

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

Phase 2: 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 all candidates at the same time under controlled conditions and applies control over the assessment at three points; task setting, task taking and task marking.^{1,2}

Welsh Government is introducing a new school curriculum in 2022³. 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.⁴

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. The four strands of work are as follows:

- Strand 1: Subject-specific focus groups and an online survey with teachers discussing their experiences and perceptions of NEA in their subjects.
- Strand 2: Subject-specific focus groups with learners to explore their thoughts about the NEA they have recently undertaken.
- Strand 3: Research into the assessment functioning of NEA, including analysis of the targeting and reliability of the assessments, the extent to which they discriminate between candidates and whether the intended weighting of NEA in the grades received by candidates is achieved in practice.
- Strand 4: An exploration of the moderation of NEA.

To enable efficient data collection, analysis and reporting, the engagement with teachers and learners for strands 1 and 2 was facilitated in two phases. Phase 1 took place in spring/ summer 2019 and examined ten subjects. Phase 2 examined a further nine subjects and took place in spring 2020. This research report contributes to Phase 2 of Strand 2. It summarises the views and experiences of NEA from the perspective of learners who, at the time of taking part in the focus groups, were studying for the following nine GCSE qualifications: design and technology, food and nutrition, history, media, French, German and Spanish

¹ 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 [Accessed 23rd August 2018].

² This is similar to controlled assessment in England.

³ Welsh Government (2020). A guide to curriculum for Wales. Available from: <https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/introduction/> [Accessed 4th May 2020].

⁴ Welsh Government (2020). A guide to curriculum for Wales. Available from: <https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/introduction/> [Accessed 4th May 2020].

(grouped as modern foreign languages, MFL), music and Welsh second language. It follows an earlier report that examined learner experiences of NEA in relation to: art and design; computer science; drama; English language; English literature; geography; physical education; science double award; Welsh language; Welsh literature.

The report considers the following lines of enquiry:

- Are learners aware of its purpose?
- Do learners think that the 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 sufficient and useful?
- Do learners make multiple attempts to get grades?
- 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

Thirty-five focus groups were carried out across Wales exploring the views and experiences of approximately 280 learners. On average, the focus groups lasted 30-45 minutes, with between six and ten learners taking part in each group.

Data was collected by five bilingual facilitators and one English speaking facilitator. 14 groups took place in Welsh or bilingual schools, of which 12 sessions took place in Welsh. When split by regional education consortia, ten took place in Central and South Wales, nine in North Wales, six in South East Wales and ten in Mid and West Wales.

The focus groups were all 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

Learners tended to hold very positive views of NEA, across the focus groups they reported that it increased their enjoyment of the subject. Learner perceptions of the purpose of the NEA broadly fell into three areas:

1. The assessment of real-world skills
2. To assess 'talent' in the performance element of a subject
3. To reduce assessment pressure on learners

Perceptions of the purpose and fairness of the NEA could be interpreted as interlinked. Increasing fairness was repeatedly perceived to be an intended outcome of reducing pressure on learners. The NEA was considered in relation to the traditional written exam, which most learners considered to be stressful, and as such the combination of NEA and exam was considered fairer than an exam only approach.

Learners felt that the NEA positively impacted on their learning as it gave them:

- The freedom to steer their projects in a direction that suited their areas of interest
- The opportunity to learn through doing
- An increased confidence
- Some preparation ahead of their exams

Most learners described receiving some teacher guidance at the beginning of the NEA and feedback throughout. Only a small number of learners discussed receiving their provisional marks, for either mocks or for NEA that had formally taken place. 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 moderation⁵. There was some suggestion from learners that this did not always appear to be happening, although it should be noted that this could be due to the time of year that the focus groups took place.

No learners described making multiple attempts or anticipated being able to do so before the end of the qualification. As per the previous report, many learners were keen to receive more feedback.

Many learners reported working on their NEA at home, this was usually preparation, research or practice but learners did not report receiving any help from parents or siblings.

Generally, the learners felt that their NEA-related workload was manageable, particularly when it was primarily carried out in lesson time rather than at home. A small number of learners reported that their workload could become difficult to manage alongside homework and revision.

A summary of the results for the individual subjects is provided below.

Design and technology (50 per cent NEA)

For design and technology learners are required to spend approximately 35 hours on a sustained 'design and make' task based on a contextual challenge set by WJEC. Learners are required to identify design possibilities, develop a design brief and generate and develop design ideas. They are then required to make a prototype and evaluate its fitness for purpose.

Learners perceived the purpose of the NEA was to help them to develop, use and assess practical skills and to also provide a less stressful assessment environment when compared to a written exam. They described how the NEA was a positive experience that gave them the freedom to be creative and express their

⁵ 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].

talents. Some learners also reported that they valued the hands-on experience of doing the NEA rather than reading a description of how to perform a practical task.

Most learners described receiving overall guidance from their teachers and some general feedback on how to improve their NEA. Most work took place in class and no one reported receiving help from home. Multiple attempts were not mentioned or anticipated.

The learners tended to be very positive about their NEA experiences. In terms of areas for potential improvement there were some suggestions for more hands-on practical work and more opportunities to gain teacher feedback on their work.

Food and nutrition (60 per cent NEA)

Food and nutrition learners are required to carry out a food investigation task (for example to investigate the use of sweeteners) and a food preparation task (where learners design and prepare a three-course menu). Both tasks have accompanying written and research components.

Learners perceived the purpose of the NEA was to allow them to learn different skills, such as practical cooking skills, that could not be assessed in a written exam. They also felt that the NEA was designed to allow them to be assessed over a longer period of time, rather than a short exam sitting. The NEA was also perceived as a way of reducing assessment pressure.

The NEA was reported to help foster an understanding of the concepts and mechanisms of cooking (for example how yeast works) whilst also providing an opportunity for independent learning that some learners considered more expressive than the written exam.

There were differing reports on the extent to which learners worked on their NEA at home, with some cooking and revision taking place but no help from family members.

Learners did not make multiple attempts at the NEA, but some practice assessments in class took place. Feedback from teachers and peers was reported, but this was perceived to be of varying quality with several groups citing a preference for better guidance and feedback.

History (20 per cent NEA)

The history NEA takes the form of two tasks that represent 'working as a historian'. The first focuses on source evaluation and the second on the formation of different historical interpretations of history. Learners are required to produce two pieces of written work that are to be completed within five hours of formal supervision time.

Learner perceptions of the purpose of the NEA varied by focus group. Some groups reported that one purpose of the NEA was to allow them to show planning and analysis skills that they anticipated may not be assessed in the written exam. Others reported that the purpose of the NEA was to provide an opportunity for those who are less well suited to being assessed in the traditional exam.

Learners were positive about their NEA and many reported that they liked the opportunity to work independently in a scenario that they perceived to be less stressful than a traditional exam. Some learners also reported that the NEA allowed them to feel more prepared for their written work and others felt that the NEA allowed them to develop a more in-depth understanding of a given topic.

None of the learners described receiving any formal feedback on their NEA, although some learners did report receiving class level guidance that they found helpful. Learners did not report working on their history NEA at home and they did not make multiple attempts at the same assessment.

The learners were generally very positive about their history NEA.

Media studies (40 per cent NEA)

For the media studies NEA learners are required to carry out research, plan, produce and evaluate a piece of media, which can be either audio-visual, print or online. Several media forms are available including television, magazines, film, music and advertising.

Learners perceived the NEA as a way of providing them with a real-world learning experience and considered the production of media as not possible within the time constraints of a traditional written exam. They also perceived the NEA to offer a less stressful form of assessment, relative to a written exam.

In terms of the impact of the NEA, the learners reported the hands-on element of their work helped them to learn the content. They also suggested that it provided them with practical, planning and research skills. Several learners reported that the NEA gave them freedom to be creative and the independence to feel ownership over their work.

Working on their NEA at home was reported in all the focus groups, but only two learners reported receiving help at home.

Learners in most media studies focus groups described receiving some guidance from their teachers at the start of the NEA and some useful feedback during the process. None of the learners we spoke to described formally making multiple attempts, but some learners restarted their work and others wished to restart but were unable to do so due to time constraints.

Learners in three of the focus groups reported that their media department did not have the software packages required to deliver the course. Several learners reported working at home because it was the only place where they could access the software that they needed. Some learners had purchased their own equipment and software to be able to complete the NEA.

Learners requested more exemplar NEA work, as they considered this to be missing from their experience of the course.

Modern foreign languages (includes French, German and Spanish) (25 per cent NEA)

The NEA for modern foreign languages (French, German and Spanish) is made up of three tasks: a role play exercise, a discussion of a photo that contains a scene such as a meal or a celebration and a conversation. There is no restriction on the amount of time learners spend on preparation and this can take place in school or at home. Most learners discussed their experiences of mock NEA as they had not yet experienced the live NEA.

Learners perceived their NEA to have three key purposes: firstly, to allow their speaking skills to be assessed, which they considered was beyond the remit of a traditional written exam. Secondly, to prepare them for the exam and thirdly to reduce assessment pressure. They reported that the NEA impacted on them in several ways namely, helping them to develop their language skills, improving their confidence and develop assessment preparation skills.

Learners in all focus groups reported that they had received feedback (but no marks) on their performance in practice/mock NEAs. They reported that they found this useful in terms of giving them amends they could make in their future speaking tasks.

Learners tended to practise their NEA in school rather than at home and dedicated considerable time to this preparation.

Many learners reported that the number of topics that they could potentially be assessed on was large and this posed a significant revision challenge. Learners in three focus groups noted that, in their opinion, this meant that the NEA had a tendency to become a memory test of anticipated questions and answers, that no longer reflected mastering a language.

Music (70 per cent NEA)

The NEA for music is split across two performing and two composing tasks. These can be applied to four areas of study: musical forms and devices, music for ensemble, film music and popular music.

Learners reported that the main purpose of the music NEA was to demonstrate performance skills that could not be captured in a written exam.

The learners were positive about the NEA and several reported that it helped to improve their confidence. They considered the freedom to choose songs and the genre of music to be good thing, as was the incremental learning that many felt took place.

None of the learners described making multiple attempts, but learners in most focus groups discussed carrying out extensive practice. They discussed receiving general feedback from their teachers and private tutors (many learners reported having music lessons outside of school).

Learners were very positive about their experience of music NEA. The main area mentioned for potential improvement related to increasing equal access to resources, as there were some reports of limited access to composition software or instruments at home which meant that some learners had less time available to compose or practice relative to their peers.

Welsh second language (50 per cent NEA)

The Welsh second language NEA is made up of two tasks, the first is a group or paired conversation about the contents of a video clip. The second requires learners to discuss a stimulus provided by WJEC (including a range of graphs, pictures and short reading texts). Here they respond orally and listen to peers by interacting in a group of two or three.

Learners in all focus groups reported that the purpose of the NEA was to assess real world speaking and listening skills which they thought could not take place in a written exam. Nevertheless, some learners also considered that the NEA prepared them for the exam, for example, by helping them to revise the content. In terms of impact, learners reported that the NEA improved their language skills and confidence and gave them the opportunity to take part in group work, although some learners mentioned that this could also be a hinderance if the members of the group did not contribute equally to the task.

Learners in all focus groups mentioned working on their NEA at home but getting help at home was uncommon. Many focus groups stated that they had received feedback from their teachers on how they had performed on their NEA, but they had not received their actual marks at the time of the focus group.

Learners in all five focus groups discussed the choice of topics as a potential fairness issue as the learners perceived their performance to be somewhat contingent on getting a topic that they were well suited to, that would allow them to best demonstrate their skills.



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