021



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1. Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has had significant impact on vocational qualifications throughout the 2020/21 academic year. The continued impact of public health restrictions introduced as a result of the pandemic resulted in disruption to teaching and learning, 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. Vocational qualifications are available at different levels and sizes. There are currently over 19,000 vocational qualifications regulated by Qualifications Wales, which are awarded by 95 awarding bodies. Over 306,000 certificates were issued for vocational qualifications in Wales in 2020.

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 jobs. They are taken by learners across a range of settings, including work based learning providers, schools and colleges either as stand-alone qualifications or as part of apprenticeship programmes.

Given these factors, it was essential that we took an approach to awarding vocational qualifications in 2020/21 that recognised their diversity, provided some degree of flexibility to awarding bodies to implement appropriate mitigations, and wherever possible aligned with approaches taken in England and Northern Ireland.

Our approach sought to minimise the impact of the pandemic on learners being able to complete their qualifications in summer 2021 and, wherever possible, enable learners to progress to the next stage of their learning or career.

2. Background

In August 2020, we published *Awarding vocational qualifications in summer 2020*. The document set out the steps we took to respond to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on vocational qualifications awarded in summer 2020 and how we sought to ensure that as many learners as possible were able to complete their qualifications and progress.

Although schools, colleges and training providers (centres) were able to welcome learners back for the autumn 2020 term there was continued disruption to teaching and learning due to localised outbreaks and the need for staff and learners to self-isolate. Public health restrictions also restricted the numbers of learners that some centres were able to have on site or prevented access to work places to assess learners on competency qualifications.

The situation worsened as the winter progressed with a further national lockdown that impacted on the spring 2021 term.

We know that 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. Many of the assessments could not continue while centres were closed for face to face-to-face contact.

Many work-based learners on apprenticeship programmes had their learning affected by furlough and other pressures placed on employers as a result of the pandemic. The impact of the pandemic on learners working towards achieving qualifications in 2020/21 was significant and varied between centres and individual learners.

We therefore needed to put in place arrangements that would allow awarding bodies to make changes to how their qualifications were assessed and awarded to enable as many learners as possible to complete their qualifications and progress.

3. Our approach

We sought to provide awarding bodies with as much flexibility as possible to make changes to their qualifications, while still maintaining the validity and currency of those qualifications.

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 continued to work closely and collaboratively throughout 2020 and 2021 to ensure a consistent approach across Wales, England and Northern Ireland.

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 elsewhere. We wanted to make sure that learners in Wales were not disadvantaged or advantaged relative to their peers.

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 intended to manage the burden 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 2020/21, it was clear that we should continue to work closely 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 and deliver results to all learners in summer 2021. 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 Childcare qualifications, and

Essential Skills Wales qualifications. For these qualifications, we applied a similar approach to those put in place for three-country qualifications.

We maintained regular constructive dialogue with our fellow regulators and key stakeholders to make sure we were responding appropriately to feedback from the sector and reviewing our approach accordingly.

4. Alternative regulatory frameworks

To enable awarding bodies to respond to the challenges learners were facing in completing their qualifications, we put in place alternative regulatory frameworks that would allow them to make the necessary changes while remaining compliant with our regulatory requirements. 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 2020/21. Therefore, we put in place a less prescriptive regulatory approach, which was based on flexible, principle-based regulatory frameworks.

In summer 2020 we implemented an Extraordinary Regulatory Framework for Vocational Qualifications that required awarding bodies to categorise their qualifications and identify the appropriate mitigation to put in place – to issue calculated results, to adapt the assessments, or to delay assessment. The framework aimed to ensure that as many learners as possible were able to complete their qualifications and progress to the next stage of their learning or into employment without undermining the validity of the qualification. The approach also sought to align with that taken for general qualifications, for example, qualifications that were assessed in similar ways with similar progressions routes. The provision to use calculated results only applied for learners who were due to complete their qualifications before 31 August 2020.

At the same time as we were overseeing the arrangements put in place for summer 2020, we began planning for the regulatory approach that would be needed from September 2020 until August 2021.

Given the continued impact of the pandemic after summer 2020, we allowed awarding bodies to continue to use adaptations within their qualifications in 2020/21. We issued an Extended Extraordinary Regulatory Framework for Vocational Qualifications on 12 October 2020 that allowed awarding bodies to decide how best to adapt their qualifications while maintaining their validity, reliability and currency. Some of the aspects awarding bodies considered were:

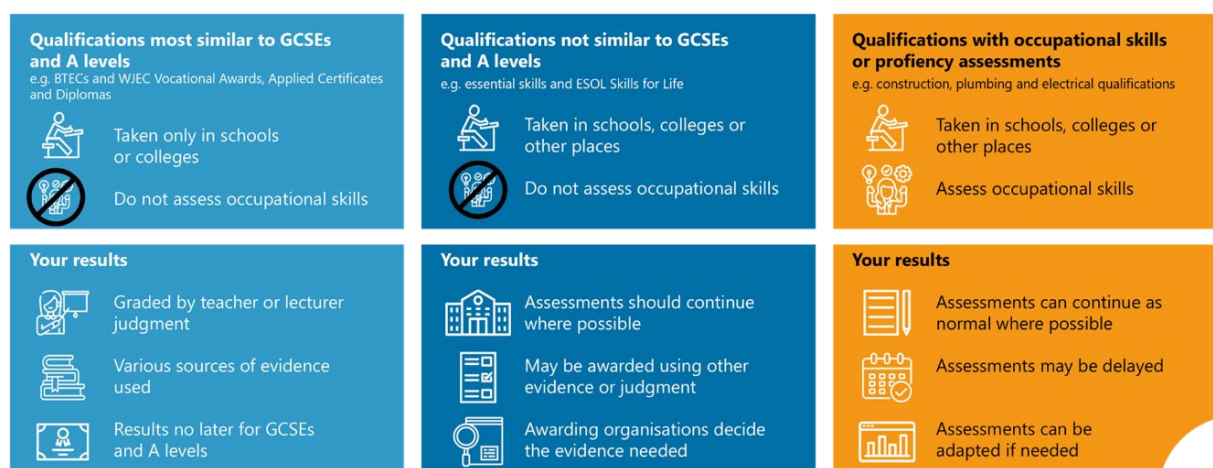
- changing how the assessments were delivered, for example using an online rather than paper-based test, or carrying out an assessment remotely rather than face-to-face;
- reducing the volume of assessment to be completed;
- changing the assessment method, for example using a practical simulation in place of an observation, or professional discussion in place of a practical demonstration;

- changing invigilation requirements, for example allowing the use of online invigilation;
- waiving or adjusting work experience or placement requirements, for example, allowing candidates to have undertaken a shorter period of work experience.

The regulators continued to discuss contingency arrangements with awarding bodies so that we were prepared for further impact on vocational qualifications caused by the pandemic. As the public health situation deteriorated during the winter months it became clear that the arrangements in place through the Extended Extraordinary Regulatory Framework would not be sufficient to mitigate the disruption to teaching, learning and assessment experienced by learners on some vocational qualifications. In January 2021 the Secretary of State for Education in the UK government announced the cancellation of examinations in summer 2021 in England. The policy position was that it was not viable for external examinations to go ahead for some vocational qualifications in summer 2021, and that results should instead be based on teacher judgement. This aligned with the policy position that had already been announced by the Minister for Education for general qualifications in Wales in November 2020.

In January 2021, Ofqual and the Department for Education in England (DfE) consulted on the regulatory arrangements that would underpin the alternative approach to awarding. Qualifications Wales and CCEA Regulation worked closely with Ofqual during the development of the regulatory framework to ensure the views of Welsh learners and centres were considered, and ensure consistency and fairness across the three jurisdictions.

Following consultation the [Vocational Qualifications Contingency Regulatory Framework](#) was put in place by Qualifications Wales, CCEA Regulation and Ofqual in April 2021, with accompanying guidance for awarding bodies. The framework required awarding bodies to place their qualifications into three categories as demonstrated in the following graphic.



The approach sought to ensure as many learners as possible were able to complete their qualification in summer 2021 and reduce, as far as possible the impact of the disruption

caused by the pandemic. Learners taking qualifications similar to GCSEs, AS or A levels would receive a Teacher Assessed Grad (TAG)¹ or Centre Determined Grade (CDG) to provide consistency for vocational learners to their peers taking general qualifications.

The framework provided flexibility for other qualifications that are not similar to GCSEs, AS or A levels but do not assess occupational skills to also be awarded by TAG/CDG if required to enable learner progression.

The arrangements previously in place under the Extended Extraordinary Regulatory Framework for adaptations to qualifications that assess occupational skills continued in the VCRF.

5. Different solutions for different qualifications

Awarding bodies offering qualifications in similar subject areas worked together to discuss consistent approaches to adapting their qualifications. Ofqual set up coordinating meetings with awarding bodies offering three-country qualifications and the relevant sector bodies whose support is required in agreeing changes to some types of competency-based qualifications.

We worked with awarding bodies offering Wales-only qualifications to agree appropriate and common approaches. We also met with key stakeholders involved in the delivery of the qualifications throughout the year to make sure we fully understood the challenges faced by learners and centres in Wales.

Given the wide range of qualifications available in the vocational sector and the different qualification structures across qualifications, it was important for the regulators to take appropriate steps to make sure that there was as much consistency as possible in the changes that were being made. We knew that centres and learners wanted as much information about changes to their qualifications as early as possible, but it was important that we took steps to check the consistency in approaches taken across awarding bodies to minimise any potential unfairness for learners based on the awarding body they were registered with.

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

We coordinated the approach to agreeing adaptations for our Approved Wales-only 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 2020/21 which minimised the impact on learners and protected the validity of the qualifications.

¹ "TAG" is the terminology used for general and vocational qualifications regulated by Ofqual and CCEA Regulation, whilst "CDG" is used for general and vocational qualifications regulated only by Qualifications Wales.

The qualifications available in the suite have different purposes and progression routes as well as a variety of assessment methods. Some of the qualifications 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, and qualifications within the suite sat within different categories (some awarded by Centre Determined Grade while others through adapted assessments). 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.

Some issues that were challenging for learners in Summer 2020 continued in 2021. The requirement for some learners to complete placements so that they could be assessed as competent to work in childcare settings was one problem that was unable to be fully resolved. There was a lack of employers prepared or able to take on placement learners during the year due to the impact of the pandemic on childcare settings. We worked closely with Social Care Wales and the awarding bodies to adapt the qualifications as much as possible, including reducing the amount of placement hours learners in further education needed to complete. However, we could not put adaptations in place that could ensure that all learners would be able to complete their qualifications without sufficient placement opportunities available to confirm their competence.

We continue to work closely with the awarding bodies, Social Care Wales and centres delivering these qualifications to monitor progress of learners completing.

Essential Skills Wales qualifications are not similar to GCSE or A levels in structure and assessment and are taken in different learning contexts – often taken as part of an apprenticeship programme. We met with representatives from the work-based learning and further education centres delivering the qualifications to listen to the issues they were encountering in assessing their learners in 2020/21. We discussed potential options with them and allowed flexibility to enable as many learners as possible to complete their qualifications in summer 2021. This approach allowed centres to either assess their learners using the adapted assessments provided by the awarding bodies, or to issue a Centre Determined Grade based on other forms of reliable evidence that demonstrated learner attainment. This flexibility enabled centres to make informed choices depending on particular issues encountered by their learners and the settings in which they were completing, to allow as many learners as possible to complete the qualification and their apprenticeship.

6. How we communicated

Our role has also been to share the narrative around our work and to bring stakeholders on the journey with us. 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
- Ofqual 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.

We set up a vocational qualifications stakeholder group that met monthly to discuss the issues impacting the delivery of vocational qualifications and consider solutions. -It included representatives from ColegauCymru, National Training Federation for Wales and Welsh Government. This group was an important way for us to gather views from the sector and make sure any concerns about three-country qualifications could be discussed with our fellow regulators or followed up with the relevant awarding bodies as necessary. We also engaged separately with work-based learning and further education Essential Skills Wales and Health and Social Care and Childcare networks throughout the year.

Other stakeholders we engaged with included the Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB) and the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ). We also chaired weekly Communications and Engagement meetings with Welsh Government 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.

We shared information with centres and stakeholders on the approaches being developed and decisions made, and encouraged stakeholders in Wales to respond to Ofqual and DfE consultations on three-country qualifications. We worked with Ofqual to ensure that all qualifications taken by learners in Wales were included on their [online tool](#) for learners and centres to search for information on the approach being taken for their qualifications.

7. Monitoring summer 2021

We met with our fellow regulators, Ofqual and CCEA Regulation, weekly throughout the year to share information and address any shared concerns about co-regulated qualifications and awarding bodies. We were also part of the Ofqual Vocational Qualifications Oversight Board which met regularly throughout the pandemic to consider strategic issues and oversee how awarding bodies were implementing the alternative regulatory arrangements. The Board included representatives from key vocational awarding bodies, the Joint Council for Qualification (JCQ), the Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB) and UK regulators.

We also attended Ofqual's Vocational Qualifications Policy Board where the development and implementation of the approach to summer 2021 were discussed in detail with awarding bodies.

At the beginning of the year, we reviewed awarding bodies' adaptations to check for consistency across qualifications and that approaches were appropriate. As the VCRF was introduced ahead of summer 2021, all awarding bodies were required to submit information on their categorisation and mitigations to the regulators. 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.

In the lead up to summer 2021, we worked with our fellow regulators to hold readiness review meeting with key vocational awarding bodies to understand how they were implementing the revised regulatory arrangements and to seek assurance on how they were managing risks that might impact on the delivery of the summer 2021 results.

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 2021 regulatory requirements in any way, including if they would be unable to issue results on time.

8. Results

Qualifications that are being awarded by Teacher Assessed Grade (TAG) or Centre Determined Grade (CDG) this summer will be awarded based on a range of evidence chosen by the teacher or tutor. The approaches taken by centres to determine grades has been subject to quality assurance by the awarding bodies. Quality assurance arrangements vary across awarding bodies depending on the type of qualification they offer.

Qualifications that are not being awarded by TAG/CDG will be awarded by the awarding body based on the adapted assessments completed by learners. Assessments have been externally quality assured by the awarding bodies.

Results for most series-based vocational qualifications that are being awarded by a TAG or CDG will be issued no later than the equivalent general qualification in summer 2021. Level 3 vocational qualification results will be issued on 10 August, alongside AS and A levels. Level 1 and 2 vocational qualification results will be issued on 12 August, alongside GCSE results.

However, some qualifications that do not usually have a set results day may issue results ahead of or after those dates.

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

9. Appeals

Given the different approaches to awarding vocational qualifications in 2021, there will be some differences in the appeals processes from one awarding body to another. For qualifications that are most similar to GCSEs, AS and A levels and are awarded using a CDG/TAG, awarding bodies may follow similar appeals processes to those in place for general qualifications. Where a qualification is awarded based on a Centre Determined Grade (CDG) or Teacher Assessed Grade (TAG) the learner will be able to appeal to the centre in the first instance, as the centre is responsible for making the judgement on which the result is based.

All qualifications will have a stage in the process where the appeal can be considered by the awarding body. 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.

11. What next – approach to 2021/22

As it became clear that the pandemic 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, and that we need to consider how to minimise the ongoing impact into summer 2022. 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 amend and extend the Vocational Qualifications Contingency Regulatory Framework so that it allows awarding bodies to continue to adapt their qualifications for the year ahead. In many cases, adaptations that are already in place will continue. We are also considering what contingency arrangements need to be prepared in the event that there is significant further disruption as a result of the pandemic in 2021/22 that means the adaptations put in place are not sufficient.

Awarding bodies will provide more details to centres on the adaptations for qualifications in 2021/22.