

**A Review of Vocational
Qualifications in Wales
July 2023**

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Foreword

I was both delighted and honoured to be asked by the Minister for Education and Welsh Language to chair this review of vocational qualifications in Wales. Over many years, I have seen the difference that vocational education and training has made to, and for individuals and have witnessed their pride in the attainment of vocational qualifications.

Vocational qualifications inevitably need to be considered in parallel with vocational education and training – it would be naïve to think that the two are separate entities. The former has the ability to construct the latter, and during the course of the review, there have been many, sometimes perplexing debates on what a vocational qualification is, and what a vocational programme of learning is - what each should contain and how each should be assessed.

The Steering Group guiding the review was asked to produce a report which was pragmatic and practical – the terms of reference are clear in this respect. Its focus has been on the systems within and surrounding vocational qualifications – how we should respond to our internal ambitions for Wales set out by the Welsh Government and how we should address external pressures, including the changes to vocational qualifications in other countries within the United Kingdom. In so doing, the primacy of the learner has been the locus of our deliberations, and in all recommendations, the fundamental consideration has been the impact of the recommendation on the learner.

We recognise that this report, and its recommendations will not gain approval from everyone. There will be those who will feel we have not been radical enough. We are not recommending wholesale change. We are not recommending the establishment of new bodies, or the dissolution of others. We are not recommending a brand new approach to vocational qualifications. We have acknowledged what is already good within vocational qualifications, based on evidence provided, and where we feel change is required, we have recommended change.

And we have good reasons for this approach. Wales is not ‘starting from scratch’. There is already much in the world of vocational education, training and qualifications which is good, and change has already been instigated. We are already eight years on from the Qualifications Wales Act, we have commenced the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales for our pre-16 learners and consulted on pre vocational qualifications, we have the Skills Challenge Certificate, and we are about to see the establishment of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research addressing post-16 learning. Therefore, we believe that we should build on that which is good, and that further change should be incremental, rather than revolutionary.

But we do need change, and change in the light not only of the changing face of Wales, and Wales in its global position, but because we *want* to change – to improve. This is not to criticize what has gone before – quite the opposite. We have

been afforded the benefit of learning from the past, and our recommendations reflect the fact that we are living in a world where change is both a constant and is rapid. The report we have produced is based on the evidence we have received – and we have not been prepared to make recommendations unless there is clear evidence to support those recommendations.

Vocational qualifications can have an enormous impact on our economy and our society. We need to declare publicly our vision for vocational education, training and qualifications, and confidently state that we both aspire, and need, to grow the number of people selecting vocational education and training as a route for learning. We need to do this in the knowledge of predicted occupational and skills gaps in our economy, but also in the way in which we want Wales to grow in societal terms – leading the way to net zero, developing respectful and inclusive communities, and promoting innovation and entrepreneurship. Let us now seize this opportunity to place vocational qualifications where they belong – of equal consideration in career choices, central to employer workforce development, and influential in creating the society we want – vocational qualifications which are valued by all.

Sharron Lusher MBE DL

Chair of the Steering Group for the Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales

Acknowledgements

There are a large number of people who have contributed to this review, and I am especially grateful to them from their unwavering commitment to vocational qualifications, their time, and their support.

Members of the Steering Group have been exceptional in attending meetings, reading papers, participating in robust debate and offering counsel and wisdom within the process. You have a vision for the future of Wales, and the role that vocational education and qualifications should play, which has guided the crafting of the recommendations contained within this report.

Members:

Tom Bewick	<i>Federation of Awarding Bodies</i>
Sian Cartwright	<i>Trades Union Congress</i>
Ben Cottam	<i>Federation of Small Businesses</i>
Owen Evans	<i>Estyn</i>
Jamie Insole	<i>University and College Union</i>
Ben Kinross	<i>National Union of Students</i>
Guy Lacey	<i>Colegau Cymru</i>
Ioan Matthews	<i>Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol</i>
Scott McKenzie	<i>Open University</i>
Chris Millis	<i>Association of Directors of Education in Wales</i>
Lisa Mytton	<i>National Training Federation for Wales</i>
Ian Price	<i>Confederation of British Industry</i>
Kieron Rees	<i>Universities Wales</i>

Strategic Advisors:

Philip Blaker	<i>Qualifications Wales</i>
Cassy Taylor	<i>Qualifications Wales</i>
Gareth Downey	<i>Qualifications Wales</i>

This review would not have been possible without support from Welsh Government officials: Rhian Edwards, Alison Bryant, Chloe Harris, Jonathan Ackland, Thomas Rose, Catherine Singleton, Marian Jebb, Chris Hare and Geoff Hicks to name but a few. A special mention must however go to Mark Price, for his incredible efficiency, his organisational skills, and his ability to keep calm whenever anything was thrown at him!

The Qualifications Wales team who have acted as strategic advisors, have provided information and advice, and I am especially grateful to Philip Blaker, Cassy Taylor and Gareth Downey. The team has a great deal of knowledge and experience in this area, and they have been quick to respond to the many queries I have had. I am also grateful to the OECD, Golley Slater and Beaufort Research for their work, and

to the Edge Foundation for facilitating workshops with stakeholders. Many individuals and organisations attended Steering Group meetings to present to us, and there are many others whose provision of information, knowledge and experience have contributed to this review, too numerous to mention.

To all of the individuals and organisations who have given evidence to the review, I thank you. Your openness, honesty, and willingness to share experiences and views has helped to shape this report. Learners will benefit from your advocacy of vocational qualifications, your support and allegiance.

Executive Summary

There is much in the world of vocational qualifications in Wales which is good, and those involved in this review have been passionate about and committed to the advancement of vocational education, training, and qualifications. Stakeholders commend:

- the wide range of vocational qualifications, offering choice to learners, employers and learning providers
- embedding vocational qualifications within programmes of learning, sufficiently flexible to allow individual tailoring for learners
- strong support from, and links with industry in both developing and delivering vocational qualifications
- an increasing number of vocational qualifications available through the medium of Welsh or bilingually

Stakeholders asked us to concentrate on certain elements: how we can ensure that we have the right vocational qualifications to meet future needs, greater responsiveness to, and flexibility for employers, clarity of progression routes for learners, assessment methodologies, and concerns about future portability of vocational qualifications.

Our focus for the review has primarily been on vocational qualifications for 16-19 year olds. One of the key drivers for this focus was the risk to vocational qualifications in Wales from the defunding of certain vocational qualifications in England, and we were asked to be pragmatic and practical in our recommendations.

Our terms of reference asked us to consider the vocational landscape in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as internationally. It became immediately evident that the position is complex, and different in each nation of the United Kingdom. England is in the middle of a significant period of reform, with the introduction of T Levels at level 3, and a plan to reform qualifications at level 2 and below. Scotland has just published its skills delivery strategy and a review of qualifications and assessment for the senior school phase. Northern Ireland has recently closed consultation on the purpose and principles of vocational qualifications. In these latter instances, the responses to the reviews and consultation are as yet unknown.

What are the key findings and messages in Wales? Throughout this review, we have been challenged in differentiating between 'vocational qualifications' and 'vocational education and training'. We are clear that our approach to vocational education and training, in which qualifications form part of a programme of learning, is the right one,

allowing us to differentiate the components of programmes to suit the individual learner, or employer needs.

We have learnt that over the last five years, the number of learners starting vocational qualifications has decreased. We recognise that over this period we have suffered the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore are cautious both about the interpretation and extrapolation of such trends. Unsurprisingly, there has also been a decrease in the number of vocational qualifications onto which these learners enrol, by around 17%. The scale of this decrease is not reflected in enrolments onto AS or A levels. There may be many reasons for this which we allude to in our report, and the magnitude of difference is a cause for scrutiny. We were also concerned to note that enrolments into occupations important to the Welsh economy, such as engineering and information communication technology, had at best remained static, and at worst, decreased as a percentage of overall enrolments.

Wales does not have a strategy for vocational education and training – indeed does not have an overarching strategy for post-16 learning. We need a strategy which brings together the divergent elements involved in vocational education and training and delivery of qualifications, into one coherent plan. In addition, we do not have a clear assessment of our national occupational and skills needs for the future. Against such an assessment, we need to chart our enrolments onto qualifications, and our learner destinations – without such correlation it is difficult to determine whether we have a relevant and effective range of vocational qualifications to meet our future needs. But we do need to recognise the primacy of learner choice, and learner choice may not always accord with demand. We also need to recognise that vocational qualifications can be the stimulus for learners to reengage with learning. Our vocational curricula need to balance these requirements.

We looked internationally and highlighted some international practices – stakeholder engagement, work placement, and Recognition of Prior Learning to name a few. We considered the learner journey, both to and through vocational qualifications. We found an inconsistency in the provision of initial advice and guidance to learners – a finding reflected in several other contemporary reports. We found that the transition between pre and post-16 vocational learning can be complex, and urge Qualifications Wales to reflect carefully on that transition in its consideration of the ‘Full 14-16 Qualification Offer’. We were pleased to acknowledge the number of qualifications available through the medium of Welsh, and an increase in the number of learners taking qualifications bilingually, but believe that there is more to do.

We were told that progression routes need to be clearer through vocational qualifications, and that choice of qualifications was important. For post-19 learners, employers told us that we were not aspirational enough in the development and delivery of our qualifications. We need to address the pace of development and accelerate delivery through learning providers.

Finally we considered the options for Wales. We considered adopting the approach being taken in England. Whilst we can see that T levels are rigorous and challenging qualifications, we felt that they have not yet provided proof of concept over a realistic time period. We also acknowledged the challenges being faced by providers. We

considered a reactive approach to qualification development in other UK nations but did not feel that a reflex reaction would meet our own aspirations.

A national awarding body for vocational qualifications in Wales would yield a number of benefits, not least of which is that we would be immune from decisions made in other countries. However, one of the key messages we received was that choice of qualifications was important – reasons including international portability– and that well established awarding body ‘brands’ were respected by employers. The significance of setting up a national awarding body for vocational qualifications, procuring expertise, design and development of new qualifications and the potential impact on existing qualifications meant that we could not recommend this as a way forward at this time.

Our final option was the expansion of *made for Wales* qualifications. Our ultimate approach was based on our opening comments – that there is much which is good about vocational qualifications in Wales, and those who design, develop, deliver and support these qualifications. We can build on this, through a renewed approach to sector reviews, and the gradual expansion of *made for Wales* vocational qualifications. However, we also note that there have been some challenges in the implementation of some *made for Wales* qualifications and need to ensure that we learn lessons from the rapid reviews of these qualifications.

Our recommended direction of travel builds throughout narrative of this report. We recommend that *made for Wales* vocational qualifications should be developed incrementally, within a 10-year plan for renewed sector reviews. We further recommend that choice should be retained, wherever possible, and restriction used only when necessary. *Made for Wales* vocational qualifications and the 10-year plan should be developed with the context of the vocational education and training strategy and the assessment of occupational and skills needs, to ensure we have the relevant and effective range of vocational qualifications.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Welsh Government should develop a national strategy for vocational education and training, which would in turn inform the strategic direction for vocational qualifications. This strategy should form part of a wider post-compulsory education and training strategy.

Recommendation 2: The Welsh Government, as part of its strategy for vocational education and training, should adopt the purpose and principles as defined.

Recommendation 3: The Welsh Government should commission work to define the future demand nationally for occupational and skills needs in Wales. This will inform curriculum development, alongside clearly articulated regional and local needs framed by Regional Skills Partnerships, and support Qualifications Wales in assessment of the priorities for vocational qualifications.

Recommendation 4: The Welsh Government should expedite work identifying not only enrolment trends of learners, but destinations of learners, to understand if learners progress into an industry related to their vocational qualification. These trends should be mapped against the labour market demands articulated in recommendation 3 above, to determine whether Wales is succeeding in filling its occupation and skills gaps to meet future aspirations.

Recommendation 5: That Qualifications Wales renews its approach to sector reviews, revisiting where necessary sectors already considered. This work should be aligned to the vocational education and training strategy referenced in recommendation 1, and to the analysis of future occupation and skills requirements referenced in recommendation 3.

Recommendation 6: That Qualifications Wales expand the remit of sector qualifications groups to advise on future requirements, supplementing these groups as and when appropriate with other stakeholders.

Recommendation 7: That Qualifications Wales present the findings and proposals of all sector reviews to its Board, to provide an opportunity for scrutiny and challenge of proposals made prior to publication.

Recommendation 8: That the Welsh Government, Commission for Tertiary Education and Research and Qualifications Wales improve co-ordination between sector reviews and apprenticeship framework reviews, and consider using Qualifications Wales' sector qualifications groups and evidence from Estyn's thematic reviews to inform the process.

Recommendation 9: That the Welsh Government explore the risks associated with changes in alignment between National Occupational Standards and Occupational Standards in England.

Recommendation 10: That the Welsh Government extend work placement opportunities to all level 3 learners who do not have work placement as a mandatory part of their qualification.

Recommendation 11: That Qualifications Wales explore with stakeholders how best to recognise generic work-place learning,

Recommendation 12: That Qualification Wales, in considering the approval of qualifications and the assessments regimes within those qualifications give increased consideration to the manageability of assessments, from a learner and learning provider perspective.

Recommendation 13: That the Welsh Government, Commission for Tertiary Education and Research and Qualifications Wales consider the terminology used in connection with qualifications, and set up a task and finish group to identify ways to strengthen the promotion, and awareness of the value of vocational education, training and qualifications, to learners and employers.

Recommendation 14: Given the decrease seen in the number of learners undertaking vocational qualifications over the last five years, that Welsh Government

and the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research consider whether this trend accords with labour market and skills requirements for the future and identifies action should it be necessary.

Recommendation 15: That Welsh Government ensure, as the Curriculum for Wales is embedded, that all learners receive equitable and impartial advice on, and access to the opportunities available to them in post-compulsory education and training, and consider how best to support this aim specifically for learners with disabilities and learning difficulties.

Recommendation 16: That Welsh Government should ensure that providers of post-16 education and training have appropriate access to pre-16 learners for the purposes of providing progression information for learners.

Recommendation 17: That the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research convene a task and finish group to consider entry requirements onto vocational programmes of learning to understand the current differences in requirements, and to determine the best options for learners in Wales. This will necessarily consider equity across entry requirements for all qualifications.

Recommendation 18 : That the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research work with Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol to develop a way in which staff able to speak Welsh can, if willing, support a variety of learning providers.

Recommendation 19: That Qualifications Wales, working with Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol publish its plan to increase the number of vocational qualifications through the medium of Welsh and bilingually, recognising that this may focus on the qualifications with the largest enrolments and Welsh language demand.

Recommendation 20: That Qualifications Wales develop its Qualifications in Wales database further to provide more detail on vocational qualifications available through the medium of Welsh.

Recommendation 21: That the Welsh Government and learning providers should work together to consider innovative ways to offer a wider curriculum offer for learners where choice is more limited, or where the number of learners is small,

Recommendation 22: That dependent upon the outcome of the consultation on the 'Full 14-16 Qualification Offer', Welsh Government and Qualifications Wales should work with learning providers and awarding bodies to ensure that the purpose of pre vocational qualifications is understood by learners, that the delivery of those qualifications is consistent with expectations and that there is integrity of progression between pre vocational qualifications and post-16 vocational qualifications.

Recommendation 23: That Qualifications Wales works with stakeholders to produce vocational qualification 'route maps' to enable learners to identify progression opportunities in each sector.

Recommendation 24: That learning providers promote single or multiple units of vocational qualifications to employers where appropriate to do so, and that

Qualifications Wales encourage awarding bodies to make unit certification available to meet demand.

Recommendation 25: That the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research provide a 'rapid response' fund to learning providers, based on identified needs and sustainable outcomes, to allow them to respond rapidly to industry requirements.

Recommendation 26: That Welsh Government, Qualifications Wales and learning providers work together to explore whether the arrangements currently applied for Recognition of Prior Learning remain appropriate, and consider the merits of consistency of application throughout Wales.

Recommendation 27: The Welsh Government and the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, should work with all relevant stakeholders to explore progression through vocational provision onto level 6 provision, with particular emphasis on degree apprenticeships. Critical within this progression model should be vertical integration between levels.

Recommendation 28: That Wales retains an open market in relation to vocational qualifications, and does not pursue the creation of a single national awarding body.

Recommendation 29: That Wales does not adopt the same approach as in England in the implementation of T Levels, but that it does keep a watching brief as the qualifications mature.

Recommendation 30: As a short/medium term measure, that Qualifications Wales should continue to work with awarding bodies to extend the typical final start date of qualifications where appropriate to do so, and should keep learning providers updated regarding potential changes to qualifications through clear and regular communications.

Recommendation 31: That the phrase *made for Wales* becomes the accepted terminology, and that the definition of *made for Wales* qualifications be adopted.

Recommendation 32: That where new qualifications are commissioned by Qualifications Wales, Qualifications Wales works with Welsh Government and representative bodies of learning providers to establish professional development and resource implications, and collectively develop an implementation plan.

Recommendation 33: That Qualifications Wales renews its approach to sector reviews by developing a 10-year plan, to include thematic reviews, and the identification of qualifications which should be *made for Wales*. Where qualification reform is necessary, Qualifications Wales should consider first the options for existing qualifications to be revised or adapted, and should only restrict and commission new qualifications where it is necessary to secure the commitment of awarding bodies.

Introduction to the Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales

Background

The review of vocational qualifications in Wales has been brought about as a result of the Co-operation Agreement¹ between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru (2021). The Agreement refers to 'Reforming the Foundations of Wales',² and, in relation to education in Wales, to:

'Focus on experiences and well-being as we reform qualifications in line with Wales' new Curriculum. We will significantly expand the range of 'made in Wales' vocational qualifications to fit the needs of our learners and our economy.'

The scope of the review was set out in the Terms of Reference (please see Annex 1) and included vocational qualifications from levels 1 to 5, regardless of where they are delivered – school sixth forms, colleges, work-based learning providers, or adult community learning. The key focus for the review was qualifications for 16-19 year olds, recognising the potential risk to vocational qualifications in Wales as a result of changes taking place in other UK nations – and in particular in England.

England is in the middle of significant reform to vocational qualifications. England is the largest market for awarding bodies operating across the four nations of the UK, accounting for 92% of all vocational qualification certifications across England, Wales (5%) and Northern Ireland (3%).³ Northern Ireland is currently reviewing vocational qualifications, and in March 2023 closed a consultation on the purpose and principles of vocational education.⁴ Scotland has just completed a review of the 'senior phase'⁵ and of the skills delivery landscape.⁶

How we have undertaken the review

The Steering Group for the review was established in July 2022. It met monthly from September 2022 until June 2023, establishing the direction for the review, and the evidence based needed to inform its deliberations. During this period the steering group:

- received presentations from other nations in the United Kingdom, and from other countries (please see Annex 2)

¹ <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-11/cooperation-agreement-2021.pdf>

² Ibid.P7

³ Briefing Paper on the Vocational Qualifications Landscape in the UK: Qualifications Wales November 2022

⁴ <https://consultations.nidirect.gov.uk/dfc/principles-for-vocational-qualifications-in-northe/>

⁵ <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/independent-report/2023/06/future-report-independent-review-qualifications-assessment/documents/future-report-independent-review-qualifications-assessment/future-report-independent-review-qualifications-assessment/govscot%3Adocument/future-report-independent-review-qualifications-assessment.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/fit-future-developing-post-school-learning-system-fuel-economic-transformation/>

- commissioned research from the OECD in the form of 5 case studies, each focussing on delivery, design and development of vocational qualifications in individual countries
- commissioned research from learners through Beaufort research and Golley Slater
- held two wider stakeholder workshops, facilitated by the Edge Foundation
- received feedback from written evidence, and from the Chair, who had undertaken discussions with a wide range of organisations and individuals (please see Annex 3)

In addition, a literature review was undertaken, and an analysis of a wide spectrum of data. Combined, all of this information provided us with a rich source of evidence in helping to inform conclusions and recommendations.

This report is based on consideration of evidence cited above, feedback from stakeholders, extensive research and analysis, and a significant amount of reflection and debate. We make 33 recommendations.

Vocational Qualifications: what works well now?

The focus of our thinking throughout the Review has been the best interests of learners, ensuring that vocational qualifications support them in providing progression opportunities into their chosen occupation, develop their knowledge and competencies to be used in the advancement of the economy, and in developing them as citizens to enrich our society and communities.

At the very outset, we need to acknowledge that there is much in the world of vocational qualifications in Wales which is good. And by vocational qualifications, we mean vocational qualifications in their widest possible context – those who design and develop, those who award, those who deliver, those who support, those who fund, those who regulate ... and we could go on. All of those with whom we engaged during this review were passionate about securing the best outcomes for learners in Wales.

Stakeholders with whom we engaged were clear about the various merits of vocational qualifications in Wales at present, and wanted to ensure that these elements were protected in any future development. These included:

- the wide range of vocational qualifications, offering choice to learners, employers and learning providers
- embedding vocational qualifications within programmes of learning, sufficiently flexible to allow individual tailoring for learners
- national and international recognition of vocational qualifications

- strong support from, and links with industry in both developing and delivering vocational qualifications
- an increasing number of vocational qualifications available through the medium of Welsh or bilingually
- a systematic approach to the review of vocational qualifications

There were areas however that stakeholders asked us to focus on, including how we ensure we have the right vocational qualifications to meet future needs, clarity of progression routes for learners, greater responsiveness to, and flexibility for employers, assessment methodologies, and concerns about future portability of vocational qualifications. We address these matters in our report.

Structure of Report

Our report is structured in the following way:

- Chapter 1 considers why this review is taking place, provides information on vocational qualification in Wales, their delivery, regulation and the relative position in other UK nations
- Chapter 2 considers our learners – who is studying vocational qualifications and in which areas are they studying
- Chapter 3 looks at the national landscape within which qualifications are developed and delivered
- Chapter 4 examines the design and development of vocational qualifications internationally
- Chapter 5 focuses on the learner journey to and through vocational qualifications
- Chapter 6 considers and evaluates options available for Wales

Chapter 1: Review of vocational qualifications in Wales

1.1 Introduction

This review of vocational qualifications in Wales has been brought about as a result of the Co-operation Agreement⁷ between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru (2021). The Agreement aims to ‘reform[ing] the foundations of Wales,’⁸ and, in relation to education in Wales, to ‘focus on experiences and well-being as we reform qualifications in line with Wales’ new Curriculum. We will significantly expand the range of ‘made in Wales’ vocational qualifications to fit the needs of our learners and our economy.’

The Terms of Reference for this review were agreed by the Minister for Education and Welsh Language, and the Designated Member in advance of the commencement of this review. Six specific objectives were identified:

- to document and comment on the relevance and effectiveness of the vocational qualifications currently on offer in Wales at levels 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, and identify priority areas for further action
- to identify the best international models for vocational qualifications, including any recent trends and changes, and their suitability and applicability here, in particular in light of the ambitions and aims of the new Curriculum for Wales
- to consider the impact of new T Level qualifications on Wales and, the options, including alternatives, for learners in Wales
- to consider work done by Qualifications Wales on ascertaining what current vocational qualifications awarding bodies in Wales, England, Scotland and Northern Ireland are planning to do to alter the range of vocational qualifications they offer at levels 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 over the remaining four years of the current Senedd
- to outline and evaluate the options for the Welsh Government, Qualifications Wales and vocational qualification providers in Wales in light of the likely changes identified under points 1 to 4 above
- to make recommendations to Welsh Ministers and Designated Members for the form and timing of the significant expansion of ‘made in Wales’ and ‘made for Wales’ vocational qualifications over the period 2023 to 2026. This will include the additional resource and funding requirements to support any proposed changes

⁷ <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-11/cooperation-agreement-2021.pdf>

⁸ Ibid.P7

The review focuses on publicly funded vocational qualifications for 16-19 year olds. In this chapter, we provide key contextual information for vocational qualifications in Wales – what they are, who delivers them, how they are funded and the role of the regulator – Qualifications Wales. We also provide intelligence on the vocational qualifications landscape in Wales, in other UK nations, and briefly in countries which formed part of research undertaken by the OECD⁹ as part of this review.

1.2 What are vocational qualifications?

Vocational education and training is designed for learners to acquire knowledge, skills and competences generally specific to a particular occupation, or access to further and higher learning. Vocational qualifications provide and assess the knowledge, skills and capability levels of learners pursuing vocational education and training. The qualifications may have work-based components, and in the case of apprenticeship frameworks, learners are employees of the organisation for whom they work.

Vocational qualifications for post-16 learners are available at many levels. This review considers those from level 1 to level 5, but we do refer to entry level qualifications (qualifications that sit below level 1) where appropriate to do so, to provide a comprehensive analysis of the vocational qualifications landscape. A variety of vocational qualifications exist: examples include extended diplomas which are broadly equivalent to three A-levels; national vocational qualifications, which can be available at all levels covered in this review; qualifications preparing individuals for life and work; and professional qualifications, such as those for accounting technicians. In many cases, providers also offer the level 3 Advanced Skills Challenge Certificate, often referred to as the Welsh Baccalaureate. From September 2023, this will be replaced by the Advanced Skills Baccalaureate Wales.

1.3 Who delivers vocational qualifications in Wales?

Vocational qualifications available for public funding in Wales are primarily delivered in three types of settings:

- schools with their own sixth forms
- further education colleges
- work-based learning providers

Adult Community Learning partners and others also deliver vocational qualifications, although the number of learners is substantially smaller in these settings.

⁹ Vocational Qualifications in an International Perspective, OECD, June 2023

In 2021/22, there were 136 schools in Wales with sixth forms¹⁰ – secondary and middle schools (all age schools).¹¹ There were 23,520 pupils¹² in those sixth forms at across years 12, 13 and 14. Just under a third of these were taking vocational qualifications – 7,335 learners. Most schools with sixth forms offer vocational qualifications at level 3 alongside A levels. In some areas, there is tertiary provision, where learners from schools without a sixth form access a local college or other school with a sixth form after completing Year 11.

Thirteen further education colleges, including Adult Learning Wales, offer a range of vocational and general education qualifications from entry level right through to level 5 in Wales. Many further education colleges offer higher level provision, generally in partnership with a university. In 2021/22, there were 45,250 full time unique learners at Further Education Colleges, and 54,680 part time learners.¹³ Not all of these learners were taking vocational qualifications. A further 19,375 learners were following work-based learning provision at further education colleges.

Apprenticeship provision – part of work-based learning – is delivered in the workplace and normally includes an off-the-job element where learners attend a training centre or college for the theory parts of their programme. In August 2021, the Welsh Government contracted with ten ‘lead’ work-based learning providers to deliver apprenticeships across Wales. Six of these are further education college led consortia or partnerships, and four are independent training providers. The ten lead work-based learning providers work with sub-contractors to deliver apprenticeship frameworks. Apprenticeship frameworks include a technical qualification, an occupational competency-based qualification, essential skills Wales and other qualifications necessary for a given occupation.

Five work-based learning providers offer Employability provision – Jobs Growth Wales+. Three of these are further education college led consortia or partnerships, and two are independent training providers. Jobs Growth Wales+ is a training and/or development programme for 16 -18-year-olds not engaged in post-16 education, training or employment. The primary objective of the Jobs Growth Wales+ Programme is to equip young people with the skills, qualifications and experience needed to enable them to progress learning at a higher level, employment (including self-employment) or an apprenticeship.

¹⁰ <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/Schools-Census/Pupil-Level-Annual-School-Census/Schools/schools-by-localauthorityregion-type>

¹¹ There are also maintained special schools with post-16 provision. Data is not collected on the qualifications being undertaken in the same way as for secondary and middle schools so these are not included.

¹² <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/Schools-Census/Pupil-Level-Annual-School-Census/Schools/schools-by-localauthorityregion-type>

¹³ Stats Wales: Statistical First Release – Further Education, Work-based learning and adult learning in Wales, 2021/22

In 2021/22, there were 43,755 unique learners in work-based learning provision.¹⁴ This number includes learners following apprenticeship or legacy traineeship routes (a 'predecessor' of Jobs Growth Wales) but does not include Jobs Growth Wales + learners starting between April and July 2022. At the end of December 2022, there were 2,035 Jobs Growth Wales + programmes running.¹⁵

1.4 What is the legislative basis for vocational qualifications in Wales?

Welsh Government is responsible for publicly funded education and training in Wales. Legislation for learners of 16 years and over is set out in the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, Learning and Skills Act 2000, and the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009, which set out the statutory basis for 14-19 learning pathways. For 16-18 year olds, statutory guidance¹⁶ is provided, which requires the creation of local curricula, informed by the 14-19 regional networks, key stage 4 curriculum requirements, and an obligation to maximise the availability of courses of study.

The composition of local curricula may vary according to local and regional priorities and requirements but should include a minimum of 30 courses at level 3. Each local curriculum must offer a minimum of 5 general courses and 5 vocational courses. The vocational courses must fall across a minimum of 3 domains,¹⁷ one of which must be the domain of mathematics, science and technology.

Provision of level 2 programmes may be included in local curricula to provide appropriate progression from Key Stage 4 for learners who choose courses which can only be delivered at level 1 for pre-16 learners.

All non-degree qualifications available for public funding in Wales up to the age of 19 must be 'approved' or 'designated' as eligible for funding by Qualifications Wales, under the Qualifications Wales Act 2015.¹⁸ Qualifications Wales, as an independent body, regulates awarding bodies and the qualifications they offer in Wales. All qualifications offered by recognised awarding bodies are listed on the Qualifications in Wales database, together with an indication of whether they are 'approved' or 'designated' for public funding.

Qualifications Wales instigated a programme of sector reviews for vocational qualifications, which commenced shortly after the organisation was established in 2015. Sector subject areas are evaluated to determine whether the vocational

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ [Jobs Growth Wales+ statistics | GOV.WALES](#)

¹⁶ [Statutory Guidance Post 16 \(gov.wales\)](#)

¹⁷ The learning domains are (a) mathematics, science and technology, (b) business, administration and law, (c) services for people, (d) arts, media, culture and languages, (e) humanities, social sciences and preparation for life and work.

¹⁸ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2015/5/contents>

qualifications they contain remain fit for purpose. Sector reviews may result in brand new *made for Wales* vocational qualifications – as in the sectors of ‘health and social care and childcare (2016)’, and ‘construction and the built environment (2018)’, the updating of existing vocational qualifications, or in retaining the status quo. The actions taken are dependent upon the findings of the review and are intended to be proportionate to those findings.

Legislation relating to apprentices is contained in the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Lifelong Learning Act of 2009.¹⁹ Apprenticeship Frameworks are offered for 16–18-year-old learners, and indeed, in Wales to any age learner, subject to meeting certain criteria. The Welsh Government is the Issuing Authority for Welsh apprenticeship frameworks.²⁰

Apprenticeship frameworks are reviewed and developed within a three-year timetable by Welsh Government. The Welsh Government ensures that new or revised frameworks meet industry standards and the minimum requirements set out in the Specification of Apprenticeship Standards Wales. In so doing, development partners are contracted to update frameworks, including sector employer representative bodies, such as the Construction Industry Training Board, and workforce development bodies such as Health Education Improvement Wales. In addition, Welsh Government publishes arrangements for ‘Calls to Action’ allowing employers to submit proposals to develop new and updated frameworks.

The Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 (TER Act)²¹ means that the arrangements for the planning and funding of all post-16 education and training, including Higher Education, are changing from 1 April 2024. The strategic vision²² states that ‘working together, we will deliver a more engaged, excellent and equitable Tertiary Education and Research (TER) sector in Wales that prioritises the interests of learners and contributes to national prosperity. We wish to see a joined-up TER system in Wales that is easy for all learners to navigate, is valued by the public, creates a highly skilled society, tackles inequalities, is globally renowned for excellent education, training, research and innovation, and has a civic mission at its heart’.

1.5 How are vocational qualifications funded in Wales?

For learners up to the age of 19, the Welsh Government provides funding via a block grant to school sixth forms (though local authorities) and further education colleges to fund vocational qualifications. Funding for work-based learning provision is provided by means of a public procurement exercise, after which contracts are

¹⁹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2009/22/contents>

²⁰ ²⁰ <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-05/apprenticeship-issuing-authority-for-wales.pdf>

²¹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asc/2022/1/contents/enacted>

²² [strategic-vision-post-compulsory-education-training.pdf](https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-01/strategic-vision-post-compulsory-education-training.pdf)

awarded by the Welsh Government to successful contractors known as lead providers, who will then be funded to deliver provision. Adult Community Learning partners also receive grant funding, normally through a local authority or further education institution.

In 2013, the Welsh Government published its framework for the planning and funding of post-16 education in Wales. The new framework modified funding regulations to focus on 'programmes of learning' rather than qualifications as the basis for planning and funding. A programme of learning is based on a package of learning with a purpose and outcome for progression to employment or further or higher education. Each full-time programme is designed with the same general structure but will have its own specification dependent on type and level of programme. Each programme of learning typically consists of four components:

- core
- main Qualification(s)
- community Learner Industry Focus (CLIF)
- work related experience (WRE)

Core: All learners should be supported to make progress in their numeracy and literacy skills throughout their programme of learning. There are various options and combinations of options in which learners can progress their skills, including undertaking the Skills Challenge Certificate, either stand alone or as part of their Welsh Baccalaureate, taking a minimum of 2/3 Essential Skills Wales qualifications, in line with the Wales Essential Skills Toolkit (WEST) assessment result for each learner, and tutorial time.

Main Qualification(s): Main qualifications within learning programmes must be selected from those listed on the Qualifications in Wales²³ database within the approved or designated categories of qualifications and must relate to the learning area of the programme. Main qualification(s) must account for over 50% of the total Guided Contact Hours for the programme with the target being 70% of the total Guided Contact Hours.

Community Learner Industry Focus: This component of the programme should be tailored to meet the specific needs of the learner, and local and specific employer needs. Qualifications delivered under the Community Learner Industry Focus should add value to a programme by developing wider skills or by developing skills to a higher level to aid progression to employment or further study. Not all learners will need to undertake this component as this may not be required where the main qualification has addressed the learner requirements fully. Providers have the flexibility to tailor this component to provide additional support for individual learners to develop literacy and numeracy skills or personal and social skills.

²³<https://www.qiw.wales/qualifications/search?lang=en&all=True>

Work Related Experience: this will only be required for some programmes, either to meet the qualification specification for assessed work experience, or the skills requirements to progress.

For learners over the age of 19, there are various routes of funding available, dependent upon eligibility. These routes include the Welsh Government Learning Grant Further Education (full time and part time), ReACT+, and Personal Learning Accounts.

1.6 Who regulates vocational qualifications in Wales?

Throughout the UK, all qualifications proposed for public funding are regulated by an external, independent body – the regulator. At present, most of the vocational qualifications taken in Wales are also available in England and Northern Ireland. This approach facilitates portability and encourages choice and flexibility for learners. Under the Qualifications Wales Act (2015), all publicly funded qualifications for learners under the age of 19 within Wales are approved or designated as eligible for funding and regulated by the independent regulator, Qualifications Wales.

The Qualifications Wales Act has a clear focus on the specific needs of the Welsh system. It specifies the principal aims of: *‘ensuring that qualifications, and the qualification system, are effective for meeting the reasonable needs of learners in Wales; and promoting public confidence in qualifications and the Welsh qualification system.’*

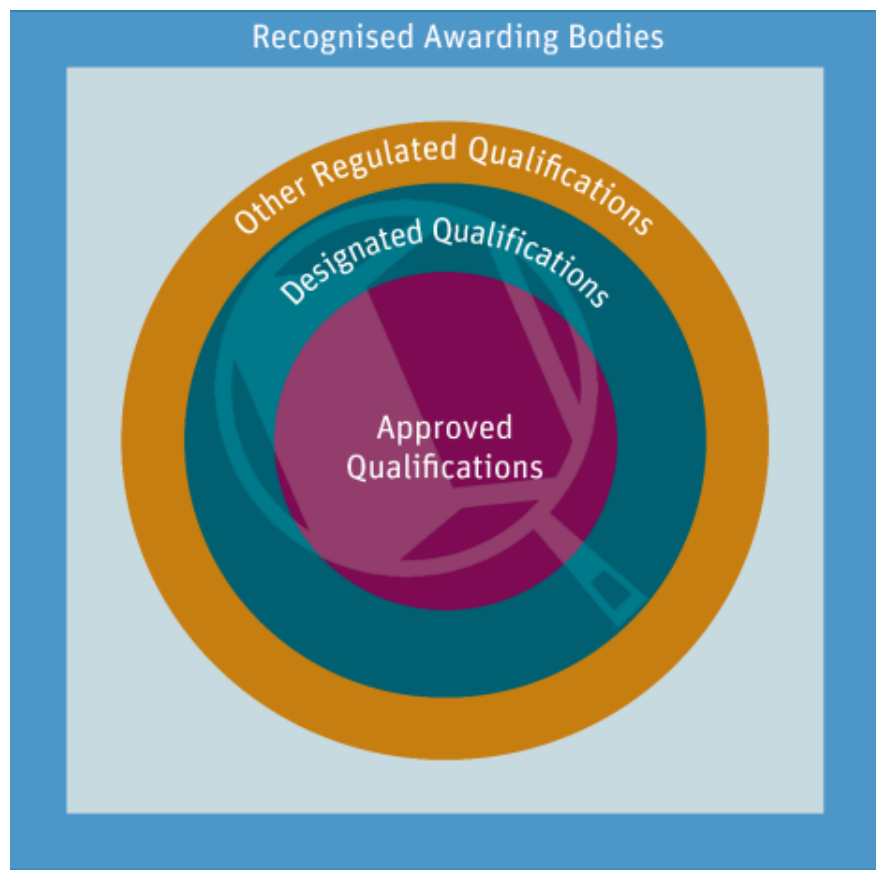
Qualifications Wales carries out the regulatory powers and functions articulated within the legislation, which include:

- regulating awarding bodies and their qualifications made available to learners in Wales
- focusing on priority qualifications
- approving forms of qualifications which are then eligible for being provided to learners attending certain publicly funded courses
- designating other forms of qualifications which are then also eligible for use on publicly funded courses
- restricting the number of forms of a qualification that may be approved
- commissioning new qualifications where such a restriction is in place, and
- reviewing qualifications and the qualification system

The role of Qualifications Wales is broader than a conventional qualifications regulator, in that it has additional powers to commission new qualifications through an open competitive process where there is a market need, restrict the range of qualifications offered and provide grants to support the qualifications system, including support for Welsh-medium qualifications.

1.7 Categorisation of Qualifications

Qualifications Wales recognises awarding bodies - awarding bodies which have satisfied criteria established by Qualifications Wales. Following recognition, all the qualifications offered by that awarding body in Wales are regulated unless the awarding body applies for the exemption of certain qualifications. They are categorised as 'approved', 'designated' or 'other regulated' qualifications.



'Approved Qualifications' are those qualifications eligible for use on publicly funded programmes of learning approved under Part 4 of the Qualifications Wales Act 2015, awarded in Wales and that have met approval criteria. Approved qualifications are:

- made for Wales, and so are designed to meet the specific needs of learners in Wales

- where Qualifications Wales publish approval criteria which awarding bodies need to meet in order to offer those qualifications
- available in both English and Welsh
- specifically targeted as part of an annual qualifications monitoring programme.

‘Designated Qualifications’ are those qualifications that are designated as eligible for use on publicly funded programmes of learning for learners under the age of 19, as defined under section 29 of the Qualifications Wales Act 2015. Designated qualifications are usually offered on a UK-wide basis, so not specifically *made for Wales*, though Qualifications Wales may place additional regulatory requirements when these are offered to learners in Wales. Qualifications Wales usually works in close partnership with other UK qualifications regulators on these qualifications.

‘Other regulated’ qualifications are those qualifications awarded in Wales by recognised awarding bodies, which have not been designated or approved by Qualifications Wales. They are regulated under the standard conditions of recognition and may be co-regulated with Ofqual and other UK regulators.

Qualifications Wales decides whether a qualification is eligible to be used on funded programmes of learning in Wales, but decisions about the funding of such programmes are made by Welsh Government.

1.8 What vocational qualifications are available in Wales?

Currently, there are 90 Awarding Bodies offering vocational qualifications in Wales.²⁴ During 2021/22, 10 Awarding Bodies accounted for 82% of the total number of vocational and other certifications awarded.²⁵ In the same year, WJEC accounted for 7.85% of all vocational certifications issued. Approximately 85% of vocational qualifications have fewer than 100 enrolments annually.

In July 2022, there were 3,768 approved and designated vocational/other qualifications²⁶ available for public funding in Wales at all levels. The number of vocational/other qualifications available for public funding has decreased

²⁴ [vq-release-e-final.pdf \(qualificationswales.org\)](#)

²⁵ <https://www.qualificationswales.org/publications-resources/annual-qualifications-market-report-academic-year-2021-to-2022-in-wales/>

²⁶ Vocational and Other includes: QCF; Other general; Vocationally related; IVET; CVET; Entry level; English for speakers of other languages; Essential Skills Wales; Higher level; Occupational qualification; National Vocational Qualification; Key Skills; Functional Skills; Other life skills; Other vocational; Performing Arts Graded Exam; End-Point Assessment

substantially, from 7,569 in 2017/18 to 3,768 - a reduction of nearly 4,000 in five years.

Graph 1: Approved and designated vocational /other qualifications in Wales



Source: Qualifications Wales Annual Qualifications Market Report 2021/22, February 2023

In addition to those qualifications available for public funding, there are over 12,000 additional vocational qualifications available to learners, although many of these will not have been awarded for some time - these do not attract public funding through a block grant.

1.9 What does the vocational qualifications landscape look like in England?

The Independent Panel on Technical Education was established in November 2015 by the Minister for Skills for the Westminster Government. The Panel was asked to advise on measures which could improve technical education in England.²⁷ Its key recommendation was for ‘the Government to develop a coherent technical education option which develops the technical knowledge and skills required to enter skilled employment, which leads from levels 2/3 to levels 4/5 and beyond, and which is highly valued because it works in the marketplace’.

As a result, England is in the middle of a significant reform of vocational qualifications. England is the largest market for awarding bodies operating across

²⁷https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/536046/Report_of_the_Independent_Panel_on_Technical_Education.pdf

the four nations of the UK, accounting for 92% of all vocational qualification certifications across England, Wales (5%) and Northern Ireland (3%).²⁸

At level 3, England has introduced T Levels²⁹ in a number of sector areas. T Levels are two-year courses which are taken after GCSEs and are broadly equivalent in size to three A levels. They have been developed in collaboration with employers and education providers and include:³⁰

- a technical qualification
- an industry placement of at least 315 hours (45 days)
- Maths and English qualifications
- other requirements as directed by T Level panels, such as licence to practice qualifications or professional registration.

T Levels are overseen and awarded by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, which has responsibility for making arrangements with awarding bodies for the development and delivery of technical qualifications within T Levels. The design and development of the technical qualifications are restricted to a single awarding body.

T Levels are being gradually rolled out. The first 16 have now been launched with the intention that 24 will ultimately be available. In early March 2023, the Department for Education deferred the roll-out of 4 T Levels, originally due to start in 2024 'to ensure that the qualifications can be delivered successfully, and that students have a high-quality experience and can progress successfully'.³¹

T Levels are likely to replace a range of funded vocational and technical qualifications for 16–19-year-olds in England. On 29 March 2023, the Department for Education in England published a final list of qualifications at Level 3 which overlap with T Levels (waves 1 and 2 of implementation phase only) and which will be defunded from 1 August 2024. In May 2023 it published a list of qualifications proposed to be defunded in relation to wave 3.

In March 2022, the Westminster Government launched a public consultation to gather views on proposals to reform post-16 qualifications at Level 2 and below.³²

²⁸ Briefing Paper on the Vocational Qualifications Landscape: Qualifications Wales November 2022

²⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/introduction-of-T-Levels/introduction-of-T-Levels>

³⁰ Briefing Paper on T Levels: Qualifications Wales, September 2022

³¹ <https://support.tlevels.gov.uk/hc/en-gb/articles/10414725763218-Wave-4-T-Level-Delays#:~:text=T%20Levels%20deferred%20from%202023,the%20needs%20of%20the%20sector.>

³² [Consultation: Review of post-16 qualifications at Level 2 and below in England \(education.gov.uk\)](https://www.education.gov.uk/consultation/review-of-post-16-qualifications-at-level-2-and-below-in-england)

The consultation proposed that eight groups of qualifications will be in scope for public funding at level 2, alongside GCSEs and Functional Skills Qualifications. Qualifications will be grouped according to whether they support progression to level 3 study, provide access to sustainable employment at level 2 or deliver English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). The eight groups comprise of six groups that will be available to both young people and adults, and two groups for adults only. At level 1 and below, five groups of level 1 qualifications and four groups at entry level will be considered for public funding in the future, with all groups available to both young people and adults. The first reformed qualifications will be available from September 2025.

1.10 ...In Scotland?

Qualifications in Scotland are regulated currently by the Scottish Qualifications Authority, which has both an awarding body and a regulatory function. There is a significant reform programme in Scotland at present, which includes the disbanding of the Scottish Qualifications Authority, and the creation of three new bodies – a qualifications organisation, a national agency for Scottish education, and an independent inspectorate.

As part of the reform programme, a Review of Qualifications and Assessment was commissioned. Its remit included advising on the purpose and principles underpinning reform of national qualifications and assessment in the ‘senior phase’ – approximately equivalent to 14-19 age learning. All qualifications were in scope – vocational and academic. The final report was published late June 2023, and its recommendations included a reform of the senior phase and the adoption of the Scottish Diploma of Achievement as the graduation certificate for the senior phase.³³

1.11 ...and in Northern Ireland?

In Northern Ireland the Department for the Economy is responsible for the strategic development of statutory further education, which includes vocational education. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment is an awarding body, and a qualifications regulator.

In December 2022, Northern Ireland issued a consultation document outlining ambitions for vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland.³⁴ It seeks to consult on a set of six principles which could underpin vocational qualifications, namely:

³³ <https://www.gov.scot/news/hayward-review-published/>

³⁴ <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/economy/Principles-Vocational-Qualifications-Northern-Ireland-Consultation.pdf>

- all vocational qualifications should present opportunities for the development and demonstration of relevant transversal skills
- all vocational qualifications must reflect economic need and support inclusive growth
- all vocational qualifications must be appropriately assessed
- all vocational qualifications must be based on recognised standards and allow portability and progression
- all vocational qualifications should embrace innovation
- all vocational qualifications must support flexible delivery and access to all

1.12 What about vocational qualifications in other countries?

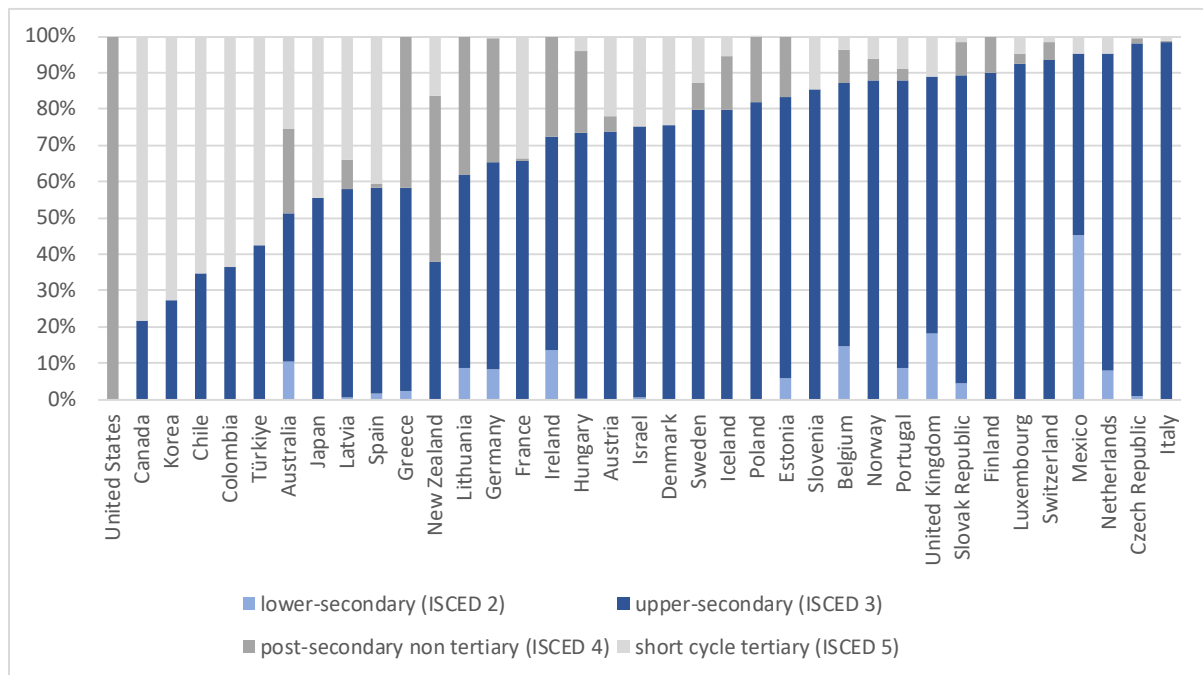
To inform our review, we commissioned work from the OECD³⁵ on the international landscape for vocational qualifications in other countries. Five 'case study' countries were examined in depth by the OECD. We were also privileged to receive direct presentations from several other countries, during steering group meetings.

It is not always easy to compare vocational qualifications across other countries, due to the way in which education systems work within those countries. Some countries have extensive vocational programmes at the upper secondary level (roughly equivalent to 14-18 years of age), whilst others, such as the United States, Canada and Ireland, tend to postpone such programmes to the post-secondary level. In the United States, for example, most vocational education and training takes place after completion of upper-secondary education. In Australia, vocational education and training serves both young people and adults, but in many countries, the system - in particular at the upper secondary level - mainly serves young people pursuing their initial education and training (for example, in Denmark, Estonia, Sweden and Switzerland).

The graph below demonstrates the concentration of vocational programmes across age groups.

³⁵ Vocational Qualifications in an International Perspective, OECD, June 2023

Graph 2: Distribution of vocational programmes by phase of learning



Source: OECD, June 2023

The number of vocational qualifications offered in each country varies significantly: Australia offers around 1400 Vocational qualifications, whilst in Sweden, there are 60 vocational qualifications, deriving from 12 main routes. We explore this further in chapter 4 of this report.

1.13 Summary

This chapter has provided contextual information for our report. We have examined how vocational education and training is delivered, how it is funded, and how it is regulated. We have recognised the positions in other nations of the UK, and we have seen that in Wales, the number of approved and designated vocational qualifications has decreased substantially over the last 5 years.

Our next chapter concentrates on those individuals that matter most to us – our learners and will help to refine further the areas on which we need to focus.

Chapter 2: Vocational Qualifications in Wales – who are our learners, and what vocational qualifications do they follow?

2.1 Introduction

Our learners. Our keys to the future. Our, and their aspirations are what motivates our commitment to vocational education, training and qualifications.

This chapter is about our vocational qualification learners. Through the analysis of data, it provides a picture about who takes vocational qualifications, and the vocational qualifications they follow. For the purposes of a comprehensive analysis, information is provided about learners studying from entry level up to and including level 5 vocational qualifications.

It is important to state from the very outset, that longitudinal analysis includes periods covering the Covid-19 pandemic. During this time, all forms of education were affected, with disruption to learning, teaching and the assessment of qualifications. We need to apply a degree of caution when interpreting this data, examining trends, and extrapolating the data to form hypotheses about the future.

Most importantly of course, behind every ‘statistic’ is a story about a person, whose aspirations will depend to an extent on the vocational qualification they are taking, and on the outcome they achieve.

2.2 Who are our vocational qualification learners?

This section of the report comments on learners – that is on individuals taking publicly funded vocational qualifications in Wales, with learners counted only once³⁶ even if they are enrolled on multiple vocational qualifications in the same academic year.

During 2021/22, 81,995 unique learners were studying at least one vocational qualification in Wales.³⁷ The number of learners has decreased compared with the average across the last five years and is lower than the number of learners starting vocational qualifications in 2017/18. Oral evidence from stakeholders received during the review suggested that the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, which had an impact on the demonstration, practice and assessment of vocational qualifications, may have affected recruitment. There is also a question mark as to whether higher than normal GCSE grades may have encouraged more learners to take A levels –

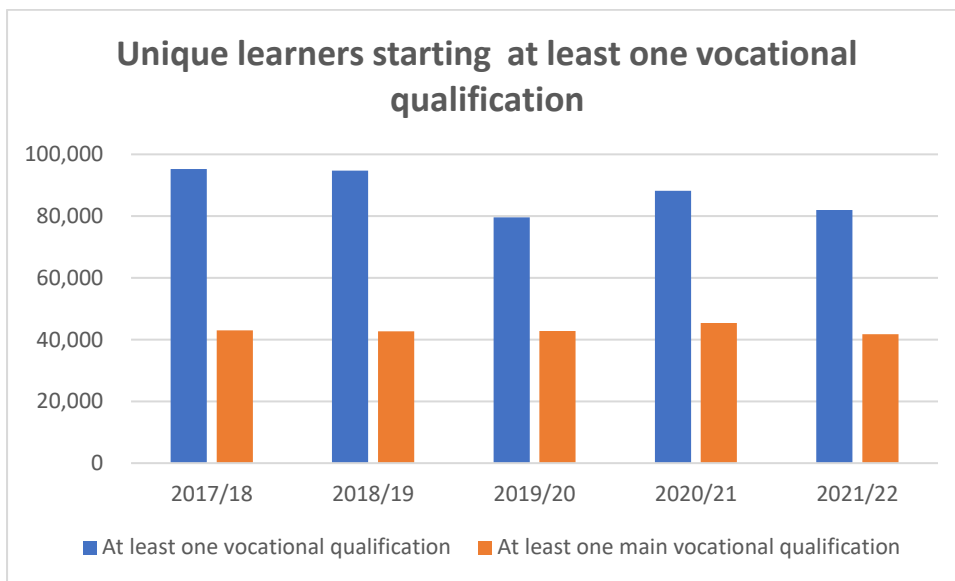
³⁶ Where analysis is presented by route and sector subject area, learners are counted once per category

³⁷ Learners started and still enrolled after 8 weeks, used as a consistent descriptor for learners and enrolments

perhaps qualifications with which they are more familiar – and we explore this further in chapter 5.

Of these learners, 41,755 were studying at least one ‘main’ vocational qualification in 2021/22³⁸ (note that main qualifications are not identified for work-based learning). The number of learners following at least one main qualification has also decreased over the last five years.

Graph 3: Unique learners starting at least one vocational qualification

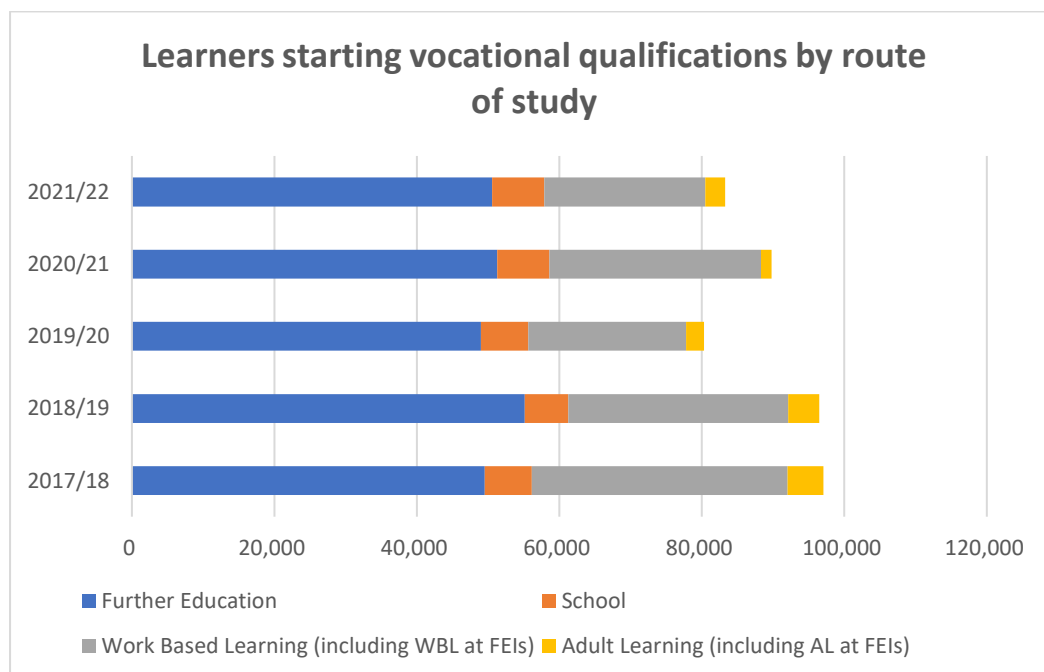


Source: Welsh Government Statistics 14 June 2023

³⁸[Post-16 planning and funding framework: programmes directory 2022 to 2023 | GOV.WALES](#)

If we look at where vocational learners are studying, the majority of learners starting vocational qualifications in Wales are in Further Education - 61% in 2021/22. Work-based learning accounted for just over 27%, with 9% in schools in the same year.³⁹

Graph 4: Learners starting vocational qualifications by route of study



Source: Welsh Government statistics 14 June 2023

The proportion of unique female learners starting at least one vocational qualification has fluctuated slightly between 54% and 52% over the last five years, with 52% of all vocational learners being female in 2021/22.

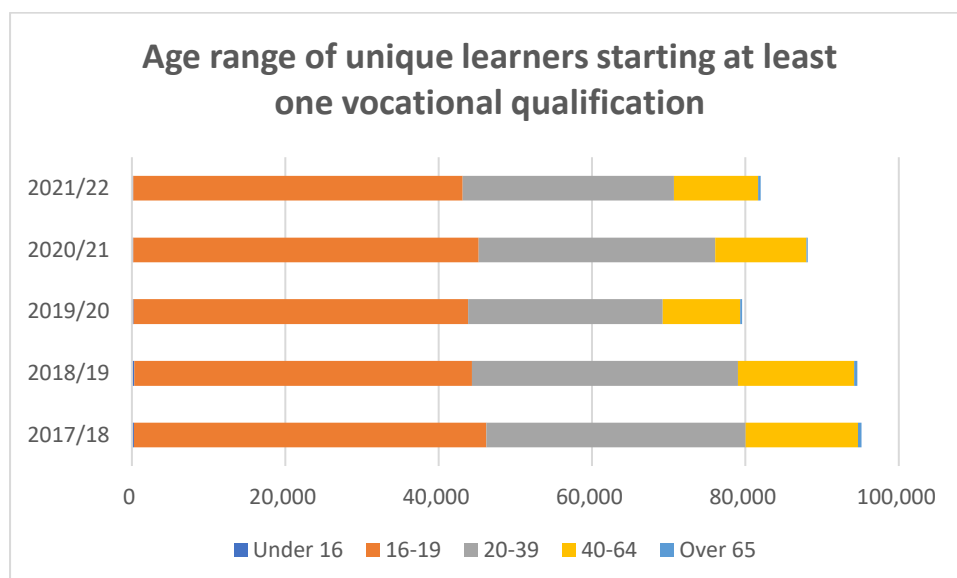
The graph below shows unique learners starting at least one vocational qualification over the last 5 years by age group. Since 2017/18, there has been an increase in the proportion of 16-19 year old learners starting at least one vocational qualification when compared to all age groups. However, the actual number of 16-19 year old learners in 2021/22 (42,940 learners) is lower than in any other year since 2017/18. 16-19 years old learners account for 52% of all learners on vocational qualifications.

Consequently, there has been a decrease the proportion of learners in age groups over the age of 20. In 2017/18, 51% of all learners were in the over 19 age group - 48,910 learners. Whilst there has been a decrease of around 3, 000 learners in the

³⁹ Referring to footnote 35, where analysis is presented by route and sector subject area, learners are counted once per category – figures will be slightly different from those shown in Graph 3

16-19 age group, the decrease in over 19s is far greater, at just under 10,000 learners.

Graph 5: Age range of unique learners starting at least one vocational qualification



Source: Welsh Government Statistics 14 June 2023

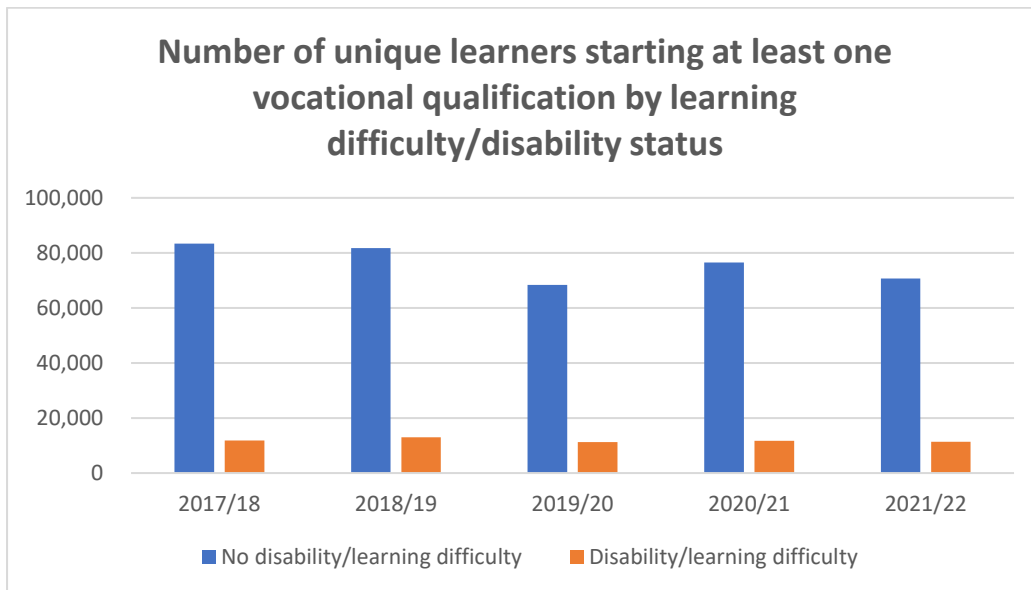
84% of learners starting at least one main vocational qualification are in the 16-19 year old age range in 2021/22.

In 2021/22, 88% of unique learners starting at least one vocational qualification described themselves as white, compared with 91% in 2017/18. Even after having accounted for an increase in the number of learners about whom information is unknown, this represents a decrease in the number of white learners, and an increase in the number of non-white learners. From the 2021 Census⁴⁰, 90.6% of the population in Wales described themselves as white.

14% of unique learners starting at least one vocational qualification in 2021/22 consider that they have a learning difficulty/disability, compared with 12% in 2017/18. The percentage of learners with a learning difficulty/disability studying at least one main qualification is higher at 18% in 2021/22, and whilst proportions have fluctuated slightly since 2017/18, there is no material change in trend.

⁴⁰ [Ethnic group, national identity, language and religion in Wales \(Census 2021\) | GOV.WALES](#)

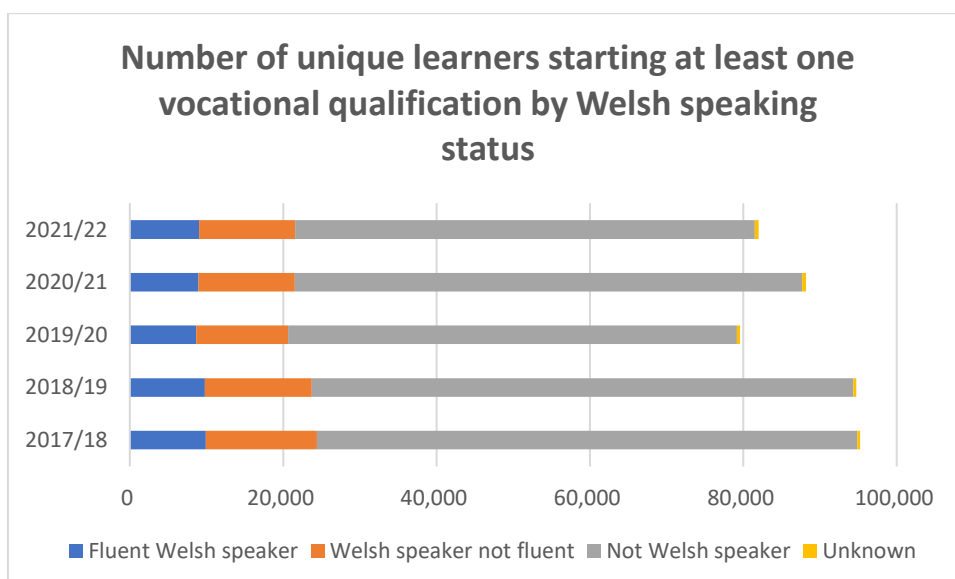
Graph 6: Number of unique learners starting at least one vocational qualification by learning difficulty/disability status



Source: Welsh Government Statistics 14 June 2023

The number of unique learners on vocational qualifications who consider themselves to be fluent, or able to speak some Welsh was 26% in 2021/22. The proportion has remained relatively unchanged since 2017/18.

Graph 7: Number of unique learners starting at least one vocational qualification by Welsh speaking status



Source: Welsh Government Statistics 14 June 2023

If main qualifications alone are considered, the proportion of learners able to speak Welsh, either fluently or in part, is greater, at 31% in 2021/22, but has remained static over the last 5 years.

In terms of proportions of learners from differing deprivation quintiles, there has been little change over the last five years. There has however been a difference between trends between local authority areas, with just under half of all local authorities remaining static or increasing slightly in terms of learner numbers.

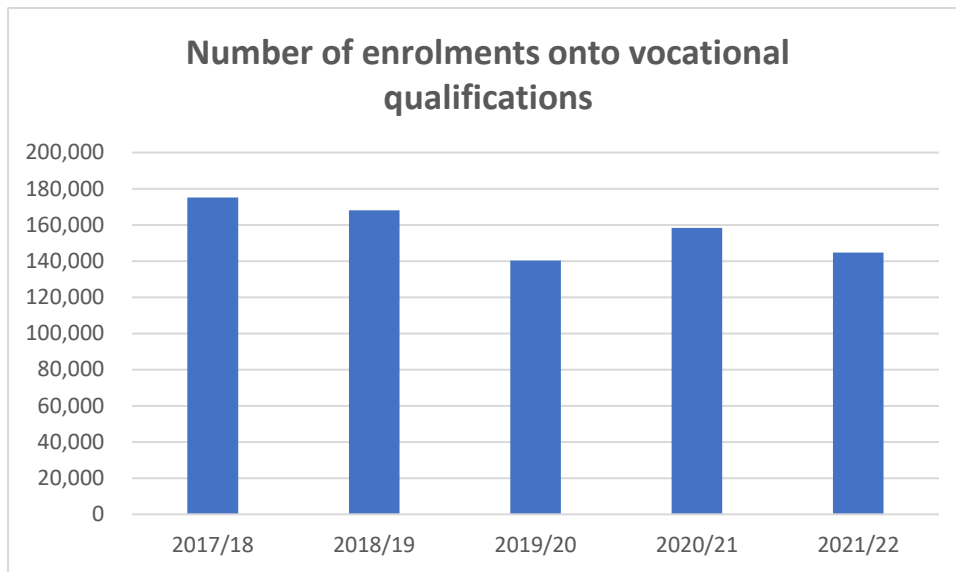
2.3 What Vocational Qualifications are learners studying in Wales?

This section of the report considers the vocational qualifications that learners are following. It uses as its base 'enrolments':⁴¹ A learner may be enrolled on one or many vocational qualifications, and several qualifications may constitute the learning programme, such as a Diploma in Engineering, Health and Safety at Work, and Essential Skills Wales qualifications.

In 2021/22, there were 144,675 enrolments onto vocational qualifications in Wales. As noted earlier, learner numbers on vocational qualifications have decreased since 2017/18, and similarly, numbers of enrolments onto vocational qualifications have decreased. Of these enrolments, 34% were onto main qualifications, and 23% onto Essential Skills qualifications.

⁴¹ Enrolments onto individual qualifications, where the learners is still enrolled after 8 weeks on the qualification

Graph 8: Number of enrolments onto vocational qualifications

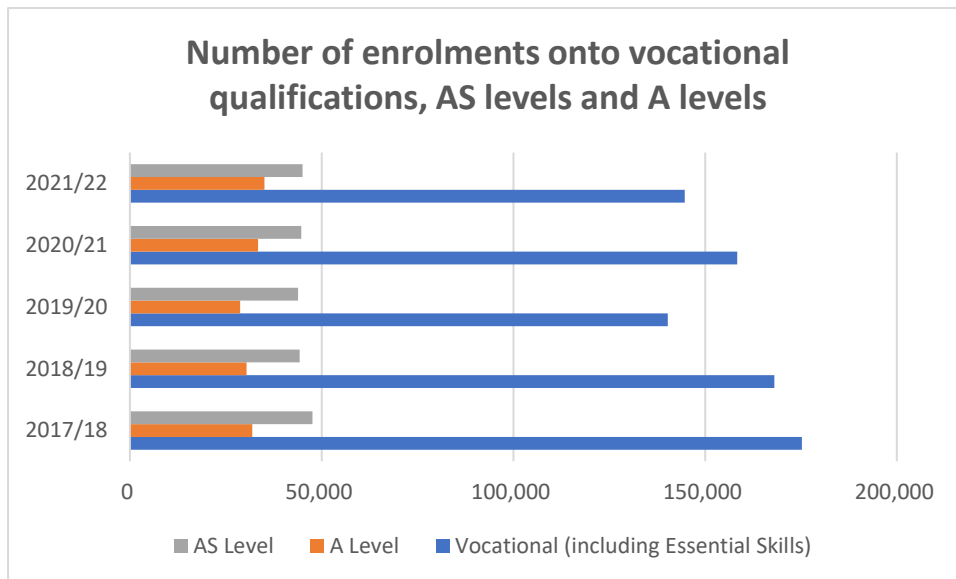


Source: Welsh Government Statistics 14 June 2023

If we compare the number of vocational enrolments with enrolments onto AS and A levels, we can see that whilst vocational enrolments have decreased substantially - by 17% - the change in AS and A level enrolments presents a different picture. Enrolments onto AS levels have decreased by 6%, and A level enrolments have increased by 10%.

The degree of difference is displayed in Graph 9. There may be many reasons for this, including an increase in the employment rate over the last five years, but the magnitude of difference is significant.

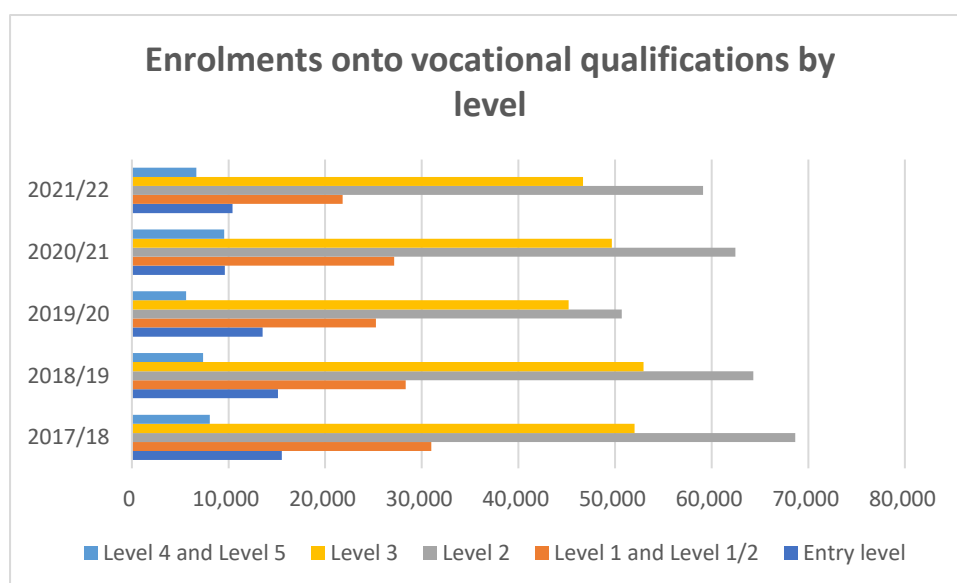
Graph 9: Number of enrolments onto vocational qualifications, AS and A levels



Source: Welsh Government Statistics 28 June 2023

Enrolments onto level 2 vocational qualifications constitute the largest proportion of enrolments overall. The proportion of vocational qualification enrolments onto level 2 has increased over the last 5 years, from 39% in 2017/18 to 41% in 2021/22. A similar increase is seen in level 3 vocational qualifications, now accounting for 32% of all vocational qualification enrolments. Entry level and level 1 qualifications have all decreased as a proportion of total enrolments, whilst levels 4 and 5 have remained static.

Graph 10: Enrolments onto vocational qualifications by level



Source: Welsh Government Statistics 14 June 2023

Table 1 below shows the number of vocational qualification enrolments at Sector Subject Area level. For 2021/22, the largest Sector Subject Area is Preparation for Life and Work, which includes a significant number of Essential Skills qualifications. After this, the largest sector by far is Health, Public Services and Care, which has more than double the enrolments of any other sector excluding Preparation for Life and Work. As shown in graph 8 above, enrolments onto vocational qualifications have decreased since 2017/18. A large proportion of this decrease can be attributed to Preparation for Life and Work, which has decreased by over 24,000 enrolments since 2017/18. However, six Sector Subject Areas have shown an increase over the same period:

- Health, public services and care
- Science and mathematics
- Construction, planning and built environment
- History, philosophy and theology
- Social sciences
- Languages, literature and culture

The latter three areas constitute a very small number and proportion of enrolments overall – 2% of all enrolments in 2021/22. The remaining Sector Subject Areas have all decreased in terms of numbers of enrolments.

Table 1: Enrolments onto vocational qualifications by Sector Subject Area

Sector Subject Area	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
1. Health, public services and care	26,150	27,710	21,525	34,360	28,725
2. Science and mathematics	2,210	2,445	2,805	2,920	2,985
3. Agriculture, horticulture and animal care	3,145	2,845	2,500	2,585	2,500
4. Engineering and manufacturing technologies	13,815	12,590	11,240	12,030	11,390
5. Construction, planning and the built environment	10,610	12,165	10,825	11,250	11,665
6. Information and communication technology	5,340	4,680	4,130	3,840	3,550
7. Retail and commercial enterprise	15,480	14,505	10,290	11,450	12,750
8. Leisure, travel and tourism	6,950	6,775	6,120	5,660	6,120
9. Arts, media and publishing	5,410	5,140	5,015	4,960	4,905
10. History, philosophy and theology	15	80	40	35	30
11. Social sciences	335	1,105	1,975	2,665	3,485
12. Languages, literature and culture	255	760	855	550	520
13. Education and training	2,425	2,225	1,815	2,425	1,975
14. Preparation for life and work	67,315	61,025	50,305	49,625	42,895
15. Business, administration and law	15,755	14,035	10,860	14,045	11,175
Total	175,220	168,090	140,305	158,415	144,675

Source: Welsh Government Statistics 14 June 2023

Whilst remaining a small proportion of overall enrolments, it can be seen that science and mathematics and social sciences have grown over recent years, and now account for 4.5% of all enrolments, compared with 1.4% five years ago. However, there is little change in the proportion of engineering and manufacturing technologies enrolments, and information and communication technology enrolments have decreased in proportion. These are both important areas for Welsh Government economic strategy.

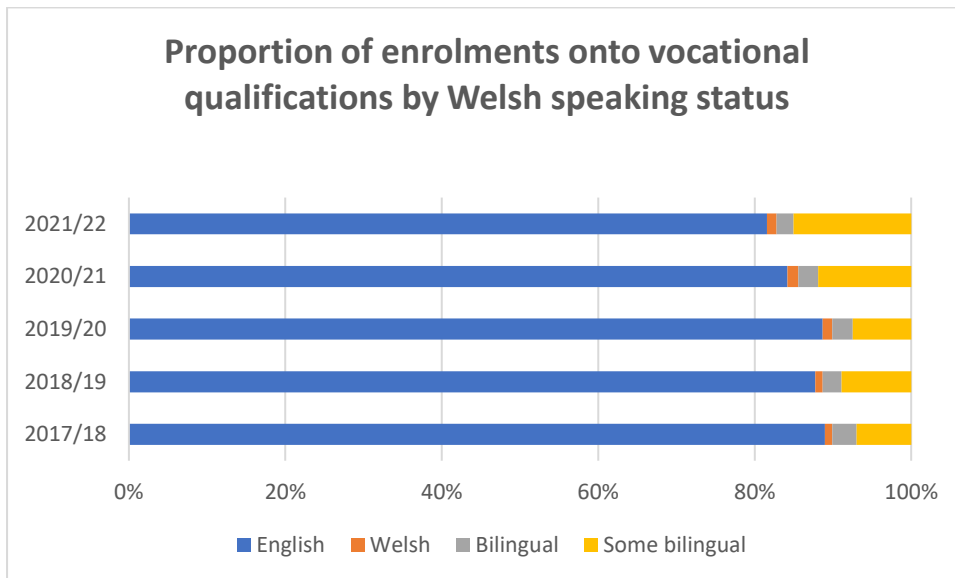
If we further analyse enrolments by differing characteristics, we can see that the number of female enrolments onto science and mathematics qualifications has nearly doubled in the last five years, compared with male enrolments which have largely remained static. Out of 28,725 enrolments onto health, public services and care, the number of male enrolments has decreased slightly, whilst female enrolments have increased by approximately 2,500.

The number of enrolments onto vocational qualifications being taken through the medium of Welsh, or bilingually has increased steadily over 5 years. The number of vocational enrolments through the medium of Welsh, bilingually, or with some bilingualism now accounts for 18% of all vocational enrolments in 2021/22 compared with 11% five years ago.

Vocational enrolments taken solely through the medium of Welsh remain small at 1%. There has been a decrease in the number of learners enrolling onto vocational enrolments with a higher proportion of bilingual content, but a significant increase in

enrolments with some bilingualism, moving from 7% of all vocational enrolments in 2017/18 to 15% in 2021/22.

Graph 11: Proportion of enrolments onto vocational qualifications by Welsh speaking status



Source: Welsh Government Statistics 14 June 2023

2.4 Summary

What have we found out about our learners in this chapter? What are the key messages?

First of all, the number of learners starting vocational qualifications over the last 5 years has decreased and decreased significantly. Unsurprisingly, the numbers of enrolments onto vocational qualifications have also decreased. The picture for AS and A level enrolments is different, and the decrease in AS level enrolments not as acute.

Enrolments have grown in some Sectors Subjects Areas but have remained static or decreased in some areas which are important to the Welsh economy – decreased both in number, and in proportion to the overall number of enrolments. In addition, whilst the proportion of enrolments has grown at level 3, levels 4 and 5 have remained static.

We have seen an increase in the proportion of 16-19 year olds taking vocational qualifications, but a decrease in those over the age of 19. The proportion of learners who consider that they can speak Welsh fluently, or have some Welsh remains relatively unchanged since 2017/18. However, the number of enrolments onto

vocational qualifications being taken bilingually, or with some bilingualism has increased substantially, to 18% in 2021/22 from 11% in 2017/18.

So whilst there are some clear positives, the overall message is one of a decline in the number of learners starting vocational qualifications. This is both a frustration and a concern in the light of the pivotal role that vocational education and training plays in the development of our economy and society. We need to be determined and clear about how we can elevate the status of vocational qualifications, with the education and training that support them.

Chapter 3: The relevance and effectiveness of qualifications in Wales

3.1 Introduction

‘Our national mission: high standards and aspirations for all’ was published by the Welsh Government in March 2023. Its vision flows through many transformative aspects of education in Wales, with aspirations set out in various strategies, such as the Curriculum for Wales,⁴² the Additional Learning Needs and Appeal Tribunal Act⁴³ and Welsh in Education Workforce Plan⁴⁴ to name but a few.

‘In Wales, education is our national mission. Together we will achieve high standards and aspirations for all, tackling the impact of poverty on attainment and ambition. All learners, whatever their background, are supported to be healthy, engaged, enterprising and ethical citizens, ready to play a full part in life and work’.⁴⁵

The National Mission seeks to reinforce the principles of lifelong learning to encourage everyone in Wales to continue to learn, developing their knowledge and skills throughout their lives. In this chapter, we try to understand the part that vocational qualifications play in realising the vision of the National Mission, and make recommendations which will support learners, the economy and our society as a whole.

3.2 Education for those of compulsory school age

Following the publication of ‘Successful Futures’⁴⁶ in February 2015, the Welsh Government began planning the new Curriculum for Wales – a paradigm shift in the design, development and delivery of 3-16 learning. In Wales, compulsory education finishes at 16 years of age, unlike England, where education is compulsory until the age of 18.

The Curriculum for Wales is underpinned by four purposes, which together express the shared aspiration for every young person in Wales:

- ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives
- enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work

⁴² <https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales>

⁴³ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2018/2/contents/enacted>

⁴⁴ <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-05/welsh-in-education-workforce-plan.pdf>

⁴⁵ https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2023-03/our-national-mission-high-standards-and-aspirations-for-all_0.pdf

⁴⁶ <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-03/successful-futures.pdf>

- ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world
- healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.

The implementation of the Curriculum for Wales started in September 2022 for funded non maintained nursery and primary schools, with around half of secondary schools introducing it in Year 7. Remaining schools will introduce the Curriculum to years 7 and 8 in September 2023 and then year by year sequentially.⁴⁷

The Curriculum for Wales, informed by extensive consultation, is supported by guidance and resources. These include guidance on developing a vision for the curriculum, design and development and assessment, pedagogical approaches, and guidance on implementation. A key premise of the Curriculum is that practitioners and schools are best placed to make decisions about the needs of their pupils, and to use the pedagogies which best support their pupils.

GCSE qualifications are being reformed by Qualifications Wales to support the Curriculum for Wales. The first teaching of these qualifications will be in 2025. A consultation has recently closed on the ‘Full 14-16 Qualification Offer’.⁴⁸ This consultation included provision for a coherent range of qualifications to sit alongside the new *made for Wales* GCSEs from entry level to level 2, including a skills suite, pre vocational qualifications and foundation qualifications.

3.3 Post-compulsory education and training

The Welsh Government’s strategic direction for 3-16 education is clear. The Curriculum for Wales and its delivery mechanisms for pre-16 learners are distinctive, and moreover, the Curriculum for Wales is aspirational in its approach.

There is far less clarity for post-16 learners, and with specific reference to this review, for vocational education, training and qualifications. There is no vision for vocational education and training, a lack of clarity in the understanding of what vocational education and training should look like and how it should be delivered, and confusion in how learners are able progress to, and through the vocational curriculum.

⁴⁷ <https://www.gov.wales/written-statement-secondary-school-roll-out-curriculum-wales-september-2022>

⁴⁸ <https://qualificationswales.org/regulation-reform/reforming/qualified-for-the-future/the-full-14-16-offer/>

For 16-18 year olds, statutory guidance⁴⁹ informed by the Learning and Skills Measure (2009) is provided. Published in 2014, this guidance is nearly 10 years old, and does not reflect the changes in the pre-16 curriculum.

Estyn's report on post-16 Partnerships of January 2021 concluded that post-16 providers and local authorities 'do not use the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 well enough in planning a local curriculum offer that features a broad range of relevant learning opportunities.⁵⁰ It referred to a range of potential barriers that may inhibit collaborative working and effective strategic planning of the local curriculum but also identified some examples of strong collaborative work.

For post-16 learners of all ages, 'Stronger, Fairer, Greener Wales – a plan for employability and skills'⁵¹ sets out a vision to create 'a Wales where individuals of all ages can receive a high quality education, with jobs for all, where businesses can thrive in a net zero economy that champions fairness and equality... skills and qualifications are the biggest single influence on a person's chance of being in employment, and on them earning a good income, offering a route out of poverty and protection against it.'

This plan includes important milestones, or success measures, including:

- 75% of working age adults in Wales being qualified to Level 3 or higher by 2050
- the percentage of working age adults with no qualifications being 5% or below in every local authority in Wales by 2050

There are additionally a number of strategies, policies and reports supporting economic and social development, and just transition, many of which refer to the key role played by education, training and qualifications. The examples below demonstrate the range of these, and the volume and diversity of actions which impact upon vocational education and training.

'Prosperity for All - an economic action plan'⁵² states that in pursuing prosperity for all, the Welsh Government intends 'building an economy on strong foundations, to supercharge our industries of the future and empower all our regions to become more productive.....and to see growth with a purpose - inclusive growth - so that as our wealth and well-being improve, inequalities across our country narrow'.

⁴⁹ [Statutory Guidance Post 16 \(gov.wales\)](https://www.gov.wales)

⁵⁰ <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files/2022-01/Post-16%20partnerships%20en.pdf>

⁵¹ <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-05/stronger-fairer-greener-wales-plan-employability-and-skills0.pdf>

⁵² <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-02/prosperity-for-all-economic-action-plan.pdf>

It identifies five priority areas for cross-government working which have the greatest potential contribution to long-term prosperity and well-being. One of these is skills and employability, a theme which has the capacity to support all objectives. The action plans urge the building of ambition and encouraging learning for life. 'We know that improving the level of skills for people from all backgrounds and places in Wales and encouraging a better match between these skills and the needs of employers is the best way of creating better jobs, higher wages and improved health outcomes. These changes help to reduce the pay gap between men and women, between disabled people and their colleagues and between people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.'

'The Well-being of Future Generations' commission in 2021 published '**Skills and (re)Training for a prosperous, green and equal recovery**'⁵³, This report found that the current skills pipeline is not prepared for the potential demand for new jobs, with analysis suggesting low apprenticeship and training numbers in key sectors compared to potential job growth.

The promotion and protection of the Welsh language across Wales has been a key cross-cutting policy for the Welsh Government and the Senedd. '**Cymraeg 2050: A Million Welsh Speakers**'⁵⁴ of 2017 has a target to increase the number of Welsh speakers to 1 million people by 2050. Its vision for post-compulsory education, is to develop provision which 'increases rates of progression and supports everyone, whatever their command of the language, to develop Welsh language skills for use socially and in the workplace'. The '**Welsh in Education Workforce Plan**'⁵⁵ of 2022 supports this vision in determining how education and training can achieve this operationally.

'**Aligning the apprenticeship model to the needs of the economy**'⁵⁶ published in 2017 recognised the way in which apprenticeships were changing and laid out the policy imperatives that underpinned the delivery of apprenticeships in Wales.

In 2019, the Welsh government published '**Wales 4.0 Delivering Economic Transformation for a Better Future of Work – a review of digital Innovation in the economy and the future of work**'.⁵⁷ One of its recommendations was to 'conduct a range of reforms aimed at building capacity within post-compulsory education so that it is able to deliver the step-change required in preparing for the future of work in an age of lifelong learning. This will include supporting a number of curriculum reforms that can provide individuals with the broad-based education required for work and life, enhanced by a digital focused version of the International

⁵³ [V2 NEF Skills report cover \(futuregenerations.wales\)](https://www.futuregenerations.wales/)

⁵⁴ [Cymraeg 2050: A million Welsh speakers \(gov.wales\)](https://www.gov.wales/cymraeg-2050)

⁵⁵ <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-05/welsh-in-education-workforce-plan.pdf>

⁵⁶ <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-03/aligning-the-apprenticeship-model-to-the-needs-of-the-welsh-economy.pdf>

⁵⁷ <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-09/delivering-economic-transformation-for-a-better-future-of-work.pdf>

Baccalaureate, and informed by the development of a new Skills Framework for Wales. A series of capacity building projects should also be supported and aimed at creating the multiversity institutions of the twenty-first century’.

‘Wales Innovates: creating a stronger, fairer, greener Wales’,⁵⁸ published in 2023, points the way to a different approach to innovation, and developing a culture of innovation. From an education perspective, its mission is to develop ‘an education system that supports the development of innovation skills and knowledge throughout people’s lives in Wales. Schools, colleges, universities, and research organisations create knowledge through research’.

The **‘Net Zero Skills Plan’**⁵⁹ of 2023 is, unsurprisingly, based almost entirely around skills, recognising that skills are an enabler to move from the current position to a net zero economy. With 7 key areas for action, it is motivating in its ambition, and well defined in the requirements for all stages of education and training.

These documents represent just some of the strategies which will support Wales to become economically strong and resilient, which will create an inclusive and engaged society, and which prides itself on leading the way to a net zero future. But we need to recognise that there is a vast array of strategies and policies, each of which commends the centrality of education and training. To realise successful vocational education and training outcomes and vocational qualifications which support these strategies, elements from all of these strategies must be brought together in an overarching strategic plan for vocational education and training.

The beauty of education and training is the central role that they play to achieve the vision for the future of Wales. The challenge for education and training is how the multitude of actions within these plans are brought together to enable delivery.

The lack of a strategic plan for vocational education and training may result in conflicting priorities, the potential to misread the relativity of priorities, unnecessary tensions between organisations, inequality for learners, thinly spread resources across learning providers, and ultimately a failure to provide the skills that we need for Wales’ future.

The development of a strategic vision for post-16 vocational education, training and qualifications was one of the most commented upon aspects of evidence received from stakeholders, with a clear majority of stakeholders stating the necessity for the development of such a strategy. Learning providers for all post-16 vocational education and training need a framework against which their curriculum can be planned. Learning providers need to be clear about the overall vision for vocational

⁵⁸ <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2023-04/wales-innovates-creating-a-stronger-fairer-greener-wales.pdf>

⁵⁹ <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2023-02/net-zero-skills-action-plan.pdf>

education and training, what the priorities are, what is expected of them, and how they should work collaboratively. There needs to be a clear direction for developing and defining the curriculum, allowing for regional responses, which requires learning providers to collaborate to deliver the curriculum, and which promotes innovation in the pedagogies and assessment methodologies that are best suited to vocational qualifications.

The strategy for vocational education and training should either be part of, or aligned with a post-16 education and training strategy. It should be congruent with the Curriculum for Wales, and pre-16 learning. It should include as a minimum:

- the vision for the future of post-16 vocational education and training
- an exposition on the differing types of vocational routes available which lead to vocational qualifications and ambitions for the relative balance between delivery routes
- expectations on learning providers of vocational qualifications, the relativity of remits of providers, and the collaboration required between providers
- the parameters by which the post-16 vocational curriculum should be planned, taking account of national strategies and regional priorities
- progression route maps through vocational qualifications, starting with pre-16 vocational qualifications, culminating with articulation to level 6 provision
- the support structures available for staff teaching and assessing vocational qualifications

The establishment of this strategy will provide the context for the development of vocational qualifications.

The formation of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research enabled by the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 (TER Act)⁶⁰, has the potential to realise this strategy, as part of its overarching vision for a post-compulsory education and training system for Wales, based on strong links between education policy, providers and provision and the social and economic goals.

Recommendation 1: The Welsh Government should develop a national strategy for vocational education and training, which would in turn inform the strategic direction for vocational qualifications. This strategy should form part of a wider post-compulsory education and training strategy.

⁶⁰ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asc/2022/1/contents/enacted>

3.4 What is the purpose of vocational education and training?

'Our National Mission' guides ambitions for lifelong learning, with learners of all ages in being confident to contribute to the economy and society in Wales and beyond. It is important that the purpose of, and principles underpinning vocational education and training are clearly articulated. The four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales provide the perfect baseline for the articulation of the purposes of post-16 vocational learning and qualifications and can be adapted such that the focus is on being in work and playing a role in society. The steering group developed the purposes and principles defined below, which have had wide acceptance from stakeholders, with all respondents at a recent stakeholder event agreeing or strongly agreeing with the descriptors.

Purpose of vocational qualifications

Vocational qualifications assess knowledge, understanding, competencies, capabilities /or skills that relate to the world of work. They are designed to assess the knowledge, understanding and skills that will support learners to be:

- ✓ ambitious, aspirational, independent and motivated individuals, resilient, and able to respond to the changing nature of work and society throughout their lives
- ✓ ethical, engaged, confident citizens whose familiarity with the principles of fair work, wellbeing and just transition make them effective social partners
- ✓ active members of, and capable of contributing to, a knowledgeable and skilled workforce, which will meet the needs of, and grow the Welsh and global economies
- ✓ able to progress to further learning and/or employment which is flexible, accessible and inclusive

Principles underpinning vocational qualifications

Vocational qualifications should:

- ✓ Be inspirational for learners
- ✓ Reflect and respond to the needs of a rapidly changing economy and society which values fair work and social partnership
- ✓ Include opportunities for the accumulation of knowledge, competencies, capabilities and habits of mind and development of skills – both practical and integral skills
- ✓ Prepare learners to join a bilingual workforce by promoting opportunities to learn and be assessed through the medium of Welsh
- ✓ Be designed to be flexible in delivery to encourage lifelong learning
- ✓ Be assessed in a way which is appropriate for the qualification

- ✓ Be reflective of the values expressed in the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act and the nature of contemporary Welsh society, economy and culture
- ✓ Be inclusive, accessible and portable
- ✓ Promote progression within a clear and simple progression framework

Recommendation 2: The Welsh Government, as part of its strategy for vocational education and training, should adopt the purpose and principles as defined.

3.5 What vocational education, training and qualifications should we be providing for the future?

Having established a strategy for post-16 vocational education and training the next question we need to ask is ‘what vocational education, training and qualifications are required in Wales for the future?’

When considering the ‘relevance and effectiveness of vocational qualifications’, unless there is a clear understanding of the requirements in the future for occupations and skills, it is difficult to provide an evidential response. What are the presumed occupational needs of the future? What are the skills requirements for the future? We need both – and both to work together. These requirements are not well articulated in Wales, and without these, it is difficult to assess either the relevance or the effectiveness of vocational qualifications.

Welsh Government’s 16-18 guidance states that the curriculum should be driven by learner demand, yet also informed by labour market intelligence and local and regional priorities. Labour market intelligence is gathered in Wales by four Regional Skills Partnerships, which analyse regional economic challenges and likely growth areas. On a three-year cycle, they produce Regional Employment and Skills Plans to analyse and influence the provision of skills based on regional economic need, to support growth and key infrastructure projects in each region. The Regional Employment and Skills Plans build on and support priorities identified by Enterprise Zones, City Deal, City Regions and cross border collaborations.⁶¹

Critically, Regional Skills Partnerships are informed by employers, and their understanding of priorities. They support opportunities for employers and learning providers to work together, and for learning providers to develop their curriculum offer in response to regional priorities.

Each Regional Skills Partnership works slightly differently, and their planning, and skills plans are different in each region, whilst having some common threads. This

⁶¹ <https://businesswales.gov.wales/skillsgateway/skills-development/regional-skills-partnerships>

approach works well within regions, but offers challenges when considering the national picture. There is no evaluation of how well regional priorities are satisfied, and employers' demands are met.

So what do we know about the national picture? At national level, there is no overall picture of the priority occupations for the future in Wales, the skills required for those occupations and for social engagement, and the associated volume of people required to satisfy demand in specific areas. Neither are we clear about whether we are delivering sufficient numbers of people to meet the demand.

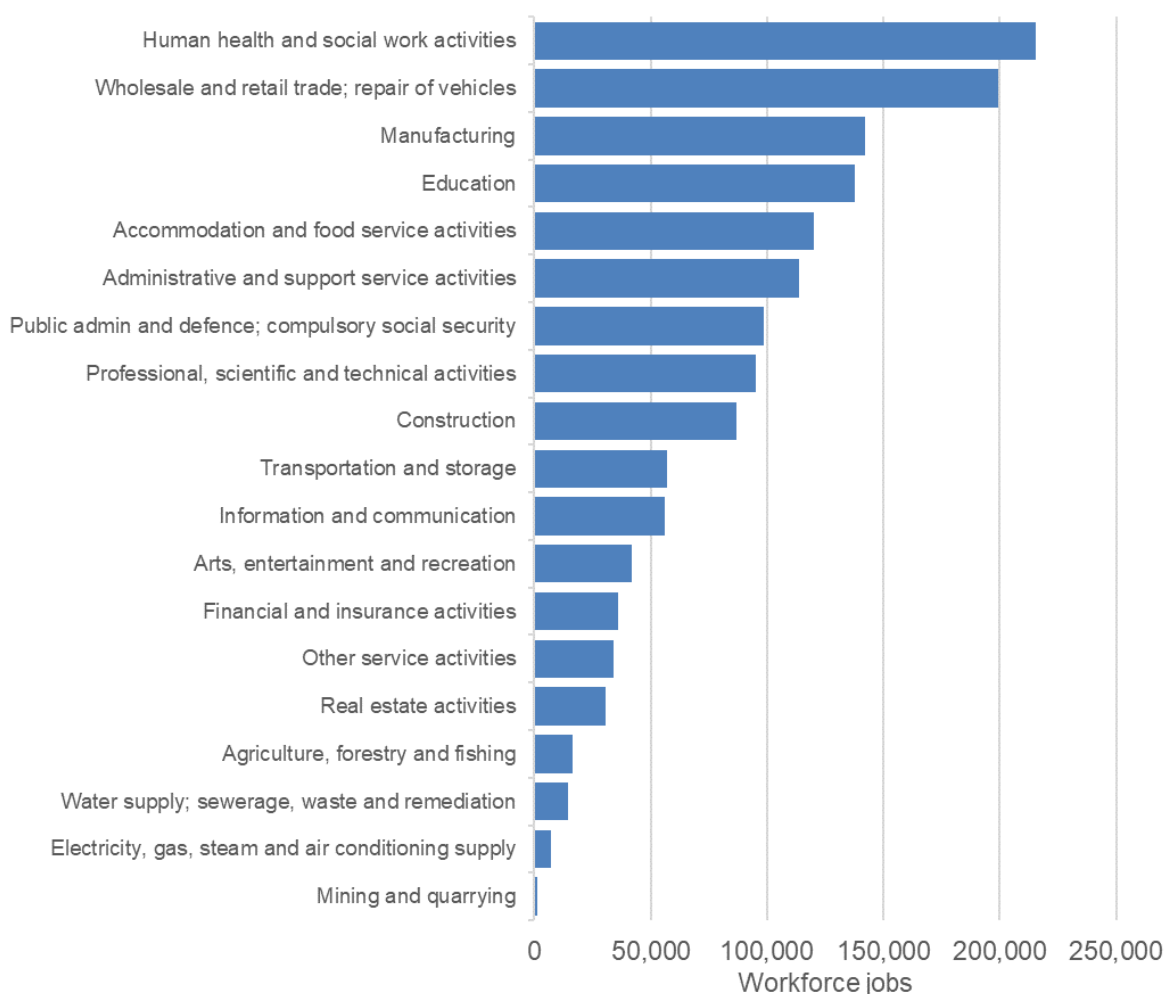
Designing a vocational curriculum is a balancing act. It is important that occupational and skills needs of the future are realised, but the primacy of learner choice is critical, and may not necessarily accord with labour market requirements.

We need to be clear that it is not only in satisfying labour market demand that vocational qualifications play a role, and we must balance the curriculum to embrace the societal value of vocational learning. Vocational learning, supported by vocational qualifications can re-engage learners who may have lost interest in learning, they can give confidence to someone planning to return to work, and they can positively affect wellbeing in a wide variety of situations.

Nevertheless, we must be able to provide advice to learners about potential employment routes – the demand for the routes, and progression opportunities through those routes. We need to develop a dynamic and flexible workforce, a workforce able both to anticipate, and respond to change, with transferable skills, which is eager to use knowledge and skills to progress their organisations. We need to promote learning throughout life, and encourage employers to encourage their employees to engage in continued education and training, to support the growth, productivity and progress within their business.

In terms of the current landscape in Wales, the graph below demonstrates the distribution of the current workforce across all sectors.

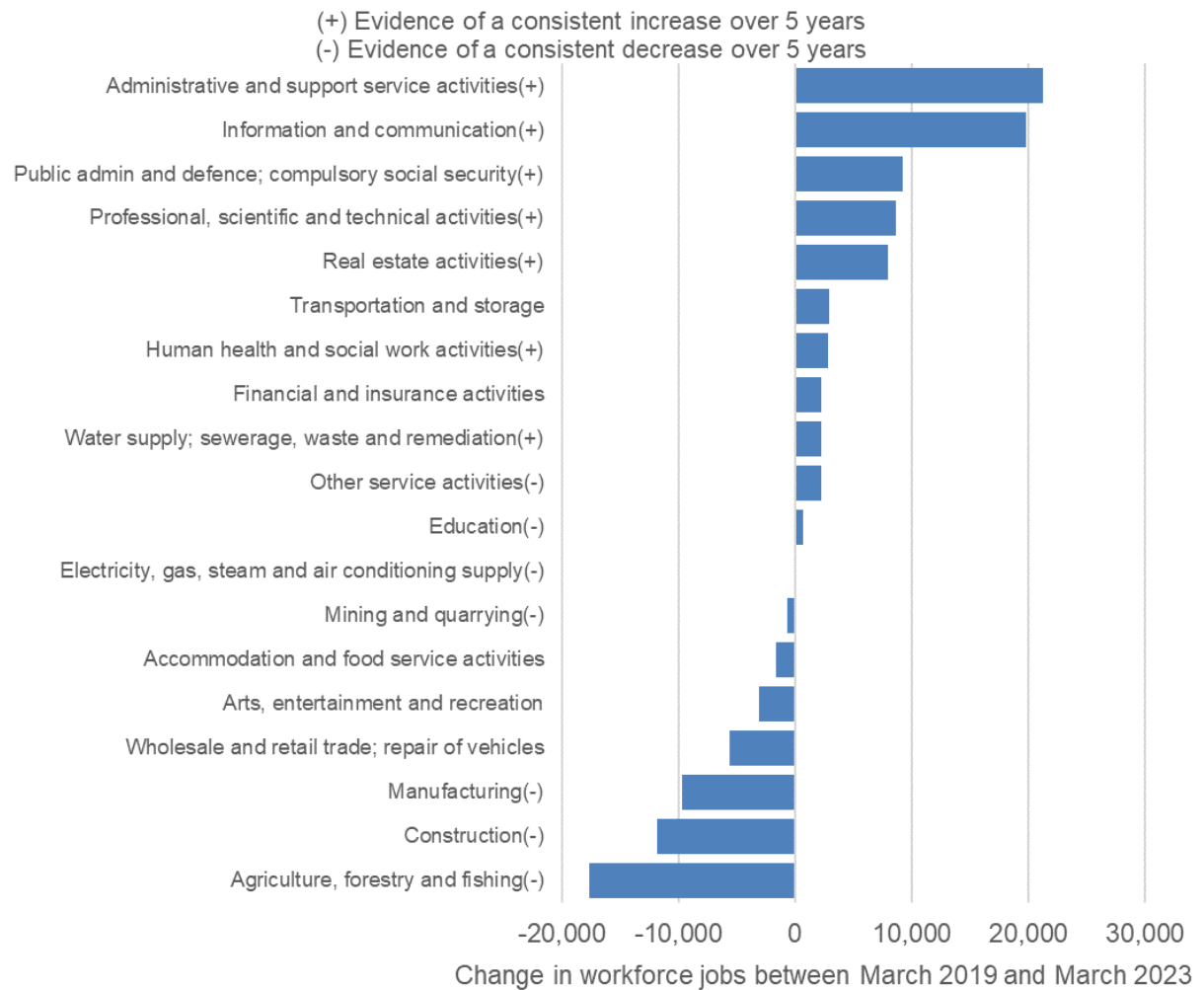
Graph 12: Workforce jobs in Wales by sector, seasonally adjusted, March 2023



Source: [ONS Workforce Jobs - Nomis - Official Census and Labour Market Statistics \(nomisweb.co.uk\)](https://www.nomisweb.co.uk)

As can be seen, the largest sector in Wales in June 2022 was that of human health, and social work activities, followed by wholesale and retail trade/repair of vehicles. However, there is a rapidly changing economic landscape in Wales and globally, and the impact on industrial trends as Wales emerges from the pandemic remains unknown. We need to find a way of measuring the fluidity of change, to plan our curriculum and workforce capacity. So the way in which these industries have changed may give an indication of the possible expansion and contraction of some industries in the future. In addition, the new technologies, artificial intelligence, the move towards net zero and other emerging trends, may mean that some occupations' needs will change even more quickly in the future. The graph below shows the changes in workforce jobs over the last four years.

Graph 13: Change in workforce jobs in Wales by sector, seasonally adjusted, March 2019 to March 2023



Source: [ONS Workforce Jobs - Nomis - Official Census and Labour Market Statistics \(nomisweb.co.uk\)](https://nomisweb.co.uk)

The largest consistent increases are in administrative and support services, followed by information and communications technology. If we refer back to chapter 2, we will recollect that overall vocational enrolments into information technology have decreased over the last five years, and that the proportion of information and technology enrolments has decreased when compared to the total. Understanding the future trajectory for differing industrial sectors is fundamental in establishing whether the range of vocational qualifications is appropriate for the future.

Qualifications Wales, in undertaking their sector reviews, have engaged with employers, employer representative bodies, learning providers and learners. Qualifications Wales is charged with having due regard for the range and nature of qualifications, and requirements of employers, higher education institutions and

professions. For each sector review, publicly funded qualifications have been considered, and action taken where necessary to update content, review assessment, and in some cases introduce new qualifications, thereby ensuring relevance.

We asked stakeholders how clear they considered the connection between vocational qualifications and the needs of the economy, and the response was broadly neutral. Stakeholders wanted to ensure that employers were appropriately represented in discussions, and in particular the views of small and medium size employers.

Further understanding can be gleaned from the Employer Skills Survey of 2019 referenced in the graph below. This illustrates those industries that have a skills need – either a vacancy, or a skills gap. Manufacturing is the key industry suffering from skills vacancies and gaps, followed by Health and Social Work, and Hotels and Restaurants. However, this is now a somewhat dated document, and is pre-pandemic – it would be useful to have this information to plan the future for vocational qualifications.

Table 2: The Employer Skills Survey of 2019: Skills needs by sector

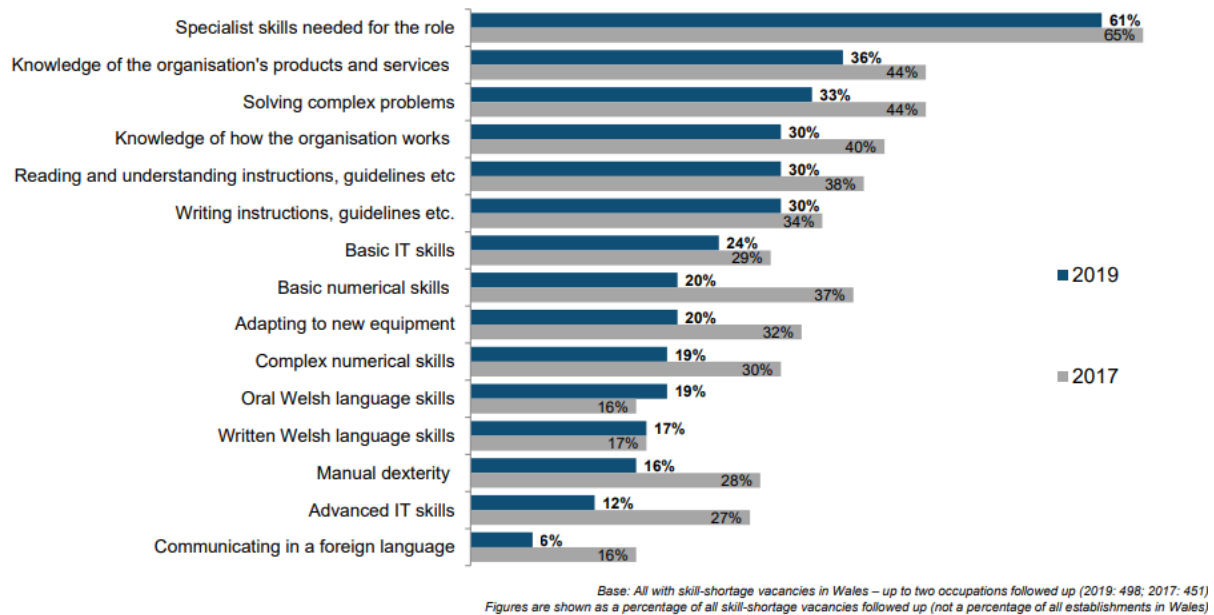
	Has a skill-shortage vacancy	Have a skills gap	Has both skills needs	Has either skills need	Has no skills needs
Wales	5%	13%	1%	17%	83%
Primary sector & Utilities	4%	6%	1%	9%	91%
Manufacturing	8%	18%	2%	24%	76%
Construction	7%	11%	1%	18%	82%
Wholesale & Retail	4%	15%	1%	18%	82%
Hotels & Restaurants	6%	17%	3%	20%	80%
Transport & Storage	5%	15%	1%	18%	82%
Information & Communications	6%	9%	1%	14%	86%
Financial Services	4%	13%	<1%	16%	84%
Business Services	4%	11%	1%	14%	86%
Public admin.	5%	16%	2%	19%	81%
Education	6%	13%	2%	17%	83%
Health & Social Work	8%	16%	3%	20%	80%
Arts & Other Services	6%	12%	1%	17%	83%

Base: All establishments (2019 Wales: 6,773; sector base sizes range from 109 in Public Admin. And Financial Services to 1,442 in Wholesale and Retail)

Source: [Employer Skills Survey 2019 Skills needs results: Wales slide pack \(gov.wales\)](#)

Graphs 14 and 15 show the types of skills that are required. Some of these are specialist skills, for which training may, or may not be available, dependent upon a number of factors, including type of industry and geographical location. Others relate to more generic skills, which should be widely available, including Welsh language skills, basic IT skills, and ‘people’ related skills such as managing own tasks and team working.

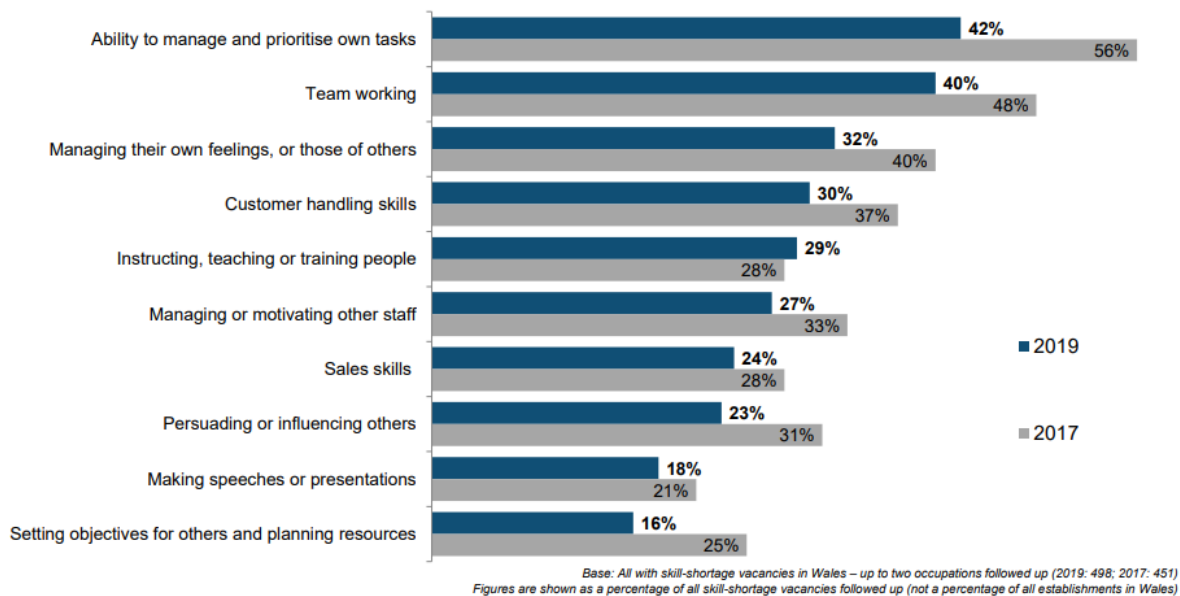
Graph 14: Technical and practical skills lacking among applicants



Source: : [Employer Skills Survey 2019 Skills needs results: Wales slide pack \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales)

We discussed the incorporation of essential skills Wales, including application of number, communication, digital skills and employability, into learning programmes, but were conscious of the review of Essential Skills qualifications already being undertaken by Qualifications Wales so have not pursued this line of enquiry further.

Graph 15: People and personal skills lacking among applicants



Source: [Employer Skills Survey 2019 Skills needs results: Wales slide pack \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales)

We discussed people and personal skills at length within the steering group, and how best these skills could be developed and assessed, with objectivity and consistency. The debate centred around whether such skill development and assessment should form part of the vocational qualification or the vocational programme of learning. Some vocational qualifications already include development of these skills, and programmes of learning have the capacity to support wider skills – team work, time management, and influencing for example. A stakeholder workshop held in June 2023 confirmed that such skills or behaviours were best placed as part of the learning programme - particularly in work placements - and we explore this further in chapter 4.

With the clarity that comes from defining a strategy for vocational education and training, and identifying occupational and skills need for the future, Qualifications Wales can plan its qualifications base, and learning providers and both plan curriculum, resources and progression routes for learners, based on clear intelligence for the future.

Recommendation 3: The Welsh Government should commission work to define the future demand nationally for occupational and skills needs in Wales. This will inform curriculum development, alongside clearly articulated regional and local needs framed by Regional Skills Partnerships, and support Qualifications Wales in its assessment of the priorities for vocational qualifications.

3.6 How do we know if our capacity will meet our demand for occupational and skills requirements of the future

Once we have articulated ‘where we want to go’, we need to measure whether we are getting there. There is no current analysis of enrolment trend against areas of national demand – or indeed whether regional demands are being met. In addition, at present, we do not know whether those learners achieving vocational qualifications go onto employment relevant to that qualification. The destinations data published currently is categorised into broad classifications, such as sustained employment or sustained learning. We recognise the challenges of such an exercise, particularly due to the difference ways in which sectors are categorised across differing organisations.

Consistent Performance Measures for post -16 education – learner destinations 2019/20 (experimental statistics)⁶² published in October 2022, states that data now available from the Department of Work and Pensions and His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs will allow the Welsh Government to analyse earnings of learners after they complete their programmes and include additional information on employer sector. This will be particularly useful in assessing the extent to which vocational learners progress to employment in areas relevant to their study.

However, we do need to introduce a note of caution here – as we have already said, balancing the curriculum is challenging, as satisfying learner needs is critical. We need to remember those learners for whom simply returning to any form of learning has been a challenge, and make sure that we can encourage learners to progress along pathways which raise their confidence and self-esteem, as well as promoting occupational routes. We can do this if we measure both destinations of all our learners.

Recommendation 4: The Welsh Government should expedite work identifying not only enrolment trends of learners, but destinations of learners, to understand if learners progress into an industry related to their vocational qualification. These trends should be mapped against the labour market demands articulated in recommendation 3 above, to determine whether Wales is succeeding in filling its occupation and skills gaps to meet future aspirations.

⁶² <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2022-10/consistent-performance-measures-for-post-16-learning-learner-destinations-august-2019-to-july-2020-947.pdf>

3.7 Summary

In Wales, we are clear about the position that education and training hold – education is our national mission. We have a newly developed curriculum for 3-16 learners. But post-16 we neither have a strategy for vocational education and training, nor indeed a coherent strategy for the delivery of post-compulsory education and training. The Commission for Tertiary Education and Research is being formed to address this gap.

We need to have a strategy which is clear about our aspirations, which articulates relative responsibilities, and which provides the right balance between different types of learning. We need to support this with an understanding of sectors that will be important to Wales' economy in the future, their workforce requirements, and with a clarity about the skills that will help us to form cohesive and inclusive communities. Against this, we need to monitor whether we are achieving what we need to, and take action where we are not achieving.

Providing such clarity will allow us to develop a forward-looking approach to vocational qualifications, ensuring that they are both relevant and effective for the future of Wales.

Chapter 4: Design, development, and assessment of vocational qualifications

4.1 Introduction

When we consider vocational qualifications, it is inevitable that we also consider vocational education and training. The chapter therefore concerns itself with the delivery of vocational education and training, and the design and development of vocational qualifications in the context of international research. Research commissioned from the OECD⁶³ during this review compared these, and other aspects of vocational qualifications across five countries - Australia, Denmark, Estonia, Sweden and Switzerland. These countries were selected to provide a variety of differing approaches, providing a breadth of comparators for consideration.

In this chapter, we examine the comparative approaches of these countries to identify whether their practices could inform our way forward with vocational qualifications.

4.2 Who provides vocational education and training in other countries?

Countries adopt a variety of approaches to vocational education and training delivery. For example, vocational qualifications in upper-secondary education⁶⁴ in Australia are delivered by Registered Training Organisations. There are six types of these – Technical and Further Education Colleges, private providers, schools, community education, and enterprise providers who are providers primarily delivering to their own employees. At the other end of the spectrum is Denmark, with ‘not for profit’ state funded vocational colleges, autonomous in terms of adapting vocational education and training to local needs, and Estonia delivering through 32 upper-secondary schools, of which 26 are owned and run by the Ministry for Education and Research. A similar breadth of delivery exists for post-secondary⁶⁵ vocational training provision.

⁶³ Vocational Qualifications in an International Perspective, OECD, June 2023

⁶⁴ Typically entrants to upper secondary are 15 or 16 years of age

⁶⁵ Typically entrants to post-secondary are above 18 years of age

4.3 How are vocational qualifications designed and developed?

The design and development of vocational qualifications differs significantly between countries. To an extent, this is influenced by the education system as a whole in each country, and how the provision of vocational qualifications is governed.

Broadly speaking, countries either tend to operate a model where the definition and awarding of vocational qualifications is a state function, or an open market model – as we have in Wales. Awarding bodies, as they exist in the UK, with many qualifications ‘owned’ by private sector and independent bodies, have few international parallels. In Swedish upper secondary education, the national board of education is in the driving seat of qualification creation, approval, and awarding. In Denmark and Switzerland, the creation of qualifications is in the hands of employers, but their approval and awarding of the qualification is the responsibility of national agencies. In Estonia, there are multiple awarding bodies, each working within their designated sectors.

In Australia, Industry Skills Councils have until recently been responsible for the development of ‘training packages’. Training packages specify the knowledge and skills required by individuals to perform effectively in the workplace, expressed as units of competency and describe how competencies can be packaged into nationally recognised qualifications that comply with the Australian Qualifications Framework. Eleven Councils provide guidance for the training packages, with the practical development work is undertaken by 60 sectoral bodies – Industrial Reference Committees. These Committees are in turn supported by independent Skills Service Organisations which assist the Committees in developing and reviewing training packages. A recent change means that training packages will be developed in future directly by Skills Service Organisations. There are around 1400 vocational qualifications associated with 70 training packages.

The Australian Government supports vocational education and training provision with labour market information. ‘Jobs and Skills Australia’ is an agency that advises the Australian Government on current, emerging, and future workforce needs, and the development of the vocational education and training system.

In Denmark, the Ministry of Children and Education has overall responsibility for vocational training. A National Advisory Council advises on new qualifications and changes to existing qualifications, and includes representatives of the social partners, local governments and regional organisations, schools, teachers, and student associations. Around fifty sectoral trade committees, composed and funded by employers and employer representative organisations, update existing courses and propose new ones. The trade committees have secretariats and their own budgets, funded by the social partners. Stakeholder involvement is seen as a key

role in advising the education ministry on overall policy and in determining the structure and general framework for training programmes.⁶⁶

Kutsekoda – a national vocational qualifications authority, has delegated authority from the Ministry for Education and Research most of the qualification system in Estonia. It describes itself as an ‘impartial platform for cooperation’⁶⁷ identifying the skills and professions needed in the future. The authority is managed by a collaboration of employers’ and employees’ organisations, including trade unions and government departments. Its remit coordinates the activities of 14 sectoral Occupational Qualifications Councils and attendant working groups which develop professional/occupational standards. It provides counselling and assistance for awarding bodies.

In Sweden, the National Agency for Education under the authority of the Ministry of Education is responsible for the upper-secondary vocational curriculum, deciding on the subject syllabuses for the different vocational programmes. In 2010, statutory national programmes councils were created for each national upper-secondary vocational programme, including a wider range of representation. The councils are not decision-making bodies, but they advise the National Agency for Education on the quality, content and organisation of vocational programmes. The councils advise on proposals for new subjects or courses submitted by the National Agency.

In Switzerland, all vocational qualifications are managed by the Confederation (the federal government), the cantons and professional organisations. The government through its agency, the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation has overall responsibility for vocational qualifications in terms of the content of qualifications, including curricula and assessment criteria, and is responsible for regulating and co-funding the vocational education and training, and professional education sectors.

Vocational education and training ordinances define the occupational profile, the content of training, the criteria that qualified workers in the occupation must meet, the maximum number of students, and qualification procedures. They are prepared through the joint efforts of the Confederation, the cantons and the corresponding professional organisations.

Restrictions of time meant that that the OECD was unable to complete a comparative evaluation of practices in the countries selected. However, there are two themes which have some commonality in the countries examined:

- adoptions of formal structures to advise on occupations and skills needs for the future in some countries

⁶⁶ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/denmark-u2>

⁶⁷ <https://www.kutsekoda.ee/en/>

- consistent high levels of stakeholder engagement

In Wales, the strategic direction and subsequent policy imperatives for vocational education and training are set by the Welsh Government, whilst Qualifications Wales, as an independent body, is responsible for qualifications. Its principal roles are to ensure that qualifications, and the Welsh qualification system, are effective for meeting the reasonable needs of learners in Wales, and to promote public confidence in qualifications and in the Welsh qualification system. As described in chapter 1, Qualifications Wales regulates qualifications, sometimes in conjunction with other qualifications regulators in the UK.

Currently there are 90 awarding bodies offering vocational qualifications in Wales. This number fluctuates according to market demand. Awarding bodies develop new qualifications, or update content when the market determines, or when Qualifications Wales have commissioned new qualifications. In some cases, learning providers work directly with awarding bodies to develop new qualifications. This engagement is welcomed and can allow swift response in many cases to learner and employer needs.

Vocational qualifications in many cases are underpinned by National Occupational Standards, which are aligned with industry needs. National Occupational Standards define skills, knowledge and understanding needed by an individual to perform a task competently. They also, together with professional standards in some sectors, when integrated with vocational qualifications provide portability and recognition of learning and achievement across the UK and internationally. National Occupational Standards are funded and managed by the three Devolved Governments of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

As well as approving qualifications, Qualifications Wales has a broader role in that it can commission new qualifications through an open competitive process where there is a market need, restrict the range of qualifications offered and provide grants to support the qualifications system, including support for Welsh-medium vocational qualifications.

The Welsh Government is the issuing authority for apprenticeship frameworks, delegating the issuing of Certificates to the Federation for Industry Sector Skills and Standards.

A fundamental difference between Qualifications Wales and the regulator in England – Ofqual – is that Qualifications Wales has responsibility for identifying whether the *range and nature* of qualifications is appropriate. In England, the *range* of qualifications is the responsibility of IfATE and the Department for Education.

In order to fulfil its duty therefore, Qualifications Wales, since its inception in 2015, has carried out a programme of sector reviews for vocational qualifications. In

Wales, there are 15 defined Sector Subject Areas for vocational qualifications, as shown in chapter 1, table 1. Sector Subject Areas have been reviewed/are being reviewed in order to determine whether the vocational qualifications they contain remain fit for purpose. Sector reviews involve consultation with a wide range of stakeholders – learners, employers, representative bodies, learning providers, trade unions, awarding organisations and other bodies. Following completion of a sector review, Qualifications Wales may consider that the vocational qualifications within a sector remain fit for purpose, may need to have updated content or assessment regimes, or result in the brand new *made for Wales* vocational qualifications.

The sector reviews are, in the context of vocational education and training, innovative, and in many ways leading the way in an approach to vocational qualifications. However, as noted in Chapter 3, there is neither a clear strategic direction for vocational education and training nor national labour market analysis setting out the national priorities against which sector reviews can be undertaken. Whilst recognising that reviewing vocational qualifications is a substantial task, sector reviews need to be revisited. The approach taken following the current round of reviews should be reviewed – looking at the principles of vocational qualifications articulated in chapter 3, specific themes throughout all sectors, progression routes and sub-sectors - for example, feedback from some stakeholders for example is that there is a lack of ‘net zero’ credentials generally within qualifications, and in some cases, a lack of integration of digital skills. These are areas which may benefit from thematic reviews.

The sector reviews should also be informed by and where appropriate aligned with Estyn’s thematic reviews. Estyn carries out thematic reviews on a planned basis, and the feedback gained from these reviews should be used to inform sector reviews.

Recommendation 5: That Qualifications Wales renews its approach to sector reviews, revisiting where necessary sectors already considered. This work should be aligned to the vocational education and training strategy referenced in recommendation 1, and to the analysis of future occupation and skills requirements referenced in recommendation 3.

Qualifications Wales has recently established sector qualification groups⁶⁸ in the majority of sector subject areas. The purpose of the sector qualification groups is to:

- receive feedback relating to regulated post-16 qualifications from learning providers and relevant stakeholders in each sector
- to identify and, where appropriate, investigate issues relating to regulated post-16 qualifications in each sector with the aim of resolving the issues
- to share examples of good practice and what is working well in each sector

⁶⁸ Qualifications Wales: Post-16 Sector Qualification Groups - Terms of Reference, January 2023

- to share current information relating to regulated post-16 qualifications with learning providers and relevant stakeholders in each sector
- to build and maintain strong relationships with learning providers and other relevant stakeholders in each sector

These groups are primarily concerned with information sharing on current vocational qualifications, and meet twice a year. Membership is stated within the terms of reference, and organisations outside the core membership can be invited to meetings to provide relevant updates.

4.4 But what about future-proofing vocational qualifications?

Taking into account practices in other countries, and feedback from stakeholders, the next logical step is, as the sector qualifications groups mature, to develop their remit to inform planned sector reviews in the future. The membership of such groups would necessarily need to be expanded when conducting a sector review, involving other partners including employers, or employer representative organisations, and trade unions for example.

Whilst we appreciate that Qualifications Wales has engaged with a wide range of stakeholders in sector reviews through advisory groups, and undertaken extensive consultation, the expansion of remit, and establishment of 'standing groups' would ensure a systematic and consistent review of vocational qualifications, responding quickly and effectively to emerging occupational developments.

Recommendation 6: That Qualifications Wales expand the remit of sector qualifications groups to advise on future requirements, supplementing these groups as and when appropriate with other stakeholders.

We saw in Chapter 1 that Qualifications Wales has a broader remit when compared to other regulators. It has additional powers to commission new qualifications through an open competitive process where there is a market need, restrict the range of qualifications offered and provide grants to support the qualifications system, including support for Welsh-medium.

The commissioning of new qualifications, and the restriction of the range of qualifications has been adopted for two sector reviews so far – health, social care and childcare, and construction, building services and the built environment – and also for the Advanced Skills Baccalaureate Wales.

In these instances, new qualifications have been commissioned from awarding bodies, developed through engagement with stakeholders. They are *made for Wales* qualifications. Qualifications Wales has recently consulted on whether to commission new qualifications in hospitality and catering.

The introduction of such qualifications has not been without contention – particularly from a learning provider perspective, and we will consider this in more detail in chapter 6. From the perspective of governance, sector reviews which involve a significant change to the qualifications landscape and which require consultation are presented to the Qualifications Wales Board for decision making. Where there is not significant change, or consultation is not required, updates on sector reviews are presented. This means that for many sector reviews undertaken so far, the Qualifications Wales board has not received the sector review report prior to publication and has not been involved in the final decision making process. Given the significance of implications of the sector reviews on the vocational qualifications landscape, it is strongly recommended that the board is presented with all sector reviews for decision making as a standard part of governance process to allow for scrutiny and challenge.

Recommendation 7: That Qualifications Wales present the findings and proposals of all sector reviews to its Board, to provide an opportunity for scrutiny and challenge of proposals made prior to publication.

The Welsh Government commissions reviews of apprenticeship frameworks. Currently, there is no direct relationship between Qualifications Wales' sector reviews and apprenticeship framework reviews. Welsh Government has stated that this is due to the fact that sector reviews are far broader in scope, covering qualifications across further education and apprenticeships, and that the time and scale of a sector review can take longer than required for apprenticeship reviews. To ensure frameworks/pathways continue to be responsive to employer demand, Welsh Government may wish to seek more flexibility in frameworks to allow swift response to employer demand.

The result of separate processes can result in duplication of effort – for all parties involved, including employers and learning providers. The principle of pace is important for all qualifications. Whilst there is an element of collaboration, there exists the opportunity to improve co-ordination of sector reviews with framework reviews. Therefore there is merit, through the implementation of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, in much closer working arrangements between reviews of apprenticeship frameworks and sector reviews. Again, the reviews should be informed by Estyn's thematic reviews.

There is also the opportunity to expand the purpose of the advisory groups noted above to apprenticeship framework, thereby reducing the risk of duplicating effort, and adopting a consistent approach.

Recommendation 8: That the Welsh Government, Commission for Tertiary Education and Research and Qualifications Wales improve co-ordination between sector reviews and apprenticeship framework reviews, and consider

using Qualifications Wales' sector qualifications groups and evidence from Estyn's thematic reviews to inform the process.

4.5 What is included in vocational qualifications?

Different practices are adopted in defining the curriculum content and assessment methodologies for vocational qualifications. Switzerland and Denmark define not only the expected outcomes – what students should know, but also how these goals should be reached through learning programmes. Others allow for greater flexibility. In Estonia, vocational education and training providers must have their proposed curricula agreed by government. Sweden provides relatively strict rules on the academic content of upper-secondary vocational education and training, but the occupational content is defined in broad terms. More detail is provided below, and in particular, we consider whether the vocational qualifications include occupational competences, transversal skills and behaviours.

Switzerland regulates vocational education and training quite tightly. Vocational qualifications are organised around a National Qualification Framework for vocational and professional qualifications. For upper-secondary provision, there is a choice of 245 occupations, whilst in post-secondary, there are 420 federal examinations. Learning objectives and the contents of programmes are set through ordinances for each profession, and education and training plans. The plans define the knowledge and skills developed in vocational schools and with employers, the number of lessons by year and course, and the evaluation and assessment plan. In addition, learners attend courses organised by industry and work-based training. The vocational qualification sets out the competencies required in each occupation. Transversal skills are also underlined 'to demonstrate physical and mental resilience, and to integrate into the team'.⁶⁹

Denmark defines its 'rules' for vocational education by executive orders. These orders identify the purpose of the programme, the role of stakeholders involved in delivery, a detailed description of the structure of the programme, the duration of different parts of the programme, and the balance of time between classroom and work-place elements. The executive orders list the skills and competences students should develop at different stages of the vocational programme, tasks he/she should be able to perform upon its completion and how these skills should be assessed.

Tasks and competencies defined in vocational qualifications are job specific tasks. Social competencies and transversal skills are also specified. Regulations for vocational qualifications emphasize the importance of basic and soft skills 'character formation, professional pride and ability to take independent positions, co-operation and communication'.⁷⁰ In Denmark, at upper-secondary vocational education and

⁶⁹ Vocational Qualifications in an International Perspective, OECD, June 2023

⁷⁰ *ibid*

training, there are more than 100 different study programmes and each programme may target more than one job. Post-secondary vocational education and training provides six programmes and 27 specialisations.

In Australia, training packages have three component parts: a set of qualifications; units of competency; and assessment guidelines associated with each competence. There are approximately 70 training packages with 1400 vocational qualifications offered. Some detail is provided for the units of competency and assessment, but providers have freedom to develop the curriculum. The training packages include foundation skills, such as reading, writing, problem, solving and initiative/enterprise. Accredited courses must identify foundation skills relevant to course outcomes and competencies.

In Estonia, occupational standards/qualifications are the basis of vocational education and training. They include the skills, knowledge and attitudes required for successful job performance, based on a job analysis. The occupational standards/qualifications include a description of the occupation, a list of competences, and indicate ways of assessment. They also define skills required such as language and digital competence. They do not set out how competences will be acquired – these elements are undertaken by the learning provider. Vocational learners in upper-secondary vocational qualifications work towards an occupational and general school leaving certificate. The vocational qualification also prescribes some academic competences, such as English proficiency and digital skills. In Estonia, there are 500-600 vocational qualifications at all levels.

In Sweden, upper-secondary vocational education offers only 12 possible vocational qualifications and around 4-5 specialisms for each qualification. The National Council sets out the overall objectives and tasks for upper-secondary vocational education and training, including the values that form the basis of teaching. Parliament decides on the upper-secondary programmes, and core study areas common across all institutions. The National Agency for Education decides on subjects to be included in upper-secondary programmes and sets teaching goals. National Councils advise on content, and as there are only 40 specialisations, occupational competencies are defined broadly. For post-secondary vocational education, providers have freedom within the development of programmes as long as they stay within the framework of the Higher Vocational Education Ordinances. Transversal skills are defined as high level objectives, with providers responsible for implementation.

Some countries allow learning providers to adjust programmes in response to local needs. Local autonomy increases the relevance of the qualification to the local labour market, although not necessarily to the national labour market. Adjustment of programme content to local needs usually requires collaboration between learning providers and local employers.

Wales has a wide choice of vocational qualifications, and similar vocational qualifications can be offered by different awarding bodies. From a stakeholder perspective, this is viewed as a positive, allowing choice of vocational qualifications according to national and regional requirements, a focus on particular specialisms, and an ability to choose a qualification which best suits cohorts of learners.

Most awarding bodies in the UK specify vocational qualifications in some detail, including the number of Guided Learning Hours overall and, for specific units, the content and assessment regimes. In many cases, additional resources are provided, including supporting documents, assignment plans, and marking schemes.

Vocational qualifications used on Welsh apprenticeship frameworks are required to be based on National Occupational Standards (NOS), as are vocational qualifications in Scotland and Northern Ireland. National Occupational Standards are developed by Standard Setting Organisations who consult with employers and other stakeholders across each of the UK nations, (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England). They are developed as individual measures of competence and are grouped in Suites which identify the sector they relate to. There are approximately 900 suites at present, with almost 23,000 separate standards, covering cover a wide range of sectors. Feedback from both employers and providers during the course of this review is that the use of the National Occupational Standards is important in consistency of outcomes. Awarding bodies use National Occupational Standards in the design and development of their qualifications.

England has adopted new 'occupational standards'. There are a number of differences between National Occupational Standards and Occupational Standards, including:

- Occupational Standards relate to whole roles; National Occupational Standards relate to specific functions, and groups are used to define whole occupations
- Occupational Standards are led by employers; National Occupational Standards are developed with the occupational expertise of representative bodies
- Occupational Standards are developed in tandem with assessment plans
- Occupational Standards consider that behaviours are integral to being competent in occupational standards; National Occupational Standards consider skills and knowledge

The extent to which there is a difference between National Occupational Standards and the Standards in England is unclear. There has not been, as yet, any substantive work undertaken to compare and contrast. There is a view that in most cases there will be compatibility, as both represent employer skills needs. However, Qualifications Wales has identified a risk that if substantial differences emerge, this will increase the cost of developing, adapting and delivering vocational qualifications in Wales.

A stakeholder event explored whether occupational standards should include behaviours, as referred to in chapter 3. Views varied, with a small majority thinking it

was 'very important or important'. Further exploration revealed that a small number of respondents felt that behaviours should be integrated into vocational qualifications, with the majority considering that they could be best integrated into the wider programmes of learning, and in particular, within work-place elements of the learning programme. This means that the community learning and industry focus element of the learning programme can be adapted and tailored to meet the needs of individual learners, and that there is no prescription regarding the delivery and assessment of such skills or behaviours.

Recommendation 9: That the Welsh Government explore the risks associated with changes in alignment between National Occupational Standards and Occupational Standards in England.

To summarise some of the key findings from the above, we therefore can see that:

- The content of vocational qualifications varies, in terms of knowledge and skills, how these are delivered, and assessment regimes
- The number of vocational qualifications in each county differs significantly

4.6 Is work-based/work-place learning a feature of all vocational qualifications or learning programmes?

In some countries, work-place learning is an essential part of vocational education and training, and/or qualifications. In Denmark and Switzerland nearly all upper-secondary vocational education and training programmes are provided as apprenticeships. Programmes provided mainly in schools include much shorter spells of work-place learning, and in these cases, its aim is to familiarise students with the work environment and provide specific skills required in an occupation which are difficult to teach in a classroom or school workshop setting.

For upper-secondary vocational education, work-placement is mandated in Sweden (13% of overall programme time of 15 weeks), Finland (20% of programme time or 6 months) and the Netherlands (20% of programme time). In Estonia, 35% of the programme must be work-based, but this is defined as a mix of schools based practical training and work-placement with an employer. In Korea and Australia, it is optional. For post-secondary vocational education, arrangements vary dependent upon type of length of programmes being followed.

In Wales, there are differing approaches to work-based or work-place learning. Apprentices are employed, and therefore spend the majority of their time in their work place. The balance between 'in work' and 'outside work' (that is, 'classroom or workshop') training is not specified at a national level, and training provided 'in a

classroom/workshop' varies according to learning provider and the vocational qualification being followed.

For learners on some specific vocational qualifications, work-related experience is an essential part of the qualification – for example, in health and social care and childcare. The Welsh Government has introduced other ways in which work-placement can be integrated into learning programmes, which attract public funding:

'Increased work-place learning': this is for a limited number of programmes, where the work-place element should be carried out within the occupational sector relevant to the vocational qualification. There are 320 learners on these programmes in 2022/23.

'Enhanced programmes': these programmes are only available in engineering and information technology. They are larger programmes than most in terms of Guided Learning Hours, with a significant work-based element, and there are 815 learners enrolled on these programmes in 2022/23.

'Innovation Fund' programmes: a part of the Welsh Government's innovation fund targets a programme enabling work-placement activity to be attached to academic or vocational programmes which do not currently have compulsory work experience. The work-placement must be relevant to the course the learner is undertaking.

England has introduced mandatory work-placement into T Level qualifications. Learners are expected to carry out around 315 hours or 45 days of work-placement during the year. Early feedback has revealed some difficulties in obtaining work-placements for all learners and significant investment has been made to aid employers to take on learners.

The Beaufort⁷¹ report found that learners who were not doing apprenticeships were eager to have more opportunities for work experience. The main benefit of work experience, said some, was better preparing learners for the workplace and that in turn would increase their confidence. It was also expected to help ease them into the world of work because some aspects would be familiar after the work experience, and also to help decide if this was the right profession for them.

⁷¹ Vocational qualifications: learners' experiences and perceptions - Qualitative research findings, Beaufort Research, April 2023

'It would prepare us more for when we go on in life and get a real job for ourselves, it would be a lot easier and it would take a lot more pressure off us and we'd have the experience for it so we'd be more confident as well'.

(Sixth form learner)

Work-placement is a valuable part of learning, and can develop skills and behaviours which can benefit learners. Employers, in their feedback, have stated that an added benefit is the 'spotting of talent', and in some cases, have employed learners as apprentices following a successful work-placement.

Feedback from most learning providers is a preference to include work-placement within vocational qualifications. However, learning providers also understand the challenges of providing this consistently. They acknowledge the need to ensure that work placements are sufficient, and of sufficient quality for all learners if work-placement is to be made mandatory within vocational qualifications. At this stage, we do not consider that there are sufficient numbers of employers in the right sectors in the right geographical areas to facilitate mandatory work-placement for every learner in the occupation of their choice and recognise that this is one of the challenges currently in England's model.

The cross-cutting theme of Careers and Work Related Experiences within the Curriculum for Wales will act as a useful preparatory tool for work placement post-16. Given the different ways in which work-placement can be delivered within learning programmes, providers consider that all models or work-placement currently available are of value. Learning providers further believe that learners should be recognised for successful achievements of work-placement, and would welcome the development of a qualification which certifies their 'work-readiness' demonstrated through their work-placement. This would include certification of general 'work-ready' skills, such as punctuality, attendance, attitude, and initiative regardless of the occupational route.

Recommendation 10: That the Welsh Government extend work placement opportunities to all level 3 learners who do not have work placement as a mandatory part of their qualification.

Recommendation 11: That Qualifications Wales explore with stakeholders how best to recognise generic work-place learning.

4.7 How do assessment arrangements work in different countries?

As with the specification of the curriculum content, the specification of assessment arrangements works differently in different countries. In Australia, detailed assessment guidance is included with the qualification, assessments undertaken for

each unit of competence separately, and implemented locally by training providers. In Denmark and Switzerland (upper-secondary) detailed assessment guidance or rules are established with the qualification. In Denmark assessments are organised by providers and local training committees, while in Switzerland, assessments are undertaken by independent bodies.

Broad based assessment criteria including grading criteria are defined in Sweden, with the final assessment conducted locally, but in Estonia, schools undertake the assessment leading to the school-leaving certificate, while the awarding bodies manage (through assessment committees) the assessment leading to the occupational qualification. Some schools have merged these two assessments and are permitted to issue the occupational qualification certificate. Some vocational and higher education institutions can be awarding bodies for qualifications yielded by their own study programmes. In Finland, vocational skills are primarily assessed in the workplace situations, for each module completed, by an educator and workplace representative.

As part of work commissioned to investigate 'the learner voice', Beaufort Research questioned learners about their attitudes to different assessment methods. Learners favoured a variety of assessment types because some assessments would suit some learners more than others.

'It's more fair as well, isn't it? Everybody's got their strengths and weaknesses, some people perform well in assessments like that and some people perform well in exams. That way then you're kind of covering everybody, they've got their opportunity, their chance to really show what they can do'.

(FE learner)

The majority of learners preferred coursework or written assignments over exams, and some had opted to do a vocational qualification for this reason. The main perceived benefits of this type of assessment was that they had an extended period of time to complete an assignment and their success did not depend on what they could remember. However, these types of assessments can pose challenges in terms of the authenticity of production. Practices where learners use artificial tools to generate work are considered to be more prevalent than previously, and in these cases do not represent learner achievement.

Overall learners were most negative about traditional written exams and they were not considered a good representation of what a learner could do. This type of assessment was considered the least useful to the workplace or 'real life'. However, a small number of learners preferred exams because of the sense of achievement if they did well. Learners with additional learning needs appreciated having further support with exams either by having teaching assistants help with reading the

questions or additional time. Learning providers expressed concern about the increase of the proportion of exams and lengthy written elements in new *made for Wales* vocational qualifications.

Some learners believed practical or work-based assessments were the fairest and most accurate reflection of what they had learned and whether they truly understood the topic. Being able to apply what had been learnt was the most valuable skill, they believed, so some learners wanted more practical or work-based assessments on their courses.

'With the workplace being assessed, it shows that the information that you're learning on paper is not just memorised in your head you could actually use it in real life and you know how to. Because a lot of people would study something, but when it comes to using it in real life they choke up and they don't know what to do. So, I think it's good to be assessed on you applying your own knowledge'.

(Sixth form learner)

For those doing assessments through the medium of Welsh or bilingually, flexibility was key. They believed it was fair for them not to be penalised if they had to use a few English terms if they could not think of the Welsh word in the assessments – this may be a perception of what may happen rather than a reality in practice. In some cases, they wanted to be able to complete some assessments in Welsh and some in English depending on the topic.

Participants highlighted that the time allocated to controlled assessment is limiting the time available for teaching and learning and questioned whether the controlled tasks could be completed in the learners' own time, without controlled conditions. It was noted that this would also support learners who are struggling with the pressures of working under the controlled conditions, again a requirement in assessment that is much more similar to A levels than vocational qualifications.

However, controlled conditions do mitigate against some of the risks identified with course work assessment. From a learning provider perspective, the key issue is that controlled assessment should not detract excessively from teaching and learning time.

Central to robust assessment is understanding the purpose of the qualification and ensuring the assessment methodology adequately evaluates competences, skills and knowledge in relation to the purpose. Qualifications Wales already consider criteria for the approval of vocational qualifications. In some cases, they set the assessment regime, and for others, assessment processes are reviewed as part of the sector reviews.

There is a broad agreement that assessment should be achieved in differing ways, according to the purpose of the vocational qualifications. There was a general feeling that a move away from examinations or externally assessed elements would be preferred, although acknowledgement that examinations were necessary in some cases. The over-riding concern was that assessment regimes should align with the purpose of the qualification, should be fair to all learners, and demonstrate to employers that learner have the competences and skills they need.

Recommendation 12: That Qualification Wales, in considering the approval of qualifications and the assessments regimes within those qualifications give increased consideration to the manageability of assessments, from a learner and learning provider perspective.

4.8 Summary

In this chapter, we have looked at vocational qualification in a number of other countries. There are a wide variety of approaches to vocational education, training and qualifications, but there are some characteristics which are more common, including:

- Strong stakeholder engagement surrounding the design and development of vocational qualifications, often through established committee structures
- Governance structures which identify future occupational trends to inform vocational requirements
- Work-place elements supporting vocational qualifications
- Manageability of assessments

From a Welsh perspective, the Qualifications Wales Act of 2015 afforded us opportunities to be different. Sector reviews are innovative, and, with some development, the sector qualifications groups have the potential to become an important element for the future proofing of vocational qualifications in Wales.

Chapter 5: The learner's path to, and through, vocational qualifications

5.1 Introduction

This chapter considers how learners decide what types of qualification to follow at post-16, how they can progress to vocational qualifications and through vocational qualifications, and what opportunities they have throughout life to continue to access vocational qualifications.

During the course of the review, research was carried out with learners – ‘Vocational qualifications: learners' experiences and perceptions: *Qualitative research findings by Beaufort Research*'.⁷² Within the confines of time restrictions, Beaufort research interviewed 46 learners, from different settings, including further education, work-based learning (including degree apprentices), sixth forms and adult and community learning. All quotations not otherwise referenced in this chapter are taken directly from Beaufort's research.

5.2 Do learners understand what vocational qualifications are?

Learner understanding of vocational qualifications was mixed. The term ‘vocational’ was not widely used by learners, and some admitted they had looked up the term to check what it meant. When asked who they believed vocational qualifications were for, learners mainly said they were best suited for people who either learned by doing or those who preferred coursework to written exams.

‘People who are better at coursework than they are at actual tests themselves, so they're better at doing a physical task instead of on-the-spot exams and stuff’.

(Sixth form learner)

‘I think it's for people who want to learn in a different way than is taught through mainstream education’.

(FE learner)

Some learners believed there was a perception that vocational qualifications were more suitable for learners with less academic ability. Learners interviewed thought

⁷² Vocational qualifications: learners' experiences and perceptions - Qualitative research findings, Beaufort Research, April 2023

teachers would often encourage learners to stay in sixth form to do A levels prior to going to university, and believed only non-academic learners were encouraged to take vocational qualifications.

'Vocational qualification,' it's more to do with the practical so people perhaps of less academic backgrounds will be drawn to it'.

(WBL / apprenticeships learner)

'I feel like BTECs are viewed less than A levels, so I feel like a lot of people in secondary school they go onto A levels just out of fearing that BTEC will be viewed less than when applying to unis and stuff. I feel like destigmatising that in some way would help massively for Year 11s'.

(FE learner)

Learners from all sectors referred to their qualification by the type or by level, for example a BTEC, apprenticeship or level 3, 4 or 5 – none said they would refer to their qualification as a vocational qualification.

The perceived academic/vocational divide noted by learners was a recurrent theme in wider stakeholder interviews. Learning provider feedback often referred to the 'competitive tension' between different learning providers – and a perturbing belief by some that certain groups of learners 'were not suited' to vocational qualifications, and therefore did not need to receive information on vocational qualification options. Many learning providers have stated strongly that we need to find a way to promote vocational education and training as a valued and attractive pathway for all learners. We should not control access to vocational education and training based upon academic record.

There remains an inconsistency in attitude and practical approaches to the promotion of vocational education and training post-16, in spite of there being many examples of good practice, and excellent collaboration between learning providers in many areas.

Fitzalan High School: information for pupils and staff

Fitzalan High School produces a Vocational Handbook which is published on its website, covering Key Stage 3, 4 and 5. Its curriculum was praised by Estyn in 2016 for its 'extensive range of subject options at key stage 4 and in the sixth form, including a wide variety of vocational qualifications'. The Handbook provides information on the vocational qualifications available at varying levels, how they are graded, and how level 3 subjects contribute to UCAS points.

In its sixth form prospectus, the school provides information for its pupils on all of the subjects available – A level and vocational. The vocational descriptors include equivalences to A level, unit choice and career opportunities.

Returning to learners on vocational programmes, most however believed the perception that vocational qualifications were only for people who were less academic was inaccurate and misleading after they had started their vocational qualifications. Whilst they believed that there was an external view that vocational qualifications did not have the same parity of esteem as A levels, they themselves thought very highly of their qualifications.

The term 'achieving parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications' is a familiar one, and one which has been a conundrum for many years. One of the most impressionable comments made during the course of this review is that 'parity of esteem is not a philosophical concept – it is a lived experience', and in a society which aims to be inclusive and equal, that is a key concern, particularly given the comments from learners. We should not be sparring 'academic versus vocational qualifications' in life and work today - we need the right balance of knowledge, skills, and behaviours.

So, this leads to the question – why *do* we differentiate between academic and vocational qualifications? In some countries, there is further differentiation: technical, applied, professional – terminology which further categorises qualifications. This binary terminology we use is perhaps of more use to those involved in education organisation and delivery rather than those who are recipients of education and training. We should be proud of vocational education, training and qualifications and the opportunities to which they lead. We should be proud of achieving all qualifications, and value the differing professions that qualifications allow. So why do we differentiate at all? Why not use terminology that refers to subjects, skills or occupational routes? Why not consider how we define levels of qualifications, to recognise varying routes of progression? This would certainly be clearer from a learner and employer perspective.

If not, we need a concerted, consistent and loud message promoting vocational education, training, and qualifications and a determined focus on providing learners, parents and wider society with a message which *values* vocational qualifications, and indeed, promotes the value of vocational qualifications.

Recommendation 13: That the Welsh Government, Commission for Tertiary Education and Research and Qualifications Wales consider the terminology used in connection with qualifications, and set up a task and finish group to identify ways to strengthen the promotion, and awareness of the value of vocational education, training and qualifications, to learners and employers.

Recommendation 14: Given the decrease seen in the number of learners undertaking vocational qualifications over the last five years, that Welsh Government and the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research consider whether this trend accords with labour market and skills requirements for the future and identifies action should it be necessary.

5.3 How well do learners enjoy vocational qualifications?

The majority of learners interviewed were pleased with the vocational qualifications that they were following. Learners enjoyed the practical aspects of learning in particular. Apprentices appreciated the fact that they were able to apply the theory and models they studied in their paid employment. This helped reinforce the value of the qualification and allowed them to envisage how they could progress professionally because of taking the course.

‘Enjoyable, learning the legalities of the industry, and that gives you a great deal of confidence and I do enjoy that, and theories and models and all sorts of things, and applying them to your daily tasks’.

(Apprentice)

Learners appreciated the support received from their teachers, tutors, peers and, according to apprentices, co-workers. Most learners felt they were able to ask for support and that help would be on hand relatively quickly. Supportive tutors were particularly important to learners who had additional learning needs.

‘I’m also dyslexic and the support that I’ve actually been given was better than I ever had in college or school...I’ve had unending support, emails, or phone calls or texts if I needed it to explain something I couldn’t read or understand properly’.

(Adult learner)

Learners also felt that they benefitted from:

- increased confidence
- better understanding of the industry and related sectors
- transferable skills
- opportunities to go straight into a profession and earning an income sooner, particularly the option to 'earn while you learn' afforded by apprenticeship routes

5.4 How do learners choose to take a vocational qualification at the age of 16?

During their school years – particularly during years 9-11 – learners receive a range of advice and guidance on careers. This can take many forms, and includes individual advice from Gyrfa Cymru/Careers Wales, talks from employers, and taster sessions from post-16 providers to allow pupils to experience learning in areas which may be new to them.

The Learning and Skills Measure (2009) recognises that advice given to learners should be unbiased and should be in the best interests of the individual. 'Our National Mission' states that the Welsh Government 'will tackle the 'aspiration gap', working with schools, colleges, universities, Careers Wales and businesses to raise awareness of the world of work and the range of available career choices'.⁷³

Estyn's report on '16-19 Curriculum'⁷⁴ of October 2022 found that learner choice at age 16 'is influenced by the quality and impartiality of information, advice and guidance they receive about the options in their local area and the pathways these provide for future education, training or employment.there remains too much variation in the quality of careers and work-related education and impartial advice and guidance to support all learners in schools fully in making choices about their education and training options post-16'.

Estyn found that the majority of schools with their own sixth form provide learners with detailed information about courses available in the sixth form, including options available as part of local partnership arrangements. However, relatively little, if any information on other options at all levels or apprenticeship opportunities available through alternative local learning providers was provided routinely. They found that insufficient attention is paid to alternative learning pathways other than staying on in the sixth form, especially if learners are expected to achieve well academically in their GCSEs. Learners feel that they should have the opportunity to meet with representatives from other providers to allow them to evaluate all available options, regardless of whether the school has its own sixth form. Where schools with their

⁷³ <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/pdf-versions/2023/3/2/1679399634/our-national-mission-high-standards-and-aspirations-all.pdf>

⁷⁴ https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files/2022-10/A%20review%20of%20the%20current%2016-19%20curriculum%20in%20Wales_0.pdf

own sixth forms allow representatives into the school to meet with groups of learners studying in Year 11, Estyn found that this is sometimes restricted to meeting specific groups of learners who are unlikely to progress into their own school sixth form.

These views are supported by the research undertaken by Beaufort. We have already recognised that there is a mixed understanding of vocational qualifications, that learners have differing perceptions of the value of vocational education, and that learners believe that more 'non-academic' learners are encouraged to take vocational education. Some thought vocational qualifications were also a good option for learners who were unsure what exactly they wanted to do in the future.

'I think they're good subjects to do if you don't know exactly what you're going into, majority of careers, so it's a good subject to study because it gives you background knowledge that could help you with nursing or teaching or basically any career'.

(Sixth form learner)

There is an inconsistency in approach between learning providers to advice and guidance, and indeed a difference in approach to advice and guidance within learning providers. Learners already on a 'subject' path, are less likely to receive the breadth of advice that exists, and Estyn's finding that access to alternatives other than sixth forms can be restricted is a real concern.

Learners were asked how they would encourage future learners to consider taking vocational qualifications. Key factors that learners believed were important surrounded messaging about the usefulness of vocational qualifications in getting a job in the future, and learning skills and gaining more experience that will help in the 'real world'. Social media was seen by learners as a quick and easy way to reach people, and messages on social media could also be targeted at parents as well as the learners themselves. Open days and taster sessions would help learners understand which courses would suit them best and demonstrate the range of skills they could obtain by enrolling to do a vocational course.

We need to be able to provide *all* learners with full, accurate and accurate information, so that they can make decisions. As one stakeholder articulated, 'choosing a course or qualification can affect life chances, and unless we present all options to all learners, we are failing in our duty as practitioners and pre-determining futures which are not our own '.

Career Choices for year 9 learners

Pembrokeshire College and Careers Wales work together to provide experiential 'taster days' for year 9 learners in Pembrokeshire secondary schools. On an annual basis, all year 9 learners from secondary schools in Pembrokeshire are invited into the college to 'try' various occupations by means of workshops sessions, provided by local employers or specialist staff.

These sessions range from analysing a crime scene for forensic science to caring for animals in preparation for veterinary nursing, from building a brick wall in construction to putting on a brief performance for drama, and from practising nail art to cooking and serving a meal. In the past, up to 90 different sessions have been available, giving learners a great opportunity to sample differing occupations.

As well as providing access to all opportunities, learners have commented that there are some other matters that they would have liked to understand better prior to enrolling on a course. These include assessment methods and the balance between theory and practical elements.

A small number of learners with additional learning needs who participated in the Beaufort Research interviews felt they would have appreciated more support and guidance before enrolling on the courses. One learner with autism commented that the course was very difficult, especially the placement, so would have appreciated having the opportunity to speak to someone with autism who had already completed the course to get their perspective and advice. Another learner with severe dyslexia had not realised how onerous the work would be as it was taking her longer to read all the course material.

'With my autism I wish I could have talked to someone who has autism and who has done [the course] because it's so difficult, it's so overwhelming. I'm really bad with eye contact and basically, I'm going into a placement in a mainstream class to help with kids with additional needs like me and it's really hard'.

(Ambassador learner)

'I have severe dyslexia and I find it's fantastic the courses, but I didn't realise how time consuming it is because there is a lot more work maybe than what I anticipated. Not that it would have put me off, but I think I would have maybe managed my time a bit better and I would have prepared myself to know how long it was going to take'.

(Ambassador learner)

The Curriculum for Wales recognises that effective careers education is important. Careers and Work related experience for 3 to 16-year-olds is a cross-cutting theme in the Curriculum for Wales which is being implemented as part of the roll out. It will enable learners to develop knowledge, skills and understanding in preparation for the challenges and opportunities of further learning and the world of work, and will ensure that they become increasingly aware of all of the opportunities available to them. This will support the ambition to provide equitable and impartial advice and guidance to all learners.

In addition, the recent consultation by Qualifications Wales 'the Full 14-16 Qualification Offer' proposes pre-vocational and skills for work provision, which may widen the curriculum offer to pre-16 learners and make learners more aware of opportunities post-16. The Welsh Government's intention to develop guidance to recognise a wider set of experiences, skills and knowledge through 14-16 learning could help support young people move confidently to employment, training and further and higher education.

Both recommendations below support the findings of Estyn's October 2022 inspection of 16-19 curriculum and of the recent 'Transitions to Employment'⁷⁵ by Dr Hefin David MS.

Recommendation 15: That Welsh Government ensure, as the Curriculum for Wales is embedded, that all learners receive equitable and impartial advice on, and access to the opportunities available to them in post-compulsory education and training, and consider how best to support this aim specifically for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities.

Recommendation 16: That Welsh Government should ensure that providers of post-16 education and training have appropriate access to pre-16 learners for the purposes of providing progression information for learners.

⁷⁵ [230622-transitions-to-employment.pdf](#)

5.5 What are the entry requirements for vocational qualifications?

Most learning providers set entry requirements for learners entering post-16 programmes of learning. Where appropriate, discretion is applied when considering whether learners have attained the entry requirements, often dependent upon the personal circumstances of the learner. This discretion is important and must be maintained, as it allows individual learning providers to make informed decisions about individual circumstances which may have adversely affected the results of prior qualifications.

The entry requirements for vocational learning programmes can vary between individual learning providers. A selection of school sixth form entry requirements showed that the standard entry requirements for sixth forms appears to be five GCSEs at grade C and above, with variation in specific requirements: some schools required a grade B in subjects chosen for AS level, whilst other required a grade B in specific subjects only. In further education colleges, the general requirements for level 3 provision in a specific subject appears to be five GCSEs at grade C and above, sometimes including English/Welsh first language and mathematics. However, for the same vocational qualification at level 2, entry requirements ranged from four GCSEs at grade D, including maths or English at grade C to five GCSEs at grade C.

Whilst in most cases learners may not consider more than one learning provider, the difference in entry requirements can lead to confusion, to the of inequality of opportunity. It is also confusing for those providing initial advice and guidance.

Hywel Dda University Health Board: Apprenticeship Academy

The Hywel Dda Apprenticeship Academy provides opportunities for learners seeking to join the National Health Service. Learners are enrolled on apprenticeship programmes which can take up to four years to complete, from level 2 to level 5.

Recruitment for apprentices onto level 2 health and social care is not determined by qualifications, but by values and behaviours. An assessment day, led by professionals, determines whether the learners have the appropriate values to be accepted onto the programme. If successful, learners have the opportunity to move through different level of apprenticeship frameworks, and ultimately progress to a nursing degree.

Recommendation 17: That the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research convene a task and finish group to consider entry requirements onto vocational programmes of learning to understand the current differences in requirements, and to determine the best options for learners in Wales. This will necessarily consider equity across entry requirements for all qualifications.

5.6 What experiences do learners have of vocational qualifications through the medium of Welsh?

The Beaufort research found that for learners undertaking their entire vocational qualification through the medium of Welsh, their experiences were positive overall. Some further education and work-based learning participants, undertaking vocational qualifications bilingually or partly in Welsh, welcomed the opportunity to do this, and appreciated being able to decide in which language they wanted to work. In one example, a learner varied the language for assessment according to the module being studied within the vocational qualification. She believed that the college's flexibility around completing work bilingually helped encourage learners to consider doing more of their course in Welsh.

'When I started, we've always been given the option where we can do it in Welsh or English or bilingual. So, all the way through my Health and Social Care, I've always been given the option'.

(FE learner)

Cambrian Training: flexible delivery through the medium of Welsh and bilingually

Cambrian Training promote bilingual apprenticeship training to its learners. Two of their learners, following an apprenticeship in Sustainable Recycling Activities, have demonstrated the flexibility of delivery of qualifications - and ultimately an apprenticeship framework - either through the medium of Welsh or bilingually. One learner, a fluent Welsh speaker, has most of his discussions recorded through the medium of Welsh. The second learner is studying through the medium of Welsh for the first time, has observations through the medium of Welsh, and written work mainly in English.

Some further education learners were aware that the more popular courses, such as hand social care, had learners completing their course through the medium of Welsh. They concluded that those courses were more viable because of the higher number of Welsh speakers. A few further education learners said their tutors had encouraged them to 'push themselves' by completing some elements of their course

through the medium of Welsh because they had attended a Welsh medium school previously.

However, some learners reported challenges to complete their course wholly or partly through the medium of Welsh. It was usually more difficult when learners were doing their own research as it was considerably harder to find information in Welsh online, according to some sixth form and further education learners. They would have to take the additional step of translating the information that they found, which could be time consuming and difficult. In addition, technical terminology could sometimes be challenging in Welsh as a few learners felt they were sometimes more familiar with the English terminology.

Not all Welsh speaking learners who wished to complete their course through the medium of Welsh or bilingually were able to do so. One participant at a further education college was discouraged from taking the qualification in Welsh because the material was all in English, and for other further education learners, it was not possible for them to be taught through the medium of Welsh because the tutors would not be able to deliver the course in that language.

'None of the business tutors actually speak Welsh. I know for other courses and bigger courses in the college they're able to do it in Welsh, it's worthwhile with the numbers. But I am actually the only person on my course who can speak Welsh. I think if they have the numbers they do it, but there's no reason to because there's only me'.

(FE learner)

Others, who could speak Welsh, said it had not crossed their minds to do their course through the medium of Welsh. In a few cases, learners, who were sometimes first language speakers, did not believe their Welsh was good enough to undertake the qualification in Welsh.

These findings accord with Estyn's 16-19 curriculum report,⁷⁶ which found that 'opportunities to learn through the medium of Welsh on vocational courses and work-based learning are far more limited [than A levels]. Around six in ten Welsh speaking learners that responded to our survey feel that they can access course or assessment activities through the medium of Welsh always or most of the time'.

It is clear from stakeholder feedback, that there is a need for a clear direction of travel for the delivery and assessment of vocational qualifications through the

⁷⁶ https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files/2022-10/A%20review%20of%20the%20current%2016-19%20curriculum%20in%20Wales_0.pdf

medium of Welsh or bilingually, a strategy for preparation of relevant resources, and access to relevant Welsh speaking tutors.

Feedback from other stakeholders accords with the feedback from learners. In particular, the feedback from Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol and CYDAG has been particularly useful in informing this element of the report. There is an inconsistency in availability of staff able to teach through the medium of Welsh or bilingually, across geographical and subject areas. In addition, vocational qualifications provided through the medium of Welsh are not available concurrently with the production and implementation of the qualifications in English. Finally, the Qualifications in Wales database is not sufficiently specific about which elements of vocational qualifications are available through the medium of Welsh or bilingually.

Qualifications Wales has entered into a strategic partnership with Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol and produced 'Choice for all',⁷⁷ a strategy for increasing the availability of Welsh medium qualifications from 2020-2025. One of its areas of focus is to 'strengthen expectations for qualifications designed for post-16 learners in identified priority areas'. However, there is an acknowledgement that the viability of qualifications can be a challenge for awarding bodies, as the number of learners taking qualifications through the medium of Welsh can most often be low and fluctuate over time.

Recommendation 18: That the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research work with Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol to develop a way in which staff able to speak Welsh can, if willing, support a variety of learning providers.

Recommendation 19: That Qualifications Wales, working with Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, publish its plan to increase the number of vocational qualifications through the medium of Welsh and bilingually, recognising that this may focus on the qualifications with the largest enrolments and Welsh language demand.

Recommendation 20: That Qualifications Wales develop its Qualifications in Wales database further to provide more detail on vocational qualifications available through the medium of Welsh.

5.7 What vocational qualifications are available to learners at 16 years of age?

There are over 2.500 vocational qualifications available to learners at age 16.⁷⁸ Estyn's 16-19 Curriculum report states that 'the landscape of vocational

⁷⁷ <https://qualifications.wales/media/cbyppqxp/choice-for-all-our-strategy-for-increasing-the-availability-of-welsh-medium-qualifications-2020-25.pdf>

⁷⁸ Welsh Government Statistics, 24 February 2023

qualifications is particularly complex. Parents and learners say they are less aware of vocational qualifications than they are of A levels'. Whilst there is no ideal number of vocational qualifications, it is important that they are not only current, but anticipatory in terms of industrial and employment practices, legislation and the knowledge content.

Vocational qualifications offered to learners depend upon national policy drivers, regional demands and learning provider choice. However, the vocational curriculum offered by any one learning provider will also depend upon the size and resources of that learning provider. For example, learning providers who have access to a smaller area geographically may not always be able to form viable cohorts in all of the occupational areas, or provide the diversity of option routes from vocational qualifications that they would wish to offer.

If we take, as an example, the level 3 vocational provision within the sector subject area of ICT, we notice that there is a wide variety of vocational provision available across Wales. There are for example, 50 vocational qualifications at level 3 available for public funding in the Qualifications in Wales database. Some of these are complementary certificates, diplomas and extended diplomas – each of which has an increased number of guided learning hours. Learning providers will additionally then market the vocational qualifications in differing ways and may combine vocational qualifications to make a learning programme. So for example, Computing with Games Development and Coding, and Computing with Cyber security are examples of the same vocational qualification, but a variety of option routes.

Learners, employers and learning providers all value the wide choice of vocational qualifications on offer, and the ability of learning providers to adapt the qualification to meet specific needs. Learners can then have access to specific units within vocational qualifications which are most appropriate for the career pathway they wish to follow. Recognising the differences in the abilities of learning providers to offer a diversity of routes, further exploration of how a wider curriculum could be offered in settings where choice is more limited should be undertaken. Whilst there are logistical challenges, there are opportunities through remote delivery or clustering to make this a reality.

Cyber College Cymru: Coleg Gwent, Bridgend College, Coleg y Cymoedd, The College Merthyr Tydfil

Cyber College Cymru is an initiative involving four geographically separate further education colleges, which enables learners to prepare for careers in cyber security by providing them with fundamental skills, knowledge, and understanding of the industry. Through professional mentoring, learners in Wales interested in a cyber-career, flourish on this evolving pathway that combines industry's insight with robust, 'best of kind' education through this agile, professional partnership. The initiative leads to a level 3 vocational qualification.

The incorporation of leading industry specialists in the design and delivery of the curriculum has been crucial in allowing learners to apply their course knowledge to real life employment scenarios. The learners have access to more employer led experiences and as such are more equipped to move successfully into the sector as they develop additional transferable skills. Partnership working ensures workforce needs of the industry are met through harnessing new talent and signposting fresh thinking young people, with different perspectives, who will bring innovation and enthusiasm to the cyber and digital sectors.

A further issue concerns employers who wish to enrol learners onto programmes or qualifications, but availability of such provision may not exist within the geographical region required, or numbers are so small that the lack of financial viability prohibits a course from running. Suggestions from employers have included the establishment of a national database, which holds details of learners wishing to undertake low volume provision, and retains such details until financial viability is secured.

Recommendation 21: That the Welsh Government and learning providers should work together to consider innovative ways to offer a wider curriculum offer for learners where choice is more limited, or where the number of learners is small.

5.8 Are learners clear about how they can progress through vocational qualifications at all levels?

The implementation of the Curriculum for Wales inevitably has implications on post-16 vocational qualifications. Qualifications Wales has just closed a consultation on 'the Full 14-16 Qualification Offer'.⁷⁹ Within this, there is an intention to 'secure a suite of bilingual, pre-vocational qualifications designed for delivery in schools at Entry Level, Level 1 and Level 2 in a range of broad occupational areas'. Schools will be able to select qualifications from a number of areas, as best suits their pupils.

From the stakeholder interviews held during this review, it became apparent that there was an imperative to ensure that pre-16 and post-16 vocational qualifications offers were complementary. The purpose of the pre-16 vocational needs to be clearly understood by learners, and the potential progression routes explained carefully. Examples were cited of learners having completed level 2 vocational qualifications in school and expecting to progress to a level 3 qualification when moving to post-16 education. However, this was not always the case, and was dependent upon the choice of qualification chosen at pre-16, the content of the curriculum, and the practical skills achieved. It is therefore critical that there is a full debate on the links between pre- and post-16 vocational qualifications and the progression routes available in advance of any decisions being made.

Recommendation 22: That dependent upon the outcome of the consultation on the ‘Full 14-16 Qualification Offer’, Welsh Government and Qualifications Wales should work with learning providers and awarding bodies to ensure that the purpose of pre vocational qualifications is understood by learners, that the delivery of those qualifications is consistent with expectations and that there is integrity of progression between pre vocational qualifications and post-16 vocational qualifications.

One of the discussions held by the steering group surrounded the general content of vocational qualifications – the extent to which various levels of vocational qualifications should include a breadth of skills, or focus on occupational specialisms. The steering group was clear that:

- progression does not necessarily mean moving ‘up’ levels. Progression can be from a qualification in one subject, to the same level of qualification in another, perhaps new or different occupational route or sector
- level 1 qualifications are a foundation for further learning, and should be more general in nature
- level 2 qualifications may be about breadth, but may also prepare learners for the workplace, such as in health and social care. Level 2 programmes of vocational learning should include elements of employer engagement
- level 3 qualifications should be more specialist, and should include work placement, as included in Recommendation 10. This level supports learners to enter the workplace or engage in further learning.
- the importance of the structure of the overall Programme of Learning is important at all levels, as it can supplement skills needs

For all learners however, an important message from stakeholders was that progression pathways through vocational qualifications need to be much clearer than they are currently. In the first workshop we held, we asked stakeholders to ‘score’

how clear progression pathways are through vocational qualifications, with '10 being absolutely clear', and '1 being not clear', with a broadly neutral response. Our second workshop explored this further, with the majority of respondents stating that progression routes do need to be clearer. Stakeholders informed us that that there needed to be clarification of language used, that it was important progression aligned with the Curriculum for Wales, and that there was a need to eliminate duplication in content between levels.

We asked stakeholders what needs to happen to make these pathways clear, and a number of views emerged. Views included:

- visual descriptors/ route maps/informatics for possible progression pathways, with consistent terminology
- progression pathways linked to destinations
- recognition that pathways are not always vertically aligned, and may involve moving sideways or to lower levels dependent upon the skills required
- endorsement from employers and higher education institutions being fundamental according to the purpose of the qualification
- clear careers advice and guidance

The steering group discussed the various levels of vocational qualifications which exist, and the broad structure of the content. Generally, the steering group was content with the existing structure, where there is increased specialism as learners move up to higher levels. There was a strong view from learning providers however that level 1 qualifications post-16 should be more generic in content than they currently are.

Recommendation 23: That Qualifications Wales works with stakeholders to produce vocational qualification 'route maps' to enable learners to identify progression opportunities in each sector.

5.9 Learners over the age of 19

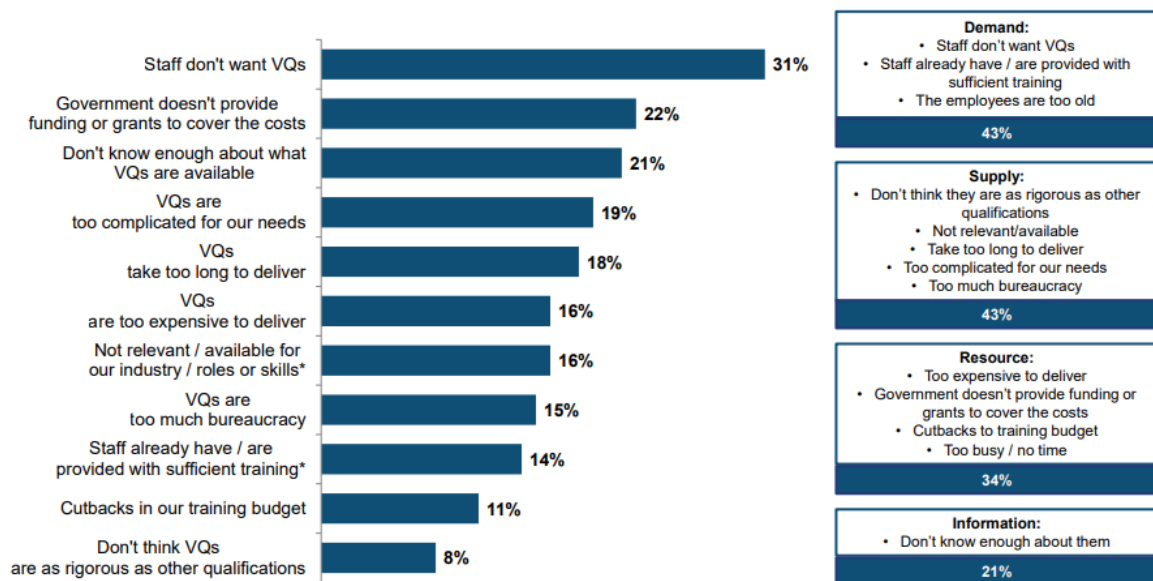
And now let us move on to post-19 learners. Today's labour market is changing rapidly. Indeed, today's society is changing rapidly. Working lives are different from those even a decade ago, and individuals can expect to change jobs, occupations and careers many times during their lives. Many of the jobs of the future are unknown – the advent of artificial intelligence, the drive towards net zero, and automation will require new skill sets. Therefore vocational qualifications need to be able to respond to these needs quickly, and to provide these competences quickly, realising lifelong learning.

Discussion with stakeholders regarding the provision of vocational qualifications for life long learning generated some clear views – particularly from employers:

- There is a lack of clarity about the role that vocational qualifications can play in upskilling or reskilling the workforce
- That delivery methods are not as flexible as employers would like
- That qualifications take too long both to develop and to deliver
- That the progression opportunities after level 3 were confusing
- That progression from a level 5 qualification to a degree was often perceived as requiring duplication of work

These views were backed up by the employer survey of 2019, which identified reasons for barriers to vocational education.

Graph 16: Barriers to take-up of vocational qualifications⁸⁰



Responses marked with an asterisk were unprompted
All establishments who train off-the-job and have not arranged training in the last 12 months that leads to vocational qualifications (Module B) (382)

Source: [Employer Skills Survey 2019 Skills needs results: Wales slide pack \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales)

Some of these barriers are fundamental - the first being 'staff do not want vocational qualifications'. This could be the result of a number of issues – amongst these could be an understanding of what vocational qualifications are, and their value to the economy and society. Whilst we accept that vocational qualifications may not be required in many cases – for example, vendor qualifications may provide alternative

⁸⁰ Welsh Government, Employer Survey 2019

routes - recommendation 13 will help to address this matter. We need to tackle the perception about the value of vocational qualifications. But before we embark on a campaign to educate and promote, we need to be clear about what we are delivering, how it can be delivered, and how we can address the issues cited above.

There is a view that vocational qualifications take too long to achieve when employers need the ability to upskill or reskill quickly. We need to be able to provide qualifications in smaller 'bite size' chunks, so that we can respond more quickly to employer needs. This may involve delivering a single unit, or a combination of units from vocational qualifications, to provide the right skills. Awarding bodies can offer 'micro-credentials', digital badges, and unit certification. Learning providers can and do provide these units of delivery, but more awareness of such is required.

In addition, learning providers are often asked to respond quickly to employer needs within their local area – this may be because of a new technology emerging in a local industry, or new opportunities arising. In these cases, a rapid response is required – sometimes involving research for the learning provider, or acquisition of new skills. This can be costly, but if the requirement has the continued potential to contribute sustainably to the local community and economy, the cost/benefit equation would be positive.

Recommendation 24: That learning providers promote single or multiple units of vocational qualifications to employers where appropriate to do so, and that Qualifications Wales encourage awarding bodies to make unit certification available to meet demand.

Recommendation 25: That the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research provide a 'rapid response' fund to learning providers, based on identified needs and sustainable outcomes, to allow them to respond rapidly to industry requirements.

Employers comment on the delivery of vocational qualifications – which is sometimes not as flexible as they would wish. There is a need to minimise time away from the workplace, and there are a variety of means by which this can be achieved. There are multiple possible delivery routes, such as demonstration of skills in the work environment, remote learning, on-line learning, and delivery outside of working hours, either directly or through recordings.

In addition, a tailored, robust approach to Recognition of Prior Learning can sometimes be effective in expediting the achievement of a vocational qualifications. There are some interesting examples of how Recognition of Prior Learning is applied in other countries.

In Denmark,⁸¹ adults can have their competences assessed in relation to adult vocational courses. For short courses, this is an option known as Individual Competence Assessment where learners have a right to this assessment and can obtain financial compensation for the time spent in this process, which takes between half a day and 5 days. When applying for adult vocational education, it is compulsory to have prior learning and experiences assessed before enrolment, which means that every adult above 25 years of age who intends to embark on vocational education should participate in the Recognition of Prior Learning process.

In Germany⁸² on the other hand, the most important tool for assessing non-formal learning outcomes is admission to a final vocational examination. Under this provision, learners can be admitted to a final examination for a recognised occupation requiring formal training if they provide evidence that they have been employed in the relevant occupation for a period that is equal to or longer than one and a half times the initial training.

Credit can be obtained for a higher level of general education attainment, which shortens the period of employment for which evidence must be produced. A previous relevant initial vocational qualification in a different training occupation can also be credited towards the required periods of employment. Apart from the practical part of the examination, where relevant professional competences are tested, external candidates must prove their theoretical knowledge in a written examination.

At present in Wales, awarding bodies specify whether Recognition of Prior Learning is permitted for specific qualifications. Individual providers then make the decision as to whether to apply, and how to apply such recognition. There is a difference between Recognition of Prior Learning – where a learner does not attend part of a course and can move more quickly to assessment – and Recognition of Prior Assessment/Attainment, which give exemption from part of the assessment. The amount of funding for a programme of learning can be affected dependent upon how these are applied.

Recommendation 26: That Welsh Government, Qualifications Wales and learning providers work together to explore whether the arrangements currently applied for Recognition of Prior Learning remain appropriate, and consider the merits of consistency of application throughout Wales.

Discussions with employers regarding access to vocational qualifications were generally positive. Employers generally noted that their first points of contact when looking for new vocational qualifications was their local provider, either to advise on a qualification, or to deliver a named qualification. Employers were clear however that

⁸¹ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/denmark-u2>

⁸² <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/germany-u2>

the pace of change in industry required increased pace of change and responsiveness in the 'qualifications market'.

Importantly, a concern from some employers is that Wales is not aspirational enough in promoting and providing vocational pathways through to 'final' – often considered to be degree level or professional recognition – qualifications. Some employers gave examples where they would want to take employees right through from a level 2 vocational qualification to a degree, enabling them to achieve the professional certification that they needed for their chosen occupation. However, in some instances, the only option for the final year – the degree level qualification – either required full time study, or significant additional time to finish the degree itself.

Employers feel that there are a number of occupations that can be reached through vocational routes, with seamless transition, and articulation to degree level qualifications or professional qualifications with greater planning, and with availability on a more flexible basis. The advent of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research is encouraging in that it could facilitate such seamless provision to be developed, perhaps in the first instance concentrating on specific professions where there are acute shortage in the workforce.

We asked stakeholders about the barriers to effective articulation from levels 4 and 5 to level 6. Primary concerns included:

- A difference in funding structures between different levels and type of qualifications
- A difference in awarding body regimes – for example, level 4 and 5 being achieved through vocational qualifications, but level 6 through a university. The main concern in these cases was cited as a lack of vertical alignment, sometimes resulting in duplication, and at other times resulting in lack of content delivery
- The small volume of learners enrolled on many qualifications, and therefore the cost implications

Degree apprenticeship are one way of overcoming some of these concerns. The Welsh Government has piloted a programme of degree apprenticeships in the areas of digital industries, information and communication technologies, engineering and advanced manufacturing. However there is a demand in other areas for this type of route. Of course, degree apprenticeships do not need to be the only route, and as noted in 'Transitions to Employment', partnership working is key. Vertical alignment, together with Recognition of Prior Learning, can avoid duplication and expediate the attainment of a qualifications.

Recommendation 27: That Welsh Government and the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, should work with all relevant stakeholders to explore progression through vocational provision onto level 6 provision, with particular emphasis on degree apprenticeships. Critical within this progression model should be vertical integration between levels.

5.10 Summary

We have looked here at the learner, and the progression opportunities through vocational qualifications. We have found that all learners should be advised of all options available to them, and should be encouraged to make their own choices with appropriate support. We have found that vocational qualification opportunities sometimes depend upon geographical location or individual learning provider, and that we have to explore ways of overcoming this.

Progression through vocational qualifications needs to be clearer, and integrity of transition between pre-16 and post-16 vocational preserved.

We have seen that there is a need to develop 'bite size chunks' of learning recognising that learning may not necessarily be continuous from age 16, and that progression routes through higher level qualifications should encourage learners to stay in work. We note particularly that the creation for the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research has a key role to play in making this a reality.

Chapter 6: Vocational qualifications: Options for Wales

6.1 Introduction

During the previous chapters, we have considered a number of aspects related to vocational qualifications in Wales – the range of vocational qualifications available, international practices, how we determine whether we have a relevant range of vocational qualifications, and the learner journey to, and through vocational qualifications.

As a result, we have made a number of recommendations – recommendations which in line with our brief are generally pragmatic in nature. Each individual recommendation has merit in its own right, but taken together, they would have a significant impact on the landscape for vocational qualifications, and most importantly, on our learners. Amongst the most fundamental, are the requirements to establish a national strategy for vocational education and training, commission work to determine national occupational, and skills needs for the future, provide comprehensive initial advice and guidance to learners pre-16, and elevate our aspirations for vocational qualifications.

As a nation with devolved powers for education and training that sits within the United Kingdom, it is natural that we compare our position with others. The way forward for vocational qualifications in Scotland and Northern Ireland has yet to be determined. At the time of writing, Scotland had recently published its independent review into qualifications and assessment within the senior phase of schooling, and into the skills delivery landscape. The response to either review is not yet known. Northern Ireland has completed a consultation on the purpose and principles of vocational qualifications, but as yet has not confirmed its intentions. Given the emerging developments in each nation, it is important that Welsh Government, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research and Qualifications Wales all maintain close relationship with counterparts in other nations, to identify whether there are opportunities for co-operation and collaboration as plans evolve.

What about the overall direction of travel for vocational qualifications in Wales? This chapter explores and evaluates the options available to Wales and makes recommendations regarding how we should approach vocational qualifications in the future. It synthesizes responses to the various objectives in the Terms of Reference for the Review including the expansion of *made for Wales* vocational qualifications. We have aligned our options approximately in the order of the objectives in the Terms of Reference.

We believe that Wales has a number of options for the development of vocational qualifications in the future. We have identified four options:

Option 1: establish a national awarding body for vocational qualifications in Wales

Option 2: adopt the approach to vocational qualifications taken in England, with initial reference to the adoption of T Levels

Option 3: manage vocational qualifications in response to developments in England and other UK Nations

Option 4: develop and expand *made for Wales* vocational qualifications in the context of a national occupational and skills needs assessment

6.2 Option 1 - Establish a national awarding body for vocational qualifications in Wales

There is an option to develop a national awarding body for vocational qualifications in Wales. This could be a national, government funded awarding body, which could develop a range of qualifications which were specifically *made for Wales*. It is an arrangement which has been adopted by many countries internationally as we saw in chapter 4, and to some extent, by Scotland and Northern Ireland, which both have more of a mixed market.

First of all, let us consider the advantages of having a national awarding body for vocational qualifications. To start with, all vocational qualifications could be developed against the set of principles that we recommended in chapter 3, delivering *made for Wales* qualifications in all sectors, according to the criteria that we deem right for Wales.

We could ensure that there was no inappropriate overlapping of qualifications, and that progression routes through qualifications were structured, simple and clear.

We could consider whether vocational programmes of learning at entry level and level 1 needed to be certified through a national structure and commence formal qualification at more occupationally specific levels – level 2 and above.

Having our own awarding body would give us immunity from changes in other UK nations and allow us to move forward secure in the knowledge that we can move forward as an individual nation.

But are there disadvantages to such a structure? The obvious disadvantage is the removal of choice, and choice was deemed by stakeholders – in particular learning providers – to be important. Choice of qualifications allows learning providers to select the best learning programme and vocational qualification to meet individualised learner needs. Choice allows learning providers to move between awarding bodies should they feel that the content of the qualification is more

appropriate, or as one stakeholder informed us, 'more exciting for learners' in a different awarding body. Choice allows adaptation to local and regional needs. Having a competitive environment for vocational qualifications could be argued to be positive, as awarding bodies will seek to gain market advantage, through response to industry needs, pedagogical and assessment developments, and learning provider feedback.

There may be issues with portability, or forms of recognition. Whilst various equivalence systems exist, there may be a nervousness about a suite of new qualifications – from an employer and possibly higher education perspective. Learning providers situated close to the border have concerns about boundaries – qualifications attained in Wales being acceptable to employers just over the border. And finally, some qualifications require professional or international recognition – this could be at best time consuming, and at worst the qualifications not accepted by the relevant bodies.

The establishment of an awarding body for vocational qualifications would be a significant undertaking. Such a body would need considerable experience of developing vocational qualifications, and a substantial structural edifice to support that development. The national body would need to be recognised by Qualifications Wales, and its qualifications regulated. The process of identification, design and development of relevant qualifications, and ensuring their acceptance cannot be underestimated.

If we were to self-regulate at entry level and level 1, learning providers would still need a structure to ensure consistency of standard.

When canvassed about the appeal of a national awarding body for vocational qualifications in Wales, stakeholders who responded had little appetite for such a move, with the majority of respondents stating that they would not support this. When asked about the advantages of a national awarding body, respondents commented that it would provide simplicity, clarity and consistency. Disadvantages were seen as a reduction in choice, and the potential for reduced standards, and a lack of competition which could lead to a lack of innovation and ambition.

As a nation, we have strong relationships with awarding bodies, who have supported development, and demonstrated commitment to Wales and its learners. These awarding bodies have experience of developing vocational qualifications, expertise in assessment methodologies, and existing relationships with representative bodies. Some awarding bodies also have specialist subject expertise. This experience and these skills would need to be sourced for a new national awarding body. We are therefore not starting from the beginning – we would be abandoning our existing awarding bodies for advantages which could be achieved, far more easily, through existing structures, and avoid the disadvantages which could otherwise ensue.

Therefore, the creation of a national awarding body would be a substantial structural change, without exclusive advantages over and above the existing system. The costs of development of such a structure would be significant, even when just based upon the costs of development of *made for Wales* qualifications within two sectors. Most importantly, such a structural change would not necessarily have a clear advantageous impact on learner achievement, and engagement, or indeed on employer satisfaction. On balance therefore, it is not considered necessary to progress with the concept of a national awarding body for Wales at this point in time.

Recommendation 28: That Wales retains an open market in relation to vocational qualifications, and does not pursue the creation of a single national awarding body.

6.3 Option 2 - Adopting the approach to vocational qualifications taken in England, with initial reference to the adoption of T Levels

The second option is to adopt the same approach as that being taken in England.

The Independent Panel on Technical Education in November 2015 was asked by the Westminster Government to advise on measures which could improve technical education in England.⁸³ Its key recommendation was for ‘the Government to develop a coherent technical education option which develops the technical knowledge and skills required to enter skilled employment, which leads from levels 2/3 to levels 4/5 and beyond, and which is highly valued because it works in the marketplace’.

At level 3, England has introduced T Levels⁸⁴ in a number of sector areas. These are described in chapter 1. T Levels are likely to replace a range of funded vocational and technical qualifications for 16-19 year olds in England. On 29 March 2023, the Department for Education in England published a final list of qualifications at level 3 which overlap with T Levels (waves 1 and 2 of implementation phase only) and which will be defunded from 1 August 2024. In May 2023 it published a list of qualifications proposed to be defunded in 2025 in relation to wave 3. Qualifications Wales has undertaken an analysis of the qualifications that are proposed for defunding in England. It has found that the impact on qualifications in Wales is likely to be very limited and is currently working with the relevant awarding bodies to understand their plans for Wales.

As described in chapter 1, at level 2 and below,⁸⁵ there is a proposal that eight groups of qualifications will be in scope for public funding at level 2, alongside GCSEs and Functional Skills Qualifications. Qualifications will be grouped according

⁸³https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/536046/Report_of_the_Independent_Panel_on_Technical_Education.pdf

⁸⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/introduction-of-t-levels/introduction-of-t-levels>

⁸⁵ [Consultation: Review of post-16 qualifications at level 2 and below in England \(education.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/review-of-post-16-qualifications-at-level-2-and-below-in-england)

to whether they support progression to level 3 study, provide access to sustainable employment at level 2 or deliver English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). The eight groups comprise six groups that will be available to both young people and adults, plus two groups for adults only. At level 1 and below, five groups of level 1 qualifications and four groups at entry level will be considered for public funding in the future, with all groups available to both young people and adults.

On 28 April 2023, the House of Commons Education Committee published its Third Report of Session 2022/2023 – The Future of post-16 qualifications.⁸⁶ In it, they recognised that T Levels are rigorous and challenging qualifications but raised a number of concerns about the ‘right balance between rigour and accessibility’.

Concerns related to:

- entry requirements,
- retention,
- accessibility,
- university entrance requirements
- availability of work placements.

The Committee further noted research from 2021 found that almost two-thirds of employers were not interested in offering a T level placement, and that employer interest is declining. It also noted its concerns that the programme has attracted over £1 billion in public funding.

In England, the AoC has called for ‘an immediate pause to the proposed defunding of existing Level 3 and below VTQs, until we can see how T Levels are working in terms of accessibility and progression for students, meeting industry needs and promoting social mobility’.⁸⁷

We recognise that there are benefits associated with T Levels, and that there would be advantages in adopting T Levels. These include:

- the rigour of the qualification
- the inclusion of work placement
- the fact that vocational qualifications at level 3 would run in parallel for Wales and England, thus reducing the potential risk associated with low volume qualifications in the future

⁸⁶ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/39333/documents/193104/default/>

⁸⁷ <https://d4hfzltwt4wv7.cloudfront.net/uploads/files/AoC20Opportunity20England202023.pdf>

However, T Levels are offered solely in England at this point, and not in any other nation in the UK. Should we wish to introduce T Levels into Wales, there would also be a number of challenges:⁸⁸

- T Levels are awarded by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education in England, which has no powers to award in Wales. If T Levels were introduced in Wales the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education would retain control over the development, review and reform of T Levels (and the technical qualifications within them), making T Level programmes vulnerable to policy changes in England – a similar, or even adverse position to that we find ourselves in currently.
- T Levels involve a compulsory requirement for a substantive 45-day (minimum 315 hour) work. We have already seen in England from the House of Commons Education Committee that this is proving to be a challenge. Feedback that we as a steering group have received from learning providers in England supports this view. There is likely to be inequality of opportunity also in Wales, finding work placements of the right quality, and in the right occupational areas, which may be more acute in more rural areas of Wales.
- T Levels are not available in Welsh, and awarding bodies contracted to develop the new qualifications have developed/are developing them in English only. If T Levels were introduced in Wales, then the content and assessments within T Levels would need to be made available in Welsh. This would also apply to the Occupational Standards on which T Levels are built. This would also require approval from the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. Government funding would likely be needed to support awarding bodies to make available the qualifications in Welsh and this funding may be needed for the lifetime of the T Levels, particularly in subjects where low uptake would make them unviable to offer in Welsh without subsidy.
- T Levels were developed by T Level panels made up of learning providers, employers and professional bodies in England (overseen by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education). Therefore, T Levels have been developed to meet the needs of English employers and learning providers and may not meet the needs of Welsh learners, employers and learning providers.

There would be a need for significant financial support from government to support learning providers and to incentivise employers to accept T Level students for work placements. Financial support has been provided in England, first of all due to the number of Guided Learning Hours necessary for the programmes, and also for industry placements. Learning providers in England can also apply for capital

⁸⁸ A Briefing Paper on T Levels for the Chair and Steering Group of Welsh Government's Vocational Qualification Review, prepared by Qualifications Wales, September 2022

funding to purchase specialist equipment and to refurbish existing facilities or build new buildings. Over £400m capital funding has been made available so far. In addition, employers and learning providers receive incentivisation funding for T Level students hosted on industry placements.

Feedback from stakeholders in England revealed that whilst T Levels were robust and challenging qualifications, with the potential for strong employer engagement, there were challenges in their implementation. In addition, it was felt that T Levels were not appropriate for all level 3 learners, and that without other level 3 qualifications some learners could lose out on opportunities. Other feedback revealed some confusion with governance – which organisation takes the lead when there are issues to resolve, and that it was challenging to integrate the work placement into timetables for learners. Stakeholders in Wales are concerned that T Levels are not being developed in all routes which may be important to Wales, such as tourism, food production and renewable energy.

In making our recommendations, we have paid particular attention to:

- the aspirational status that the T Level seeks to attain
- the strong employer engagement in development and delivery
- the perceived lack of inclusivity within T Levels which could disadvantage some learners
- the challenges around work-placements
- the governance structures
- the fact that as yet, outcomes are not proven

Recommendation 29: That Wales does not adopt the same approach as in England with the implementation of T Levels, but that it does keep a watching brief as the qualifications mature.

6.4 Option 3 - Manage vocational qualifications in response to developments in England and other UK Nations

One of the key concerns prior to the start of this review was the risk of qualifications being defunded in England, and the consequent implications for those qualifications in Wales. The risk identified was that the number of enrolments in Wales on vocational qualifications being defunded in England may be too small for the awarding bodies to consider the qualifications financially viable in the future, and that those qualifications would be withdrawn by the awarding bodies concerned.

The UK Government's Department for Education has already published lists of qualifications that either will or may be defunded as a consequence of the first three waves of T Levels. From 2025, the first new qualifications at level 2 and below will be introduced. Awarding bodies will need to submit their qualifications for approval

against a new set of criteria, and as a result, there is a risk that awarding bodies may decide to cease offering some qualifications where the cost and effort of reviewing and updating them is too high. This would mean that some qualifications cease to be offered in Wales.

Where risks have been identified – currently to level 3 vocational qualifications - Qualifications Wales has worked with awarding bodies to encourage them to extend the typical final start date of appropriate vocational qualifications in Wales. Whilst a short-term solution, it does introduce a degree of certainty for employers and learning providers, whilst the implementation plan continues in England, recognising that delays in implementation have been already been introduced in England.

Awarding bodies spoken to during the course of this review have been positive in relation to the extension of typical final start dates for qualifications, and indeed, in their desire to work with Wales. Qualifications Wales have also stated that conversations with awarding bodies have been ‘reassuringly positive’.

However, this option is reactive rather than proactive – it is responding to change imposed externally, and does not therefore meet the aspirations we have for vocational education, training and qualifications in Wales. There remains, therefore, an element of risk around the future range of qualifications that will be available to learners in Wales. This has to be considered alongside the low number of certifications in many qualifications and therefore the low viability for *Made for Wales* options and for Qualifications Wales to use its powers to commission new qualifications where necessary.

The landscape for vocational qualifications is complex, and learning providers in particular have expressed concern about the future of vocational qualifications given defunding of qualifications in England. It is therefore important that there is precise and regular communication from Qualifications Wales to learning providers to inform them of qualifications at risk, and the actions being undertaken to mitigate the risk. It would be helpful if regular updates to changes to final typical start dates were communicated in a systematic way to learning providers, in order to help with curriculum planning.

Recommendation 30: As a short/medium term measure, that Qualifications Wales should continue to work with awarding bodies to extend the typical final start date of qualifications where appropriate to do so, and should keep learning providers updated regarding potential changes to qualifications through clear and regular communications.

6.5 Option 4 - Develop and expand *made for Wales* vocational qualifications in the context of a national occupational and skills needs assessment

Qualifications Wales' strategic priorities for 2022-2027⁸⁹ identify 5 key themes underpinning their work:

- a Made-for-Wales focus - including securing a sustainable offer of high-quality bilingual qualifications
- taking a dynamic evolutionary approach to qualifications so that they remain up to-date and relevant to modern society
- undertaking careful change management and stakeholder engagement to promote buy-in and deliver successful reforms
- using their influence to promote modern and innovative assessment approaches
- having learner wellbeing at the centre of their decisions

The first of these - *made for Wales* qualifications - has been the subject of extensive discussion within the steering group and with stakeholders during the course of this review. We therefore will consider this option in three stages:

- what do we mean by *made for Wales* vocational qualifications?
- what is our experience so far of *made for Wales* vocational qualifications?
- how should we take forward the development of *made for Wales* qualifications?

What do we mean by made for Wales vocational qualifications?

We realised early on that there was no common understanding of what is meant by *made for Wales* vocational qualifications. The Terms of Reference for the review referred to 'made in Wales' and 'made for Wales' vocational qualifications.

The steering group debated the differing terminology. There were many questions surrounding *made in Wales* and discussions with stakeholders including awarding bodies questioned its interpretation, such as:

- does this mean all awarding bodies will need to be domiciled in Wales if their qualifications are offered in Wales?

⁸⁹ <https://qualificationswales.org/media/azgbk0k1/strategic-priorities-2022-27.pdf>

- would this mean that awarding bodies already operating in Wales would no longer be able to do so, with a risk that long established and respected vocational qualifications might cease to be offered?
- what might happen to niche qualifications which are designed and developed by smaller UK wide organisations?

We concluded that there was a risk of misinterpretation of the term *made in Wales* and that it should not be adopted to describe vocational qualifications in Wales.

We then considered what *made for Wales* might mean and developed a definition. This definition below has been widely accepted by stakeholders, with 85% of respondents at the most recent stakeholder event strongly agreeing or agreeing with the definition, 3 % disagreeing with the definition, whilst the remainder neither agreed nor disagreed.

Consequently, our definition of *made for Wales* qualifications are qualifications which:

- are designed or adapted to meet the specific needs of learners, employers and providers in Wales
- have Welsh stakeholders included in the design, development and review of qualifications
- have content which is sufficiently flexible to relate to the Welsh context, its priorities and policies
- are available bilingually

Whilst there has been general agreement about the definition of *made for Wales* qualifications, there have been mixed views as to the *need for made for Wales* qualifications. These views have ranged from the minority opinion for an absolute need for a suite of *made for Wales* qualifications, to a majority opinion, which is that there should only be *made for Wales* qualifications if they can offer real added value above and beyond existing qualifications, or where there is a need to adapt a qualification to preserve its availability in Wales (for example if it is being defunded or changed in England).

Such qualifications should be the 'best' on offer, in terms of content reflecting the most up-to-date and emerging employer/industrial practices, be engaging in approach, allow providers to be innovative and creative in delivery, and adopting assessment methodologies that best reflect the vocational area in question and purpose of the qualification. All stakeholders agree that any qualifications *made for*

Wales must be widely recognised by employers and universities and must gain acceptance nationally and internationally where appropriate.

Some stakeholders have raised concerns about Wales ‘diverging’ from a UK wide approach, but in reality, there is already divergence in the education system – both for academic and vocational qualifications. From an academic perspective, we only have to consider the grading of GCSEs, and the approach taken with A levels/AS levels to demonstrate that divergence.

Recommendation 31: That the phrase *made for Wales* becomes the accepted terminology, and that the definition of *made for Wales* qualifications be adopted.

What is our experience so far of made for Wales vocational qualifications?

The first sets of *made for Wales* vocational qualifications have been introduced in two sector subject areas: in health and social care and childcare, and construction and building services. Estyn’s review of the 16-19 curriculum found a generally positive reaction to the new *made for Wales* vocational qualifications but noted that many learning providers did express some frustration with early issues regarding the design and implementation of some of the new qualifications. Qualifications Wales undertook ‘rapid reviews of’ both suites of new vocational qualifications, to address concerns raised by learning providers.

With the introduction of the new suites of *made for Wales* vocational qualifications as identified above, Qualifications Wales introduced ‘restriction’. Where a *made for Wales* approach requires awarding bodies to develop qualifications to meet new requirements, it involves a commercial decision by them as to whether to invest in change. Where the size of the market in Wales is a factor, Qualifications Wales has powers to restrict and commission or select new qualifications - this means that the investment made by the awarding body can be recovered over the period of the restriction (typically five to seven years). Restriction elicits the required commercial response by awarding organisations, but inevitably reduces choice for providers as qualifications that do not meet the *made for Wales* requirements are no longer eligible for public funding.

Positive feedback on the new *made for Wales* vocational qualifications included the importance of the updated content of provision, the relevance of the qualifications to Wales, and in many cases, the breadth of the qualification.

‘The qualifications are a big step forward... We have had an unprecedented amount of engagement from Qualifications Wales and the awarding bodies. I am not aware of anything comparable that has been done. They have done all they can.’

(Learning Provider)

However, it would be fair to say that the perception of *made for Wales* qualifications has been adversely affected by the issues arising from the introduction of the first sets of *made for Wales* qualifications, the impact of those issues on learners, learning providers, and ultimately employers.

Those concerns have included:

- Size of qualifications – some too large compared with previous qualifications
- Volume and depth of content, with greater focus in some cases on theoretical content
- Balance of delivery time/assessment time
- Assessment methodologies and assessment windows, with more emphasis on written assignments
- Access to Higher Education for some learners, particularly to universities outside Wales

A recent report into ‘Stakeholder Confidence in non-degree qualifications’ commissioned by Qualifications Wales and carried out by Beaufort Research⁹⁰ supported these findings. The research found that some stakeholders ‘did not think the [made of Wales] qualifications were ‘working’ or meeting the needs of learners, despite wide ranging consultation. It appeared to some as though the education sector had not been genuinely listened to enough during consultations’. As noted earlier, the rapid reviews undertaken by Qualifications Wales have highlighted important lessons which must be considered carefully in future reviews.

Recommendation 32: That where new qualifications are commissioned by Qualifications Wales, Qualifications Wales works with Welsh Government and representative bodies of learning providers to establish professional development and resource implications, and collectively develop an implementation plan.

⁹⁰ <https://www.qualificationswales.org/media/ygdbkrpx/stakeholder-confidence-in-non-degree-qualifications-in-wales-and-the-qualifications-system.pdf>

How should we take forward the development of made for Wales qualifications?

It is clear that there are advantages surrounding *made for Wales* qualifications. All vocational qualifications could be developed against the set of principles proposed in recommendation 2, and we could deliver *made for Wales* qualifications in all sectors, according to the criteria that we deem appropriate for Wales.

The key objection to *made for Wales* vocational qualifications is the reduction of choice as experienced in two sectors so far. As we rehearsed earlier, learning providers are able to choose the qualification which best suits groups of learners, the needs of employers in their local areas, the curriculum content they feel most relevant, the approach to learning and teaching that they feel offers the best opportunities for innovation, and which can be best integrated into individual learning programmes. Some learning providers accepted that given the differing approaches in UK nations, it may be difficult to retain the choice currently on offer, although the vast majority felt that everything possible should be done to retain that choice.

It is however possible that some of these views have been influenced by the restriction of qualifications in the two sector subject areas which have been most affected, and the challenges of implementation. There are other ways of achieving *made for Wales* qualifications which do not involve restriction, and which have been effective in other sectors such as engineering, where choice has not been affected.

Portability of qualifications was also considered to be extremely important. *Made for Wales* qualifications need to be recognised nationally and in many cases, internationally. They would need to be acceptable to employers and higher education institutions, and past experience has shown that this can be challenging.

There are concerns about the cost of *made for Wales* qualifications. Qualifications Wales has told us that the new suite of 22 qualifications in health and social care and childcare cost the awarding bodies over £3.0 million to develop and introduce, excluding ongoing delivery costs. Not included in this cost are all the additional costs to the qualifications system, including the work for Qualifications Wales, sector bodies and learning providers.

So what does all of this mean in terms of recommending expansions to *made for Wales* vocational qualifications for the future? During the course of this report, we have made a number of recommendations which build toward a plan for the future.

Stage 1:

We have recommended a strategy for vocational education and training which sits within the context of post-16 learning (recommendation1). We have also

recommended that the Welsh Government undertakes an assessment of the occupational and skills requirements for the future (recommendation 3).

Stage 2:

Within the context of this assessment, we have recommended that Qualifications Wales renews its approach to sector reviews (recommendation 5) revisiting where necessary sectors already reviewed, and expanding the remit of its sector qualifications groups (recommendation 6). Whilst recognising that that reviewing vocational qualifications is a substantial task, sector reviews need to be continued on an iterative basis. We have recommended that the approach taken following the current round of reviews should consider looking at principles articulated in recommendation 3 and specific themes throughout all sectors as examples.

We now further recommend that Qualifications Wales produce a 10-year plan for the review of sectors, or of specific themes within and across sectors. This plan should take account of the emerging requirements of occupational and skills needs in Wales, but also be cognisant of changes in England and other UK nations. This plan should be aligned where appropriate with Estyn's thematic inspections, such that feedback from Estyn inspections on learning and teaching can inform the individual reviews.

The sector reviews should take account of pre-16 qualifications, in particular pre-16 vocational qualifications, as in recommendation 22. The sector reviews should also set out progression routes where it is necessary to do so, as in recommendation 23.

Stage 3

The final part of the jigsaw is an assessment within each the sector reviews of which qualifications should be *made for Wales*. We do not believe that it is right to have all vocational qualifications developed as *made for Wales* qualifications. On a practical level, there are over 2,500 vocational qualifications at level 1-5, many of which have fewer than 100 enrolments. There are over 12,000 other regulated vocational qualifications currently available in total, most of which are co-regulated.

However, within the reformed sector reviews there should be an incremental approach to *made for Wales* vocational qualifications, targeting those with the most enrolments, those which appear in apprenticeship frameworks, or qualifications by level. We need to build confidence in *made for Wales* qualifications, learning the lessons from the rapid reviews undertaken, and assuring ourselves that learners are not disadvantaged by a precipitate roll out before confidence and acceptance is assured.

We advocate that wherever possible, the *made for Wales* qualifications should not result in restriction which inhibits choice. Where a need for qualification reform is identified, we would recommend that priority should be given to making amendments to existing qualifications rather than restricting and commissioning new qualifications.

Restriction should be used with caution, and only where absolutely necessary in order to secure the commitment of awarding bodies. We do note however that Qualifications Wales can restrict to more than one awarding body. *Made for Wales* vocational qualifications need not be about constraining the market – they are about encouraging the market to work with us, through adaptation, swift response, and providing vocational qualifications which are compelling for employers, learners and learning providers.

Recommendation 33: That Qualifications Wales renews its approach to sector reviews by developing a 10-year plan, to include thematic reviews and the identification of qualifications which should be *made for Wales*. Where qualification reform is necessary, Qualifications Wales should consider first the options for existing qualifications to be revised or adapted and should only restrict and commission new qualifications where it is necessary to secure the commitment of awarding bodies.

6.6 Summary

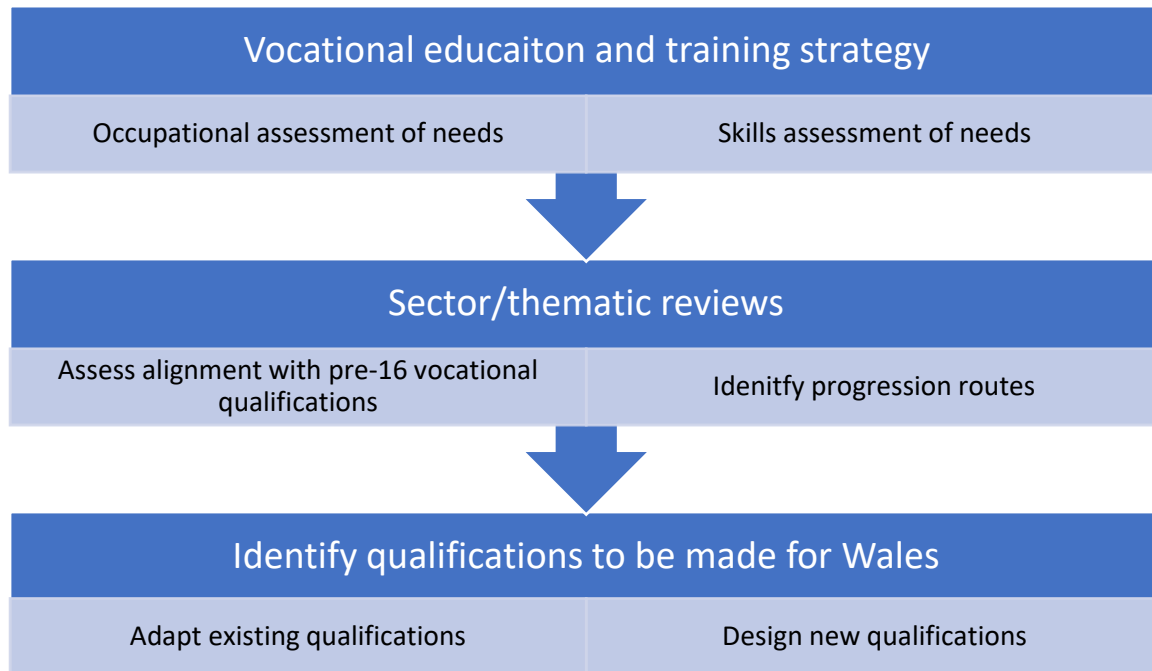
In evaluating the options we have for vocational qualifications in Wales, we have taken a number of factors into account. Our primary concern has been the impact on the learner – how will any recommendations we make affect a learner's ability to become enrolled on the right qualification/s, and progress through to their chosen career.

Then we had to consider how best we could achieve that. How can we ensure that every learner receives the right vocational education and training and is enrolled on the right qualification for them? In this respect, having a choice of qualifications is considered important – it allows learning providers to respond to individuals, to cohorts of learners, and to their local employment needs. It allows learning providers to move between awarding bodies where content or delivery may better suit cohorts of learners.

Yet against this, we have the defunding of vocational qualifications in England, and the implications that may have on the sustainability of those qualifications in Wales.

We know in Wales what we want our qualifications to look like – we are clear about the underpinning principles, and the purpose of our qualifications. We are also clear that with the introduction of any new qualification, learners must not be put at a disadvantage, and the implementation of such qualifications carefully planned.

Our proposed approach is shown is perhaps best demonstrated below:



We believe that the best approach we could take, is to adopt a renewed approach to sector reviews, planning within these which qualifications should be *made for Wales*, and in the first instance, adapt vocational qualifications to adhere to the new principles we have proposed. Full restriction of vocational qualifications would be used only where necessary. By so doing, we have an incremental approach to *made for Wales* vocational qualifications, rather than adopting new qualifications with

We base this recommendation on experience and evidence, and firmly believe this way, we can achieve the vocational qualification structure that best meets the needs of our learner, our economy and our society.

Annex 1: Terms of Reference for Vocational Qualifications Review

Introduction

A key element of The Co-operation Agreement (2021) between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru to guide the work of the Welsh Government in the current Senedd is the commitment to review the vocational qualifications on offer to learners and employers in Wales⁹¹. In the Co-operation Agreement the following objectives are stated:

‘Working together, we will lead the way by radically reforming qualifications, with a focus on experiences and well-being. We will match the ambition in Wales’s new curriculum with ambition in our reformed qualifications. We will significantly expand the range of ‘made in Wales’ vocational qualifications to fit the needs of our learners and our economy.’

The need to begin this review in Spring 2022 and to consider the steps necessary to ‘significantly expand the range of made-in-Wales vocational qualifications’ has been brought into focus by the decision of the Westminster Government to defund large numbers of level 2 and 3 vocational qualifications by 2024 as part of the introduction of T’ levels in England^{92 93 94}.

The planned reduction in the number of vocational awards available in England is likely to affect all the nations of the U.K. as the cost effectiveness and commercial viability of some specific awards will be reduced if they are only available in one or more of the smaller nations of the U.K. This is problematic for three reasons. First, it will potentially impact on the availability of vocational qualifications required for important industries and occupations in Wales, e.g. avionics, childcare, cybersecurity, Fintech insurance, healthcare and social care. Second, the form of qualifications provided in the future may not as currently conceived by awarding bodies fit the requirements of Welsh apprenticeship frameworks or related work-based training routes. Finally, we need to consider the implications of the changes on the availability of vocational qualifications delivered and assessed through the medium of Welsh.

Aims and objectives

The vocational qualifications review will have the following six objectives:

1. To document and comment on the relevance and effectiveness of the vocational qualifications currently on offer in Wales at levels 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, and identify priority areas for further action.

⁹¹ [The Co-operation Agreement: 2021 | GOV.WALES](#)

⁹² [Levelling Up the United Kingdom - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁹³ [Secretary of State letter to Ofqual on level 3 qualifications - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁹⁴ [Chancellor Rishi Sunak's Mais Lecture 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

2. Identify the best international models for vocational qualifications, including any recent trends and changes, and their suitability and applicability here, in particular in light of the ambitions and aims of the new Curriculum for Wales.
3. To consider the impact of new T level qualifications on Wales and, the options, including alternatives, for learners in Wales.
4. To consider work done by Qualifications Wales on ascertaining what current vocational qualifications awarding bodies in Wales, England, Scotland and Northern Ireland are planning to do to alter the range of vocational qualifications they offer at levels 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 over the remaining four years of the current Senedd.
5. To outline and evaluate the options for the Welsh Government, Qualifications Wales and vocational qualification providers in Wales in light of the likely changes identified under points 1 to 4 above.
6. Make recommendations to Welsh Ministers and Designated Members for the form and timing of the significant expansion of “made in Wales” and “made for Wales” vocational qualifications over the period 2023 to 2026. This will include the additional resource and funding requirements to support any proposed changes.

Governance and organisation

The review of vocational qualifications will be overseen by a steering group chaired by a leader in the field based in Wales. The membership of the steering group will also include representatives from the following organisations:

- Colegau Cymru
- Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol
- Confederation of British Industry (CBI)
- Estyn
- Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB)
- Federation for Small Business (FSB)
- National Training Federation for Wales (NTfW)
- National Union of Students Wales (NUS Wales)
- Qualifications Wales (QW)
- University and College Union (UCU)

The work of the steering group will be reported and discussed at the Minister for Education and Welsh Language Policy Board and Strategy and Implementation Board. These reports will detail progress, issues and risks as well as future plans and prospects.

Schedule of work

The focus of the review of vocational qualifications will be five workshops at which Welsh Government officials and external experts will be invited to outline a summary

of recent research on policy and activity in relevant areas, as well as facilitating discussion of the following questions.

1. What vocational qualifications are on offer and used in Wales?
2. What is the Westminster Government proposing for the reform of vocational qualifications in England?
3. What are UK vocational qualification awarding bodies planning to do over the next four years to alter the pattern of vocational qualification provision in Wales?
4. What options do the Welsh Government, Qualifications Wales and providers have to alter the vocational qualifications on offer in Wales? What options are available to significantly expand the volume and range of “made in Wales” vocational qualification opportunities? How will these best expand Welsh-medium provision? What are the best European models of vocational qualifications that Wales could consider adopting? What reforms are needed to match the ambition and values of Wales’s new curriculum?
5. What steps should be taken to implement any changes to vocational qualification provision in Wales?

The secretariat for the work of the steering group and associated workshops will be provided by the Further Education and Apprenticeship Division (FEAD) within the Welsh Government.

A summary of the discussions and conclusions of the five workshops and deliberations of the Steering Group together with recommendations for the Welsh Government and Qualifications Wales will be produced by the secretariat and agreed by the Steering Group for publication and presentation to the Minister for Education and Designated Members in Spring 2023.

Wider Briefing Note – Vocational Qualifications

Background

Vocational qualifications make up the majority of the qualifications that are regulated and awarded to learners in Wales. They assess knowledge, understanding and/or skills that relate explicitly to the world of work.

Over the academic year 2020/21 there were 168,095 vocational programmes, representing 88 per cent of all programmes delivered across work based learning programmes and any programme in FE or adult learning not identified as a GCSE, AS level, A level or International Baccalaureate learning programme.

The vast majority of vocational qualifications that are presently available in Wales are also available in England and Northern Ireland.

Programme for Government Commitments

The Programme for Government has two clear commitments in respect to Vocational Qualification reform:

- Promote parity of esteem between vocational and academic routes in Welsh education.
- Reform qualifications and significantly expand the range of ‘made in Wales’ vocational qualifications.

Co-operation Agreement Commitment

The Co-operation Agreement makes the following commitment:

‘Working together, we will lead the way by radically reforming qualifications, with a focus on experiences and well-being. We will match the ambition in Wales’s new curriculum with ambition in our reformed qualifications. We will significantly expand the range of ‘made in Wales’ vocational qualifications to fit the needs of our learners and our economy.’

Reform of VQ in England

- DfE has published its response to a second consultation on a review of L3 qualifications confirming that any qualifications that overlap with T Levels and/or do not meet specific criteria, will be defunded in England from August 2024 at the earliest.
- The House of Commons Education Committee launched an inquiry into the ‘effectiveness’ of post-16 qualifications; A-levels, T Levels, BTECs and apprenticeships by on 23 November 2021. The inquiry will explore whether a new baccalaureate system that would “allow young people to study a greater blend of academic and vocational subjects” should be introduced in their place.

- DfE have committed to provide a list of Level 3 qualifications to be defunded in the first wave to QW in January 2022 prior to formal publication. We understand Qualifications Wales has received an indicative list and is doing analysis work to assess potential impact.
- The UK Government's Skills and Post-16 Education Bill includes legislative provision which, if passed, would allow the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) in England to provide advice and assistance, and take steps it considers appropriate, in order that T Levels could be made available in areas of the UK other than England, as well as internationally.

Risks to Welsh Learners

- Reform of VQs at Level 3, 4 and 5 in England could mean that where qualifications are defunded and/or replaced by T Levels, remaining qualifications may lose their market value for awarding organisations in England resulting in an unviable and smaller market in Wales.
- Where QW has commissioned new qualifications for Wales as a result of its Sector reviews (to date, in Health and Social Care, and in Construction and Built Environment) the risk posed by the changes in England has been removed for those specific sector areas. Risks do exist however for those sectors where QW Sector reviews did not propose the commissioning of new qualifications specifically for use in FE colleges and apprenticeship, including Digital Technology (DT) and Engineering, Advanced Manufacturing and Energy (EAME).
- The defunding in England of all Level 2 Functional Skills Qualifications (FSQs) will have no impact in Wales because Wales has developed its own suite of Essential Skills qualifications.
- City & Guilds expects a number of ICT User qualifications to continue to be made available to respond to the ongoing demand for these qualifications, however, the defunding of ICT User qualifications may impact on progression for learners from Level 1, and direct entry to Level 2. Awarding organisations will have a notice period to provide evidence if qualifications support entry to specific occupation or job role – any qualifications retaining funding will be subject to the wider qualifications review. There is currently only a very small amount of planned delivery for 2021-2 in Wales of Level 2 ICT User qualifications.

The Role of the Welsh Government

- Deliver a review of vocational qualifications, working with colleagues in pre-16 education and wider stakeholders.
- Manage engagement with government departments across the UK and Europe and Qualifications Wales on the implications of technical education reform in UKGOV on Wales, including the review of qualifications at Level 3 and below, and the introduction of T Levels.

- Work with Qualification Wales on the roll out of their programme of Sector Reviews to significantly expand the range of ‘made in Wales’ vocational qualifications.
- Work with the education directorate and Qualifications Wales on the review of General Qualifications and implications for post 16.
- Ensure parity of esteem for vocational and educational pathways is a key focus of any future review of 16-19 curriculum and qualifications, and that these align with the ambitions set out in the Curriculum for Wales and vocational qualifications at 14-16.
- Develop models for effective progression systems in post 16 education.
- Work with Careers Wales to roll out ‘Your Future Festival’ to raise the profile of vocational qualification pathways to learners in school.
- Evaluate the Junior Apprenticeship Programme with a view to expanding provision.

The Reform of Vocational Qualifications for Wales

The principles underpinning our work on Vocational Qualification reform are:

- Clear and coherent post 16 progression pathways from the new Curriculum for Wales.
- Ensure that improving the effectiveness of qualifications in Wales improves their portability across Europe and internationally.
- Expand the provision of Welsh-medium assessment and other services in order to expand and normalise Welsh-medium education.

The Role of Qualifications Wales

- Update the Vocational Qualification Strategy 2017.
- Continue with a programme of sector reviews as its core approach to the strategic review of vocational qualifications. The aim of each review is to identify the extent to which qualifications and the qualification system in that sector, are effective for meeting the reasonable needs of learners.
- Conduct a series of lighter-touch phase 2 sector reviews which focus on whether there is likely to be a suitable range of qualifications, including Welsh-medium qualifications, available in future. The first phase 2 review (sport and public services) was published in September 2021, and the second review has recently started (agriculture, horticulture and animal care). Further reviews are planned for business administration and retail (2022), art, creative and media (2022) and hair and beauty (2023).

- Support employers in a sector and awarding bodies to work together in the normal way to review and revise qualifications – or to develop new qualifications to meet learners' needs.
- Designate qualifications as eligible for use on certain publicly-funded programmes of learning.
- Grant fund some Welsh-medium assessment for vocational qualifications.
- Monitor vocational qualifications (including Essential Skills qualifications).
- Monitor awarding bodies.
- Address identified issues through regulatory intervention.
- Commission new qualifications and oversee their development.
- Conduct research into vocational qualifications.

Links to Wider Welsh Government Policy

- Employability Plan
- Apprenticeship Policy
- Equity in Education
- CYP Plan

Annex 2: List of presentations given to the steering group from other countries

Amelia Brennan, Department for Education England

Catherine Sezen, Association of Colleges

Vickie Illingworth, Executive Principal Chichester College

Anna Dawe, Chief Executive Officer Wigan and Leigh College

David Roy – Policy Officer, Independent review of qualifications and assessment team, Scottish Government

Mark Lee – Director of tertiary reform, Department for Economy, Northern Ireland

Rebecca Cope – Vocational Qualification Reform Team, Department for economy, Northern Ireland

Erno Hyvönen - Project Coordinator, Department for vocational education and Training Finland

Margrethe Marstrøm Svensrud – Head of department for working life and skills, Directorate for Higher education and skills, Norway

Nadia Starr - Chief Executive Officer, South African Qualifications Authority.

Vijayen Naidoo - Chief Executive Officer, Quality Council for Trades & Occupation, South Africa

Annex 3: Interviews/meetings held during review, excluding governmental departments

Sector	Organisation
Awarding Bodies	City and Guilds WJEC Pearsons
Careers	Careers Wales/Gyrfa Cymru
Children's Commission	Children's Commissioner
Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol	Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol
Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (from 1 April 2024)	Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (from 1 April 2024)
Education Directorate	Powys County Council
Education Workforce Council	Pathways into Teaching
Employers* *The list of employers does not include those attending meetings of the Regional Skills Partnerships, nor CSConnected	Amcanu Hywel Dda UHB Seren Group South Wales Police Caerphilly County Council Aspire Blaenau Gwent GE Aviation AXIOM RCTCBC Trivallis
Employer Representative Bodies	CBI CITB FSB Social Care Wales Industry Wales CS Connected
Enterprise Zone	Haven Waterway Enterprise Board
Federation of Awarding Bodies	FAB Central FAB Wales Advisory Board
Further Education Representative Body	ColegauCymru

Sector	Organisation
Further Education/Work-based Learning Provider	Gower College Swansea Grwp GLLM Coleg Sir Gar CAVC Pembrokeshire College Grwp NPTC Coleg Cambria Bridgend College Coleg y Cymoedd Coleg Gwent
Future Generations Commission	Future Generations Commission
Higher Education Provider	University of South Wales University of South Wales Admissions Group Open University University of Wales Trinity St David
Higher Education Representative Body	Universities Wales
Inspectorate	Estyn
Schools	Fitzalan High Queen Elizabeth High Ysgol y Creuddyn Ysgol Aberconwy
Schools Representative body	Cydag
Regional Skills Partnerships	South and West North Wales Cardiff Capital Region Mid Wales Human Foundational Economy Cluster Cardiff Capital Region
Trade Union Representative Bodies	University and College Union
Welsh Language Commission	Welsh Language Commissioner
Work-based Learning Providers	Cambrian Training Educ8 Protechrail Academy The Construction Hub Academy
WBL Representative body	National Training Federation for Wales