



Review of the summer 2023 exam series for vocational qualifications

August 2023



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Introduction

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 17,500 vocational qualifications regulated by Qualifications Wales, which are awarded by 90 awarding bodies. Over 240,000 certificates were issued for vocational qualifications in Wales in 2022.

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 schools, colleges and work-based learning providers, either as stand-alone qualifications or as part of apprenticeship programmes. Vocational qualifications are assessed in a variety of ways with many including more internal assessment and less external written examinations than general qualifications.

Not all vocational qualifications are delivered over an academic year or with assessment linked to scheduled examination series. Results for many vocational qualifications are issued to learners throughout the year, as they complete their qualifications, rather than at fixed points in the year. The main focus of this document is on those qualifications taken over an academic year, with results issued in the summer for learners to progress onto the next stage of their learning or into employment, alongside those learners taking GCSEs and A levels.

The 2021/22 academic year saw the return of scheduled examinations and assessments that had been disrupted during the pandemic, with awarding bodies permitted to make adaptations where necessary. The return to pre-pandemic assessment arrangements continued in 2022/23 with adaptations that awarding bodies had been previously permitted being withdrawn. Advance information was made available for examined units in Wales-only Health and Social Care and Childcare qualifications that are used for progression alongside GCSEs and A levels, to align with the approach taken on GCSEs and A levels in Wales.

Preparing for the series

We have continued to work collaboratively with our fellow qualifications regulators in England and Northern Ireland to minimise the regulatory burden on awarding bodies.

We met with Ofqual and CCEA Regulation fortnightly throughout the year to discuss and agree policy approaches, and to share risks and issues that may affect vocational qualifications taken in the three nations.

We joined Ofqual and CCEA Regulation in readiness review meetings with key vocational awarding bodies in the spring. Readiness reviews focused on how well prepared awarding bodies were to deliver assessments and results in the summer and to seek assurances that key risks were being effectively managed.

We attended monthly Ofqual-coordinated VTQ Delivery Oversight and Regulatory Approaches Group (DORAG) meetings, where vocational qualification policy, approaches, risks and issues were discussed with awarding bodies.

We held Qualifications Delivery Management Group (QDMG) meetings with City & Guilds and WJEC throughout the year. These meetings allow us to discuss key risks to the delivery of assessments and examinations with the awarding bodies offering approved vocational qualifications in Wales, and to gain assurances on the mitigations in place to manage those risks effectively.¹

Issues relating to awarding vocational qualifications in summer 2022 were discussed in detail at the Standards and Technical Working Group (STWG) and Standards and Awarding Group (SAG). STWG is a three-country group focused on qualifications designated for use on publicly funded programmes in Wales. SAG is a Qualifications Wales group attended by WJEC, where approaches to awarding approved Wales-only qualifications are agreed. Both groups met regularly throughout the year.

We continued to hold our Vocational Qualifications Stakeholder Group meetings throughout the year and these continued during the examination series. The group includes representatives from ColegauCymru, NTfW, Estyn and Welsh Government. The meetings provided an opportunity for issues affecting the delivery of qualifications to be discussed.

¹ Health and Social Care and Childcare qualifications awarded by City & Guilds and WJEC and Construction and Building Services Engineering qualifications awarded by City & Guilds and EAL

Responding to the late results affecting vocational qualifications in summer 2022

Summer 2022 saw unacceptable delays to the timely issue of results for some learners taking three-country vocational qualifications. This mainly affected learners in England taking vocational qualifications designed for the England market which are also available in Wales. As a result of the issues encountered in 2022, Ofqual put in place a [VTQ action plan](#). The action plan put additional quality checks in place and required awarding bodies to confirm with centres, well ahead of results days, which learners at the centre were expecting a result in summer 2023. We attended VTQ action plan working group meetings with regulators and awarding bodies, where progress and risks were discussed in the lead up to the summer results.

Our regulatory approach

Adaptations were permitted in 2021/22 to support learners to complete their qualifications and minimise the impact of the disruption caused by the pandemic. However, many vocational qualifications did not require extensive adaptations. Adaptations were not permitted in 2022/23 and the contingency regulatory framework put in place during the pandemic was no longer used as a regulatory tool.

We did permit WJEC to provide advance information for learners taking examinations in Wales-only vocational qualifications in Health and Social Care and Childcare. This was to align with decisions taken to provide advance information for learners taking GCSEs and A levels in Wales.

Our approach to approved Wales-only vocational qualifications

Health and Social Care and Childcare qualifications

During the pandemic, adaptations were put in place for the core qualifications in Health and Social Care and Childcare, Play, Learning and Development. The adaptations reduced the number of case studies required to be completed alongside the multiple-choice assessment from three to one. When we returned to the full assessment strategy for the qualifications, we received feedback from centres and Social Care Wales that doing so was proving problematic for the sector.

Challenges within the workforce post-pandemic and pressures on the sector and staff meant that learners were finding it challenging to complete all the case study assessments as required. In dialogue with the WJEC, City & Guilds and Social Care Wales, we agreed that a permanent change to the assessment strategy for the core qualifications was justified.

While WJEC and City & Guilds work on proposals for a new assessment strategy to take effect from January 2024, we have allowed the reduced assessment approach permitted during the pandemic to continue in the interim.

For Health and Social Care qualifications taken in schools or colleges that are similar to GCSEs and A levels and offer progression routes into further and higher education, advance information was made available to reflect arrangements put in place for general qualifications.

Essential Skills Wales qualifications

The adaptations for Essential Skills Wales qualifications were removed in autumn 2022. Some of the changes introduced during the pandemic to support learners to access assessment in a manageable way have continued. Remote invigilation of multiple-choice assessments has continued, while awarding bodies have developed guidance for centres that allow remote invigilation of controlled tasks without compromising the controls required for the assessment.

Construction and Building Services qualifications

Our monitoring focused on the delivery of new Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications in Construction and Building Services. Level 3 qualifications were taught from September 2022, with assessments taking place from January 2023. We monitored the awarding bodies' meetings and met regularly with City & Guilds at Qualifications Delivery Management Group meetings. We also ran a *Have Your Say* survey for learners and centre staff to feed back on the new qualifications. We shared themes emerging from the survey with City & Guilds and EAL.

Monitoring the series

Awarding bodies are required to notify us of any incident that happens that may have an adverse effect on learners. We monitor how the awarding body manages the incident to ensure that the interests of learners are protected and the validity of the qualification is maintained. The majority of incidents received this summer for vocational qualifications related to the awarding bodies' progress against the VTQ Action Plan (further detail included below). There were no significant incidents reported relating to the delivery of assessments and examinations in summer 2023 that resulted in adverse effects for learners in Wales.

We met regularly with our fellow qualifications regulators throughout the series to discuss any emerging issues. In addition, the monthly VTQ Delivery Oversight and Regulatory Approaches Group (DORAG) meetings provided an opportunity to receive feedback from awarding bodies on how the series was progressing and to consider and review the key risks to the safe delivery of the summer examinations and results.

We also met WJEC and City & Guilds regularly at Qualifications Delivery Management Group (QDMG) meetings to discuss risks relating to the delivery of approved vocational qualifications in Wales.

We monitored key awarding body meetings for Wales-only approved vocational qualifications during the series. We observed examiner and moderator standardisation meetings where markers and moderators are trained in applying the mark schemes consistently. We also monitored the awarding meetings where the grade boundaries are set to check that the awarding body is following the correct procedures and that appropriate evidence is considered when making grading decisions. Our monitoring did not identify any concerns with awarding body processes for summer 2023.

Focus on the Ofqual VTQ Action Plan

There were unacceptable delays in some learners receiving their results for some vocational qualifications in summer 2022. The delays affected three-country qualifications that are awarded to learners in Wales, and not approved Wales-only qualifications. As the delayed results related to qualifications designed to meet England policy requirements and affected more learners in England than in Wales, Ofqual took the lead on investigating the cause. Qualifications Wales worked closely with Ofqual and the awarding bodies during the investigation.

After completing their investigation, Ofqual published the [VTQ Action Plan](#).

Three new deadlines were introduced to ensure that awarding bodies issued complete and correct Level 3 results:

- 26 May 2023 – the latest date by which awarding bodies must have agreed with schools and colleges which learners expect to receive a result by 17 August
- 23 June 2023 – the latest date by which awarding bodies must have agreed with schools and colleges the remaining information or evidence needed for each learner to receive a result
- 14 August 2023 – the latest date by which awarding bodies should issue results for vocational qualifications to schools and colleges

The following additional measures were also put in place:

- awarding bodies were required to collect and maintain details of a senior designated contact in schools and colleges who is responsible for exam delivery
- awarding bodies worked with UCAS to track learners applying for higher education
- Ofqual launched a [VTQ Information Hub](#). The hub brought together key information from awarding bodies, including important dates, into one central location to support schools and colleges

Awarding bodies reported to regulators any issues with centres not providing the required information by the deadlines. Where the awarding body was unable to elicit a response from a centre in Wales, Qualifications Wales contacted the centre directly to underline the importance of complying with the request to ensure that learners received their results on time. Qualifications Wales also wrote to ColegauCymru in June to ask if there were any challenges colleges were facing in complying with the information requests.

Awarding and results

Due to the range of vocational qualifications available, there will be differences in how these qualifications will be awarded across awarding bodies in 2023.

For three-country vocational qualifications taken in schools and colleges, the policy intent set in England for awarding in the 2022/2023 academic year is to return to pre-pandemic standards, taking account of the approach to awarding general qualifications (where appropriate) to ensure that students are not advantaged or disadvantaged. Given the diverse nature of vocational qualifications, awarding bodies will take an approach that is appropriate for each of their qualifications to achieve the policy intent this year.

For Wales-only approved qualifications in Health and Social Care and Childcare, which offer similar progression routes to learners taking GCSEs or A levels, WJEC will take account of the approach taken to awarding general qualifications in Wales during awarding. We set out our expectations for awarding these qualifications in our Wales Summer 2023 Data Exchange Procedures.

Results for vocational qualifications that are used for similar progression routes into further learning as GCSEs or A levels will be released no later than the equivalent GCSE or A level results day. Results for other vocational qualifications will be released in line with the awarding bodies' published dates.

Appeals

All awarding bodies are required by Qualifications Wales to have an appeals process in place for learners. Appeals processes vary across vocational awarding bodies and across different qualification types. Details of each awarding body's appeals process can be found on their websites. If an appellant is dissatisfied with how the awarding body has dealt with the appeal, they can submit a complaint to Qualifications Wales.

Welsh Government has made additional financial support available for economically disadvantaged learners who wish to appeal their grade this summer. The support applies to all general and vocational qualifications taken by learners in Wales in summer 2023.

How we communicated

This year, as in any academic year, it has been a priority that we deliver effective communications to learners, parents, carers, schools and colleges and the wider public.

We continue to focus on improving our communications with learners as one of our key audiences. We have consulted our Learner Advisory Group on our exam and assessment-related communications throughout the year and have valued their input and feedback on our communications approach.



At the beginning of this academic year, we created a dedicated [exams and assessments](#) area on our website to provide information and support relating to this year's exams and assessments. We've shared information about this year's arrangements in various formats, including:

- [our learner guide to exams and assessments](#)
- [frequently asked questions](#)
- [blogs and articles](#)
- [video content](#)
- [social media posts](#)
- letters to schools and colleges

In addition, we've included links on our website to resources to help and support learners taking qualifications.

Throughout the academic year, we have delivered ongoing communications with a focus on Qualifications Wales's role at the heart of the qualifications system.

Power Up campaign

We have also delivered a joint communications campaign with other education partners, with the aim of supporting learners taking qualifications this year and signposting them to additional support. The campaign was launched in collaboration with Welsh Government, WJEC, Careers Wales and e-sgol.

The Power Up campaign launched in November 2022 and ran up until the end of the summer exam series in July 2023. The [Power Up / Lefel Nesa](#) website was updated as a central content hub for learners to access information about this year's assessment arrangements, revision guides, online revision sessions, well-being support and more. Throughout the campaign, all partners developed content that was used across all partners channels to raise awareness and drive traffic to the website.



On 11 May we celebrated **Pob Lwc Day**, showing our support to all learners taking exams and assessments this year. We created a [Pob Lwc video](#) with messages from staff and learners at Qualifications Wales to wish all learners the best of luck.

Approaching results days

As in previous years, we held a media briefing ahead of results days to provide some context to results this year. The media briefing also provides an opportunity for journalists to ask questions to inform their results day reporting.

In July 2023, we also created a dedicated [Summer 2023 Results](#) area on our website to provide information and support to learners that were eagerly anticipating their results. Content included:

- [video on how qualifications were awarded in Wales this year](#)
- [video on the appeals process](#)
- [video on progression options](#)

We will continue to share helpful information on and around this year's results day, to support learners as they take their next steps in education or employment. To keep up to date, you can follow us on social media or sign up to receive our monthly e-newsletter:

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Instagram](#)

[LinkedIn](#)

[Sign up to our e-newsletter](#) via the button at the footer of our website.