



# Review of the summer 2023 exam series for general qualifications

August 2023



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## Introduction

This report gives an overview of the summer 2023 exam series, including our approach to overseeing the delivery, standard setting and awarding of assessments for general qualifications sat by learners in Wales.<sup>1</sup>

Our role, as the independent regulator of qualifications in Wales, is to ensure appropriate processes are in place for the delivery of GCSE, AS and A level and the Skills Challenge Certificate assessments and to scrutinise the award of these qualifications.

WJEC provides Made-for-Wales-GCSEs, AS and A levels and the Skills Challenge Certificate qualifications and these are the main focus of this report. There are a small number of GCSEs and A levels developed for England that are also funded in Wales. Independent schools are able to choose Made-for-Wales or other qualifications developed for England provided by other awarding bodies. Qualifications developed for England are principally regulated by Ofqual. To maintain a proportionate approach, we work closely with Ofqual in their regulation.

**Over 374,000 GCSE, AS and A level grades were awarded this summer**

**17,040 learners received AS grades**

**13,930 learners received A level grades**

**56,660 learners received GCSE grades**

Learners taking exams this summer have had their education affected by the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In recognition of this, we took the decision to require WJEC to provide an additional level of support for Made-for-Wales qualifications as part of the transition back to pre-pandemic processes.

This was provided in two ways - advance information published by WJEC in February and a specific approach to grading for summer 2023.

The 2023 grading policy for Made-for-Wales GCSEs, AS and A levels and the Skills Challenge Certificate qualifications required national outcomes at subject level that

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<sup>1</sup> GCSE, AS and A level qualifications and the Skills Challenge Certificate qualifications

are broadly midway between national subject outcomes in 2019 and 2022. To achieve this, many grade boundaries have had to be set below where they have been before the pandemic and should not be regarded as typical.

This overview provides information about how the grading policy was implemented, along with some of the challenges and issues in a unique year. It also outlines the preparations ahead of the series, and the monitoring and work that took place during the series.

## Section 1

### Standard setting, awarding and results

#### GCSE, AS and A level standard setting

2022 saw the first summer exam series for two years and, overall, the series was delivered successfully. We were aware that some learners had found the return to exams worrying and centres had to familiarise themselves with processes that had not been implemented for a few years, as well as those that were put in place due to the impact of the pandemic. Throughout last year, stakeholders continued to tell us that learners were still being impacted by the disruption to teaching and learning caused by the pandemic. We considered this, alongside the impact of the 2022 grading policy on outcomes, in our decision making on the approach to take for this summer. For example, the Made-for-Wales AS levels awarded in 2022 contribute 40% to the overall A level awarded this summer.

Qualification Wales made the decision on the approach to summer 2023 last September and [announced](#) the grading policy would be that national subject outcomes should be broadly midway between those of 2019 and 2022. This would mean that 2023 would continue the transition back to pre-pandemic arrangements, whilst still supporting this year's cohort of learners in a unique year. We sent a [letter to centres](#) setting out the grading approach. At the same time, we also outlined that the policy approach would apply to the November 2022 and January 2023 series. This was appropriate because entries for the November series were mainly made up of learners taking the qualifications early in Year 11, and therefore in the same cohort as those who would be sitting the exams in summer 2023. Similarly, the units sat in January 2023 were for qualifications to be awarded in summer 2023. This meant that it was appropriate for the grading policy to apply to these series too.

The broadly midway grading policy was similar to the policy in place for last summer, so we were able to build on the technical processes WJEC established in 2022. As in summer 2022, we did not require WJEC to maintain the performance standard set in previous series. Instead, we required WJEC to set a standard that would achieve results that are broadly midway between 2019 and 2022 outcomes, be acceptable given the context of the series, and that would be the fairest approach for learners.


We worked closely with WJEC to explore the options for achieving the broadly midway policy as effectively and fairly as possible.

Although the approach was similar to that applied in 2022, there were still complicating factors such as:

- changes in the age make up of learners taking the qualification and changes in the ability of the cohort of learners
- whether learners had sat any units of the same subject in an earlier series
- unpredictable performance in assessments due to impact of the pandemic
- the impact of advance information on learner performance

The focus of discussions was to agree principles that would support learners as far as possible and maintain the validity of the qualifications.

During the awarding process, WJEC holds meetings of their awarding committees, which are made up of senior examiners. They use a combination of statistical information and judgements drawn from the review of examples of learners' work to establish how many marks are needed to achieve a certain grade on each assessment. These are the grade boundaries and they are set for each assessment.



See the [Exams 360](#) area of our website for more information on how grades are set

Usually, awarding bodies produce predictions of the outcomes of each qualification to support awarding, and outcomes are expected to be broadly in line with these predictions, unless there is a justifiable rationale that learner performance has been significantly better or worse than in previous years. There are no quotas or allocations to be filled and we expect to see some variation in the outcomes from year to year.

The established prediction process would not achieve the grading policy put in place to support learners this year. However, awarding committees could not be asked to determine grade boundaries that could deliver the expected results on the basis of their judgement alone, since they might have put more weight on the pre-pandemic standard that they are most familiar with.

Instead of a prediction, WJEC calculated a statistical starting point using subject-level results from 2019 and 2022. The statistical starting point guided the awarding committees to the range of marks at which the scrutiny of learner scripts could begin. Committees could then consider learner scripts at marks above and below this starting point to identify the number of marks that represented an appropriate performance standard, within the context of this summer.

When setting this standard, we required WJEC to ensure that the level of attainment demonstrated by learners at the recommended grade boundaries was sufficient to maintain public confidence in the qualification.

The judgement of awarding committee members had an important role in the awarding process this summer. Awarders had the flexibility to move away from statistical starting points if the evidence supported a different grade boundary.

In normal years, if outcomes are further away from the predicted outcomes than the agreed percentage ranges, or tolerances, then WJEC has to provide a rationale for this. In the same way, this year, WJEC provided a rationale and evidence to us for variation in results that were more than a certain number of percentage points away from the statistical starting point. We refer to this as the award being 'out of tolerance'. This principle is outlined in our [data exchange](#) document.

Awarding bodies are directly responsible and accountable for their awarding decisions. However, as the regulator, we review the award outcomes and, where an award is 'out of tolerance', we consider the evidence submitted to be satisfied that the award was justified. In reviewing the evidence, we are mindful of the following three principles:

- fairness for learners
- public confidence in the results being issued
- views of the WJEC awarding committees on acceptable standards of performance in the context of the 2023 exam series

This summer, our approach to setting standards in Made-for-Wales GCSEs, AS and A levels varies in comparison to other regulators. Ofqual is the regulator for qualifications in England and CCEA Regulation is the regulator in Northern Ireland. Usually the approaches are very similar, so we maintained regulator discussions throughout the planning stages for the series and during the series, so that the differences and any potential impacts were fully understood.

Our position was announced early in the academic year, so that stakeholders could understand the differences. We ensured appropriate communications were shared with key stakeholders. Higher education institutions were of particular importance so that learners in Wales would not be disadvantaged in relation to admissions processes for higher education places. Our communications work is outlined further in [Section 5](#).



## **Approaches to setting standards in GCSEs, AS and A levels in Wales, England and Northern Ireland**

Education is a devolved matter and regulators take separate decisions on the approach to grading for the qualifications they regulate.

A key factor in our decision making on the policy for awarding Made-for-Wales qualifications was the fact that the AS levels awarded in summer 2022 contribute 40% towards the A level awards in summer 2023. This means that the policy applied last year still had some effect on A levels this summer. Similarly, units of some GCSEs were taken last summer and would have an effect this year.

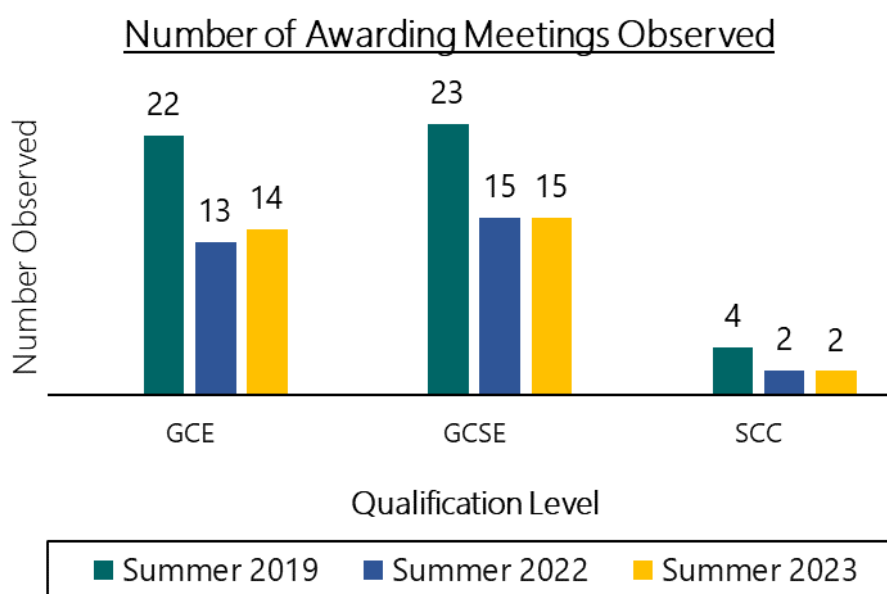
We did not think it would be appropriate to apply a different policy to different qualifications in Wales, and alongside the feedback we had received about the ongoing impact of the disruption on learners, we decided on a policy that positioned the 2023 series as part of the transition back to pre-pandemic arrangements.

We continued to discuss our approaches with other regulators so that we fully understood the potential implications of our approaches.

## Monitoring the awarding process

A full monitoring programme was put in place so that we could be satisfied that WJEC's processes were implemented appropriately and in line with our requirements. Since some aspects of the awarding approach were still novel in this series, we maintained a high level of monitoring for GCSE, AS and A level and Skills Challenge Certificate qualifications. We monitored the award of all qualifications with large entries and those where any particular concerns had been identified.

We observed around half the awarding meetings — 15 GCSE and 14 AS and A level. We also monitored the awarding of the Skills Challenge Certificates.



Our monitoring focused on WJEC's compliance with the regulations and requirements in place for summer 2023. We were also interested in the impact of the advance information put in place to support learners this summer. The majority of meetings were held online rather than face to face, as they would have been before the pandemic.

This is a continuation of adjusted approaches that were put in place as a result of the pandemic and that have been retained. WJEC now has systems in place to allow awarding committees to access all the necessary supporting documentation, including learner scripts, and to be able to discuss issues as necessary in an online event. We have adjusted our own monitoring processes and expectations to account for these changes.

The awarding meetings we observed complied with our requirements and the online processes worked effectively. Some meetings took more time than in previous series and, as in summer 2022, this was mostly related to the larger ranges of scripts that were reviewed and the challenges of balancing complex issues. We provided feedback to WJEC following our monitoring.

As well as monitoring of awarding meetings, we also held regular discussions with WJEC throughout the awarding period to consider emerging concerns and issues — for example, the impact of combining unit outcomes from summer 2022 in subjects where some learners may have sat units early and the midway grading policy was different. WJEC reported five awards as out of tolerance<sup>2</sup> (four GCSEs and one AS level) and we were satisfied with the rationale provided.

### **Grade boundaries**

Grade boundaries can change in any year, since it is very difficult to produce assessments that have exactly the same level of demand as those in previous years. Given our broadly midway policy position for results this year, we were aware of the possibility that grade boundaries might need to be different to what they were pre-pandemic in most subjects. We also knew that advance information could impact on grade boundaries and the impact would likely be different across subjects.

In many subjects, lower grade boundaries were needed in comparison to those set before the pandemic and, in some cases, boundaries had to drop significantly. However, there have been some small increases in grade boundaries in some subjects when compared to 2022, which we had anticipated.

WJEC has had to finely balance achieving the broadly midway policy position with setting grade boundaries that hold public confidence and maintain the validity of the qualification.

2022 and 2023 should still be considered as unique years. We anticipate that grade boundaries will generally rise as the impact of the pandemic diminishes and we return to established performance standards.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Out of tolerance' is variation in results that is more than a certain number of percentage points away from the statistical starting point, as explained on page 8

In addition to our focus on WJEC's awarding processes, we joined regulators' meetings with the Joint Council of Qualifications (JCQ) awarding bodies hosted by Ofqual. (JCQ represents all awarding bodies that offer GCSEs, AS and A level qualifications). We also joined regulators in fortnightly catch-ups to consider arrangements across the three jurisdictions.

We regularly updated Welsh Government, both ahead of and during the awarding period, on issues, risks and emerging outcomes.

## **New qualifications – Digital Technology and Built Environment**

This summer saw the first award of GCSEs and AS levels in Digital Technology and Built Environment. All four qualifications had been developed as a result of two sector reviews carried out by Qualifications Wales and form part of a suite of new Made-for-Wales qualifications.

Standard setting in new qualifications brings challenges and we would normally expect WJEC to apply a comparable outcomes approach to protect learners in the early years of the new qualifications. This was complicated this year by the fact that we required WJEC to aim for outcomes to be broadly midway between the outcomes from summer 2019 and summer 2022 (which did not exist for these qualifications). In addition, these qualifications were not replacements for equivalent qualifications, which means that there are no direct comparisons in terms of standards or expected outcomes. There are no direct 'cognate' subjects. In some of these new qualifications the task was also complicated due to entry numbers being very low. For example, there were fewer than ten entries in total for one new qualification.

We discussed WJEC's proposed approach to awarding these new qualifications and we agreed that it was important to use a range of evidence to support the awarding process. As well as the evidence that should routinely be considered at award, the awarding committees also made use of information from comparisons with other similar legacy qualifications, and learner performance across a range of subjects.

Whilst the policy to support learners with broadly midway outcomes should still apply to these new qualifications, it is also important that the awarding committees understand where standards should be going forward.

We monitored WJEC's award of these qualifications and reviewed outcomes with WJEC. We are satisfied that, in the context of this summer, grades were awarded to learners as fairly as possible.

## Results

On both the GCSE and AS/A level results days, we publish results analysis [on our website](#) along with infographics highlighting the important themes from the data.

Due to the different awarding arrangements between 2020 and 2023, results are not directly comparable to each other or to results in previous years. It is important to remember this and take care when comparing this summer's results.

### AS and A levels

The headlines for AS and A level results were:

- the overall number of AS qualifications taken increased compared to both last year and 2019
- the number of A levels taken was lower than last year but higher than in 2019
- overall, AS and A level results were broadly midway between 2019 and 2022, in line with our grading policy
- 13.5% of A level grades issued were grade *A\**, 34.0% were *A\*–A* and 97.5% were *A\*–E*
- for 18-year-olds taking Made-for-Wales A levels, 13.2% of grades issued were grade *A\**, 33.7% were *A\*–A* and 97.7% were *A\*–E*
- 25.5% of AS grades issued were grade *A* and 90.9% were *A–E*  
for 17-year-olds taking Made-for-Wales AS levels, 25.7% of grades issued were grade *A* and 90.8% were *A\*–E*

## GCSEs

The headlines for GCSE results were:

- in Wales this summer, there were fewer GCSE entries than last summer, but more than in summer 2019
- overall GCSE results in Wales were broadly midway between 2019 and 2022, in line with our grading policy
- 21.7% of GCSE grades issued were grade A/7 or above, and 64.9% were grade C/4 or above
- for 16-year-olds taking A\*-G GCSEs, 9.0% of grades issued were grade A\*, 22.0% were A\*-A and 65.6% were A\*-C

It is important to remember that the results published by JCQ are for exams that were sat this summer by learners of all ages. These results do not give a full picture of all the GCSEs that 16-year-olds in Wales have achieved, as they don't include any grades for GCSEs they may have achieved in previous exam series.

## Section 2

### Preparing for the series

#### Our regulatory approach

Preparing for an exam series begins well in advance of the series itself. We have regular meetings with WJEC to consider and discuss key aspects that need to be in place to ensure a successful exam series. These include: assessment production, examiner and moderator recruitment, and guidance for centres on various aspects, including access arrangements.

We also joined Ofqual in readiness review meetings with WJEC and other 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.

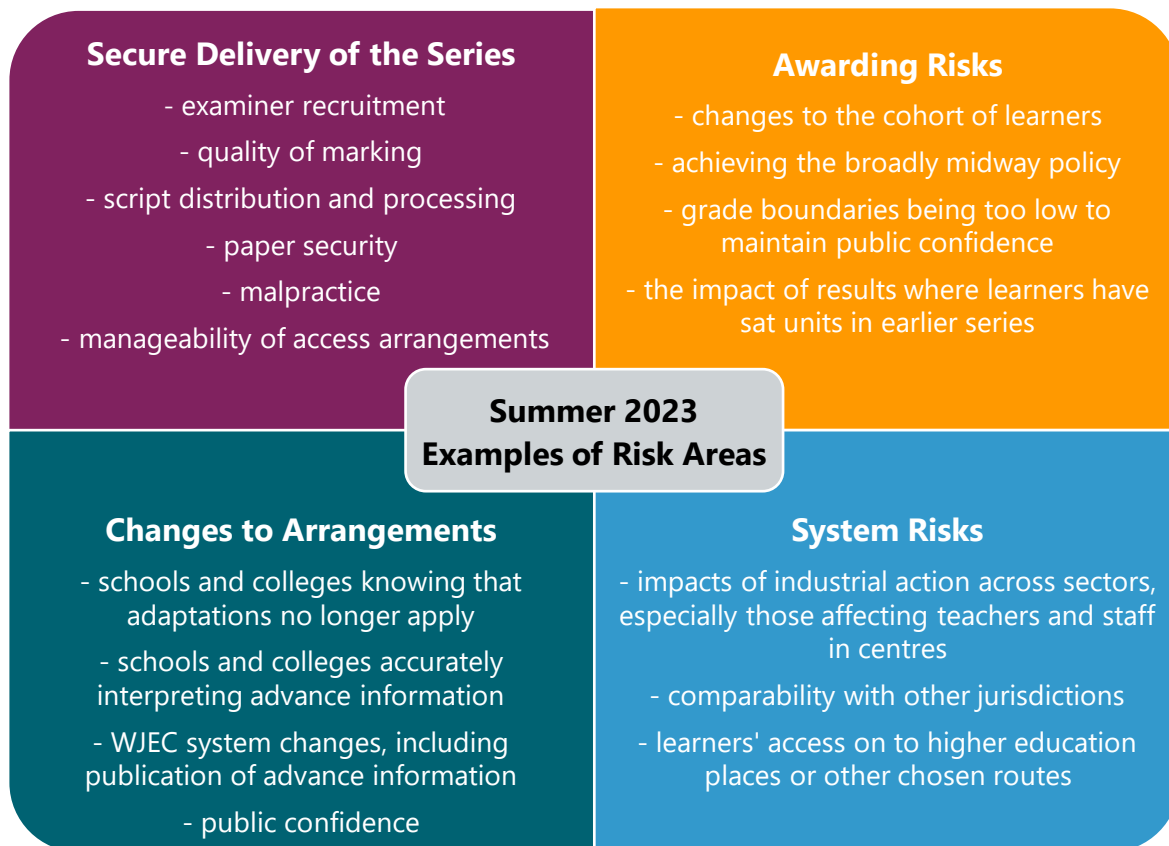
As well as these aspects, this summer we also focused on the changes put in place to support learners in Made-for-Wales qualifications:

- advance information that was provided by WJEC to help learners prepare for their exams and assessments -this replaced the adaptations to assessment requirements that were put in place for summer 2022
- advance information is not possible for the Skills Challenge Certificates, so the previous adaptations for these qualifications continued for this series<sup>3</sup>
- the principles to be applied to the adjusted awarding approaches that would be needed for WJEC to implement the policy decision for outcomes to be broadly midway between 2019 and 2022 outcomes (as outlined in [Section 1](#)).

We monitored how these principles and approaches were implemented during the awarding period, as well as any impact of the advance information during the standardisation events. We worked closely with WJEC to identify and manage risks to the secure delivery and award of the series.

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<sup>3</sup> WJEC made permanent changes to the Skills Challenge Certificate qualifications in November 2022, which mirrored many of the adaptations introduced for 2021/22



Along with our fellow regulators, Ofqual and CCEA Regulation, we engaged with all awarding bodies that offer GCSEs, AS and A levels, as well as the body that represents them, JCQ. Through this work, we identified common risks and issues, exchanged information, and received regular updates on progress for mitigating actions.



## Advance information

In 2022, a variety of adaptations had been put in place to support learners in the first exam series since the pandemic and for most subjects, the assessment requirements were changed to narrow the range of content to be assessed. For some subjects the adaptations were in the form of advance information. Qualifications Wales commissioned research<sup>4</sup> into the perceptions of teachers, lecturers and learners of the adaptations in Wales and this confirmed the view that having many different approaches was potentially confusing and felt unfair to some. Where some aspects were removed from assessments, we also knew there was a risk that learners might not study the whole qualification and this could then impact on progression for those learners.

Given the ongoing impact of the pandemic on learners, the ongoing implications of the grading policy in 2022 and feedback from stakeholders, we decided that additional support should still be provided for learners sitting exams this summer.

After consideration of the benefits and disadvantages of the adaptations put in place last year, we decided that WJEC should provide advance information for GCSE, AS and A level qualifications ahead of each exam series this academic year<sup>5</sup>.

On 13 May 2022, we sent a [letter](#) to centres confirming that advance information would be released ahead of the winter 2022/2023 series and summer 2023 series.

We worked with WJEC to agree the principles and approaches to providing advance information. The principles were:

- advance information should not be so detailed that learners are able to memorise answers to write in the exam
- advance information should not be so extensive or specific that it will damage a learner's progression to higher level qualifications in the subject
- it should still be possible to differentiate between learners on the basis of their performance

We published a [special condition](#) to set out our requirements for advance information.

Advance information is intended to communicate, ahead of exams, the focus of the content of the exams, or part of the exams.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Views on adaptations to GCSE and AS level assessment arrangements for summer 2022 in Wales' research will be published in September 2023

<sup>5</sup> For learners resitting GCSEs, AS and A levels entered in 2022 some adaptations relating to the number of units required were still available in summer 2023

WJEC's information made it clear that the whole specification should still be taught and that advance information was being provided to support learners' revision for exams, but it would not detail exactly what would be assessed in an exam.

For the summer 2023 series, WJEC published summary guidance on 30 November 2022, giving a high-level overview of the advance information, highlighting key points, and providing an indication of what format it would take for each qualification. WJEC then published subject-specific advance information on 6 February 2023.

Although we decided that advance information was a useful way to support learners this year, we knew there would still be challenges in providing it. Due to the different assessment approaches in place across different subjects, it was difficult for WJEC to make the format of the advance information the same across all GCSEs or all AS and A levels.

In some subjects, like GCSE English Language, the advance information could be relatively short since it identified which type of reading and writing would be assessed in two units, making a big difference to learners' preparations for a high-tariff question in each exam unit. In contrast in other subjects, like GCSE sciences, lists of specific topic areas that would be assessed needed to be given and these needed to be quite lengthy to provide a comparable level of support.

We have had feedback that some stakeholders still feel that there is a degree of unfairness in advance information and that some subjects get more information than others. Although there are only a few comments about advance information, this view is reflected to some extent in the Have Your Say summary in Section 3.

Publishing advance information adds another unique step to procedures for WJEC, and therefore carries some risk. We were notified of a small number of errors in relation to the advance information. Most did not have the potential to have an adverse effect on learners but one error in AS Computer Science did have that potential to have an adverse effect and mitigating actions are outlined in the case study below.

## **Our contingency plans for 2023 and beyond**

Following the extraordinary assessment arrangements that had to be put in place in 2020 and 2021, we are now more conscious that future events could again result in a need for alternative assessment arrangements.

In December 2022, we published [high level guidance](#) on the contingency arrangements that would be implemented in the event that safe delivery of the national exams was at risk. The guidance largely reflects the approach to producing 'centre determined grades' in place for 2021 and relies on centres having evidence of learners' attainment from internal assessments.

As in normal years, we also published an updated [joint contingency plan](#) with Welsh Government, the Department for Education in England and the Department for Education in Northern Ireland to provide guidance for centres should local contingencies be needed in summer 2023. For example, this is guidance to support centres to have plans in place in the event that a centre is affected by a flood, or an isolated power failure.

## Entries

In May, we produced a [statistical release](#) detailing the provisional entries for exams to be sat in the summer series. The report included tables of the provisional number of entries for GCSEs, AS and A levels submitted by awarding bodies for the exams being sat between May and June 2022. It also included provisional entries for the Skills Challenge Certificate. Changes in results can be a consequence of fluctuations in entries from year to year. However, the different awarding approaches since 2020 make it difficult to say how much of an effect changes in entries have had on results. Analysis of entry patterns allows us to identify trends and look for changes in entries compared to the pre-COVID patterns.

### AS and A level entries

#### Provisional total AS and A level entries over time

In Wales, provisional A level entry figures fell by 8.7% compared to summer 2022, but increased by 1.7% compared to summer 2019. AS entries went up by 5.3% compared to summer 2022 and 1.0% compared to summer 2019.

	Total AS entries	Total A level entries
<b>2023</b>	42,080	33,140
<b>2022</b>	39,970	36,310
<b>2021</b>	43,670	36,140
<b>2020</b>	42,445	31,095
<b>2019</b>	41,645	32,580
<b>2018</b>	44,995	33,640

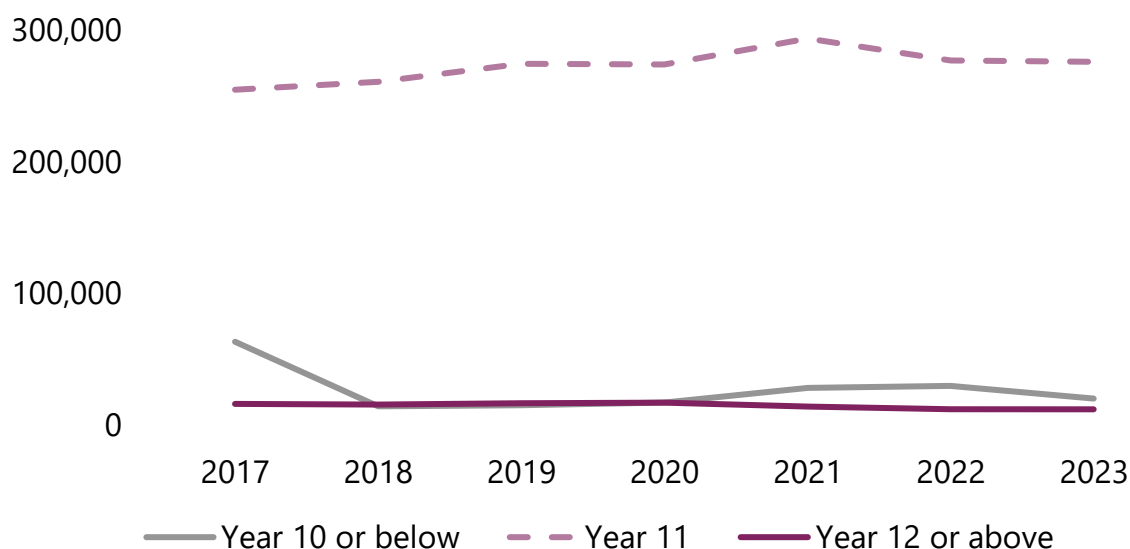
Source: Awarding bodies - Entries by Year Group collection, Qualifications Wales

Some of these changes in entries are likely to be linked to the alternative assessment arrangements implemented during the pandemic.

In both AS and A level, entries from older candidates (Year 13+ for AS and Year 14+ for A level) remain lower than in 2019. This suggests that there are fewer resitting candidates this summer than in pre-pandemic years, which is probably a consequence of higher results in 2020, 2021 and 2022.

## GCSE entries

### Provisional total GCSE entries by year group



Source: Awarding bodies – Entries by Year Group collection, Qualifications Wales

GCSE provisional summer entries in 2023 decreased by 3.3% compared to summer 2022, but were 0.7% higher than in 2019.

Total GCSE entries	
<b>2023</b>	307,920
<b>2022</b>	318,590
<b>2021</b>	335,780
<b>2020</b>	307,925
<b>2019</b>	305,745
<b>2018</b>	290,640

Source: Awarding bodies - Entries by Year Group collection, Qualifications Wales

Provisional GCSE entries from Year 11 learners decreased by a further 0.4% this summer following a decrease in summer 2022, but were still slightly above 2019 entries. There was an decrease of 32.2% in provisional entries for learners in Year 10 compared to last summer, but entries from this age group remain higher than in 2019 and 2020. Entries from learners in Year 12 or above decreased for the third year in a row. This suggests that there are fewer resitting candidates this summer than in previous years, which is probably due to higher results in 2020, 2021 and 2022.

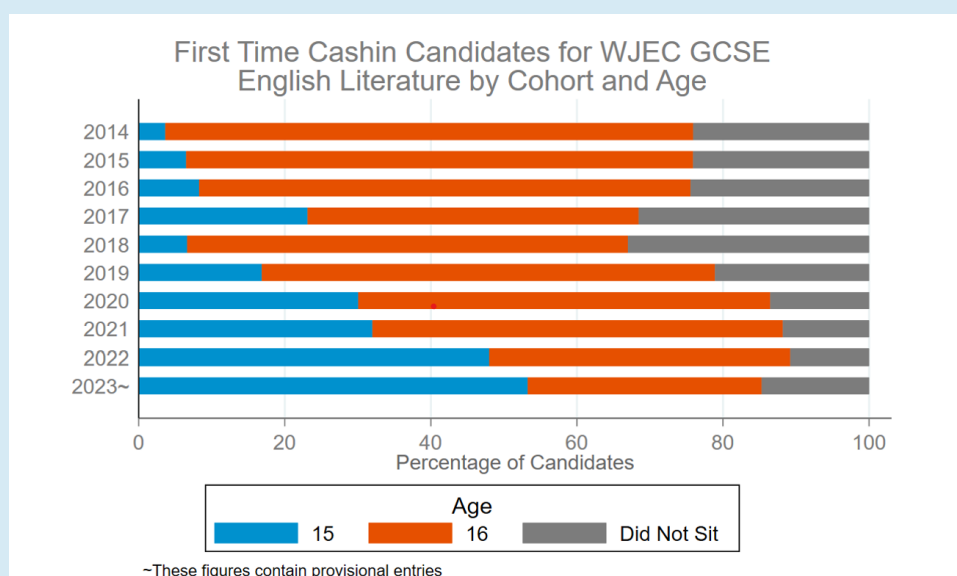
## GCSE English Literature — changing entries

WJEC submits provisional entries data to us ahead of each exam series and it is used to support discussions of WJEC's approach to awarding each qualification. Analysis of entry patterns can sometimes explain changes in performance that are seen in a subject.

Changes in the cohort of entry adds challenges to the standard-setting process. GCSE English Literature is an example of a qualification that has seen substantial changes to entries over the years.

The chart below includes WJEC provisional entry data for GCSE English Literature. It shows that:

- the proportion of each cohort taking GCSE English Literature each year since 2014 has fluctuated, and overall it has increased
- the proportion of Year 10 learners entered for the whole qualification (cashing in) has increased substantially overall
- in 2017 and 2018, there was a decrease in the proportion of learners taking the qualification
- in 2017, there was an increase in the proportion of learners who sat the qualification in Year 10 which reduced sharply in 2018



These changes are important to note, since such large changes in the proportion of a cohort taking a qualification can affect the ability profile of the cohort.

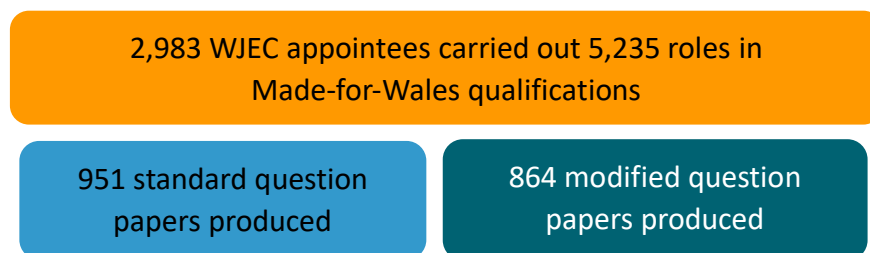
This is also true of large changes in 'early entry' that can impact on performance in the series when the qualification is taken early, plus the series after when the number of learners resitting the qualification might then increase.

This information is all taken into account by WJEC's awarding committee as part of the process to set grade boundaries.

We also consider possible explanations for big changes in entry patterns. Of note, 2017 was the first year of award for the current GCSE and 2018/19 was the year when a change to Welsh Government performance measures was implemented. These interim measures included a change so that only first entry outcomes would be included in a school's performance figures.

These interim measures were suspended during the pandemic. Welsh Government announced the reintroduction of the interim measures for 2022/23 in January 2023.

## Monitoring ahead of the series



We monitored the production of exam papers and non-examination assessments in advance of the series. Pre-pandemic, these processes would usually take place in the year before the series. However, since there were no exams for two years, in some cases papers written for either the 2020 or 2021 series were used for summer 2023. In other cases, papers were written during 2021 or 2022. Draft exam papers are agreed by WJEC in Question Paper Evaluation Committee (QPEC) meetings, which include principal examiners for the qualification, practising teachers, subject experts and WJEC officers.

We observed nine QPEC meetings considering assessments that were used for this series. This is a lower number than previous series as some of the assessment materials planned for 2020 and 2021 were utilised in 2023. We had also planned for a reduction in the level of monitoring as this suite of qualifications had been awarded a number of times. We prioritised new qualification suites, such as the digital technology qualifications. The QPEC observations included subjects where there were any issues of particular interest.

See **Exams 360** on our website for more information on qualification monitoring

We completed a detailed report and gave feedback to WJEC following each monitoring activity. This included identification of best practice and occasionally points for consideration, such as having more detailed discussions about the appropriateness of the allocation of marks to the questions, and the appropriate use of subject-specific terminology. If feedback from a QPEC observation was related to the suitability of any assessment or fairness to learners, follow up was arranged.



## Equalities

Awarding bodies are required to make reasonable adjustments as per the Equality Act 2010. We require awarding bodies to have procedures in place to make these arrangements.

JCQ sets out procedures for applying access arrangements on behalf of the awarding bodies that provide GCSEs, AS and A level qualifications. The details of the procedures are regularly reviewed and updated guidance is provided annually for centres.

In 2022, with regulators' agreement, the JCQ awarding bodies made an exceptional route to awarding available for disabled learners who were unable to sit assessments due to their disability. For 2023, we required WJEC to again make this route available. This mirrored the approach also taken by Ofqual in England. JCQ published updated guidance that included advice for centres on applying for this exceptional route.

### **Access arrangements — ongoing review**

In May 2023, it was brought to our attention that there was a JCQ rule on access arrangements that differed between level 2 and level 3 qualifications. The rule related to how much additional time learners who have just arrived in the UK with no previous knowledge of English could automatically have access to as part of their access arrangements.

The rule stated that for level 2 qualifications, learners would automatically be allowed 10% extra time to account for the time needed to make use of a bilingual dictionary, but for level 3 qualifications such learners were not eligible for extra time.

With our support, WJEC amended the rule so that learners sitting Made-for-Wales qualifications could have the same amount of extra time, whether sitting a level 2 or level 3<sup>6</sup> qualification.

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<sup>6</sup> Made-for-Wales AS and A levels and level 3 Health, Social Care, and Childcare qualifications

## Section 3

### Series delivery



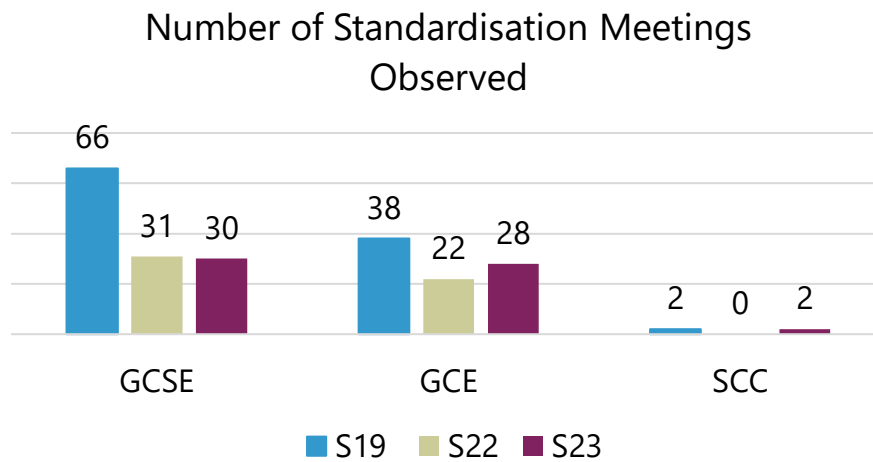
### Monitoring during the series

As well as monitoring the production of exam papers and non-examination assessments, which took place ahead of the series, we also observed WJEC's moderator and examiner standardisation meetings. At standardisation meetings, examiners carefully review and discuss the mark scheme to make sure it can be applied consistently. As in previous years, we considered how these meetings promoted a good understanding of the mark scheme, so that both examiners and moderators were marking at the same standard (that is, giving the same number of marks for the same learner response).

During standardisation meetings, provisional mark schemes are often adjusted to ensure credit is given to learners fairly. That is why mark schemes are not finalised until this standardisation process is completed. As in previous series, we noted many cases of mark schemes having a number of additions or alterations made to them, so that learners got as much credit as possible for their work.

As well as the planned monitoring, we respond to incidents where, for example, there have been exam paper errors, or where there was a lot of feedback on a paper, we can add additional monitoring to our planned programme if necessary. Such additional monitoring work was not required this summer.

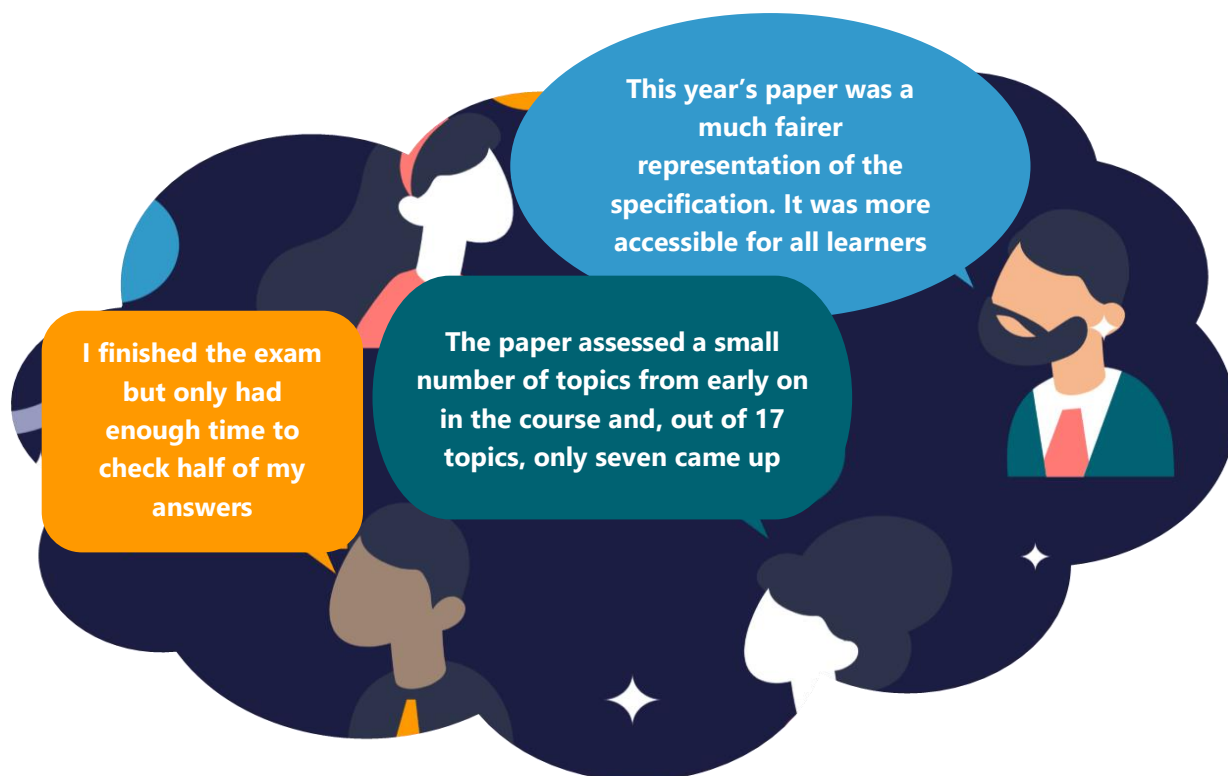
The graph below represents the number of standardisation meetings observed for this series.



We also monitored social media channels and other media sources. We did this to identify trends relating to particular exams for us to consider as part of our monitoring intelligence gathering on the exam series.

See our [Exams 360](#) area of our website for more information on exam paper marking

## Have Your Say survey

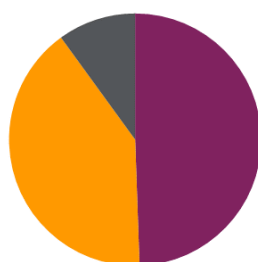


Our *Have Your Say* survey gives learners, parents, teachers and other stakeholders the opportunity to share their feedback on the summer 2023 exam series. The questionnaire opened on 15 May 2023 and was available until 7 July 2023. It was available in both Cymraeg and English.

There were a total of 192 responses during the eight weeks the survey was active, of which 180 were in English and 12 were in Cymraeg. This is a substantial drop from the 1,909 responses received during 2022 and a smaller drop from the 254 responses received in 2019.

Of these 192 responses, 89 were from learners (49.4%), 73 were from teachers (40.6%) and 18 were from others (10.0%).

## Have Your Say Respondents 2023



■ Learner ■ Teacher ■ Other

131 responses were regarding GCSE exam (68.2%), 30 were for AS level (15.6%), 24 were for A2 level (12.5%), and seven were for level 2/3 Health and Social Care, and Childcare qualifications (3.6%).

The subjects with the highest response rates at each level were as follows:

### GCSE

Subject	Number of responses	% of total responses at GCSE
<b>Health and Social Care, and Childcare</b>	34	26.0%
<b>Religious Studies</b>	10	7.6%
<b>Double Award Science</b>	8	6.1%
<b>English Language</b>	8	6.1%
<b>Mathematics - Numeracy</b>	8	6.1%
<b>English Literature</b>	7	5.3%
<b>History</b>	7	5.3%
<b>Chemistry</b>	6	4.6%
<b>Welsh Second Language</b>	6	4.6%

*No other subject received five or more responses.*

### AS Level

Subject	Number of responses	% of total responses at AS level
<b>Mathematics</b>	6	20.0%
<b>Chemistry</b>	4	13.3%
<b>Biology</b>	3	10.0%
<b>Business</b>	3	10.0%
<b>Government and Politics</b>	2	6.7%
<b>Physics</b>	2	6.7%
<b>Sociology</b>	2	6.7%

*No other subject received more than one response.*

## A Level

Subject	Number of responses	% of total responses at A level
<b>Mathematics</b>	6	25.0%
<b>Chemistry</b>	3	12.5%
<b>Welsh Second Language</b>	3	12.5%
<b>Biology</b>	2	8.3%
<b>Health and Social Care, and Childcare</b>	2	8.3%
<b>Psychology</b>	2	8.3%

No other subject received more than one response.



### How do we use the information from *Have Your Say*?

We monitor responses daily and, if any theme emerges, we check the comments against the exam paper or other relevant information to understand any issues that might exist and whether further action is needed in any way.

We provide updates to WJEC on responses and we can discuss any issues with WJEC as necessary.

There were two cases where we carried out additional checks this summer:

- **Case 1 - GCSE Health and Social Care, and Childcare**

The highest number of responses (30 of the 34 responses) were from teachers. Many of their comments referred to the Unit 1 paper. They suggested that the paper was too difficult, contained too many long answer questions, and included complicated language that was not appropriate for learners sitting this qualification.

As a first check we compared this summer's paper to the sample assessment materials (SAMs) for the qualification. We found that the structure of the paper was very similar to the SAMs in terms of number of questions and number of marks for each question. We also considered the number of responses relative to the entry numbers. There were around 4,700 entries for the qualification so, whilst it had the highest number of comments, this was still a very small sample, considering the number of learners and centres involved in teaching the qualification.

We monitored the standardisation events and award of this qualification and are satisfied that the qualification was awarded fairly to learners.

- **Case 2 - AS and A level Mathematics**

Whilst this qualification had the largest number of responses at AS and A level, the number was still very low (six in total for AS level and six in total for A level). In contrast, there were a total of 676 responses about AS and A level Mathematics in the 2022 questionnaire (35.4% of all responses) and yet entries are higher this year compared to summer 2022 (there were around 4,700 entries at AS level and 3,640 at A level this year).

The reduction in *Have Your Say* activity in relation to mathematics papers was reassuring and meant we did not need to make any further checks, as we had in 2022. A few responses provided positive feedback on this summer's papers.

### **Advance information**

The responses referencing advance information were varied with mixed views about the benefits of providing advance information. Several learners and teachers commented that it allowed revision to be more focused and therefore the learner had the best opportunity to apply their knowledge during the exams. However, a few responses suggested there were questions on the exam papers that had not been included in the advance information and a few comments suggesting the advance information had been provided too late. We checked and all releases were in line with the planned timing of release by WJEC. One response from a teacher said that providing advance information devalued the qualifications and made the learners unwilling to learn anything that was not included, thus leaving large gaps in their subject knowledge when starting AS courses. There was one error in relation to advance information that had the potential to impact learners and WJEC will be putting mitigating actions in to address this issue at award. We only had one response that referred to this issue.

## Production of the exam timetable

The November series dates were not helpful being straight after a half term

Onscreen exams that fell in the afternoon were not ideal as it meant the rooms were out of bounds for the entire day

Could AS be morning papers and A2 be afternoons?

A few responses in our *Have Your Say* survey referred to the timetabling of exams.

The exam timetable has to be produced by awarding bodies well in advance of each exam series. Each year a common timetable is produced by JCQ and the awarding bodies use this to produce and publish their own specific timetables. The timetable is common across Wales and England, and almost the same in Northern Ireland. It has been part of a common approach so that learners taking qualifications with more than one awarding body are not adversely affected by exam clashes.

A group of JCQ representatives work together to draft the exam timetable, taking into account a number of principles, including stakeholder feedback. Each year, provisional timetables are released, usually in February for the year after, and centres can share feedback with awarding bodies or JCQ. This is then taken into account before the final timetable is published by each awarding body in April or May of the year before.

We are updated on the processes in place to produce a fair exam timetable, so that we are assured that it will not disadvantage any particular learners unnecessarily.

## Response levels to *Have Your Say*

This year, the number of responses received was very low compared to last year when there were 1909 responses, 65% from learners and 25% from teachers. However, it is not that much lower than the 2019 response rate - when there were 254 responses the vast majority of which were from teachers.

Whilst the reason for this year's drop is not known, there are a number of possible explanations.



One potential explanation is that there were no question paper errors or security breaches that carried the potential of there being a substantial impact on learners in Wales this summer, and therefore there was not the desire or need to provide feedback.

Additionally, stakeholders have been asked to complete numerous surveys and questionnaires this year, which could mean that there has been an 'overload' at a busy time in the academic year. Positive feedback was also received, from learners and teachers.

Looking ahead we will:

- review the responses again to ensure all feedback is taken into account, and follow up as necessary
- review our processes for raising awareness of the questionnaire amongst learners to seek improvements in engagement next summer
- consider if the social media channels used to promote the survey - Facebook, Twitter and Instagram - are still the most appropriate way to engage with relevant target audiences

## **Access arrangements and special consideration requests**

Awarding bodies make reasonable adjustments for learners with disabilities and learners who are disadvantaged at the time of the exam (for example, through injury or illness).<sup>7</sup> These adjustments are known as 'access arrangements'. Access arrangements are agreed before the exam and can include, for example, the provision of a modified paper (such as larger font sizes) and extra time for the exam.

If a learner has been absent from an exam due to illness, injury or bereavement, or their performance in an exam has been impacted by illness, injury or bereavement around the time of the exam, special consideration can be requested by the school or college for the learner. The awarding body, where applicable, will estimate a mark for the learner, or adjust the mark given to the learner.

We produce Wales-only statistical releases after the summer exam series. The first of these (in November) will report on access arrangements and special consideration requests for GCSEs and A levels during the 2022/23 academic year.

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<sup>7</sup> The Equality Act 2010 defines disability

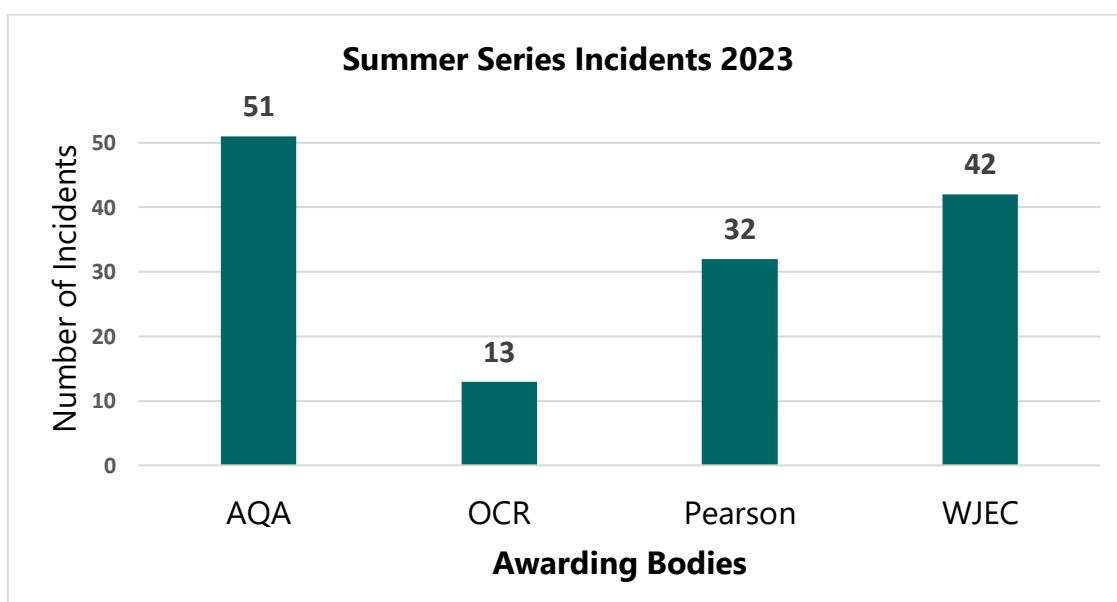
## Incidents relating to the summer series in 2023

Awarding bodies must notify us of any incident that is likely to lead to an adverse effect for learners or threatens the integrity of a regulated qualification — for example, errors in assessment materials or a breach in the security of an exam paper. Some incidents that originate outside of Wales also have the potential to impact upon Welsh learners who are entered for the same qualification, and these are notified to us so that we can consider if suitable actions have been taken.

When we receive a notification, we check that the awarding body is taking appropriate steps to reduce the impact on learners in Wales and to prevent a recurrence.

By the end of July 2023, awarding bodies had notified us of 138 incidents relating to the summer series. This figure is not final because incidents may come to light at any point before or after an assessment is delivered. By a comparable point in 2022, we had been notified of 90 incidents relating to the 2022 summer series. Due to exams being cancelled in 2020 and 2021, there is no incident information available for these years.

The graph below gives a breakdown of incidents<sup>8</sup> relating to this summer series, by awarding body:

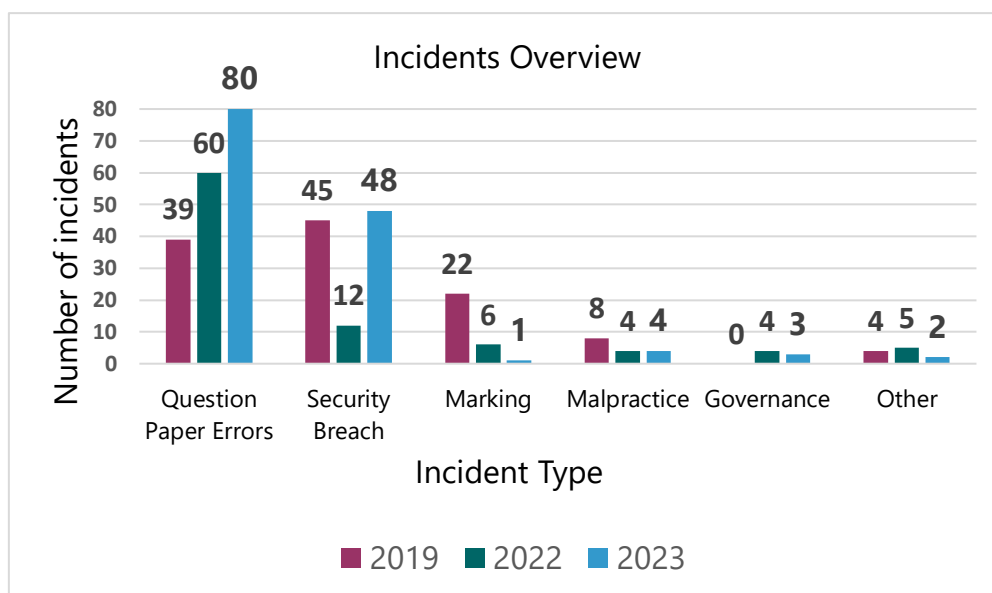


<sup>8</sup> All data in this incidents section is indicative and inclusive to 31 July 2023

We categorise incidents as follows:

- **question paper errors** — issues in any material used for assessment purposes, including the mark scheme
- **security breach** — any disclosure of confidential information or assessment materials
- **malpractice** — an intentional or reckless breach of the regulations, in Wales, that could undermine the integrity of an assessment
- **marking** — issues with the process of marking assessments and releasing results
- **governance** — issues regarding the awarding body's resources or governance
- **other** — incidents that do not fit into any of the above categories

The graph below gives a breakdown of the type of incidents reported by awarding bodies, relating to the summer series:



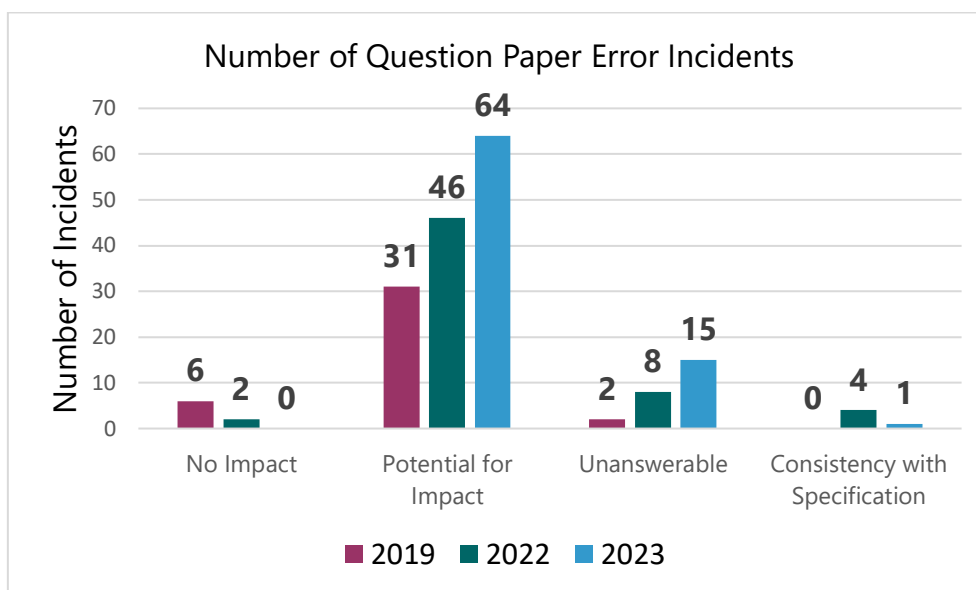
## Question paper errors

Assessments are subject to internal quality assurance processes during their production, which on average take 18 months. However, errors in question papers, Welsh translation and the modification process can occasionally occur.

When errors on question papers or supporting resources are detected before an assessment is sat, the awarding body sends an erratum notice to schools and colleges to minimise the impact on learners, and reports the incident to us.

In very few cases, errors are discovered during or after the assessment has been sat.

Awarding bodies report the incident to us, explaining what impact the error has had on learners and, where necessary, what actions they will take to ensure learners are not disadvantaged. For example, awarding bodies may amend a mark scheme to compensate for an error, or credit all learners with marks for the affected questions in the most serious cases. These measures minimise any disadvantage to individual learners.



Across all awarding bodies, 80 question paper errors were reported to us that related to the summer series, an increase of 33% overall. There were 64 incidents with a potential impact on learners, and 15 incidents in which a question was deemed to be unanswerable.

Examples of some of the incidents reported by WJEC from the summer 2023 series are given below. The risk of there being an adverse effect varied in each example but as for all cases, we monitored the awarding body's actions to ensure no Welsh learners were disadvantaged.

### Incident examples:

- a GCSE Physics exam for Welsh-medium centres incorrectly translated the word 'current' as 'volume' - the question could not be answered as a consequence
- a GCSE English Language exam referred to a text as an 'article' instead of a 'blog' - there was a very small risk that learners may have been confused and attempted to answer the question by referring to a different text

- an error was identified in the advance information for AS Computer Science, with an area of content listed under Specification Area 4 was described as 'Representation of *data* as bit patterns' instead of 'Representation of *numbers* as bit patterns' - one question on the exam paper was based on the intended area of content (see below)

## AS Computer Science

WJEC notified us that there was an error in the release of advance information for Unit 1 of AS Computer Science on 17 May 2023. One centre had contacted WJEC on the day of the exam and one the day after.

The advance information for the subject said "Representation of *data* as bit patterns" as a topic that would be assessed via a higher tariff question on the paper. However, the advance information should have said 'Representation of *numbers* as bit patterns'.

The advance information and previous communications had emphasised that the whole course should be studied and any aspect of the specification could be assessed, since the advance information was only intended to support learners revising for the questions with eight marks or more — the higher tariff questions. Question 14 was worth 12 marks. WJEC acknowledged that learners may not have been sufficiently prepared for the question because of the incorrect description of relevant areas of content in the advance information.

WJEC monitored marking of the related question carefully and examiners reported that there did not appear to be any significant variation in the quality of learner responses. Further statistical analysis of performance was carried out once most of the marking was completed and it was not found to have had a substantial impact on performance. However, the error meant that some learners may not have prepared as well as they might have for this specific area of the specification, so WJEC decided that mitigations needed to be put in place.

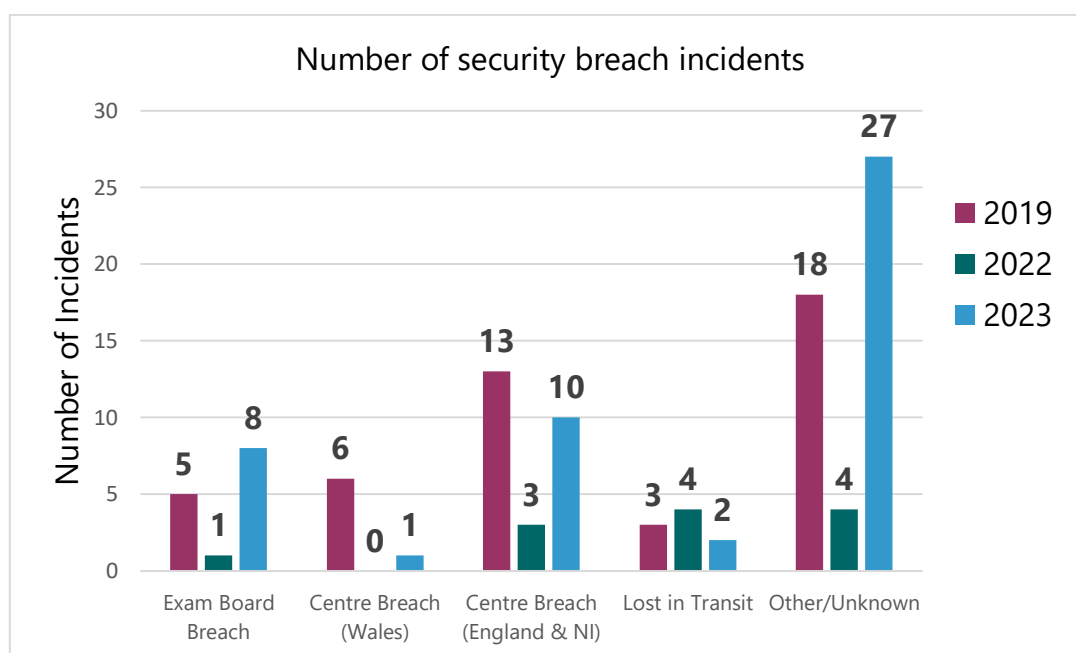
WJEC took steps to mitigate this issue. We monitored this award and are satisfied that learners were not disadvantaged by this error in the advance information. WJEC has written to all centres affected to update them on the mitigations taken.

## Security breaches

Exam papers are kept securely by awarding bodies and by schools and colleges until the day of the exam. Occasionally a security breach occurs and is reported to us, along with actions the awarding bodies will undertake to mitigate the impact. These actions may include:

- monitoring social media to evaluate the scale of the breach
- conducting statistical analyses of completed exam scripts from the centres affected, to detect any atypical performances
- recalling and replacing the exam paper to be sat

We closely monitor the actions awarding bodies take to investigate breaches, conduct statistical analysis to identify learners who may have been unfairly advantaged, and sanction the individuals or centres involved.



The graph above shows the incidents for all awarding bodies. The majority of security breaches this year originated online, which usually involved the sharing of assessment material on a digital platform. There was a substantial increase in these types of breaches from last year. Only one breach originated from a centre in Wales.

We have monitored the awarding bodies' actions to investigate the sources of these breaches, and to take action where appropriate. Although the volume of security breach cases we were notified of has increased this year, there is no evidence that these matters have impacted upon Welsh learners.

## Cyber security

Maintaining the integrity of the exam system relies heavily on exam papers not being seen until learners sit the exams. The awarding bodies have strict rules that centres must follow to support this key principle.

Online security breaches pose a major challenge to the security of exam assessments and this summer saw a growth in some of these issues.

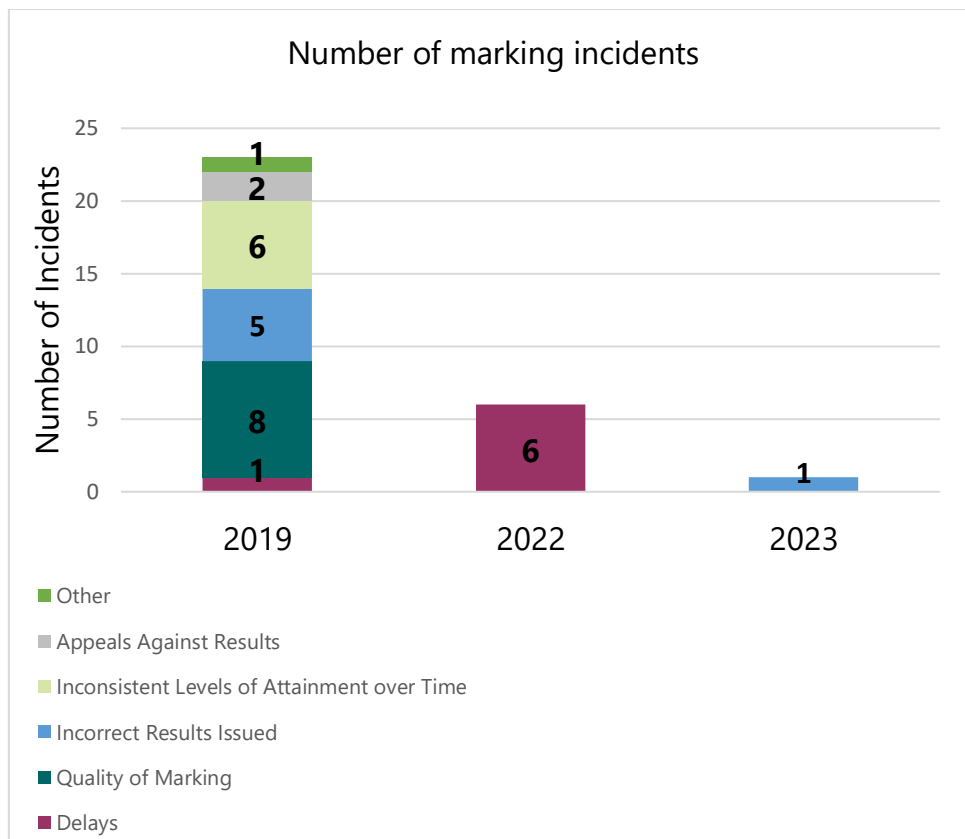
In June, the BBC reported on fake exam papers being sold on social media for huge amounts of money, by sellers claiming they were leaked papers. Awarding bodies take action as quickly as possible to investigate and seek removal of such posts. Legitimate leaks are rare but learners are at risk if they respond to such claims.

Awarding bodies, schools and colleges can also be at direct risk from cyber security breaches as noted [in this article](#). Although these breaches did not have the potential to affect many learners in Wales this summer they are indicative of an area of risk that is actively monitored and managed by awarding bodies. JCQ emphasises that where malpractice is proven, sanctions may be severe.

## Marking

We are notified by awarding bodies if there are any issues in relation to the progress of marking, the quality of marking, or the accuracy of results issued during the series. This year, we have only received one incident regarding these types of issues. This is a decrease in the number of incidents notified to us in previous years.

In December 2023, we will publish a statistical release that presents data on marking issues in Wales for GCSE, AS and A level qualifications in summer 2023.



## Malpractice

We require awarding bodies to take all reasonable steps to prevent malpractice by learners and centres, and to investigate allegations thoroughly. If evidence of malpractice is found, awarding bodies are required to impose appropriate sanctions.

In December 2023, we will publish a statistical release that presents data on the number of malpractice penalties and offences in Wales for GCSE, AS and A level qualifications in summer 2023. The release will contain details about the types of malpractice reported by awarding bodies and any penalties they have imposed.

Where an alleged malpractice case could affect standards or public confidence, an awarding body must report this to us promptly, as an incident. We closely monitor the actions taken by awarding bodies in respect of these cases. We expect awarding bodies to take steps to ensure that alleged malpractice does not advantage or disadvantage learners in Wales, such as requiring learners to complete a replacement assessment, applying special consideration, and issuing qualification results based on projected marks.



## Section 4

### Post results

#### Appeals

We require WJEC and other awarding bodies to have appeals processes in accordance with our [Additional Standard Conditions of Recognition for GCE and GCSE Qualifications](#). For the Skills Challenge Certificate, awarding bodies are required to have appeals processes in accordance with our [Additional Standard Conditions of Recognition for the Welsh Baccalaureate Skills Challenge Certificate](#).

After results day, schools and colleges can ask the awarding body to check if any errors have been made in how a learner's paper was marked. This is called a review of marking. Following the review of marking, schools and colleges can submit an appeal to the awarding body. Results will only be changed if an error is found and the grade could go up, down or stay the same. There is more information about appeals on our [website](#).

Welsh Government again provided financial support so that economically disadvantaged learners could be financially supported with applications for any of the services available.

We will be publishing an official statistical release on appeals in Wales in 2024.

#### Further results analysis

We will publish further analysis of the summer 2023 Made-for-Wales GCSE, AS and A levels results in the autumn. These reports will include analysis of:

- variation in centre type (to be published September 2023)
- changes in attainment gaps at different grade thresholds (to be published October 2023)

#### Post-results services data

We collect data from awarding bodies on many aspects of the post-results services that are provided. This data is released as official statistics once all the data has been received. This will include:

- **Reviews of marking and moderation**

We will publish a statistical release on reviews of marking and moderation for GCSE and AS and A level qualifications in Wales in December 2023. This will include detail about administrative errors leading to the incorrect issue of results.

## Section 5

### 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 exams and assessments-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.

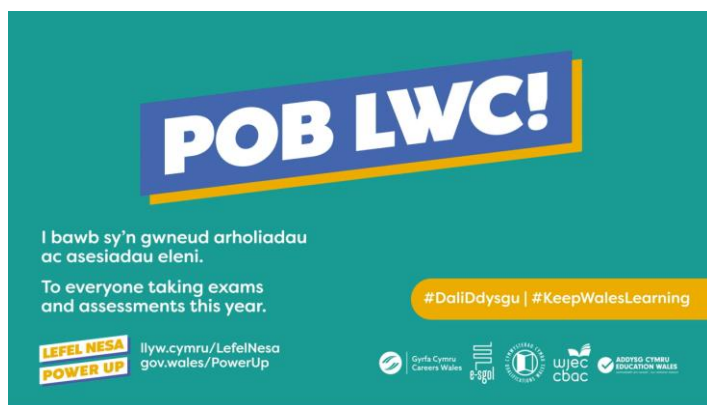
Throughout the academic year, we have delivered ongoing communications with a focus on our role at the heart of the qualifications system.

#### **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 learners and staff 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 who were eagerly anticipating their results. We shared information in many ways, across a variety of channels, this 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.

## Conclusion

The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic continues to have an impact on learners and we appreciate that things have not yet 'returned to normal' in education. However, the completion of a second summer exam series since the pandemic marks a significant step on the transition back towards pre-pandemic arrangements in qualifications.

We continued to listen to various stakeholders in 2022 and understood there was still a need to support learners in this transition by providing advance information ahead of the exams and by applying the broadly midway grading approach. As in any year, some learners will be disappointed with their results, and schools and colleges are there to support and guide learners in a variety of progression routes. After results are published, [help and support](#), including [information about appeals](#), can be found on our website.

Our monitoring of the preparation for, and delivery of, the summer 2023 series reflects the efforts across the education sector to support learners' progression to the next stage in their lives. Generally, there were very few issues that had the potential to have a significant adverse effect for learners in Wales.

When issues did arise, we oversaw the awarding body's actions to ensure that they took appropriate action to protect learners, maintain public confidence, and issue timely and accurate results. We closely monitored the awarding process in the Made-for-Wales GCSE, AS and A level and Skills Challenge Certificate qualifications, and are content that national results have been awarded broadly midway between 2019 and 2022 outcomes and that a balance has been maintained between setting appropriate standards and maintaining public confidence in this transition year.

In September 2022, we said we would aim to return to pre-pandemic outcomes in 2024. Once the series has been reviewed, we will announce our plans for 2024 early in the autumn term. Our current view is that we are not aware of sufficient reason to require WJEC to provide advance information for exams in 2023/2024 or for there to be a new grading policy that is different to the pre-pandemic position.

## What next?

In the short term, we will be focused on ensuring the successful delivery of the 2024 exam series and the awarding of current GCSEs, AS and A levels in the next few years.

We will:

- confirm our approach to national standards in 2024
- evaluate the impact of the summer 2023 advance information on performance in summer 2023
- retain our focus on WJEC's work and continue to monitor preparations for the future awarding of the Wales GCSEs, AS and A levels and Skills Challenge Certificates
- review WJEC's readiness for the challenges and risks identified
- adapt our programme of monitoring on the basis of findings of any evaluation and research work, and continue to refine our regulatory processes as necessary
- evaluate our processes for gathering stakeholder feedback, so that we are able to effectively gather information on the exams from learners and teachers in 2024 and beyond

As well as our focus on the delivery and awarding of the current GCSE, AS, A level and Skills Challenge Certificates in the next few years, we are also planning programmes of work to establish the approaches that will be taken to delivering, setting and maintaining standards in the new suite of GCSEs that will be ready for teaching in 2025.