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Consultation Document

Review of Qualifications for 14 to 19-year-olds in Wales

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Action required: Responses by **1 September 2012**



Review of Qualifications for 14 to 19-year-olds in Wales

Overview

This consultation seeks views on qualifications taken by 14 to 19-year-olds in Wales. It forms part of the Review of Qualifications 14–19, which is looking at how we can achieve qualifications that are understood and valued and meet the needs of our young people and the Welsh economy.

This paper identifies and invites views on the main issues that have emerged so far. It seeks views on some proposals and options for the future.

Qualifications are technical by nature, and detail is important. We have therefore divided the paper into two parts. Part A is for all respondents and sets out the big picture and key questions. Part B is more detailed and technical, and includes questions on a number of specific areas that will be of interest to specialists and practitioners. All respondents are encouraged to answer Part A and any questions in Part B that they wish, but there is no expectation that all respondents will have a view on every question.

How to respond

Response forms should be e-mailed/posted to the address below, to arrive by **1 September 2012** at the latest.

There will be an evidence day on 11 July 2012 in Newtown. If you wish to present your views to members of the Review Board in person, you can apply to attend this event. Please send an e-mail by 15 June to reviewofquals@wales.gsi.gov.uk with the words 'Evidence day' and your name in the title line. Applications will be dealt with on a first-come-first-served basis. We will let you know the result of your application by 29 June 2012.

Further information and related documents

Large print, Braille and alternate language versions of this document are available on request.

The consultation documents can be accessed from the Welsh Government's website at www.wales.gov.uk/consultations

The Review of Qualifications web pages can be accessed at www.wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/qualificationsinwales/revofqualen/?lang=en

Here you will find background information about the Review, this consultation paper, its annexes, the consultation response form, and details of the evidence day.

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Data protection**How the views and information you give us will be used**

Any response you send us will be seen in full by Welsh Government staff dealing with the issues which this consultation is about. It may also be seen by other Welsh Government staff to help them plan future consultations.

The Welsh Government intends to publish a summary of the responses to this document. We may also publish responses in full. Normally, the name and address (or part of the address) of the person or organisation who sent the response are published with the response. This helps to show that the consultation was carried out properly. If you do not want your name or address published, please tell us this in writing when you send your response. We will then blank them out.

Names or addresses we blank out might still get published later, though we do not think this would happen very often. The Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 allow the public to ask to see information held by many public bodies, including the Welsh Government. This includes information which has not been published. However, the law also allows us to withhold information in some circumstances. If anyone asks to see information we have withheld, we will have to decide whether to release it or not. If someone has asked for their name and address not to be published, that is an important fact we would take into account. However, there might sometimes be important reasons why we would have to reveal someone's name and address, even though they have asked for them not to be published. We would get in touch with the person and ask their views before we finally decided to reveal the information.

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Foreword

The Deputy Minister for Skills, Jeff Cuthbert AM, launched the Review of Qualifications for 14 to 19-year-olds in September 2011. He asked me and the other Review Board members to consider how we can achieve the vision of “qualifications that are understood and valued and meet the needs of our young people and the Welsh economy”.

Between November 2011 and May 2012 the Board has gathered evidence and held extensive discussions with a wide range of stakeholders to explore their opinions and ideas about qualifications for 14 to 19-year-olds. This consultation paper sets out our current thinking at this halfway stage in the Review, and invites views on key issues and proposals.

The Board is acutely aware of the economic context in which the Review is taking place. High unemployment and the world economic downturn place considerable new pressures on young people. The current arrangements for qualifications evolved in a different economic climate, in which many young people left school and entered employment at 16. In recent years the youth labour market has declined dramatically. More young people are now staying on in education after 16, and more are progressing to higher education at 18.

These changes need to be recognised and the qualification system needs to respond to the evolving challenges, delivering positive outcomes in terms of the learning and qualifications achieved. There is evidence that the age profile of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) is rising, with fewer at 16–17 but more at 18–25. It is essential that young people in education are not simply marking time. Rather, they must be gaining the skills, knowledge, understanding and qualifications that will best equip them to enter the increasingly competitive worlds of employment or higher education. We want our young people to be able to achieve qualifications that are internationally recognised and respected.

It is timely therefore to take stock of whether our current qualifications at 14–19 are fit for purpose, and whether they meet the needs of learners, employers, universities and society as a whole.

The proposals and questions in this paper aim to ensure that the next stage of the Review is based on firm evidence, reflecting the views of everyone with an interest in qualifications for young people.

Please take this opportunity to let us know what you think, whether you are a learner, a parent/carer, an employer or someone who works in education or training. We have divided the paper into two parts. Part A is aimed at all respondents; Part B is more detailed and technical and may be of more interest to specialists in particular fields. Please feel free to answer some or all of the questions.

Following this consultation exercise and further evidence gathering, the Board will submit its final report and recommendations to the Deputy Minister towards the end of 2012.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Huw Evans', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Huw Evans OBE
Chair of the Review of Qualifications for 14 to 19-year-olds

Section guide

The following list shows the sections of the consultation paper that specific groups might be particularly interested in.

Learners/parents/ carers	Part A and B3, B4.1, B4.2, B5.1, B5.2, B5.3, B5.4, B5.5, B5.7, B5.9, B5.10, B5.11, B5.13, B6.4
Learning providers	All questions
Employers	Part A and B3, B3.1, B3.2, B4.1, B4.2, B5.1, B5.4, B5.7, B6.4.
Higher education practitioners	Part A and B3, B3.1, B3.2, B4.1, B5.4, B5.5, B6.4
Awarding organisations	All questions

Part A: For all respondents

A1. Background to the Review

The Review of Qualifications 14–19 ('the Review') is led by a Review Board ('the Board') appointed by the Deputy Minister for Skills, Jeff Cuthbert AM. Board members are listed [here](#). The views in this consultation paper are those of the Board, not necessarily of the Welsh Government.

The Review has been prompted by concerns about the complexity of the current system, the extent to which it is understood, and the relevance, value and rigour of some qualifications. Its remit is to consider how to achieve the vision of qualifications that are understood and valued and meet the needs of our young people and the Welsh economy. Its scope is all qualifications for delivery to 14 to 19-year-olds in schools, colleges and work-based settings. Apprenticeship frameworks are outside its scope.

Consideration of qualifications inevitably touches on other aspects of education policy and delivery, such as the curriculum, teaching strategies, individual learning plans, school and college management, funding and performance, and careers guidance. The Review cannot encompass all of these areas, and the Board has maintained its focus on qualifications themselves. We are working closely with the Welsh Government's Post-16 Planning and Funding Review to ensure the two reviews are aligned.

The Review is based on consideration of evidence and stakeholder views. Between November 2011 and May 2012 the focus has been on gathering and analysing a large amount of evidence and feedback from a wide range of sources (see Annex on page 47 for details).

A2. Vision and principles

A2.1 A long-term vision for qualifications 14–19 in Wales

This consultation paper seeks your response to the Board's vision for the qualifications system for 14 to 19-year-olds in Wales, that it should:

- be clear and simple, and based on coherent programmes of learning
- provide learners with qualifications that are relevant, valued and internationally recognised

- help drive improvements in literacy and numeracy
- ensure that assessment is robust, valid and proportionate
- support the engagement and motivation of all learners
- provide access to qualifications through the medium of Welsh and English
- be evidence-based and quality-assured
- over time, allow more scope for learners taking qualifications when they are ready rather than at a certain age
- meet the needs of Wales.

These principles are discussed in sections A2.2–A2.10 (pages 7–13).

Consultation question

**Do you agree with the vision and principles set out at A2.1?
What, if anything, would you add or change?**

Achieving the vision will take time and will need to happen in stages. Hasty change in the field of qualifications can be dangerous, and damaging to learners. In the next phase of its work the Board will develop a timeline for change as part of its recommendations to the Welsh Government.

A2.2 A clear and simple system based on coherent programmes of learning

The qualifications landscape is complex and confusing. It can be difficult for learners, parents/carers, employers and others to know what specific qualifications mean or how relevant and valuable they are for a particular career or individual.

Some level of complexity is inevitable, but the Board considers that the current system in Wales is too complex, with too many qualifications. We intend recommending a simpler system that can be understood by all, with fewer qualifications and more coherent personalised programmes of learning.

Young people entering employment in the coming years are likely to change jobs, roles, settings and careers several times. They will need to be adaptable. Rather than training for a specific job at school or college they will be better served by gaining strong core and

transferable skills, a broad knowledge and understanding and an ability to learn and develop. The qualifications system should therefore promote this broad approach to education, including skills related to citizenship and employability. The degree of specialisation could be greater post-16 and should be sufficient to enthuse learners and equip them for progression to the next stage, but the learning should be based in a broad programme of learning.

The proposals in this paper aim to promote coherent programmes of learning that lead to progression to the next stage, rather than rewarding the 'piling up' of many similar qualifications at the same level, or the repetition of learning for different qualifications.

Consultation question

How could the qualifications system be made simpler and more coherent?

A2.3 Relevant, valued and internationally recognised qualifications

For the purpose of the Review:

- the **relevance** of qualifications is seen from the perspective of employers and next stage educational establishments. **Relevant** qualifications are those that lead to and equip learners for the swiftest educational progression or related employment
- the **value** of qualifications is seen from the perspective of the learner. **Valuable** qualifications are those that engage the learner and encourage participation in further or higher education, training and employment.

In section A3.7 and Part B, the Board seeks views on proposals for ensuring that qualifications with relevance and value are available to and taken by learners in Wales.

It is essential to maintain the currency and competitiveness of qualifications achieved by learners in Wales, in the higher education and employment markets. Qualifications are passports to further learning or employment. They must be recognised and respected across the UK and internationally. This means using or developing strong brands and reputations.

In the short to medium term there is a case for building on existing brands, such as GCSEs and A levels, that are recognised and valued across the UK and internationally. This would mean that learners in Wales would continue to receive GCSEs, A levels or well-known vocational qualifications on a par with learners in England and Northern Ireland (although in some cases with different structure or content). In the longer term there is a case for considering new types of qualification.

Consultation question

Should we retain existing brands such as GCSE, A level and vocational qualifications (such as BTECs, OCR Nationals or City and Guilds) in Wales, in the short to medium term?

A2.4 Improvements in literacy and numeracy

It is clear that literacy and numeracy must be absolutely central to the qualification system in Wales. Qualifications at 14–19, operating alongside and reflecting an appropriate curriculum, have a role in encouraging the development of literacy and numeracy skills. Qualifications must also provide clear, accurate and useful information about a learner’s literacy or numeracy. The Board has heard strong representations that this is not currently the case.

There are proposals in Part B of this paper for changing the qualifications through which we assess literacy and numeracy at 14–19, and for requiring learners who have not achieved Level 2 (for instance A*–C in relevant GCSEs) in literacy and numeracy by 16, to continue working towards these, with appropriate support.

Consultation question

To what extent does the current suite of qualifications at 14–19:

- (a) sufficiently encourage the development of literacy and numeracy?
- (b) provide clear information about an individual’s literacy and numeracy?

A2.5 Assessment that is robust, valid and proportionate

Stakeholders have expressed a view that qualifications must be sufficiently rigorous in order to properly assess the skills, knowledge and understanding of young people. Lack of rigour, or the perception of it, can be damaging to qualifications. Our future approach to the quality assurance of qualifications must ensure that assessment is, and is seen to be, both robust and valid.

The assessment of qualifications is a technical matter and is dealt with in detail in Part B. A common theme is whether there should be a stronger emphasis on externality in all qualifications or all parts of all qualifications. The Board does not believe that exams and external tests are the only ways of ensuring rigour and sufficient externality of assessment. Strong quality assurance of internal marking and/or strict controls placed by awarding organisations on internal task-setting and task-taking conditions can also increase rigour.

Over time, the Board would like to see more space in the curriculum for learning and the enjoyment of learning, by reducing the burden of assessment experienced at 14–19. External qualifications and school assessment are useful tools for demonstrating and measuring educational achievement, and can be a strong motivator for learning. However, education must not be reduced to a process of ‘teaching to the test’, and the educational experience should not be dictated by the specifications for assessment and qualifications.

Consultation question

Should there be a stronger external element in the assessment and/or quality assurance of all qualifications (through one or more of the methods suggested above)?

Should the volume of assessment at 14–19 be reduced?

A2.6 Engagement and motivation of all learners

Qualifications in Wales should meet the different needs of all our learners, equipping them to progress to employment or further learning (including higher education) and enabling them to compete internationally, while also ensuring inclusion and encouragement of lower achievers. This means performing a difficult balancing act between rigour and standards of education, and the ability to

interest, engage and motivate all learners to achieve their potential. The qualifications that are awarded should accurately reflect attainment and differentiate between levels of skill, knowledge and understanding.

Consultation question

How can the qualifications system help engage and motivate all learners?

A2.7 Access to qualifications through the medium of Welsh and English

Wales is a bilingual nation, and Welsh-medium considerations are integral to the qualifications infrastructure and to this Review. The Board will consider the implications for Welsh-medium provision of any changes it proposes. A reduction in the number of qualifications available at 14–19 will make it easier to ensure that the qualifications of greatest relevance and value are available in both Welsh and English. The demand for Welsh-medium provision is growing but is not yet great enough for provision to be left to market forces. The Board considers that the Welsh Government will need to continue supporting awarding organisations to develop Welsh-medium qualifications.

Consultation question

What are the key issues relating to Welsh-medium provision of qualifications at 14–19?

A2.8 Evidence-based and quality-assured

To ensure the quality and sustainability of the qualifications system, the Board is exploring the idea of an ongoing mechanism for review to ensure that individual qualifications and programmes of learning are fit for purpose. This will be developed in the next phase of the Review. Part B of this paper seeks views on the involvement of employers and others in development of qualifications, and on issues relating to relevance, value and regulation.

The work of the Review has revealed that evidence available about the destinations, outcomes and progression of learners in relation to qualifications is often inadequate. The evidence that is available is not sufficiently accessible or used.

There are several pieces of work in hand to address this, including proposals to introduce Unique Learner Numbers to track individuals through the system, and work to improve the interpretation, accessibility and usage of Labour Market Intelligence. The Review will recommend that this work be supported and progressed as quickly as possible.

Analysis of destination information should inform decisions by providers on which options to offer to subsequent cohorts. It should help individuals when making qualification and career choices (see A3.7). At a Wales level, better information about the value and relevance of qualifications to future learning or career paths will improve policy. In the longer term, destination data might form part of school performance measurement, but the Board is not satisfied that suitable data is yet available to make this approach possible or fair.

Consultation question

How might we best ensure that qualifications are fit for purpose?

How could evidence about the destinations, outcomes and progression of learners in relation to qualifications be improved?

A2.9 Stages rather than ages

Over time, the Board would like to see a gradual move towards learners taking qualifications and progressing to the next stage when they are ready rather than at specific ages, as at present.

The consultation is seeking views on options to ensure that learners work towards literacy and numeracy qualifications as appropriate throughout the 14–19 phase (see section A2.4). It is also seeking views on new qualifications as stepping stones towards English Language, Welsh First Language and Mathematics GCSEs, which could be a move towards some learners being given more time to reach the required level (see section B5.3). This could be supported by, for instance, extending Key Stage 4 back to Year 9 so that progress towards qualifications could begin earlier. This approach is already taken in some schools, and the Board would welcome an evaluation of its benefits and drawbacks.

In time, the economic and cultural shift towards young people staying in education until the age of 18 rather than 16 may well reduce the significance of external qualifications at 16 (such as GCSEs). Several European countries already place their emphasis on qualifications at 18 and some do not have external qualifications at 16. The Board thinks this could have potential benefits but that the pace should not be forced, and that we should for the present retain external qualifications (such as GCSEs) at 16.

Consultation question

To what extent should young people be able to take qualifications when they are ready rather than at an expected age?

Should we retain external qualifications (such as GCSEs) at 16 in Wales at least in the short to medium term?

A2.10 Meeting the needs of Wales

The qualifications system should meet the needs of our learners and our economy. In common with other countries we are facing difficult economic times and we need to ensure that our young people are as well equipped as possible to respond to the demands of the jobs market. To achieve this, the Board thinks that we need a qualifications system for 14 to 19-year-olds that is specifically designed to meet the educational, social and economic needs of Wales. The needs will include specific skills or economic sectors, and will be informed by Labour Market Intelligence and other evidence.

A question recurring in many contexts during the Review has been the extent to which qualifications in Wales should be aligned with those in England, and whether, given good reason, they should be allowed to diverge from qualifications in England.

Historically, Wales, England and Northern Ireland shared a common education system and a single set of qualifications, but this has begun to change since devolution. Some types of qualification now exist in one of the three countries but not the others. Policy developments unique to Wales have included the Welsh Baccalaureate, Learning Pathways 14–19, the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009, the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales, a distinctive national curriculum for Wales, and Essential Skills Wales.

During the same period there have been developments in England which the Welsh Government has not adopted. For instance, recent changes to GCSEs in England have not been required by the Welsh Government in Wales, meaning that GCSEs need not be identical in the two countries. Changes in England do not necessarily reflect the policy objectives of the Welsh Government, such as social and educational inclusion.

The Review Board has concluded that:

- divergence between Wales and England is already happening in a number of qualifications
- we need to allow further divergence where this is needed in order to meet the needs of Wales
- divergence can present more opportunities than threats in relation to some qualifications, and measures can be taken to address the risks involved.

The opportunities presented by further divergence include the ability to define priorities and make decisions appropriate to Wales, including Welsh-medium provision and qualifications to reflect our curriculum. It enables us to be proactive rather than reactive in terms of policy development, implementation and timescales. The ability to control qualifications more closely will allow the Welsh Government and partners to work towards ensuring that qualifications in Wales are of the highest quality and rigour, for instance through benchmarking against qualifications in the rest of the UK and in other high-performing countries. There may be scope for more collaboration with Northern Ireland and Scotland in relation to qualifications.

The risks include threats to the perception of qualifications achieved by learners in Wales, for instance as a result of media or political commentary. Proposals for addressing this are at section A3.7. The size of the qualifications market in Wales poses challenges: some awarding organisations may not be interested in developing Wales-only qualifications. It should be noted that divergence would reduce the ability of the Welsh Government to make direct comparison at a national level of attainment between Wales and England, but the Board does not consider that this should be a driver for policy.

Specific issues in relation to divergence and the development of qualifications designed for Wales are discussed throughout this paper, for instance in the sections dealing with GCSEs, A levels, vocational qualifications and measurement of school performance. In the following question the Board would like to hear views on the fundamental principle.

Consultation question

What do you perceive to be the needs of Wales in relation to qualifications at 14–19?

To what extent do you think that qualifications at 14–19 should be allowed to diverge from those in England, in order to better meet the needs of Wales?

A3. Key proposals and issues

A3.1 Welsh BaccaLaureate Qualification

The Board is currently of the view that the Welsh BaccaLaureate has both relevance and value, that it should be further developed and promoted, and that eventually it should be universally adopted at 14–19 across Wales.

The Welsh BaccaLaureate is an overarching qualification available at three levels: Foundation, Intermediate (both usually taken at 14–16) and Advanced (usually taken at 16-plus). It has gained recognition and currency in a relatively short time: from introduction as a pilot in 2003 to almost 70,000 learners taking it in 2011/12. More detail about the structure of the Welsh BaccaLaureate can be found [here](#).

Feedback to the Review has been largely positive about the Welsh BaccaLaureate. Stakeholders like its use of established qualifications in its options, the development of skills (including testing aspects of literacy and numeracy) in its Core, together with elements valued by employers and universities such as work experience, community participation and independent research.

However, some stakeholders have expressed reservations about the Welsh BaccaLaureate, including concerns about rigour, assessment of some of its elements, and its relevance to higher education and employment. The Board would like to establish more clearly through this consultation what people think of the Welsh BaccaLaureate.

The Board is considering the concept of an overarching qualification for Wales: a set of requirements ensuring that young people have a well-rounded and coherent education, rather than just a collection of qualifications. It would provide minimum thresholds at different levels and allow young people to 'matriculate' by achieving a prescribed level in a balanced mix of subject qualifications, literacy and numeracy, understanding of the world and society around them as well as skills for life, learning and work.

Having considered all options, including the International Baccalaureate and other Baccalaureate qualifications, the Board considers that the obvious basis from which to develop this concept in Wales is the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification. The Board is interested in exploring this idea and understanding what changes might be needed to the Welsh Baccalaureate requirements in terms of elements, levels and assessment regimes. The Board also wants to understand the risks and opportunities associated with such changes, and to learn lessons from elsewhere, including recent experience of the 14–19 Diploma in England. Grading of the Welsh Baccalaureate is discussed in section B5.1 (page 29).

Consultation question

What are your views on the content, delivery, relevance and value of the current Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification?

What are your views on the further development of the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification as the overarching qualification for Wales?

In what ways would you like to see the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification changed or developed?

To what extent should the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification be universally adopted by learners in Wales?

A3.2 GCSEs

GCSEs have, for many years, been the main qualifications taken at the end of Key Stage 4. They are widely recognised by employers, used as a key indicator of ability when considering learners' progression into further or higher education or apprenticeships, and they form the backbone of school performance indicators.

The Board is currently of the view that Wales should continue, at present, to have GCSE qualifications as the main suite of qualifications for learners in Key Stage 4. In the longer term there may be a case for rethinking the emphasis on external qualifications at 16 (see section A2.9, page 12). However, the Review is likely to conclude that GCSEs should continue in their present central role, probably within an overarching Welsh Bacculaureate Qualification (see section A3.1, page 15).

To ensure that learners in Wales at Key Stage 4 follow programmes of study that build on their learning from the Foundation Phase to Key Stage 3, and take qualifications which reflect the curriculum and incorporate the best possible forms of assessment, the Board believes that GCSEs in Wales may well, in future, need to be different in content and assessment from those offered in England.¹

Consultation question

Which of these three options for qualifications at 14–16 do you feel would best meet the needs of learners in Wales?

- i. Completely new, high-quality and rigorous qualifications (not called GCSEs) for 14 to 16-year-olds that reflect the curriculum in Wales.
- ii. For Wales to retain the brand name of GCSE, but to develop Wales-only, high-quality and rigorous GCSEs to reflect the curriculum in Wales.
- iii. For Wales to adopt GCSE developments as and when they emerge in England.

Section B5 of this paper invites views on more technical issues relating to GCSEs, including assessment, tiering and Level 1 qualifications, and the number of GCSEs taken by individual learners.

A3.3 A levels

The Board is of the view that A levels should currently remain the basis of general qualifications at Level 3 in Wales. In the first phase of the Review there have been no suggestions from stakeholders to move away from A levels and there appears to be strong brand recognition and loyalty. However, there has been considerable

¹ The Welsh Government (in common with English and Northern Irish counterparts) owns the title of GCSE and the right to award this title to qualifications that it considers meet the agreed criteria in terms of size and standard. There is no legal barrier to GCSEs in one of the three countries being different from those in others. GCSEs can and in some cases already do reflect the different curriculum and have different assessment regimes.

discussion of A levels in the media in recent months, for instance in relation to the degree of specialisation they involve. We would therefore welcome your views on A levels in Wales.

Consultation question

Are A levels fit for purpose for young people in Wales at 16–19?

Section B5 of this paper seeks views on assessment issues related to A levels.

A3.4 Vocational qualifications

The Board is clear that many vocational qualifications are valuable and relevant. Pursuing a vocational educational route is the best option for many young people. Including a vocational element in the mix is appropriate for many others. There is a history of debate about the relative esteem in which general and vocational qualifications are held. The Board does not want the Review of Qualifications to spend time on this debate, and is working from the premise that both vocational and general qualifications can be relevant and valuable to individual learners and employers. The focus of the Review is to ensure that the qualifications available, whether vocational, general or a mixture of the two, are high quality and robust, and that learners, employers and providers are clear about their relevance and value. It is particularly important, following recent changes in England, that the Review of Qualifications provides clear support for vocational qualifications; there should be no crisis of confidence in vocational education in Wales.

As well as having intrinsic value, the Board considers that vocational, and particularly hands-on subjects, can motivate and engage some learners who might otherwise lose interest in education.

Consultation question

What are the key issues in relation to vocational qualifications at 14–16 and 16–19?

Part B of this paper contains some detailed proposals and questions about vocational qualifications, including the types and numbers appropriate at 14–16 and 16–19, the treatment of vocational

qualifications in measurement of school performance, assessment issues and the potential use of the GCSE brand for vocational qualifications.

A3.5 Essential Skills Wales and Wider Key Skills

Essential Skills Wales qualifications were introduced in September 2010, replacing some Key Skills and Basic Skills qualifications. They aimed to provide a single ladder of progression in the skills of Communication, Application of Number, and Information and communication technology (ICT). They are intended to be applicable to all ages, abilities and contexts. Stakeholders have to date been generally positive about the qualifications. The Review presents an opportunity to take stock of views about Essential Skills Wales.

Wider Key Skills qualifications assess the skills of Working with Others, Improving Own Learning and Performance, and Problem Solving. The Review has found general agreement that these skills are relevant and of value, but has identified a lack of awareness and understanding of the Wider Key Skills suite of qualifications.

Assessment of Essential Skills Wales and issues related to Wider Key Skills are discussed in section B5 of this paper (page 29).

Consultation question

To what extent are Essential Skills Wales qualifications relevant and valued?

To what extent are Wider Key Skills qualifications relevant and valued?

A3.6 STEM subjects

Stakeholders, especially employers and their representatives such as the CBI and Federation of Small Businesses (FSB), have raised concerns over science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects. These subjects are of strategic importance to the economy. They are also of demonstrable benefit to learners in terms of progression to higher education and employment, and lifetime financial return. They are regarded by many as an underdeveloped area. This consultation seeks views on how qualifications at 14–19 might drive improvements in this area.

Consultation question

Should more emphasis be placed on STEM subjects in the 14–19 phase?

If so, how might the qualifications system contribute to this?

A3.7 Communication

The Board intends to recommend that the Welsh Government launch a major long-term communication campaign. The aim of the campaign should be to ensure that employers, universities, learners and their families, teachers, lecturers, work-based learning assessors and the general public gain a better understanding of the qualifications framework operating in Wales, with easier access to better information.

The communication campaign should extend beyond Wales, for instance including all UK universities and the UK media, to promote the status of qualifications in Wales. If the Welsh Government follows a different route from the direction taken in England, it will be necessary to explain and promote qualifications taken in Wales.

Clear, accessible information is crucial for learners choosing qualifications at 14 and 16. Stakeholders have emphasised that young people and those advising them need good, impartial information, including the typical destinations of young people achieving each qualification. Each year some learners change course or drop out of education at 17. It is natural at this age for some to decide to change direction, but some may have made the wrong choices at 16. Where information is available, for instance on Sector Skills Councils' websites, about the most relevant qualifications for progression in each economic sector, there is evidence that learners at 16–19 are not accessing it.

Consultation question

Do you think that the Welsh Government should launch a major communication campaign in relation to qualifications in Wales, once its new policy is established?

Do you have suggestions about the messages of the campaign and how to make it effective?

How could learners be better supported, informed and advised when choosing qualifications at 14 and 16?

Part B: Technical and specialist issues

B1. The purpose of qualifications

The Board began its work by considering the purpose of qualifications. It agreed that the primary purpose of qualifications at 14–19 is to differentiate between and provide information about individuals' levels of skills, knowledge and understanding, for purposes of entry to the next stage of education or employment.

While being clear about the primary purpose of qualifications, the Board feels strongly that qualifications must be designed and delivered in a way that supports the inclusion and engagement of all young people and enables them to achieve their full potential. This means having suitable Entry level and Level 1 qualifications (see sections B5.3 and B5.11, pages 30 and 38), and some qualifications that might be of low relevance but of high value to the learner.

B2. Phases 14–16 and 16–19

Although the Board is interested in the idea of young people taking qualifications according to their stage rather than age (see section A2.9, page 12), we have noted that stakeholders have generally seen the two phases within 14–19 as two different stages in a young person's education, 14–16 and post-16. The Review recommendations will be framed on an assumption of the continuation for the present of these two separate phases.

B2.1 A broad, general education at 14–16

The trend towards more young people staying in education until at least 18 means that qualifications at 14–16 now primarily prepare youngsters for further study rather than for employment.

The Board is of the view that the 14–16 phase should provide a broad general education. During this last phase of compulsory schooling (Key Stage 4) learners should acquire and be tested on core cognitive, practical and other study skills as well as a general knowledge of a broad and balanced range of subjects. Literacy and numeracy should be at the heart of the curriculum. Any vocational qualifications on offer to 14 to 16-year-olds should assess transferable skills and provide a broad introduction to sectors of employment rather than focus on a particular occupation.

An overarching qualification based on the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification at Foundation and Intermediate levels could provide a structure for promoting this coherence at 14–16, as described at

section A3.1. This paper sets out proposals for reducing the number of qualifications available at 14–19 and seeks views on how information about them could be improved and made more accessible.

Qualifications accredit learning and should therefore reflect the curriculum. The Welsh Government is currently considering a broader look at the curriculum. This might provide an opportunity for considering which courses should be compulsory and which optional, and could help in the potential further development of the Welsh Baccalaureate requirements.

B2.2 Coherent programmes of learning at 16–19

Provision at 16–19 is more complex than at 14–16, with more providers and a greater variety of pathways. Young people may follow routes that are primarily vocational or academic, or a mixture of the two. It is appropriate for learners to follow a more specialised programme at this age range. However, there is still a need for a broad education that creates well-rounded young people with generic transferable skills for life, learning and work.

Such a broad education could be provided through well worked-out programmes of study such as the Welsh Baccalaureate at Advanced level or Apprenticeship frameworks.

Apprenticeship frameworks are already well-defined and are not within the remit of this Review. The content of other programmes of learning such as a revised Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification for learners at 16–19 could be informed by recent work by ColegauCymru and the Welsh Government in developing Learning Area Programmes. So far, there are Learning Area Programmes in 16 different vocational areas. These set out a preferred combination of qualifications for learners that assist progression to employment or further learning. They provide a promising model that could be developed to raise standards and bring consistency within subjects and across Wales, and could be expanded to cover general qualifications at 16–19.

The Board intends to develop its thinking on the structure and mechanisms for delivering coherent programmes of study at 16–19 in the next phase of the Review.

Funding is a strong lever for encouraging coherence in programmes of study. The Review of Qualifications is likely to recommend that the Welsh Government's review of planning and funding of post-16

provision should fund programmes for individual learners rather than separate single qualifications, and that it should encourage a focus on quality rather than quantity of qualifications. There may be scope within a balanced programme for funding some elements of learning that are not linked to qualifications or formally assessed units.

Consultation question

Do you think that qualifications should be funded and delivered through coherent programmes of learning at 16–19, rather than as individual qualifications?

Within a coherent programme of learning should there be scope for some elements that are not linked to qualifications or formally assessed units?

The coherent programmes of study would operate in the context of the Credit and Qualifications Framework Wales. The CQFW is an 'umbrella' structure that recognises learning and development in Wales. This includes higher education, regulated vocational and general learning, and units of non-regulated learning known as Quality Assured Lifelong Learning (QALL). The proposed coherent programmes of study may include any of the above elements, combining a core of high-quality regulated qualifications with some flexibility in meeting local needs.

Consultation question

What have been the benefits to learners at 14–19 of credit-based qualifications?

What are your views on the future role of credit-based qualifications in the 14–19 curriculum?

The Board considers that learners at 16–19 could be better supported in preparing for qualifications by greater collaboration between education providers, and that there is scope for the three post-16 sectors to work more effectively together for the benefit of learners. Greater flexibility for appropriately qualified teachers, lecturers and work-based learning assessors to travel to teach or provide support to 16–19 learners in a mixture of settings would enable more learners to benefit from their specialist and technical expertise without learners having to travel extensively between locations.

Consultation question

In relation to qualifications, how could schools, colleges and work-based providers collaborate better for the benefit of learners?

B3. Simplification

Many stakeholders have told us that they find it difficult to understand the current system of qualifications and to know what an individual qualification says about an individual's abilities. Part A of this paper discussed the need for better communication and clearer information about qualifications (section A3.7, page 20). This section sets out an approach to reducing the number of qualifications available at 14–19.

Qualifications approved for teaching in Wales and eligible for public funding are listed on the publicly searchable Database of Approved Qualifications in Wales (DAQW). In January 2012 there were 11,400 qualifications on DAQW for the 14–19 age group, and the number is increasing each year. As shown below (section B3.1, page 25), this often-quoted and very high figure is slightly misleading: the number of qualifications actually in use is lower at around 4,000. Nevertheless, the Board considers that this number of qualifications could, and should, be actively reduced. In particular, the number of qualifications available to learners at 14–16 should be much smaller. At 16–19 there is scope for reducing numbers, but also for ensuring that they are pursued within coherent programmes of learning.

The Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 sets out the minimum number of courses of study to be available within a local curriculum, and within this the minimum number of vocational courses. The figure is currently set at 30 courses of study of which at least five must be vocational. Any reduction in the overall number of qualifications on DAQW is unlikely to compromise this figure as there are still likely to be many more qualifications available for public funding than the 30 required by the Measure.

Consultation question

Should the number of qualifications approved for public funding at ages 14–19 be reduced?

If so, which qualifications should no longer be available at 14–16 and/or 16–19?

B3.1 Reducing the number of qualifications – a phased approach

The Board cannot hope, during the period of the Review, to assess each individual qualification on DAQW. This section sets out a phased approach to reducing the number of qualifications and ensuring that those available are relevant and valuable.

The Board has already endorsed, during the period of the Review, a number of administrative steps to reduce the number of qualifications, including bringing forward the approval end dates on DAQW of qualifications not used in the previous three years. This will effectively remove at least 7,000 qualifications from DAQW for this age group, simplifying the overall picture and clarifying the remaining challenge.

The Board has also commissioned a number of small-scale studies to explore the potential for reducing the number of qualifications in individual vocational sectors, by identifying the most relevant qualifications at each age group in those sectors. The studies are drawing on work undertaken for the Learning Area Programmes (see section A2.2, page 7) and will work closely with the Sector Skills Councils.

If effective, this approach could be extended to other sectors, and all 4,000 active qualifications on DAQW could be reviewed by 2014, to produce a reduced list of qualifications approved for public funding at each age group. It could also inform which qualifications count towards institutional performance measures.

The Board would welcome views on this approach and suggestions as to what the criteria should be for retaining a qualification.

Consultation question

What should be the criteria for retaining a qualification in the list approved for public funding?

B3.2 Development and approval of new qualifications

Following the initial review process, a new approach would need to be taken to new qualifications, to prevent further proliferation. For the next generation of general qualifications in Wales the Board favours a centrally driven approach to development. New qualifications should reflect the priorities, and the learning, teaching

and assessment styles of the curriculum in Wales. The Welsh Government would commission the development of national criteria for qualifications that awarding organisations designing new qualifications for Wales would have to meet.

For vocational qualifications, once a reduced list has been generated, strengthened gatekeeping and subsequent regular review should be put in place to ensure that new qualifications approved for public funding are, and remain, relevant and valuable.

From April 2012 Sector Skills Councils will be commissioned by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, to deliver a number of Universal Services on a UK basis. The services will include a database to provide a statement of qualification priorities by sector and by nation. The Welsh Government will be able to work with SSCs to prioritise vocational qualifications for use and potential funding within Wales. This will provide a mechanism for employers to be involved in determining which qualifications are offered in their sector. The Board would welcome views on whether this is the best and should be the only means of involving employers in the qualification development process.

Consultation question

To what extent should employers play a role in the development of qualifications for 14 to 16-year-olds and 16 to 19-year-olds?

Should Sector Skills Councils be the main mechanism for this?

There has been discussion in England recently about the potential role of universities in designing A levels, to make the qualifications more relevant to the needs of learners progressing to higher education. The Board is interested in views on this approach.

Consultation question

To what extent should universities play a greater role in the development of A levels?

B4. Literacy and numeracy

B4.1 Assessing literacy and numeracy at 14–16

The Board believes that it is essential that 14–19 learners in Wales have access to qualifications that provide clear assurance to both further and higher education institutions and to employers that learners are literate and numerate. Having reviewed the current suite of qualifications, and having listened to the views of stakeholders, the Board is not convinced that such qualifications are currently available.

While employers have told us that they use grades C to A for GCSE English Language or Welsh First Language as initial indicators of literacy and GCSE Mathematics as an initial indicator of numeracy, they also tell us that candidates with these qualifications are not necessarily literate or numerate. Further and higher education institutions have expressed similar views. Those involved in delivering qualifications have stressed that English Language or Welsh First Language GCSEs are not designed to provide conclusive evidence of literacy and that GCSE Mathematics is not designed solely to assess numeracy. While many learners also take Essential Skills Wales qualifications in Communication and Application of Number, these qualifications also are not regarded as direct indicators of literacy and numeracy.

The Welsh Government is well aware that improving literacy and numeracy levels in school leavers will not be achieved by better qualifications alone and is currently developing a new National Literacy and Numeracy Framework (NLNF). This sets out the skills that young people should be able to demonstrate from Foundation Phase to Key Stage 3 (age 4–14). The introduction of the NLNF, combined with support for teachers in developing literacy and numeracy, will, over time, raise young people's skills by the time they start their qualification programmes. The next generation of qualifications for 14 to 16-year-olds in Wales needs therefore to provide an incentive for young people to build, in Key Stage 4, on the literacy and numeracy skills that they will have developed, in future, by the end of Key Stage 3.

The Board is therefore minded to recommend that we change the qualifications in which we currently assess literacy and numeracy. There are a number of options for achieving this, which are not mutually exclusive. They include:

- a) commissioning new specifications for GCSE English Language, GCSE Welsh First Language and GCSE Mathematics qualifications for Wales which build directly on the literacy element of the NLNF framework and encourage the development of those skills throughout Key Stage 4 and beyond if needed

- b) developing or commissioning new externally assessed national literacy and numeracy tests for Key Stage 4 and incorporating these into the core of the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification at Intermediate level, instead of Essential Skills Wales qualifications
- c) increasing the level of demand in the assessment of literacy and numeracy skills within Essential Skills Wales, perhaps in externally marked tests
- d) commissioning new GCSEs in Literacy and Numeracy to run alongside, or as a precursor to English Language, Welsh First Language and Mathematics GCSEs
- e) integrating subject-specific expectations for literacy and numeracy skills into the subject criteria for each of the next generation of GCSEs
- f) introducing teacher-assessed literacy and numeracy tests at 16.

Consultation question

How should learners' literacy and numeracy skills at 14–16 be assessed? Which of the options listed do you prefer?

B4.2 Literacy and numeracy at 16–19

The Board considers that in order to improve literacy and numeracy there should be a requirement that learners who have not already achieved Level 2 in appropriate literacy and numeracy qualifications by the age of 16 should continue to work towards achievement of these. Appropriate learning and teaching should be provided to help learners to improve these skills and to achieve Level 2 qualifications. This requirement should form part of the coherent programme of learning at 16–19.

The mechanisms for ensuring this happens might include:

- a requirement for learners to have achieved Level 2 qualifications in literacy and numeracy in order to be eligible for the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification at Advanced level
- changing the post-16 school performance measures
- including specific literacy and numeracy requirements within the new planning and funding framework for post-16 provision
- providing learners and others with clearer and higher profile information on the importance of Level 2 qualifications in literacy and numeracy.

Consultation question

Should post-16 full-time learners who have not achieved Level 2 in literacy or numeracy be supported to reach this standard?

B5. Issues relating to specific types of qualification

B5.1 Grading the Welsh Baccalaureate

Early in 2012 the Board proposed to Welsh Ministers that the Welsh Baccalaureate should be graded at Advanced level to maintain its currency for higher education admission, and to ensure that learners' differing achievements are properly recognised. Ministers accepted this recommendation and that there should be further consultation about how this should be achieved. They also indicated that further views about whether the Intermediate and Foundation levels should be graded, in due course, should form part of this wider Review of Qualifications consultation exercise.

Consultation question

Should the Welsh Baccalaureate be graded at Foundation level and/or Intermediate level in due course?

B5.2 Assessment issues for GCSEs

Currently, awarding organisations offering GCSEs in Wales are able, if they choose, to offer them on a unitised basis. That is, learners may take units of the GCSE at different times throughout their two-year course. If they do not achieve the grade they hoped for, learners may resit any one unit **once** to attempt to improve their mark for that unit.

Consultation question

Should GCSEs continue to be available to learners on a unitised basis?

What are your views on the amount of 'terminal assessment' that is appropriate (it is currently 40 per cent)?

What are your views on having a more formal two-stage assessment of GCSEs, along similar lines to the current model for AS and A2?

Controlled assessment was introduced into most GCSEs to improve the reliability and rigour of assessment in the light of widespread discontent about its predecessor, 'coursework'. Coursework was vulnerable to malpractice on the part of candidates, where assessments were not subject to appropriate forms of control.

A recent evaluation of the introduction of controlled assessment into GCSEs has identified that it has proved challenging for some centres to manage, that there are some concerns about variable guidance from awarding organisations, and that in some cases it appears that learners are being over-assessed, with a negative impact on learning and teaching. On the other hand, the evaluation did indicate that a majority of teachers supported the principles of controlled assessment and felt that it was an improvement upon coursework in terms of reliability and validity of assessment. Awarding organisations are responding to the findings of the report by producing clearer guidance and support materials for centres, and particular attention is being given to controlled assessment in modern foreign languages.

Consultation question

What are your views on controlled assessment? How could it be improved?

Should controlled assessment be retained as a feature in the next generation of GCSEs in Wales? If so, should it be retained for most GCSEs or only a few?

B5.3 Tiering of GCSEs and achievement at Level 1

Many GCSE qualifications are currently offered in two tiers: foundation tier and higher tier. Foundation tier GCSEs are graded C–G and are intended for learners who are showing Level 1 characteristics. Higher tier GCSEs are graded A*–D and are for learners who are expected to achieve at Level 2. The overlapping grades (C–D) allow for learners who exceed expectations at Level 1 or who do not quite achieve expectations at Level 2.

The Review has heard from many stakeholders that, in reality, it is only grades C to A* that have relevance in terms of progression to higher education or employment. While for many Level 1 learners, a grade D or E might represent a real achievement, the Review has found little or no value is placed upon it in the external world. It can be challenging for awarding organisations to ensure that the overlapping grades C and D reflect the same achievement at the foundation and higher tiers.

Some stakeholders have suggested that foundation tier GCSEs have low relevance and value. They have suggested that it might be better to have a separate type of qualification at Level 1, which represents a clear achievement in itself but which is seen as a stepping stone to a subsequent attempt at a Level 2 GCSE. A number of possible descriptions of such a qualification have been suggested, including Pre-GCSEs, Foundation Certificates of Secondary Education (FCSEs) or simply Level 1 Certificates.

There are pros and cons to this model. It could offer a more positive and inclusive approach to learning and achievement at Level 1, rather than leading to a lower-grade GCSE that is regarded by many as a 'fail'. It could also provide the means whereby some learners, for some subjects, are given more time to reach Level 2 – perhaps, for example, with a planned programme of study from Years 9 or 10 through to Level 2 in Year 12. This could begin to address the issue that learners mature at different rates through their teenage years.

On the other hand, the move could be seen as adding to the proliferation and complexity of qualifications. It could also be seen as a reversion to the days of O levels and CSEs. The key difference could be that Level 1 in this new model would be seen as a stepping stone to Level 2 (and GCSEs) for most learners, rather than as an end in its own right.

Consultation question

What are your views on the current tiering of GCSEs? What are your views on focusing GCSEs on Level 2 attainment and creating a new Level 1 qualification to reward achievement at this level as a stepping stone to subsequent progression?

B5.4 Numbers of GCSEs taken by learners in Wales

Many learners in Wales are pursuing large number of GCSEs (up to 13 or 14 in some cases). This can particularly be the case in Welsh-medium schools, where learners often take language and literature GCSEs in both English and Welsh. While recognising the need to accommodate breadth and choice into the curriculum, the Board would welcome views on whether there is too much pressure to take large numbers of GCSEs at the possible expense of the standards achieved, well-rounded and discursive learning, employability skills and time for extra-curricular activities.

Consultation question

Should there normally be a maximum number of GCSEs pursued at school? If so what should this maximum number be?

B5.5 Assessment in A levels

Stakeholders have raised some important issues in relation to the assessment of A levels. Many felt that there was too much assessment taking place throughout A level courses and that this impacted unduly on teaching time and the learning experience.

The Board is considering whether the assessment of A levels should change in due course in Wales, for instance to remove or reduce the right to resit units, or to move to an entirely linear model (with all units taken at the end of the course). The consultation paper seeks views on these potential changes. The Board is also interested in views on the relevance and value of AS levels, either as qualifications in themselves or as stepping stones towards A level.

As with GCSEs, the Welsh Government owns the title of GCE A level and can, in theory, seek to develop its own requirements for A levels.

Consultation question

Assuming the continuation of A levels in Wales, should AS levels be retained as a stepping stone to A levels?

Should A level learners be able to take modules before the end of the course (AS and/or A2)?

Should learners be able to retake A level modules to improve their grade, without having to resit the whole qualification? If so, should:

- i. the best mark count?
- ii. the most recent mark count?
- iii. retakes of modules be limited to one per module?

A levels offered in Wales are currently identical to those in England. It would be possible in the longer term for Wales to develop its own bespoke qualifications for learners at 16–19. However, there are

likely to be changes to the current suite of qualifications driven by policy in England, before such developments could take shape.

B5.6 Vocational qualification classification: IVETs and CVETs

European guidance from the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), defines two categories of vocational qualifications, IVET and CVET.

- IVET (Initial Vocational Education and Training) is general or vocational education and training carried out in the initial education system, usually before entering working life.
- CVET (Continuing Vocational Education and Training) is education and training after initial education and training, or after entry into working life, for instance to improve or update knowledge or skills or acquire new skills for a career move.

The UK system of vocational qualifications is not compliant with the IVET/CVET classifications. The Review of Qualifications provides an opportunity for Wales to align itself to the European classifications. The Board is in favour of adopting these definitions in Wales in order to clarify the purpose of vocational qualifications and to identify which ones are suitable for different age groups and settings. Under this categorisation, only IVETs would be available for the 14–16 age group. For 16 to 19-year-olds the emphasis would still be on IVETS, but with some focused use of CVETS, including in work-based settings. This would clarify the purpose and role of a large number of qualifications that are currently approved for delivery and public funding at all age levels. The distinction could be used in the process of simplification through the reduction of numbers as set out in section B3 (page 24).

CVET is concerned with competency-based training and development. Within the UK there is a well-established process for the development of competency-based qualifications, which are employer led and endorsed by the appropriate Sector Skills Council. National Occupational Standards (NOS) are UK-wide statements providing benchmarks of occupational competence, developed through extensive employer consultation. All vocational qualifications on the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and all Apprenticeship frameworks are based on NOS, ensuring a common understanding of knowledge and skills across the UK and Europe.

Consultation question

Should Wales adopt the IVETs and CVETs definitions for vocational qualifications?

B5.7 Vocational qualifications at 14–16

The Board is considering recommending that at 14–16, when the emphasis should be on a general education:

- vocational qualifications should usually add up to no more than 40 per cent of learning time
- large vocational qualifications should not be offered, as they could encourage a learner to specialise too young
- qualifications that attest to occupational competency should not be approved
- only vocational qualifications that could be categorised as IVETS should be used
- vocational qualifications should cover broad subject areas and should encourage the development of transferable skills and a good contextual understanding alongside specific practical knowledge and skills.

Consultation question

Do you agree with the proposed recommendations for limiting vocational qualifications at 14–16 to 40 per cent of learning time?

Do you agree that at 14–16 vocational qualifications should be broad-based and not attest to occupational competency?

Do you agree that only IVETs are appropriate at 14–16?

Learners making their choices at 14 should be better informed about what vocational qualifications mean in terms of employability within a sector. Young people and employers should understand that the qualifications will not fully qualify or equip the learners for specific jobs at 16, and that further training will be needed. Learners and parents/carers should also be aware that the progression route following vocational Level 2 IVET qualifications is likely to be to Level 2 CVET qualifications rather than straight to Level 3 qualifications.

Some stakeholder feedback indicates that there may be more confidence in the GCSE brand than in other qualifications for 14 to

16-year-olds. The Board is considering whether there might be a case for including vocational subjects and sector areas within an extended GCSE suite. This might strengthen the perceived relevance and value of vocational qualifications.

Consultation question

What are your views on expanding the use of the GCSE brand across vocational and general subjects?

Vocational qualifications for the 14–16 age group have been much in the news recently due to the position in England and the changes proposed following the Wolf Report, in particular to change the way vocational qualifications count in the English school league tables. It should be noted that the explosion in take-up of vocational qualifications in recent years was largely an English phenomenon, and the contribution to the Level 2 threshold made by non-GCSE subjects in England (including BTECs and other equivalents) is twice what it is in Wales.

The Board does not consider that there is a problem on the same scale in Wales or that such high-impact countermeasures are called for here. The proposals for change to the way vocational qualifications count in performance measurement of schools in Wales reflects this difference (see section B6, page 39).

Many vocational qualifications, some of which are considered to be equivalent to one or more GCSEs, differ from GCSEs in that they do not include any external tests or exams. Stakeholders seem to be in broad agreement that a strong element of externality in qualifications can add a degree of rigour and improve the wider perception of their reliability and value, particularly in terms of progression. However, many stakeholders agreed with the emerging view of the Review that externality need not necessarily be defined as tightly as an externally marked examination. The rigour of some internally marked assessments could be improved, for example, by more thorough external verification or external moderation of assessment decisions.

Consultation question

What are your views on strengthening externality in the assessment of all vocational qualifications approved for use at 14–16?

Do you have views on what forms this element of strengthened externality should take?

B5.8 Vocational qualifications at 16–19

In the post-16 phase, vocational education becomes the chosen route for many learners. The vocational qualifications taken at this stage will be more focused on employment than at 14–16, but should still be sufficiently broad to be relevant to a wide range of employment settings and to support future career changes. Either IVETs or CVETs might be appropriate, depending on the learner and their aspirations. The Board would like to see a system that encourages all young people to pursue coherent programmes of study that will maximise their long-term career chances.

Consultation question

Do you agree that both IVETs and CVETs could be appropriate for 16 to 19-year-olds? In what circumstances or sectors might CVETs be appropriate?

B5.9 Assessment of Essential Skills Wales

Qualifications in Essential Skills Wales are offered at Levels 1 to 4. Assessment is on the basis of a candidate's portfolio of evidence, assessed and internally verified by the centre, and externally verified by the awarding organisation. Certification at Entry level is on the basis of a controlled task.

Stakeholder feedback regarding Essential Skills Wales assessment has raised concerns that:

- portfolio assessment can be time-consuming, at the expense of learning and teaching
- the combination of internal assessment and external quality assurance is perceived as leading to inconsistency in interpretation of standards and evidence requirements, between awarding organisations and between external quality assurers within awarding organisations
- the portfolio method of assessment is felt to be open to question in terms of authenticity, and how much of it is a candidate's unaided work.

This Review is mindful of the fact that there was an external test component within the original Key Skills qualifications until 2004, but this was withdrawn as it was considered to be inappropriate and

burdensome for the learner. It was believed at that time that the application of skills could be better assessed over a range of contexts through portfolio assessment. However, there may now be a case for addressing perceptions of limited rigour and efficiency, by introducing an externally assessed component, while retaining validity of assessment.

This consultation seeks views on introducing an element of externality in assessment of Essential Skills Wales. We are also interested in views on grading Essential Skills Wales qualifications (whatever assessment model is used). Grading would reflect variable proficiency in technical skills or different levels of quality in response to assessment tasks. It would represent a significant change from the current competency model.

Consultation question

Do you think there should be a greater external element in the assessment of Essential Skills Wales?

Do you think that Essential Skills Wales should be graded?

B5.10 Wider Key Skills

Wider Key Skills qualifications are assessed via a portfolio of evidence. Stakeholders have suggested that the current approach to building portfolios relies too heavily on written evidence and is time-consuming and repetitive. The Board would welcome views on whether an externally assessed element should be introduced to increase the rigour of the qualifications. Stakeholders have also raised questions about the need for a clearer sense of progression through the levels. Some have suggested that the skills would benefit from a clearer title, such as 'Employability Skills', 'Wider Learning and Employability Skills' or 'Skills for Work'.

Consultation question

Do you think the Wider Key Skills need a clearer title? Yes/No

If so what should they be called?

Do you have any views on the content or assessment of the Wider Key Skills or the progression they offer?

B5.11 Entry level qualifications

There has, to date, been very limited feedback about entry level qualifications. Work has therefore been commissioned to determine whether the current qualifications are meeting the needs of entry level learners.

The Board is aware that many entry level qualifications are valued, and that timely entry level interventions can provide vitally important encouragement and stepping stones for some learners who are demonstrating limited progress or who have difficulties with basic skills.

Consultation question

Are entry level qualifications currently meeting the needs of less-able or less-engaged students? Are any changes needed?

Could any of the proposals in this consultation paper impact adversely the provision of appropriate qualifications for less-able or less-engaged students?

B5.12 Quality Assured Lifelong Learning

Quality Assured Lifelong Learning (QALL) is recognised within the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales. It is offered by further education (FE) colleges and other providers, sometimes to 14 to 19-year-olds. A number of awarding organisations are recognised to award QALL with current provision dominated by one awarding organisation.

All the CQFW-recognised bodies currently offering QALL provision in Wales use rigorous guidelines and processes for recognition. However, QALL operates outside the regulatory framework for qualifications that operates across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, offering a distinctly Welsh approach that enables flexibility and responsiveness in the development of units.

The Board considers that QALL units may be usefully incorporated into programmes of learning for 16 to 19-year-olds (contributing up to 10 per cent of the programme). In this way units from any CQFW-recognised body would have the potential to form part of funded programmes of learning.

Consultation question

Do you see a role for the delivery and funding of QALL units within programmes of learning for 16 to 19-year-olds? If so what would they add?

B5.13 Welsh-medium issues

The Welsh Medium Education Strategy was published by the Welsh Government in April 2012 making Welsh-medium education and training integral parts of our education infrastructure. The policy of the Welsh Government is to ensure equal opportunities for those learners who choose to access learning and qualifications through the medium of Welsh. The number and range of Welsh-medium qualifications has gradually increased in response to learner and centre demand. In total there are currently approximately 80 general and 369 vocational qualifications available through the medium of Welsh, through 18 awarding bodies.

In relation to the Review of Qualifications the Board considers the key issues to be:

- ensuring that qualifications considered to be of greatest relevance and value are available in both Welsh and English. This should be made easier by the proposals in this paper to have fewer qualifications in total and clearer information about the relevance and value of those qualifications
- the continued need for the Welsh Government to support awarding organisations to develop Welsh-medium qualifications
- the potential impact on Welsh-medium provision of any changes to assessment methods or accelerated introduction of new qualifications.

Consultation question

Do you have any suggestions for improving the Welsh-medium qualification offer at 14–19?

B6. Measurement of school performance

B6.1 School performance measures

When we refer, in this document, to the ‘measurement of performance’ we are referring to measurement of the performance of schools rather than the measurement of individual learners’ achievements. The indicators used to measure performance can influence the provision of qualifications. The Board wants performance measures to act as a positive driver for education providers to:

- focus on the best interests of learners
- offer relevant and valued qualifications that provide clear progression.

The main performance indicators used and reported in Wales are as follows.

- For learners in Key Stage 4, the percentage who achieve:
 - the **Level 1 threshold** (equivalent to five GCSEs at Grade A* to G)
 - the **Level 2 threshold** (equivalent to five GCSEs at Grade A* to C)
 - the **Level 2 threshold** including a GCSE grade A* to C in English or Welsh First Language and Mathematics (called **Level 2 Inclusive**)
 - GCSE grade A* to C in each of English or Welsh First Language, Mathematics and Science (called the **Core Subject Indicator**).
- Additionally, for the same group:
 - average wider points score per learner
 - average capped points score per learner (the best eight results).
- For post-16 learners:
 - percentage who achieve the Level 3 threshold (equivalent to two A levels)
 - average wider points score per learner.

At this stage the Review is focusing on Key Stage 4, because that is where the main issues are. However, some of the questions have implications for post-16 too.

There are important differences between the contribution value of a qualification to a threshold and the performance points that it may attract.

The contribution of a qualification to a threshold is based on its 'size' (how long it takes to teach in guided learning hours, or GLH) relative to one GCSE (for Level 1 and Level 2) or one A level (for Level 3). Contribution to a threshold does not depend on the grade achieved. For example, all GCSE grades A* to C contribute equally (20 per cent) to the **Level 2 threshold**.

When calculating the **performance points** allocated to a qualification, its 'size' and 'challenge' are taken into account. Size is based on GLH and challenge relates to its level (for example, Level 2) and the grade achieved. Here, the actual grade achieved does impact on the number of points allocated.

Several of the above measures are used in calculations for further performance indicators including school banding. Performance measures based on factors other than qualifications, for example attendance figures or free school meals are excluded from this consultation as they are outside of the remit of this Review.

The Board's view is that we should reaffirm the primary importance of the **Level 2 Inclusive** and the **Average capped points score** as headline performance measures for Key Stage 4 in Wales.

The **Level 2 Inclusive** threshold balances the importance of the core skills of literacy and numeracy with the need to offer learners a broad and varied range of options. The **Average capped point score** is based on the best eight results for each learner, so it allows a fair comparison between schools regardless of the average number of qualifications taken by learners, and does not provide an incentive for schools to encourage learners to take very large numbers of GCSEs.

The Board suggests that all other existing performance measures be retained for now, and their long-term value reviewed in due course.

Consultation question

Do you agree with the proposal to reaffirm the importance of the Level 2 Inclusive and Average capped points score at Key Stage 4?

Do you think there should be any changes to the post-16 measures?

Should we remove any measures, or are there any additional measures we should include?

B6.2 Equivalences

Currently some vocational qualifications are worth up to six GCSEs in performance terms because (based on GLH) they take much longer to deliver than a GCSE.

There is evidence that this system creates incentives for schools to offer learners vocational qualifications that attract heavy weighting in performance terms. This may not always be in the best interests of learners. The current set of equivalences has been strongly challenged by many stakeholders during the early stages of the

Review. The Board agrees that some current equivalences are not credible and may distort the choices offered and promoted in schools and colleges. Misperceptions of the real worth of some qualifications beyond the school or college gate may also lead learners to make poor choices, and can damage the reputation of the qualifications themselves.

We are considering changing the 'equivalences' in Wales so that vocational qualifications will still contribute to performance measures, but they will attract a maximum value of two GCSEs in performance terms. This reflects the fact that, to offer an appropriate level of skills, knowledge and understanding, vocational qualifications often require around twice the GLH of a GCSE.

This does not mean that larger vocational qualifications cannot be taught, but they will only count for the equivalent of two GCSEs in the performance measures. This supports the emerging view that large vocational qualifications should not be encouraged at 14–16 because of the risks of learners specialising at too early an age.

Many stakeholders have commented on the importance of recognising the value of GCSE short course qualifications, which are half the size of a full GCSE. The emerging evidence suggests strong support for continuing to count these in performance measures, to encourage flexibility in curriculum planning and support an inclusive approach to education. Counting two GCSE short course qualifications as equivalent to one full GCSE in performance terms would accurately reflect the demands of each in GLH. Counting vocational qualifications which are smaller than a full GCSE could also support flexibility and inclusivity.

Consultation question

Do you agree with our proposal to introduce a limit of two GCSEs 'equivalence' for vocational qualifications in performance terms?

Do you agree with our proposal to continue to count qualifications that are smaller than a GCSE (for example, GCSE short course or vocational qualifications of similar size) in performance measures?

B6.3 Contribution of 'equivalent' qualifications and discounting

The aim at 14–16 is a broad and balanced general education which does not restrict choices at a later age. The Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 recognises that there is a place for vocational qualifications in Key Stage 4. However, there needs to be an appropriate balance. Placing a limit on the number of 'equivalent' qualifications that count towards the Level 1 and Level 2 thresholds would help support this balance.

We are considering placing a limit of 40 per cent per learner on the contribution of vocational qualifications to the Level 1 and Level 2 performance measures. This would mean, for example, that three GCSEs (60 per cent) and two vocational qualifications (40 per cent) could reach the Level 2 threshold, but two GCSEs and three vocational qualifications could not. This should encourage schools to focus on GCSEs and a narrower range of vocational qualifications than at present.

We are also considering maintaining the current approach to 'discounting'. This means that where a learner enters for two qualifications that are the same, or very similar, only one is counted for the purpose of performance measures – the other is discounted.

Consultation question

Do you agree with our proposal to place a limit of 40 per cent on the contribution of vocational qualifications to the Level 1 and Level 2 performance measures?

Do you agree with our proposal to maintain our current approach to discounting for identical or very similar qualifications?

B6.4 Comparison of performance with England

Historically there has been a close relationship between headline performance measures in Wales and England. However, England has announced a number of changes to performance measures from 2014. Adopting these changes in Wales would prevent the allocation to appropriate vocational qualifications of a maximum value of two GCSEs in performance terms (they would count as one only). Also, GCSE short course qualifications and entry level courses would not

count towards performance measures. If we do not adopt these changes in Wales, comparisons between the two countries will not be straightforward.

Consultation question

How important is it to maintain the ability to make direct comparisons of school performance with England?

B7. Marketplace and regulation

B7.1 Review into the structure of the general qualifications market

On 14 December 2011, following press reports regarding examination seminars held by the awarding organisations, the Minister for Education and Skills announced a review into the structure of the general qualifications market in Wales, led by three external consultants.

Under current arrangements, each of the five main awarding organisations in England (AQA, OCR, Edexcel), Wales (WJEC) and Northern Ireland (CCEA) offer GCSEs and A levels in the main subjects. Schools and other centres in each country are free to enter candidates for GCSEs and A levels with any of these awarding organisations. It is in the awarding organisations' interest to attract candidates for the qualifications they offer. That is, the awarding organisations operate in what is a competitive market place and one where the candidate (or the centre which enters them) is the 'consumer'.

The review into the structure of the general qualifications market in Wales was tasked with:

- defining the unique issues facing Wales as a marketplace for qualifications
- assessing the impact of the current market structure of awarding organisations on standards in GCSEs and A levels
- assessing the efficacy of the current market structure
- identifying options for change and recommendations.

Ministers are currently considering the findings and recommendations of the review and will, in due course, indicate how they want those outcomes to be taken forward within the context of the Review of Qualifications for 14 to 19-year-olds in Wales.

B7.2 The marketplace for qualifications

Although the review team has delivered their report to Ministers, this only covered the general qualifications market. The Board of the Review of Qualifications would welcome stakeholder views on the structure of the whole qualifications market in Wales, including general and vocational qualifications.

Consultation question

To what extent do you think that the current market structure for the provision of qualifications:

- is 'fit for purpose'?
- influences the behaviour of centres in terms of the specific qualifications they choose for their learners?
- impacts on grades, standards or outcomes?
- impacts on the provision of Welsh-medium qualifications?

Is there an alternative model which you think might be preferable to the current system?

B7.3 Regulation and quality assurance

The qualifications system in Wales is linked with those in England and Northern Ireland, reflecting the history of government in the three countries. The Welsh Government is the qualifications regulator in Wales, working alongside Ofqual in England and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in Northern Ireland. The qualifications regulators are focused mainly on ensuring that an awarding organisation's systems for its governance, and the development, assessment and award of qualifications are compliant with a prescriptive set of criteria. For general qualifications, the focus is on the maintenance of standards across awarding organisations, within subjects and over time. The three regulators currently continue to cooperate on a three-country basis but, increasingly, there is a need to take separate decisions in each of the three nations and to implement different aspects of national policy.

Consultation question

Do you have any views on the future of regulation and quality assurance of qualifications for 14 to 19-year-olds in Wales?

Awarding organisation seminars, or as they are more commonly referred to in Wales, 'continuing professional development sessions', have a long history of providing a service to learning providers, enabling them to develop their understanding of qualifications and the assessment methodologies involved. In England, restrictions are being placed on these seminars in order to reduce the risk of breaches in the security of examinations. We would welcome your views on this matter.

Consultation question

Should awarding organisations be allowed to deliver seminars to teachers in Wales?

If so, for what purposes should they be able to deliver seminars? To what extent could, or should, the security of the present system be improved?

Annex: Evidence and stakeholder engagement

The Review Board has so far met nine times. It has considered evidence and papers provided by the Welsh Government's internal workstreams, set up to address aspects of the Review, and has heard from external speakers representing key organisations.

Evidence has been gathered for the review from a number of sources, including:

- official statistics
- Welsh Government management information
- evidence provided by partner organisations and stakeholders such as employers, Careers Wales, Welsh Local Government Association, local authorities, schools and colleges, ColegauCymru, teaching unions, awarding organisations, Sector Skills Councils, higher education institutions and learners themselves
- existing research reports
- previous reviews in relation to Wales and England
- specially commissioned work including studies of international comparisons, perceptions of qualifications, assessment of writing and numeracy skills, and sector-specific qualifications.

Stakeholder engagement has taken a number of forms and has been a key focus of effort during the first phase of the review. We have sought views from stakeholders in the following ways:

- a letter from the Chair of the Review Board to all identified stakeholders
- web pages dedicated to the Review and a mailbox for correspondence
- joint ColegauCymru/Welsh Government conference on qualifications, including delegates from schools, colleges, awarding organisations
- meetings with employers, schools, colleges, universities, awarding organisations, local authorities, representative bodies, teaching unions
- meetings between Board members, Welsh Government officials and groups of stakeholders, including learners

- discussion at scheduled meetings of stakeholder organisations
- workshops at conferences and annual meetings
- 'Real Conversation' event with learners, recent learners, apprentices and employers in dialogue about their experiences of qualifications.

Details of events and meetings

Event	Stakeholders	Date and location
National Qualifications Conference, run jointly by ColegauCymru and Welsh Government	All stakeholder groups	02.02.12 Cardiff
Sector Skills Council seminars (x 3 regions)	Sector Skills Councils	21.02.12 Llanelli 27.02.12 Swansea 05.03.12 Swansea
Sector Skills Council meeting	Sector Skills Councils, Alliance of Sector Skills Councils (ASSC)	07.03.12 Cardiff
NTFW Annual Conference	NTFW	27.02.12 Llandrindod Wells
NUS conference	HE and FE students	27.03.12 Newtown
Awarding Organisation Forum	Awarding organisations	29.02.12 Cardiff
Sector Skills Council Sector Policy event	Sector Skills Councils	29.02.12 Cardiff
FE Senior Curriculum Managers' meeting	FE	07.03.12 Newtown
14-19 Network Coordinators' meetings	Local authorities	19.03.12 Llandudno 23.04.12 Cardiff 25.04.12 Swansea 30.04.12 Bedwas
Real Conversation event	Employers, learners, apprentices	29.03.12 Wrexham
Schools events	School teachers	21.03.12 Llandudno 27.03.12 Swansea

South Wales Chamber of Commerce/Careers Wales West	Employers	28.03.12 Llanelli
Institute of Welsh Affairs conference	Providers, policy makers	21.02.12 Cardiff
Careers advisers' event	Careers advisers	16.04.12 Swansea
Welsh Government SHELL stakeholder meeting	External stakeholders	06.03.12 Bedwas
Careers convention	Careers advisers	07.02.12 Llanelli
Focus groups with learners in schools (English and Welsh medium)	Learners	23.02.12 Aberdare 23.02.12 Port Talbot 24.02.12 Deeside 24.02.12 Gwynedd 28.02.12 Cwmbran 02.03.12 Port Talbot 08.03.12 Aberdare
Focus groups with learners in FE colleges	Learners	09.03.12 Wrexham 02.04.12 Cardiff
Academic Registrars Council	Universities	10.02.12 London
UCAS Change Users Group	Universities	01.03.12 Cheltenham
Meetings with stakeholders	ColegauCymru Estyn WJEC NUS FAB Chair FAB all reps WLGA JCQ ASCL, NAHT, ATL Ceredigion Education Department FSB WESB Heads of Valleys Education Programme ADEW Directors of Education	13.12.11 11.01.12 11.01.12 21.02.12 11.01.12 18.05.12 17.01.12 19.01.12 27.01.12 21.02.12 28.02.12 17.05.12 30.05.12 27.04.12

Event	Stakeholders	Date and location
Meetings with schools	Prestatyn High School Radyr Comprehensive Alun School Ysgol Gyfun Cwm Rhymni Milford Haven School Ysgol y Gader Ysgol Gyfun Gymunedol Penweddig	05.01.12 Prestatyn 17.01.12 Radyr 20.01.12 Mold 08.02.12 Blackwood 09.02.12 Milford Haven 21.02.12 Dolgellau 21.02.12 Aberystwyth
Meetings with FE colleges	Deeside College Bridgend College Cardiff and Vale College Pembrokeshire College Coleg Gwent	20.01.12 08.02.12 08.02.12 09.02.12 25.04.12
Presentations by organisations to Review Board	ColegauCymru FAB People 1st ASSC ASCL NAHT Cymru ATL NUT NASUWT UCAC CYDAG NUS (cancelled) Institute of Directors Federation of Small Businesses Aberystwyth University Cardiff Metropolitan University	

Meetings with employers and Sector Skills Councils	St Bride's Spa Hotel	08.03.12
	Admiral Group	08.03.12
	SEMTA	08.03.12
	Wales & West Utilities	15.03.12
	CSkills	27.03.12
	Rockwool International	27.03.12
	Skills for Justice	17.04.12
	Valero	17.04.12
	CBI	24.04.12
	International Rectifier	24.04.12
	LANTRA	24.04.12
	General Dynamics	24.04.12
	Schaeffler	24.04.12
Airbus	03.05.12	
Meetings with universities	University of Bath	09.05.12
	University of Manchester	16.05.12
	University of Glamorgan	23.05.12
	Cardiff University	23.05.12