

# QUALITATIVE RESEARCH WITH LEARNERS TO EXPLORE VIEWS ON NON- EXAMINATION ASSESSMENT

## Phase 1: Executive Summary

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# Executive summary

## Research aims

GCSE qualifications have traditionally assessed knowledge, skills and understanding through a combination of written examinations, oral examinations, controlled assessments, portfolios and coursework. Non-examination assessment (NEA) refers to any type of assessment that is not taken by candidates at the same time under controlled conditions and applies control over the assessment at three points; task setting, task taking and task marking<sup>1</sup>.

Welsh Government has published the draft *Curriculum for Wales 2022*. In line with this new curriculum framework, there is the potential for changes to occur with qualifications taken by 14-16 year-olds in Wales, which may include changes to NEA elements.

As part of an ongoing programme of work to consider how qualifications can support the new curriculum for Wales, Qualifications Wales have developed a research project exploring whether the current approach to delivering, assessing and moderating NEA in GCSEs is appropriate. This research project has four strands of work, one of which is the learner engagement outlined in this report.

This research report summarises the views and experiences of NEA from the perspective of learners currently studying for the following 10 GCSE qualifications: art and design; computer science; drama; English language; English literature; geography; physical education; science double award; Welsh language; Welsh literature. For each subject, the report addresses the following lines of enquiry:

- Are learners aware of the NEA's purpose?
- Do learners think that the NEA assessments are fair?
- Do learners feel that NEA is important? What do they get out of it? How does it impact their learning?
- Which forms of NEA do learners think work well/ not so well and why?
- Is feedback and marking of the NEAs sufficient and useful?
- Do learners make multiple attempts to get grades on NEA's?
- How much time is spent on NEA in the classroom or at home?
- Do learners receive help to complete NEA at home?
- Do learners feel that NEA is manageable across subjects?

## Methodology

Fifty focus groups were carried out across Wales exploring the views and experiences of approximately 400 learners. On average, the focus groups lasted 30-45 minutes, with between six and ten learners taking part in each group.

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<sup>1</sup> Ofqual (2013). *Review of Controlled Assessment in GCSEs*. Coventry: Ofqual. Available from: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/377903/2013-06-11-review-of-controlled-assessment-in-GCSEs.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/377903/2013-06-11-review-of-controlled-assessment-in-GCSEs.pdf) [Accessed 23rd August 2018].

Data was collected by five bilingual facilitators. Twenty focus groups took place in Welsh or bilingual schools, of which 15 sessions took place in Welsh. When split by regional education consortia, 12 took place in Central and South Wales, 11 in North Wales, nine in South East Wales and 18 in Mid and West Wales.

All focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Those conducted in Welsh were then translated into English. The analysis was structured by subject area. The transcripts were coded in NVivo against the lines of enquiry. These were further coded into finer grain categories that were analysed for similarities and differences between and within the groups.

## Overview of results

Across the focus group discussions, learners often reported the purpose of NEA in terms of the following interacting themes:

- Providing a fairer method of assessment relative to the traditional exam
- Testing the application of knowledge to the real world and developing real world skills
- Increasing or 'banking' marks
- Reducing stress

These are not necessarily the primary purposes that an awarding organisation or Qualifications Wales would identify but reflect the learners' perceptions of their qualification.

Learners reported that the NEA allowed them to:

- Be assessed in a less stressful way than the exam
- 'Bank' marks before the exam
- Prepare for the written exam by learning through doing
- Develop skills and confidence that can be used in other subjects
- Carry out independent learning and freely steer their work
- Work collaboratively

Across all subjects, the current specifications recommend that the qualification allows where possible for overlap with the Welsh Baccalaureate Skills Challenge Certificate. Learners reported that the NEA allows them to develop independent study skills such as, creativity and innovation, personal effectiveness etc. which are all skills that the Welsh Baccalaureate Skills Challenge Certificate aims to develop.

The extent to which learners received feedback and marking on their NEA work varied by subject, in line with the rules set out in the individual subject specifications. According to Additional Standard Condition C.2 of Qualifications Wales' Additional Standard Conditions of Recognition for GCSE/GCE qualifications, in subjects where the assessment is marked by the centre, centres are required to provide learners with their marks before the work is sent off for moderation<sup>2</sup>. There was some suggestion from learners that this did

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<sup>2</sup> Qualifications Wales (2019). *Additional Standard Conditions of Recognition for GCSE/GCE qualifications*: Newport: Qualifications Wales. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/publications/additional-standard-conditions-of-recognition-for-gcse-gce-qualifications/> [Accessed 16 July 2019].

not always appear to be happening. Learners almost universally would like to have received their marks before the exam period.

The design of the assessment meant that it was not possible or practical to make multiple attempts in the NEA for most subjects. The exception to this were the Welsh and English language oral assessments where learners frequently reported repeating their presentations, when they felt that they could be improved. In physical education, it was speculated that some learners selected their best performances when submitting video evidence collected outside of school.

There was some suggestion of inconsistent practice in the timing of when learners were issued their marks for NEA. Qualifications Wales colleagues confirm (personal communication) that for centre-marked tasks in GCSEs, there is now a general requirement for schools to issue learners with their mark **before** they sit their other exams in the subject concerned. This is because learners have a right to appeal those marks. However, our focus group respondents suggested that this practice is not applied in all cases; with differences in approach between subjects, schools and (on occasion) even classes within schools.

Learners reported working on their NEA at home for several subjects including art and design, computer science, English language, Welsh language and physical education. The main report was of some computer science learners preparing for their NEA at home and thus outside the direct supervision of their teacher.

In terms of the manageability of NEA across subjects, most learners felt their workload was manageable. However, there were two notable exceptions to this. Those studying art and design were likely to report that their NEA workload was difficult to manage and interfered with the amount of time they had to dedicate to other subjects. A subgroup of the learners reported that studying for the Welsh Baccalaureate Skills Challenge Certificate<sup>3</sup> meant that they had an unmanageable amount of NEA. However, we are unable to ascertain whether learners who reported a manageable NEA workload were also studying for the Welsh Baccalaureate Skills Challenge Certificate as it was not part of the focus group schedule. In a point somewhat related to manageability, focus groups in most subjects perceived NEA marks to have a low weighting in the final grade relative to the work required to complete the NEA (the contrary view was also expressed, albeit less commonly).

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<sup>3</sup> The Welsh Baccalaureate includes the Skills Challenge Certificate. This comprises of four Skills-based components (Individual Project, Enterprise and Employability Challenge, Global Citizenship Challenge, and Community Challenge) that are completed by all learners.

At Key Stage 4, the combined outcomes of the four components determine whether the Skills Challenge Certificate is awarded at National or Foundation level.

To be awarded the Welsh Baccalaureate, learners must achieve the Skills Challenge Certificate, in addition to a range of supporting qualifications. These supporting qualifications include two mandatory GCSEs of English language or Welsh language, together with mathematics-numeracy or mathematics. A further three GCSEs are also required, of which two may be equivalent qualifications.

WJEC, (2016). *Welsh Baccalaureate National/Foundation Key Stage 4. Accredited by Welsh Government Teaching from 2015*. Available from: [https://www.wjec.co.uk/qualifications/welsh-baccalaureate/welsh-bacc-from-2015/ks4-national-foundation/Welsh%20Bacc%20Specification%20KS4%2028%2010%2014%20-%20Branded..pdf?language\\_id=1](https://www.wjec.co.uk/qualifications/welsh-baccalaureate/welsh-bacc-from-2015/ks4-national-foundation/Welsh%20Bacc%20Specification%20KS4%2028%2010%2014%20-%20Branded..pdf?language_id=1)

## Art and design (100 per cent NEA)

The art and design NEA is made up of a portfolio and an externally set assignment. Learners in the focus groups were largely positive about their art and design NEA tasks. Many reported enjoying the freedom to steer their own projects and considered that the method of assessment allowed them to demonstrate their creativity and potential in a less stressful environment. The nature of the NEA required a sustained effort over time, which some learners considered had helped them to develop their time keeping skills. Selected learners also reflected that their analytical and annotation skills had improved as a result of their NEA work. Some of the learners were spending a considerable amount of non-classroom time on their art and design NEA, but they were not receiving help at home.

Some learners reported concerns about the manageability and impact of their NEA in Art and Design. It appeared to analysts that more concerns were expressed in respect of this subject than others, although no formal count of this was made.

## Computer science (20 per cent NEA)

Computer science learners are tasked with programming a solution to a software development problem. Learners reported that they felt the NEA was designed to assess their performance beyond the exam context, whilst also preparing them for the exam. They reported preferring what they perceived to be the more relaxed environment in which NEA took place (compared with a traditional exam). For some learners, the NEA was reported to provide independent learning and problem-solving skills, and some learners reported benefitting from 'learning through doing'.

The amount of feedback they received was variable across schools. Similarly, some learners spent time preparing for their NEA at home whilst others felt it was against the rules for that particular subject, from which we could infer that there may be inconsistencies in how schools delivered the NEA.

Some of the learners felt that the NEA should carry a heavier weighting and there were some inconsistencies in views on whether the length of 20 hours was appropriate.

## Drama (60 per cent NEA)

Drama NEA is split into two performance tasks, one of which is supported by a portfolio. Learners felt that the purpose of the NEA was to reduce the amount of stress and pressure exams put them under, which was explicitly linked to a feeling that NEA was "more fair" than exams due to giving learners with different strengths, or those who got stressed during exams, a chance to shine.

The learners in drama focus groups felt that the NEA in this subject helped improve both their confidence, and their acting-related skills. It also gave them an opportunity to demonstrate their individuality, creativity and to be expressive. They also felt that it allowed them to practise communicative skills, which had real-world relevance.

Some learners reported practising lines at home with family members, but other external help was rare. Learners rarely reported having been given their marks for the NEA, but they were very positive about the qualitative feedback they received on their performances, which allowed them to improve in future.

In terms of potential improvements, there were no overarching themes mentioned by almost every focus group, as in other subjects. However, some learners noted that group dynamics could be a challenge, in that they sometimes had to "drag along" other group members who the teacher had put them with. Others stated that they felt they had spent too long on the first task, leaving them feeling bored, and at the expense of the second task and the exam. These same learners felt that the NEA should be worth a higher percentage of the overall grade.

## **English language (20 per cent NEA)**

Learners felt that the English language NEA (an individual researched presentation and a group discussion) helped build confidence and improved oral communication, skills which have “real-life” value and that written exams do not allow learners to develop. It also provided an opportunity to work more independently than they were used to. Learners felt that the NEA was intended to allow them to ‘bank’ some marks before the exams, and to reduce the stress they often felt during other forms of assessment.

Most learners reported that their families listened to them practise their presentations, but otherwise had no help from home. Almost all learners made multiple attempts in some form for at least the individual task, be that practice presentations or explicit second attempts, but it is unclear whether these were formally submitted to the awarding organisation.

The main concern that learners had related to a lack of agency in certain aspects of the NEA. For the individual task, this related to them feeling somewhat stifled by a narrow choice of topics, which they may not have a keen interest in, whilst for the group task, they could be allocated to a group where other learners did not do their share of the work, or talked over others, restricting their opportunities to show their skills and knowledge. They also felt that the amount of effort that went into the NEA did not match the percentage of the grade it was worth, and suggested that it should be worth more, or that less time should be spent on it so as not to “waste” exam preparation time.

## **English literature (25 per cent NEA)**

Learners felt that the English literature NEA (two written assignments linked to themes and texts) was a holistic assessment that allowed them to develop and demonstrate a range of skills. They also felt that it was a low-pressure assessment, which was more valid than exams, where learners who were prone to stress were not likely to perform as well as they could in other situations. They identified that the experience of doing the NEA was excellent preparation for the exam, as it entailed writing what was essentially a long essay.

The main issue learners raised with regards to the NEA was that they felt the time spent on the NEA was disproportionate to the percentage it contributed to their grade. They also highlighted that practice could be inconsistent between classes and schools, in terms of both the feedback given and the preparation they had for the assignments, and that this was a potential source of unfairness.

## **Geography (20 per cent NEA)**

Geography NEA is based on the collection of data and creation of a fieldwork portfolio that informs an evidence-based report. Learners perceived their geography NEA to offer a fairer method of assessment relative to the traditional exam which they considered to be unfair. They also felt that the NEA functioned to improve their grade relative to what they would achieve if the assessment was 100% examination based. Some learners valued that they were able to prepare for the NEA written component and learners in all the focus groups flagged geography NEA as less pressurised than an exam.

Learners considered the opportunity to apply their classroom-based learning to the real world as an asset of the assessment method. They also considered it to provide the opportunity to develop and use different skills than those required by the traditional exam.

## **Physical education (50 per cent NEA)**

Physical education NEA is comprised of three sports activities, in addition to the development of a personal fitness programme. Learners perceived that the purpose of physical education NEA was to assess practical sporting ability that could not be assessed in a written exam in a similar way to how some art and design

learners considered creativity something that was not suited to measurement in an exam. It was also perceived to be designed to be fair to individuals who underperform in exams, who could demonstrate their skills in a different context.

Many learners reported enjoying the physical education NEA, although some learners were less happy with the personal fitness plan. They valued the freedom to choose the sports they were assessed on. There was some suggestion that the NEA was less pressurised than the exam and offered the opportunity to 'bank' marks.

Some guidance from teachers on the NEA was reported at both class and individual level, for example in one school, the Year 10 learners took part in the Year 11 NEA as opponent players to give them a taster for their own NEA. As videos of performances outside of school, for example in a martial arts class, could be submitted as evidence, there was some scepticism that learners choosing non-schools subjects were carrying out several attempts at the NEA task and then picking their best performance for submission. It was felt that this was potentially putting them at an advantage over those who had a single opportunity in school. In line with many of the other subjects, some learners felt that the effort to reward ratio was out of sync.

### **Science double award (10 per cent NEA)**

Learners were largely positive about their science double award NEA where they are required to work in groups to practise an experimental method and then individually analyse and evaluate the results (this is done on two occasions). They perceived it to offer them a fairer assessment method that was suitable to those that were less exam orientated. They also considered the NEA practical to assess different skills, in addition to offering the opportunity to boost their overall grades.

Many learners described it as fun and enjoyable and valued the combination of group work and independent learning afforded by the practical, which they considered to take place in a less stressful context. Learners reflected that the practical activities they were taking part in could aid their recall of information in their science exam.

Some schools provided guidance prior to the NEA but this was not universal, and there were inconsistencies in how schools delivered the NEA. There were no reports of learners making multiple attempts to improve their grade and learners made very few suggestions as to how the science double award NEA could be improved.

### **Welsh language (30 per cent NEA)**

Learners reported that the Welsh language NEA (an individual researched presentation and group discussion) helped them develop communication and language skills and build their confidence. They also highlighted that it was a much less stressful way to be assessed, and it let them 'bank' some marks prior to the exam, which aided in reducing their stress levels. The NEA was also considered to be good preparation for the exam, in terms of learning about mark schemes and what was expected of them. Lastly, they reported that the NEA had helped them develop analytical skills, and experience of collaborative working.

The majority of learners had practised their NEA at home, with many having done so to an audience of parents or other family members. Multiple attempts were common, and these could be interpreted as practice which is recommended in the specification. Learners reported inconsistent practice in terms of whether they had received their NEA marks, with differences between both classes and schools.

The main improvement learners suggested was dedicating more time (and other resources) to the NEA in school, as they felt they had a lot to do at home. There was also some confusion about rules and topics, with the Welsh language and English language NEA tasks potentially being on very similar topics but one

presentation prohibiting the inclusion of opinion and the other group discussion encouraging the inclusion of opinion.

### **Welsh literature (25 per cent NEA, 25 per cent oral examination)**

Learners felt that the primary purpose of the Welsh literature NEA (two written assignments and one oral) was to reduce the amount of stress they were under, which in turn was perceived to make NEA a more valid type of assessment than exams. They felt that NEA helped improve their confidence for the exam, largely due to providing a sense of security in terms of having some “marks in the bank”. More rarely, it was noted that the NEA helped them develop skills and techniques they might otherwise not have, such as analytical skills<sup>4</sup>.

Getting help at home seemed to be rare for this NEA, as were multiple attempts. However, dry runs or drafts of the assessment seemed to be commonplace, with varying degrees of similarity to the NEA task itself. Some learners reported that they did the same task in the practice as they did in the actual marked assessment and others reported that they had completed practice attempts with similar but not the same topic as their final assessment. Learners often reported that they had not yet received their marks for the NEA, with practice varying between and within schools. It was also clear that whilst qualitative feedback in the run-up to the NEA was common, this was rare after its completion – seemingly as the focus rapidly shifted to the next NEA or the exams.

Learners were somewhat split on whether the NEA should have more or less time allocated to it, with a suggestion that this might be down to wanting more time on the task itself, but less on the practice for it. There was also confusion about the demands of the assessment, due to perceived differences between the NEA and exam mark schemes (and those of other subjects).

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<sup>4</sup> Transferrable skills were not specifically probed for in the focus group schedule. The schedule was semi-structured but given time constraints it is not possible to claim that the topic of transferable skills was exhausted and other untapped skills may be undocumented.



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