

By email

Jeremy Miles MS  
Minister for Education and the Welsh Language

22 September 2021

Dear Minister

As you know, while responding to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have also continued our work to reshape qualifications for 14- to 16-year-old learners to help bring the new Curriculum for Wales to life.

In this letter we summarise our work to date and how, moving forward, we will use the principles of co-construction to give stakeholders a strong and central voice in achieving our twin aims of reimagining GCSEs and reshaping the wider 14 to 16 qualifications offer.

We then outline some key assumptions and priorities for reforming qualifications so that they support and align to the Curriculum for Wales Framework and meet the needs of future learners.

In view of your joint responsibility for Education and the Welsh language, this letter also touches on our commitment to making sure that qualification reforms contribute to Welsh Government's Cymraeg 2050 policy ambitions.

Finally, we discuss some of the key risks and dependencies to securing qualification reform that will help to make the new curriculum a success, notably the timeline for introducing the new curriculum and the development of a new approach to school evaluation, improvement and accountability.

[www.qualificationswales.org](http://www.qualificationswales.org)



## **1. Background**

Since the start of 2020, we have held two public consultations to help shape our approach to this work. The first consultation established guiding principles and foundations for our work, and the second sought views on the range of subjects for GCSE qualifications.

### **Guiding principles and foundations**

In our first consultation, we explained why there is still a case for 14- to 16-year-old learners to continue studying for and taking qualifications. Turning 16 is an important milestone in a young person's life, when they complete their compulsory education before going on to more specific academic or vocational study, training and work. Qualifications at this point reflect education at its broadest point for the learner and provide information that helps young people decide which path to take next. The experience of the past two years has further demonstrated the important role that qualifications play in helping young people to progress on their learning journey.

There was strong support for the guiding principles we proposed for the future range of 14 to 16 qualifications that can be publicly funded. We have agreed that these qualifications should:

1. Relate to, and support, the aims and purposes of the new Curriculum for Wales Framework.
2. Be available in Welsh and English.
3. Contribute to a coherent and inclusive offer.

We also agreed that the main qualifications taken in schools, aligned to the Curriculum for Wales, should continue to be called GCSEs, but that their content and assessment will need to change. We describe below how we intend to collaborate with stakeholders to co-construct the design of a new suite of GCSE qualifications.

## **2. Shaping the wider 14 to 16 qualifications offer**

Our work on reforming qualifications to support the Curriculum for Wales goes further than considering what next for GCSEs. In collaboration with stakeholders, we also want to shape the whole 14 to 16 qualifications offer so that it meets the needs of all learners and offers something for everyone.

We want to give centres a coherent and inclusive choice of bilingual qualifications that supports their school curriculum and meets the needs of their learners. Over the summer we have reviewed the range of qualifications available internationally. We will now engage extensively with stakeholders to consider what other qualifications should be available alongside GCSEs.

Our work on this wider offer will consider the range of qualifications available to 14- to 16-year-old learners from entry level upward and a wide variety of subject areas, including those related to the world of work. We will be guided by learners' needs and the views of teachers, parents and other stakeholders. We expect that the future range of qualifications will include a mix of existing and new qualifications. Some will be made-for-Wales qualifications, and some will be UK-wide qualifications.

We will consult on the defining features of the offer in autumn 2022. Our aim is to have a fully coherent and inclusive range of bilingual qualifications in place by September 2027.

Depending on the degree of change required to shape the offer, there is a possibility that we will require additional resource to help reform existing qualifications or secure new ones. Will continue to work closely with your officials on this to feed into future budget planning.

### **3. Reimagining GCSEs**

Earlier this year, we consulted on the proposed range GCSE subject that would best support the Curriculum for Wales. We have carefully considered all responses and will shortly confirm the range of subjects in which new, made-for-Wales GCSEs will be developed.

This marks the beginning of an exciting and creative phase of our Qualified for the Future work. We will work closely with stakeholders to do two things. First, to rethink the relationship between curriculum, pedagogy and qualifications. Second, to look at the practical ways qualifications' content and assessment should align to the ethos, purposes and content of the Curriculum for Wales Framework, enable effective teaching, and support positive learner experiences and wellbeing.

There are many ways in which qualifications can be designed to assess and demonstrate learner attainment and experiences. Qualifications should not be seen as synonymous with traditional written exams. We will explore how qualifications can be designed to encourage learners to gain meaningful experiences, without assuming the only learning or experiences gained by learners are those specified in qualifications.

We are committed to exploring innovative approaches and reimagining the content and assessment for future qualifications. These include:

- How qualifications can be designed to be as engaging as possible for learners and support their mental health and wellbeing.
- Increasing flexibility - to reflect a school's curriculum and offer its learners a positive teaching and learning experience.
- Exploring digital technology to enhance assessment experiences for learners and build more resilience in how qualifications are delivered.

These ambitions reflect the qualification design priorities discussed later in this letter.

The GCSE name offers considerable benefits to learners; it is familiar, trusted and helps ensure that young people's achievements are recognised and valued. As already discussed, our immediate priority is to work with stakeholders to reimagine the content and assessment of the next generation of made-for-Wales qualifications. Once we have developed the high-level design for these new qualifications, we will consider whether to revisit the question of keeping the GCSE name.

We do not currently believe that additional resources other than those already agreed will be required to support our work of reforming GCSEs; the anticipated costs are already reflected in the Welsh Government impact assessment for the new curriculum.

However, it may be that our renewed focus on stakeholder engagement means that we incur some costs earlier than we had originally expected, so some re-profiling of the funding required in each year may be needed. We will continue to work with your officials to support budget planning for future years.

#### **4. A co-constructed approach**

It is essential that everyone involved in education works together to deliver the Curriculum for Wales. We want to give learners, teachers, assessment experts, parents and carers, employers, colleges, and universities a strong voice in shaping new qualification content and assessment.

We will involve stakeholders directly in the work of exploring and developing proposals for each individual subject. Our approach will be collaborative and open. We will learn lessons from how the Curriculum for Wales was developed, and from our recent experience of

working closely with stakeholders to ensure qualifications were delivered successfully in summer 2021.

We will use a three-tier model for stakeholder involvement, consisting of:

- i. Subject-level working groups
- ii. AoLE network groups
- iii. A stakeholder reference group

The enclosed appendix describes in more detail how we will use these groups to co-construct the design of new GCSEs and develop and test ideas for the wider 14 to 16 qualifications offer.

In addition to these groups, we are also working with your officials to agree how the National Network for curriculum implementation can help shape the thinking on new qualifications.

## **5. Aligning qualifications to the Curriculum for Wales**

To support the work of reimagining future qualifications, we have discussed and agreed some key assumptions with your officials about how future qualifications will relate to the Curriculum for Wales Framework at national and school level.

It is important that everyone involved in implementing the Curriculum for Wales recognise that it is much wider than just the qualifications taken by learners. There is no expectation that all learning activities and experiences undertaken by learners should lead to a qualification. Well-designed qualifications can help to encourage high-quality teaching and learning in schools, but they are by no means the only way of securing this. Valuable skills and knowledge can be gained and recognised through other experiences and activities.

It will be for centres (schools, colleges and other settings) to decide which qualifications to make available to their learners. Our role is to shape the range of publicly funded qualifications from which centres can choose the most appropriate for their learners.

The mix of qualifications offered by centres and taken by learners should reflect the purposes, aims and expectations of the Curriculum for Wales Framework. That is, learners should have a choice of qualifications that help them to realise the four purposes, reflect

their learning and experiences across a broad and balanced curriculum, and support their future progression.

Our understanding is that Welsh Government does not intend to specify a minimum or maximum number of qualifications that each learner will be expected to take, nor to dictate specific qualifications that centres must offer to their learners. Our research shows that learners take on average around 13 GCSEs or equivalent qualification. This seems like a high number given the broader expectations of the Curriculum for Wales, so we might expect to see the average number of qualifications taken by learners to decrease over time as schools focus on offering their learners broader and more balanced learning experiences.

Qualifications can be designed to help learners to realise the four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales. The design of individual qualifications should also make clear how they relate to specific aspects of the Curriculum for Wales Framework, such as the statements of what matters, descriptions of learning and progression steps. When reimagining qualifications, we will also consider a range of other design priorities, as discussed below.

## **6. Priorities for qualification design**

The following priorities will shape our work with stakeholders to reimagine how new GCSEs and other made-for-Wales qualifications could be designed differently.

### **Choice and flexibility**

As far as possible, we want qualifications to offer schools and learners the opportunity to deliver and to experience their school curriculum in line with the Curriculum for Wales Framework. We will explore with stakeholders how the assessment of knowledge, skills and experiences can be done in ways that offers more flexibility for learners and centres to choose some of the content and context they want to focus on. The nature and degree of flexibility required will vary across subjects, history is likely to include more optional content than mathematics for instance. There are lots of ways flexibility can be achieved, for example by including more teacher-led assessment, or more project-based assessment where learners can decide the area they want to focus on. For each qualification it should be clear how and why the balance has been struck between what is fixed and what is flexible.

### **Learner experiences, engagement and progression**

We will look at how qualifications can help broaden the ways in which the learning and experiences gained by learners are recognised in ways that can support their engagement and progression. For example, qualifications could require learners to conduct specific tasks or activities as part of their work, which they must complete but which may not contribute directly to their final grade. Additional information could be provided alongside an overall grade to indicate a learner's attainment in relation to specific skills or to reflect a particular topic or theme they have focused on.

### **Digital technology**

We will look at how qualifications can be designed to include more effective and widespread use of digital technology in assessment. This is about more than simply switching from paper-based end of course exams to on-screen exams. It is about how digital technology can help broaden the range of evidence that can contribute to a learner's grade, can help make teacher-led assessment more manageable, and make the assessment experience more relevant and engaging. We know digital technology can help to motivate and engage learners, giving them a more positive experience and helping them to demonstrate their true potential.

New technology could also help to make assessment more manageable and less stressful by helping to support more modular and on-demand assessments. Learning from the challenges of the pandemic, more use of digital technology also has the potential to improve efficiency and resilience in the delivery of assessment. Ensuring that qualifications are manageable and accessible to all centres and learners will play an important part when considering new ways of doing things.

### **Learner mental health and wellbeing**

Qualifications are one of the many factors that can impact on learner mental health and wellbeing. Any form of assessment presents a degree of challenge and anxiety. Successfully facing that challenge can help build a learner's confidence and resilience. But it is also important to consider carefully how qualifications can be designed to make it more likely that learners will have a positive assessment experience. New approaches to assessment may be able to help reduce the anxiety for learners. Well-designed assessment should help learners to engage with their learning and to develop their confidence and independence. This can be done for example, by ensuring that the assessment method is appropriate to the learning being demonstrated (validity), by including a mix of different assessment methods within a qualification to cater for different preferences, and by considering the context in which assessments take place.

## **Change management**

As we work with stakeholders to reimagine the design of future qualifications, we will work with others to plan early and effectively to make sure that change is implemented successfully. This will include systematically agreeing the requirements for teaching and learning resources, professional development and training for new teachers.

### **7. Supporting Welsh language learning**

Our recent consultation confirmed that there are many of different views on the part that qualifications should play in helping to realise the Welsh Government's policy of reaching one million Welsh speakers by 2050. We support that aim and are committed to ensuring that qualifications make an active contribution to achieving it.

Given the diversity of views in this area, we would welcome an opportunity to discuss how you would like qualifications to contribute to achieving your policy ambitions.

We will continue to work with your officials and stakeholders to agree how any new qualifications can make the most effective contribution possible to a coherent and joined-up approach across the system. One that will help to create a generation of learners who are enthusiastic and confident about using Welsh in their everyday lives. We will write to you again shortly to update you on our thinking on this important policy area.

### **8. Future school evaluation, improvement and accountability**

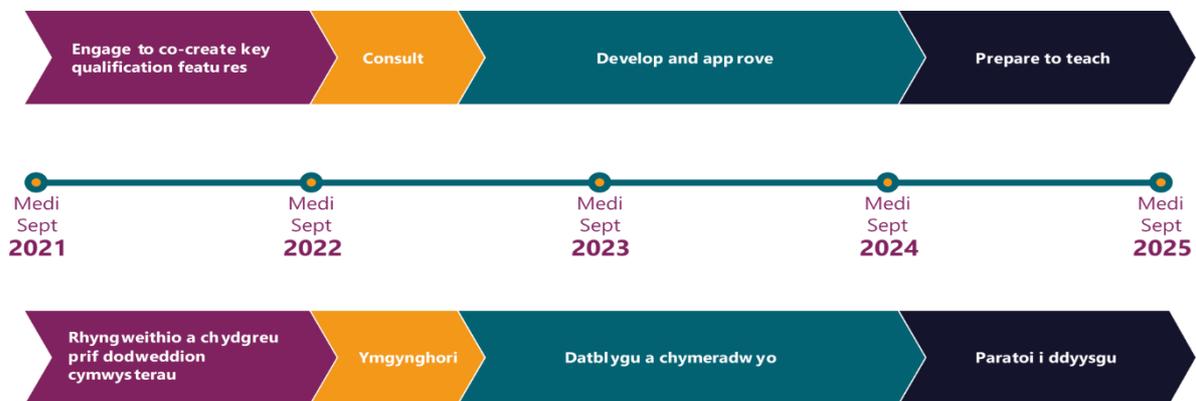
We want to take this opportunity to emphasise the relationship between how qualifications are designed and how their outcomes are used. We fully support the Welsh Government policy aim of reducing the current disproportionate reliance on qualification outcomes in school accountability arrangements and broadening the range of data, evidence and measures to support school evaluation and improvement.

The current use of qualifications in school accountability has two major impacts. First, it limits how qualifications are designed by requiring highly reliable and rigid approaches to content and assessment. Second, it drives school decision about which qualifications learners should take and how much time they spend preparing for them. The less emphasis there is on qualification outcomes, the more scope there is for innovation in how content and assessment is specified. But the reverse is also true. If future arrangements continue to rely heavily on qualification outcomes, this will significantly limit the scope for reimagining qualifications and assessment.

We will continue to work with your officials to support their development of the new approach and help to mitigate any risks to qualification reforms.

## 9. Timeline for reforms

The timeline below shows the key activities required to create a new set of GCSEs and supporting qualifications. This includes a period of stakeholder engagement and consultation to agree key design features, a period of development and further stakeholder engagement on the detailed specifications and assessment arrangements, and time to prepare for teaching the new qualifications.



Our aim is to have new qualifications available in time for first teaching in September 2025. That is when the first national cohort of learners to have experienced the new curriculum through their secondary education will be starting in Year 10. There is much to do, and we know that securing sufficient time for preparation and implementation is vital to successful delivery. We will keep this timeframe under review as we continue to explore with stakeholders the nature and scale of the reforms required.

## 10. Journey to curriculum roll-out

The coming academic year marks a crucial and exciting time in the curriculum reform journey. We look forward to working with your officials and many others to seize this opportunity to co-create an innovative and forward-looking set of new qualifications. Qualifications that will bring the new Curriculum for Wales to life and help give future learners the best possible start in life.

Yours sincerely



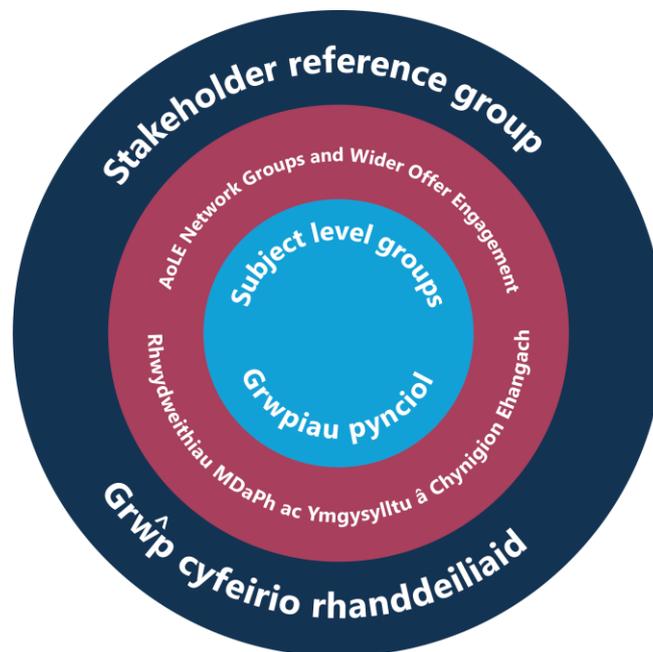
David B Jones OBE DL  
Chair



Philip Blaker  
Chief Executive

Enc: Model for co-constructing new 14 to 16 qualifications  
**Appendix 1: Model for co-constructing new 14 to 16 qualifications**

We will use a three-tier model for stakeholder involvement. The groups described below will help us to co-construct the design of new GCSEs, they will also help to shape thinking on the wider 14 to 16 qualifications offer.



Subject-level working groups will focus on gathering stakeholder views and developing ideas and proposals for each new qualification being designed. Each group will include a mix of practitioners, subject specialists and assessment experts.

Supporting the subject-level groups will be six stakeholder network groups, one for each curriculum Area of Learning and Experience (Area). These will provide regular suggestions and feedback to the subject level groups to help identify, debate and refine ideas. The network groups will include teachers, lecturers, examiners, learned and professional bodies, and others with an interest in each curriculum Area.

An overarching stakeholder reference group will offer a wider perspective on emerging thinking. The group will include a wide range of voices representing different interests from across the education sector and beyond. The group will help to ensure that the overall qualification offer meets our guiding principles by advising on the following overarching considerations:

- i. Manageability, deliverability and coherence
- ii. alignment to the Curriculum for Wales Framework and its implementation
- iii. teaching practice and learner experience
- iv. accessibility and inclusion
- v. learner mental health, wellbeing and engagement
- vi. progression and post-16 implications
- vii. change management (including teacher training, professional learning, teacher and learner resources)
- viii. public understanding and communications.