

INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF THE SUMMER 2020 ARRANGEMENTS TO AWARD GRADES, AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR SUMMER 2021: INTERIM REPORT OCTOBER 2020

Executive Summary and Early Recommendations

Through September and October 2020, the Independent Review Panel has been examining documentation from key bodies and listening to the experiences and reflections of a wide range of stakeholders involved in, or impacted by, the awarding of grades for GCSEs, AS and A levels, Skills Challenge Certificate and vocational qualifications in the summer 2020. The Panel starts this report by acknowledging the professionalism and dedication of everyone we have met during this Review; there is great expertise in the Welsh education sector and the hard work and dedication displayed across the summer of 2020 is to be commended. We believe that expertise now needs to be harnessed and co-ordinated from wherever it sits across the education sector to ensure that the processes for awarding grades in 2021 place learners at the centre and ensure a fair and equitable outcome for all.

The Covid-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges and uncertainty across the Welsh education system, and everyone has worked under enormous professional and personal pressures. Regrettably, this continues to be the case, and the urgency for decisions to be made for 2021 has come across strongly in all our meetings and discussions. Our full report, with reflections on the lessons of summer 2020, will be available in December 2020. We are using this Interim Report to make a series of early recommendations, those that can be implemented immediately to bring a greater degree of certainty and control to learners, their parents and carers, and to education professionals in challenging times. Delaying clear direction on the arrangements for awards in 2021 will serve no-one well and there is a consensus around the need for an early decision so that appropriate planning can take place.

The Panel is aware of current work within Welsh Government (WG), Qualification Wales (QW), Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC) and across the Welsh secondary and further education sectors to learn lessons from 2020 and develop clear options for 2021. Our early recommendations are made with the intention to bring that current effort into a coherent and timely programme of work, that puts the learner first and enables all to focus on a single, collective way forward. From the perspective of the learner, our early recommendations recognise that, while Schools and Colleges continue their best efforts to support learning for all, experiences of learners have been and will continue to be uneven for some time due to local events relating to Covid-19.

Our early recommendations are therefore made in the context of the current academic year continuing to be an unusual year, disrupted in an unprecedented way by the ongoing impact of Covid-19. Hence a different way of working is required with innovative solutions that will allow learners to move forward with confidence in their future careers and lives. Our interim recommendations are made with the aim of prioritising equity with a clear focus on maximising the time for learning, and ensuring all learners have an equal chance to acquire the knowledge and develop the skills needed to progress in the next stages of their lives.

The recommendations centre on our key finding that the level of unevenness in learner experiences across 2020 and extending into 2021 would make any exam series an unfair way to judge progress and ability across the 2021 cohort of learners. To quote one of our expert contributors *..it would advantage the most advantaged and disadvantage the most disadvantaged...* Operationally, to run any form of exam series for 2021 remains a high-risk endeavour, easily knocked off course by ongoing uncertainty around the progress of the pandemic that could upend any examination schedule - a Plan B would always be required. The Review Panel believes it would be far better to invest concentrated time and effort now in developing,

collectively, an alternative centre-based assessment plan and committing to it. This will give learners and their parents, carers, schools and colleges certainty about the way ahead and clear direction about prioritising available time in schools and colleges to maximise learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. Decisions on awarding grades in Wales in 2021 should prioritise the needs of, and fairness to, the learners who are being assessed by acknowledging the challenging circumstances in which their learning has taken place through 2020 and 2021.**
- 2. In 2021, qualifications should be awarded on the basis of robust and moderated assessment undertaken by the learner's educational setting and not through an exam series.**
- 3. Robust centre assessment methods need to be developed so that learners are awarded fair grades whilst ensuring the integrity of qualifications.**
- 4. These assessment methods should be developed in consultation with key stakeholders and the key decisions should be communicated clearly to all involved.**
- 5. Welsh Government should establish an independently chaired Delivery Board to oversee and steer the revised approach to qualification in 2021.**

We believe that with such an approach in place there is a real opportunity to rebuild confidence in the qualifications system in Wales. It will also place trust and accountability with the teachers, lecturers and school and college leadership teams in undertaking the assessment judgements and in holding those judgements up to internal and external scrutiny. Most importantly, it will maximise the available time for learning and focus School and College efforts through to the end of the summer term 2021 on supporting learners in their learning and building their confidence to progress on with the next stages of their lives.

The reasons for these recommendations and additional details are expanded on in this interim report.

We recognise that there are risks associated with these recommendations but our research and findings lead us to believe that such risks can be managed successfully.

- Risk 1: Equity
There is concern that some groups of students, for example those from a black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) background and those with additional learning needs, will receive less favourable treatment through centre assessments due to unintentional bias by teachers.
The Panel has seen complete dedication from the educators to do their very best for all their students. We have also learnt of good practice and experience in removing unintentional bias in the assessments, particularly in vocational qualifications. We are confident that best practice can be shared and there is capacity within the system to deliver the best outcomes for all young people. We believe that with effective training and development in place for teachers and lecturers, this risk can be successfully overcome.
- Risk 2: Comparability
There is concern that, if grades are not based on exams, then universities and employers may not recognise and have confidence in the qualifications of Welsh students.
Universities and employers deal with a wide range of qualifications on a regular basis, based on a variety of robust alternative assessment methods. The Welsh and English universities with whom we met emphasised their openness and understanding on this matter, and we believe that the key to broad acceptance will be communication, together with confidence in the robustness of an alternative approach.
- Risk 3: Capacity
There is a concern that teachers/lecturers do not have the capacity at the present time to engage

with or develop an enhanced Centre Assessment process.

This concern is borne out of the understandable aim to keep additional burden on the teaching profession to a minimum, recognising the demands on them in keeping schools/colleges open and the desire to focus efforts on teaching. The overwhelming feedback we have received from the profession however is that they are ready and willing to engage in this assessment. They recognise the need for professional development and learning and are ready to draw on and learn from the expertise of many in the schools and colleges sector with experience in non-examination assessments as well as from those staff who are also examiners.

- Risk 4: Time & Deliverability

There is a further concern that there is little time available to plan, design and implement an enhanced Centre Assessment process.

With an early decision, more time is available to develop a moderated centre based assessment process for 2021 than was available for 2020. There is also learning to draw from the 2020 experience. But time will still be a resource that cannot afford to be wasted. Work will need to start immediately upon a decision being made and be organised, structured and delivered in a very different way to normal times. The approach we recommend, utilising the strength and capacity of all the parties and clear independent oversight, will be essential to making the most efficient use of time and expertise.

The high level of constructive engagement from stakeholders in this Review, and in particular the prominent level of engagement from learners, their parents/carers and their teachers and lecturers, gives us confidence in making these early recommendations. Working together across all levels will enable an innovative and practical approach to assessment to be achieved. We are reassured that the implementation of these recommendations will be the best way forward to support Welsh learners to progress to further study or employment.

We recognise that an alternative approach could be to continue with some form of reduced exam series for 2021 and to develop contingency planning in the event that exams cannot take place. We believe that such an approach carries higher risks than our recommendations particularly for those young people who have found their time in school disproportionately reduced through no fault of their own. The evidence from 2020 would suggest that late switching of assessment approaches is wholly unfair to learners and working with the possibility of two different assessment methods creates an even greater workload for those within the system and produces ongoing uncertainty for learners and educators.

The Independent Review Panel is clear that a different approach is needed in 2021. Significant innovation is needed in a short amount of time and the will, skill and engagement of many across the education sector in Wales is needed to make that happen. Structures and past practices need to be challenged, and new approaches adopted to avoid the difficulties of 2020.

The pandemic has forced us all to work in different ways and to find innovative solutions. We have found different ways to collaborate taking advantage of working online and the ease of getting people together. People in all walks of life have demonstrated their willingness to engage with change and to build back in better ways. There is the opportunity to create momentum that wouldn't be possible in different times. The Independent Review Panel has found that there is now a real opportunity to move forward with professional dialogue and action regarding assessment in a way that will benefit learners in Wales not only in 2021 but also in future years.

Note on Terminology

Throughout this work we have been struck by the extent to which a broader understanding of the issues involved has been hampered by inconsistent use of key terms by stakeholders of all types. In this report we are using the following key terms:

Validation is checking for conformance of a process against a specification or set of criteria.

Moderation is a process that involves review and judgement of individual grades.

Standardisation is the application of statistical processes to ensure that a set of grades conforms to some predefined criteria.

Introduction

- 1.1 The Covid-19 pandemic has affected every aspect of our lives, causing uncertainty, disruption, worry and loss. In the education sector in Wales, it led to the physical closure of school and college sites in March 2020. It caused the majority of learners to experience a rapid move to learning supported online, and significant disruption to learners and learning as everyone sought to adapt. The Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams, MS, had to take the difficult decision to cancel the summer exam series on public health grounds as the country sought to fight the pandemic. To ensure that all learners were able to progress to further study or employment, alternative arrangements for awarding grades were put in place.
- 1.2 For GCSEs, AS and A levels, and the Skills Challenge Certificate, an approach for awarding grades in 2020 was developed by Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC) and signed-off by Qualifications Wales (QW). Schools and colleges were asked to submit Centre-Assessed Grades (CAGs) and to rank order their learners within each grade for each qualification. This data was combined with relevant historical data where it was available to predict final grades for each learner in each qualification. This approach was broadly similar across the UK as the qualifications standards bodies, led by Ofqual in England, co-ordinated their activities and shared plans. Scotland was the first country to publish results (Highers) on 4 August and a public outcry followed as many learners received results that differed significantly from those that had been expected. This outcry led to a change of decision a week later in Scotland to award results based solely on the CAGs in cases where the CAG was higher than the calculated award. Over the course of the following week, similar events unfolded across the rest of the UK's nations with Wales the last to change. Ensuring a level playing field for Welsh learners with the rest of the UK became the prime definition of fairness to the learner.
- 1.3 For the Approved Vocational Qualifications designed for Wales, the approach for awarding grades in 2020 was aligned with the approach being taken in the rest of the UK, recognising that the majority of vocational qualifications are available across Wales, England and Northern Ireland. Those qualifications used for progression into further or higher education followed the CAG approach, but without the statistical standardisation. For those qualifications requiring demonstration of occupational competence, the awarding bodies were required to adapt existing assessments to take account of the public health restrictions arising from Covid-19. Some assessments could not be undertaken, and some learners were not able to complete their qualifications in summer 2020. Centres running vocational qualifications work with multiple awarding bodies in Wales and England, and this caused additional complexity for them with different requirements and varying effectiveness of communications.
- 1.4 On 18 August 2020, the Minister for Education stated that she would be commissioning an independent review of the awarding of grades in 2020 with lessons learnt to inform arrangements for 2021. The Independent Review was established in September 2020 and its interim report is presented here. A full report will be published in December 2020.

Terms of Reference and Membership

- 1.5 The review is being undertaken by an independent panel:
 - Louise Casella, the Director of The Open University in Wales (Chair of the Review);
 - Professor Alma Harris, Deputy Head of Swansea University School of Education. International Council Adviser to First Minister and Deputy Minister, Scotland;

- Rosemary Jones OBE, School Improvement Advisor, Education Consultant and former Headteacher;
- Andy Youell, freelance data and systems specialist, formerly Director of Data Policy and Governance at the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

1.6 The Terms of Reference are set out in full in Appendix 1.

In summary the Review Panel has been asked to:

- Consider the key issues which emerged from the arrangements which were developed and implemented following the cancellation of the 2020 summer exam series (GCSEs, AS and A levels, Skills Challenge Certificate and approved vocational qualifications designed for Wales).
- Consider the challenges resulting from the 2020 experience and (in the context of future Covid uncertainty) the challenges for learners in the summer 2021 exam series.
- Take key lessons from the experience in 2020 to inform recommendations and considerations of a possible approach to prepare for 2021 which prioritises the needs of learners and their progression, and has regard to the continued need to maintain the standards and integrity of the education system and awarding of qualifications.
- Provide recommendations and considerations for the Minister for Education, and to recognise the multiple partners involved in supporting learners in Wales.

1.7 It is acknowledged that there are many vocational qualifications taken by Welsh learners that are not within the scope of this Review. The Review covers approved vocational qualifications designed for Wales, namely health and social care and childcare qualifications and Essential Skills Wales qualifications.

1.8 It should also be noted that in-depth testing or review of the statistical processes used in the standardisation stage of grade allocation in 2020 is beyond the scope of the Independent Review. The Panel is however considering how the processes were developed and used and may return to this in the Final Report. The Office for Statistical Regulation (OSR) is reviewing the development and use of the algorithms across all four UK nations, and members of the Panel have met with the Director General for Regulation of the OSR and the Statistical Regulator conducting the Review to learn more about the approach being taken.

1.9 While this Interim Report sets out the basis for the recommended approach to awarding grades in 2021, and a framework and set of principles to guide further work, we firmly believe that the Panel should not develop the specifics of the approach. A key element of our recommended approach is that the education sector itself should come together to develop, test and own the detail, and it is through that collective approach that the needs of Welsh learners will be best served.

How the Panel has worked

1.10 From the start of our work, we have placed emphasis on listening to stakeholders involved in and/or affected by the events of summer 2020 awarding of grades:

- the bodies involved in developing and delivering the arrangements;
- the educators and those organisations supporting them in delivery of education;
- the learners and their families/supporters;

- those receiving the learners into further study or employment; and
- those with roles to scrutinise decisions and their implementation.

We have held on-line meetings with as many stakeholder representatives as possible in the time available and will continue to consider inputs and seek further dialogue as needed over the coming weeks. Appendix 2 lists those with whom we have met to date.

- 1.11 Recognising that we cannot meet with everyone, the Panel has also invited written submissions from a wide range of stakeholders and groups (see Appendix 2), and through an on-line questionnaire which has been widely publicised through education networks. The questionnaire sought views on the experience of 2020 and gave opportunity for respondents to express their views for 2021. We have received close to 4,000 responses to the questionnaire which closed on 18 October (42% from learners, 33% from parents/carers and 27% from teachers and Heads of Schools and Colleges). We will include a full analysis of these responses in our final report in December. Initial findings are consistent with the evidence gathered by the Panel in its face-to-face meetings.
- 1.12 The high level of constructive engagement from stakeholders in our meetings, and in particular the high level of engagement from School/College leaders and teachers/lecturers, gives us confidence in making these early recommendations, and confidence that implementation of these recommendations will be the best way forward to support learners in Wales progress to further study or employment.
- 1.13 All stakeholder meetings have been conducted with an emphasis on learning lessons from 2020 to ensure that the best possible way forward for 2021 and beyond can be found, and that learners will be able to progress to further study or employment with confidence. The Panel has been impressed by the expertise and professionalism of all those involved in developing and delivering learning and assessment.
- 1.14 The Panel has also been impressed by the learners' positive attitudes to learning and their constructive contributions in the meetings. Our meeting with members of the Youth Senedd (Welsh Youth Parliament/Senedd Ieuntyd Cymru) is of particular note. The representatives we met provided extremely valuable insight and the role of the Youth Senedd in providing input and views on future developments must be carefully considered.
- 1.15 We wish to thank everyone for their open engagement and valued comments and for the thoughtful and respectful way in which ideas were shared.
- 1.16 In order to be able to provide early and urgent recommendations this Interim Report concentrates on the way forward. It draws lessons from the experiences of 2020 but also looks at the circumstances of 2021 in making forward looking recommendations. There remain a number of important areas to be addressed in the implementation of our recommendations, including appeals and resits and the issues experienced by private candidates, including those who are home educated. The next phase of the Panel's work will look in more detail at the experiences in these areas in 2020 and draw out lessons for 2021 practices.
- 1.17 The Final Report of the Independent Review is due in December 2020.

Recommendation 1:

Decisions on awarding grades in Wales in 2021 should prioritise the needs of, and fairness to, the learners who are being assessed by acknowledging the challenging circumstances in which their learning has taken place through 2020 and 2021.

- 2.1 Throughout the Panel's work to date, in meetings and in the questionnaire responses, we have been hearing about the impact on learners of the disruption brought by the pandemic and the experience of the grades awarded in 2020. Learner experiences have differed and been influenced by home circumstances and digital access on top of the challenges of adapting to new ways of learning outside of the normal school or college setting. While some learners have told us how they have adapted well, the majority of those we heard from have told us about the negative impact on their well-being and the uncertainty and anxiety that has been a feature of their lives and their studying since March 2020. While many of the 2020 qualifications cohort have moved on in autumn 2020 to further study or employment as they would have hoped, some will have been unable to progress and continue to await final assessment or will be revisiting assessment in 2021 or reapplying for different choices.
- 2.2 The uncertainty on the approach to awarding grades in 2021 continues to impact on learner well-being. Anxiety about how they are to demonstrate their skills, understanding, learning progress and potential was weighing heavily on many of the learners who engaged with the Panel.

I would like to have certainty and please listen to our approach on what should be done as our lives are the ones being affected.

Overall confusion, great anxiety and stress about my future as no one seems to know what's going on!!

There's more pressure for evidence in schools, so pupils (myself included) feel that every bit of work has to be perfect.

Uncertainty about the future. Lack of confidence in the award system. Worry about having to sit exams if I've had to learn from home for parts of the year.

(Source: online questionnaire responses from learners)

- 2.3 Qualifications are a passport that opens up access to learners' futures. The cohorts of learners facing assessment for qualifications in 2021 have been uniquely affected by Covid-19 and it is essential that the impact of their particular circumstances is properly allowed for in assessment approaches for 2021.

We believe the following considerations are essential and must underpin the design of assessment methodologies for 2021:

- If the approach to awarding qualifications to the 2021 cohort of learners is to be fair when compared with previous years, then it must reflect the different context in which learning is having to happen through 2020 and 2021.
- The wellbeing and mental health of many young people was negatively affected by the events surrounding assessment and qualifications in 2020. A repeat of this must not occur.
- The approach adopted must ensure that each individual learner has the opportunity to gain the grade they deserve and that their potential to progress is appropriately recognised.

- The approach adopted must allow for those learners recognised as being at the greatest disadvantage in society to be judged fairly alongside their peers.
- Learners need to have confidence in the grades awarded to them and understand how they are being assessed.
- Learners need certainty on this rapidly.

2.4 The Welsh Government identified four principles to guide the development of the grading systems for 2020:

1. Enabling the future progression of all learners and recognising their hard work by awarding grades
2. Ensuring learners are not disadvantaged, particularly in relation to those elsewhere in the UK
3. Delivering a robust and fair approach, that is fair for past, present and future learners
4. Maintaining confidence in and credibility of the qualifications system.

All four principles are valid and important, and all play a role in providing fairness to the learner, some more directly than others. Our discussions to date with Welsh Government, Qualifications Wales and WJEC have led us to the conclusion that, in arriving at the original set of 2020 A level results, the principle of *maintaining confidence in and credibility of the qualifications system (principle 4)* took primacy, as the application of the standardisation model sought to create comparability at a system level with previous years. This resulted in grades for some individual learners that did not *recognise their hard work (principle 1)* and did not appear to be *fair for present.... learners (principle 3)*. When the other UK nations reverted to using CAGs, the principle of *ensuring (Welsh) learners are not disadvantaged, particularly in relation to those elsewhere in the UK (principle 2)* became the overriding definition of fairness to the learners.

2.5 Our Terms of Reference specifically asked us to consider whether the learner voice was appropriately represented in arriving at the approach for 2020. Qualifications Wales' consultation on the approach for 2020 included a version specifically targeted at young people and a large number of learners (2,079) did respond. This level of response indicated the depth of interest and willingness to engage among learners. Just a quarter of the learners responding to the more recent questionnaire issued by the Review Panel said that they felt the planned approach took account of the views of learners and parents/carers.

2.6 The Youth Senedd representatives described how they had sought out information on the processes from websites and social media, and how they had tried to help other young people make sense of what was happening. We learnt that while as individuals they had contributed to the QW consultation, they had not as a body been part of any formal or informal consultations on the changes that had to be put in place. The panel believes that this was a significant lost opportunity.

2.7 The lessons from 2020 must inform more detailed and actionable Children's Rights and Equality Impact Assessments for 2021, with the data from Qualifications Wales' review of the grades awarded in 2020 providing valuable insights. There is more time available to ensure that these impact assessments are used as positive tools to improve policy and its implementation to ensure fairness for all learners for 2021. We urge the Welsh Government, Qualification Wales and the awarding bodies to take up any offer of assistance with impact assessment for 2021 from the Children's Commissioner and the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). Early engagement in such assessments can help ensure actions are put in place to mitigate any risks of learners with protected characteristics, additional learning needs and in different educational settings not being treated fairly.

- 2.8 The needs of and fairness to the learners must be prioritised in all decisions on the approach to awarding grades in 2021, and the final decision must be tested to ensure that the principles most directly supporting fairness are paramount

Recommendation 2:

In 2021, qualifications should be awarded on the basis of robust and moderated assessment undertaken by the learner's educational setting and not through an exam series.

- 3.1 In our meetings with Schools and Colleges, we have been encouraged to hear of the excellent work going on throughout the sector to ensure that there is continuity of learning during this time for their students. Educators have adapted quickly to new ways of teaching to support the learner when away from the school or college, with on-line delivery of content and blended learning mixing on-line and classroom activities. We have also received feedback from the education profession that the experiences of the 2020 gradings have allowed a real conversation to start on the nature of assessment going forward and, for many, this has allowed reflection and consideration of how to ensure greater focus on learning and engaging with subject content and avoid narrow preparation for testing and exams.
- 3.2 We have, however, heard of the disruption and variability in learning and teaching across Wales since lockdown in March 2020. The initial national lockdown affected learners in different ways, with varying time spent studying and varying levels of support, as evidenced by the survey undertaken by WISERD¹. Undoubtedly digital access for learners has been uneven across this period. Since Schools and Colleges returned in September, the second wave of Covid-19 is giving rise to continued unevenness with local or partial closures of Schools, and with periods of isolation of individuals and classes, with some areas of Wales affected more than others. Unfortunately, given the ongoing public health concerns, we must expect and plan for continued disruption to learning over the winter and through into 2021.
- 3.3 The Panel has listened to the pleas from learners, parents/carers, teachers, schools and colleges for certainty on how the qualifications are going to be assessed for grades in 2021. We have heard of the anxiety of learners caused by the ongoing uncertainty over how they will be assessed, and of additional pressure being felt now by some learners believing that every piece of course work might count towards their final grade. Teachers, lecturers, Schools and Colleges, and those organisations supporting them, do not know what type of assessment they are supporting their students towards. At the same time, Qualifications Wales, WJEC and other vocational qualifications examining bodies are working hard to plan and prepare for both 'normal' assessment and alternative methods in case exams cannot take place.
- 3.4 The need for clarity applies to both vocational and academic qualifications equally. The scope of this Review is limited to approved vocational qualifications designed for Wales, but we acknowledge the complex landscape of vocational qualifications in Wales with the mix of different examining bodies and common qualifications with other parts of the UK. The assessment of some practical skills and

¹The impact of COVID-19 on children's learning in Wales, published 6th October 2020
<https://wiserd.ac.uk/news/impact-covid-19-childrens-learning-wales> accessed 8 October 2020

knowledge in those vocations experiencing restrictions due to Covid-19 is particularly challenging and has meant that some learners have not been able to complete their qualifications in 2020.

- 3.5 The urgency for a decision on the awarding of grades in 2021 is clear. A decision is needed now that will give everyone certainty. The decision will allow (i) the learner to focus on and enjoy their learning, maximising learning time through to July 2021, (ii) the education professionals to focus their expertise on delivering learning content, (iii) educators and the qualification bodies to come together to develop and deliver the fairest possible grading system, and (iv) universities to prepare well for recruiting Welsh students. Providing certainty and control over this one aspect now will support the well-being of learners and all education professionals during uncertain times.
- 3.6 The Panel recommends that qualifications should be awarded on the basis of robust and moderated assessment undertaken by the learner's educational setting and not through an exam series. Adaptations of assessments for vocational qualifications need to continue, and resolution found to those assessments currently unable to complete due to Covid-19 restrictions. This alternative approach is developed further under Recommendation 3.
- 3.7 The 2020 exam series was cancelled in March 2020 given the growing public health crisis and uncertainty over whether exams could safely be administered. By March 2020 the learning for the cohort facing exams in summer 2020 had largely been completed and curriculum had been covered in whole or in the majority. Most Schools and Colleges were about to enter a period of preparation and revision with learners in anticipation of exams. For the cohort of learners facing qualifications in 2021 the situation is very different. Their learning has been disrupted by Covid-19 since March 2020. Despite the best efforts of their Schools and Colleges, many will have lost learning and their experiences of trying to cover curriculum during this time and build knowledge and understanding will have been shaped by uncertainty and worry and affected by unevenness in digital access.
- 3.8 In our meetings with stakeholders we repeatedly asked whether participants believed that it was possible to put together any kind of exam series for summer 2021 that could ensure fairness to learners from all backgrounds. Only a very small minority believed a fair exam series would be possible. The answer we heard repeatedly was no. The Panel agrees and does not believe that an exam series in 2021 could be run, even in a reduced way, that would be fair to the learners across Wales given the unevenness of their learning during the year. We agree with the statement made to us by one expert contributor that any form of exam series '*...would advantage the most advantaged and disadvantage the most disadvantaged*'.
- 3.9 These qualifications are too important to the future lives of learners to allow the known inequities of an exam series to be perpetuated in 2021, and an alternative route to awarding fair and robust grades that is centre based and that recognise learner progress and potential must be developed.

Recommendation 3:

Robust centre assessment methods are developed so that learners are awarded fair grades whilst ensuring the integrity of qualifications.

- 4.1 The awarding of grades in 2020 for A Levels, AS levels and GCSEs was initially based on Centre-Assessed Grades (CAGs) and rankings with statistical processes of standardisation to preserve the normal distribution of grades in relation to recent years. In the meetings with the Panel, School and

College staff at all levels have explained how they undertook their own internal moderation between individual teachers' gradings, and ensured they had the evidence-base for their decisions. There was no external moderation between Centres' CAGs to ensure that grade boundaries were consistent across Centres. Schools and Colleges expected to be challenged on their CAGs and were ready to engage in dialogue with WJEC to justify their gradings; this dialogue did not take place.

- 4.2 Qualifications Wales and WJEC have shared with the Panel their learning from 2020 and have explained that they had not felt there was enough time nor capacity in the Schools and Colleges in 2020 to undertake the development of external moderation (developing the moderation system, training the moderators, etc.). However, they have identified external moderation as a feature that needs to be explored for 2021 should a centre assessment alternative to exams be required.
- 4.3 The process developed for 2020 involved the centres producing predicted grades for every learner in each qualification and then ranking the learners in each grade for each qualification. This centre data was subject to a review process within each centre and then signed-off at a senior level, typically the headteacher or college principal.
- 4.4 WJEC developed models to predict grades using the centre data for each qualification. These models also used historical data where it was available and appropriate to do so. Historical data included previous performance data for the learners and previous performance data for the centres. The models had to deal with cases where historic data was not available and cases where numbers for a centre were so small as to render to the statistical processes unreliable. The models were reviewed by Qualifications Wales through an iterative process which challenged the models and their outcomes before being signed-off.
- 4.5 It is beyond the scope of this review to pass judgement on the models themselves. However, the review notes that the development of the models faced the twin challenges of severe limitations in the types of input data available and high levels of complexity and variability in the domain that was represented in the data.
- 4.6 There was wide recognition that the centre assessment system employed in 2020 was a rapid response to a difficult and pressing situation. Analysis of the differences between the profile of the 2020 CAGs and the standardised outcomes of grades in previous years shows some significant uplifts in the proportions of grades awarded both at GCSE and A level in the upper half of the grade distribution.
- 4.7 There is an extent to which such a shift is not surprising. In previous years there will always have been a proportion of candidates who do not show for the exams; there will be those whose performance on the day in part or in whole does not reflect their ability and those who have adverse events in their personal lives that affect their performance either on a single day or through the exam period. CAGs would not, nor should not have reflected any of those circumstances. It is also to be noted that any comparison of CAG outcomes with previous year grade distributions are not a comparison of like with like. Previous year outcomes would already have been through considerable moderation as well as the standardisation process to meet an expected profile. Therefore, any perturbations or change in year-on-year outcomes prior to 2020 had *already* been smoothed through moderation and through standardisation.
- 4.8 In both the face-to-face meetings with the Panel and in the online questionnaire responses, the Panel is hearing suggestions for improving the robustness of centre assessment methods should they be needed in 2021. There is support and recognition that any well-designed system of centre-based assessment would include far greater moderation than was possible in 2020. Training, development,

common processes and externally sampled moderation would all serve to increase confidence in centre-based assessments and remove more extreme deviations earlier in the awarding process. As one Youth Senedd representative told the Review Panel, '*...you need to standardise the processes not standardise the product*'.

- 4.9 The School and College leaders who met with the panel were emphatic in their willingness, desire and capacity to engage with developing a fair assessment process for 2021. Rebuilding confidence in the qualifications system for 2021 must be built on the active participation of the whole education sector.
- 4.10 Learners too want to be active partners in the assessment process. They want to understand what they have achieved and what they need to do to improve and believe that their teachers and lecturers are best placed to explore this with them. This underlies good pedagogy and is in the spirit of the new Curriculum for Wales and the education reform journey.
- 4.11 There are however concerns over the potential for bias in centre-based assessments that must be addressed. The Panel were grateful for the thoughtful contributions from those from BAME backgrounds, brought together through the Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team (EYST), who highlighted the potential for unconscious bias in centre-based assessments. They also highlighted the disproportionate impact that Covid-19 is acknowledged to have had on BAME communities. Contributors from refugee backgrounds and from those in families where English was a second language in the home told the Panel that they often did not feel 'known' or recognised in schools or colleges, particularly where they had short educational histories. In addition, there must be recognition and support of identified additional learning needs in centre-based assessments. The Panel learnt of excellent work across Further Education Colleges (where lecturer assessment is common for vocational qualifications) to recognise unintentional bias as a risk and put training and other measures in place to minimise it. Such mitigating actions must be a key part of the assessment approach for 2021.
- 4.12 The Panel recommends that centre assessment methods are developed so that learners are awarded fair grades whilst ensuring the integrity of qualifications. These methods need to be robust and will need to involve:
- definition of learning to be assessed in each subject area by the awarding bodies;
 - internal moderation within Centres supported by training and development for teachers/lecturers in moderation of assessment and in addressing unintentional bias;
 - validation of Centres' internal moderation processes through a respected external agency;
 - external moderation across assessors and schools/colleges by awarding body.

The definition of learning to be assessed is important not only for the awarding bodies' purposes but also for the well-being and mental health of learners. The Panel is aware of the risk that without clear guidance learners could experience too frequent assessments, putting them under disproportionate pressure and detracting from their learning.

- 4.13 For vocational qualifications, a significant proportion of content will already be covered by centre-based assessment methods. We believe that the alternative approach outlined above will also be applicable to examined elements of vocation qualifications.
- 4.14 We believe that with such an approach in place there is a real opportunity to release exam revision time and focus School and College efforts on additional learning time through to the end of the summer term 2021. This learning gain would help make up for some of the lost time caused by Covid-19, and support learners in building their confidence to progress on with the next stages of their lives.

- 4.15 The impact of lost learning time and the social distancing measures in schools and colleges has been acknowledged by Welsh Government and Qualifications Wales (QW). Adaptations to qualifications for assessment in 2021 were announced in the summer of 2020 and a regulatory document setting out the requirements for adapting assessments was published by QW in August 2020. These adaptations now need review and development to reflect ongoing changes in circumstances and decisions on approaches to assessment. This review, by QW and all awarding bodies, needs to update the essential content for all subjects and qualifications (academic and vocational) and be linked to the revised key assessment opportunities.
- 4.16 It is not the Panel's role to develop the final approach and its detail. We have identified the key features that should be present and are grateful to WJEC and QW for some initial discussions and challenge on whether such an approach can be delivered in the time available. We are making these proposals in the firm belief that there is capacity and willingness across the education sector in Wales to deliver a fair and robust centre-based assessment method for 2021.
- 4.17 We strongly recommend that those with a deep understanding and expertise of assessment (Qualifications Wales, the awarding bodies and the education practitioners) come together to co-design an agreed approach and its details to ensure that it can be implemented fairly and with credibility. Acceptability, confidence and trust in the system will be much improved by the involvement of those from Schools and Colleges in the design and development stages
- 4.18 We recognise that there are risks associated with these recommendations but our research and findings lead us to believe that such risks can be managed successfully.
- Risk 1: Equity
There is concern that some groups of students, for example those from a BAME background and those with additional learning needs, will receive less favourable treatment through centre assessments due to unintentional bias by teachers.
 The Panel has seen complete dedication from the educators to do their very best for all their students. We have also seen good practice and experience in removing unintentional bias in the assessments, particularly in vocational qualifications. We are confident that best practice can be shared and there is capacity within the system to deliver the best outcomes for all young people. We believe that with effective training and development in place for teachers and lecturers, this risk can be overcome.
 - Risk 2: Comparability
There is concern that, if grades are not based on exams, then universities and employers may not recognise and have confidence in the qualifications of Welsh students.
 Universities and employers deal with a wide range of qualifications on a regular basis, based on a variety of robust alternative assessment methods. The Welsh and English universities with whom we met emphasised their openness and understanding on this matter, and we believe that the key to broad acceptance will be communication, together with confidence in the robustness of an alternative approach.
 - Risk 3: Capacity
There is a concern that teachers/lecturers do not have the capacity at the present time to engage with or develop an enhanced Centre Assessment process.
 This concern is borne out of the desire to keep additional burden on the teaching profession to a minimum, recognising the demands on them in keeping schools/colleges open and the desire to focus efforts on teaching. The feedback we have received from the profession however is that they are ready and willing to engage in this assessment. They recognise the need for professional development and are ready to draw on and learn from the expertise of many in the schools and

colleges sector with experience in non-examination assessments as well as from those staff who are also examiners.

- Risk 4: Time & Deliverability

There is a further concern that there is little time available to plan, design and implement an enhanced Centre Assessment process.

With an early decision, more time is available to develop a moderated centre based assessment process for 2021 than was available for 2020. There is also learning to draw from the 2020 experience. But time will still be a resource that cannot afford to be wasted. Work will need to start immediately upon a decision being made and be organised, structured and delivered in a very different way to normal times. The approach we recommend, utilising the strength and capacity of all the parties and clear independent oversight, will be essential to making the most efficient use of time and expertise.

Recommendation 4

These robust assessment methods should be developed in consultation with key stakeholders and the key decisions should be communicated clearly to all involved.

- 5.1 In developing and implementing a changed programme of assessment there must be effective two-way communication that (i) ensures that the voices of learners and education professionals are heard in the design of the approach; and (ii) ensures that clear, concise and timely information is provided in formats appropriate to their audience, with a key audience being the learner.

Stakeholder involvement in the development of the approach for awarding grades in 2021

- 5.2 How the robust assessment methods are developed will be crucial to their success. We firmly believe that learners will be served best by the educators and the qualification bodies coming together to develop and jointly own the approach for 2021 so that it can be implemented fairly and with credibility.
- 5.3 Confidence in the qualifications systems was undermined by the events of 2020 and must be rebuilt. In 2020, involvement of schools, colleges and learners was sought via consultation exercises, but we heard an overwhelming message from teachers and school and college leaders that they felt their concerns had not been addressed in the approach taken. They felt that the approach taken to awarding grades was 'done to them' rather than 'done with them'. We believe a co-design approach for 2021 will improve acceptability, confidence and trust in the system. Stakeholders from a wide range of settings and from a diversity of backgrounds need to be involved in the design and development stages. This is about more than consultation. It is about a shared understanding of what will work and what will fairly reflect the efforts and potential of the 2021 cohort.
- 5.4 We have seen expertise and a wealth of experience among school and college staff, and among staff in those organisations supporting schools. The qualifications bodies can usefully draw on that expertise to ensure that policy intent can be delivered in practice. There is genuine concern from Welsh Government, Qualifications Wales and WJEC of adding unnecessarily to the workload of those in schools and colleges, but we have heard a clear and strong desire from school and college leaders to be involved in a meaningful way with a willingness to invest time. The pandemic has taught us how to organise effective and efficient collaboration across Wales using online tools and has removed geographic barriers to participation in workshops and in dialogue. There is a real opportunity to seek

wider engagement than may have been possible in the past. Feedback from those with whom the Panel met suggested that the WJEC Head Teacher Stakeholder Group was well appreciated as engaging with a wider set of representatives, while the Welsh Government and Qualifications Wales stakeholder groups were seen to be more remote in their representation.

- 5.5 The willingness of learners to engage should also be harnessed to ensure that the system for awarding grades takes account of their needs and concerns. We believe that there is a role for the Youth Senedd to be consulted and listened to as approaches are developed. Involving the learner in developing the assessment methods would align closely with the spirit of the new Curriculum for Wales and the education reform journey. Learners have a legitimate role to play in testing and contributing to system design.

Clear communications of the approach to all stakeholders

- 5.6 Effective communication of the approach, and the reasons why it can be trusted to deliver robust and credible results, will be essential. There will need to be a coherent communication plan that covers all stakeholders and that enables information to be conveyed at the earliest opportunity and the understanding and engagement of all parties to be developed and tested. Such a plan must cover:
- *Learners:* building understanding of how they are being assessed and confidence in the grades awarded to them.
 - *Schools and Colleges:* ensuring clarity in expectations, clear guidance on approaches and understanding of, and confidence in, the overall approach. This is essential if Schools and Colleges are to be able to (i) support learners and their parents/carers, and (ii) undertake their own roles in the academic and vocational qualifications processes with confidence.
 - *Colleges, universities and employers:* building understanding and confidence in the robustness and credibility of the awards so that Welsh learners progress into further study or employment on a level playing field with their counterparts across the UK.
- 5.7 Qualifications and Assessments can be complex areas. The language and definitions used can be off putting to those beyond the expert bodies and educational professionals. Shared definitions and straightforward terminology will aid communications and understanding for everyone. Explaining who does what in the assessment process will help as will common definitions of frequently used terms like 'validation' and 'moderation', 'marks' and 'grades'.
- 5.8 The Children's Commissioner for Wales offers the services of her office to support communication with the learners. The experience of 2020 has had a negative impact on the well-being of many learners and priority in 2021 must be given to ensuring that learners have ownership and confidence in their qualification grades.

Recommendation 5

Welsh Government should establish an independently chaired Delivery Board to oversee and steer the revised approach to qualification in 2021.

- 6.1 Throughout the work of the Independent Review Panel, we have found nothing but dedication and professionalism from those who worked under very difficult and challenging circumstances to ensure that learners could progress with grades awarded in 2020.
- 6.2 The creation and delivery of robust and credible qualifications requires clear demarcation between the roles and responsibilities of regulator, examining bodies and educators, if there is to be confidence in the awards made to learners. While that demarcation may not be well understood beyond education professionals in Wales, it is well understood and carefully observed among the key bodies working in this space. Governance and communication arrangements are in place between the Government, the Regulator and the awarding body that are carefully observed in normal times. These same arrangements were relied upon through Summer 2020, albeit with much increased frequency of communications and co-operation. The evidence we have considered has led us to question whether that was wise and whether, given the extraordinary circumstances and the scale of changes needed in assessments in 2020, a different approach would have helped avoid the risk of system failings and ensured all aspects of change were properly co-ordinated, communicated and risk assessed.
- 6.3 Our research to date has failed to identify where, among those working on the changes, the overarching and coherent overview of the whole picture of change going on in assessment in Wales through summer 2020 was held. There was not a place in which all the strands of work that needed to be completed were being overseen together and the interdependencies reviewed. We acknowledge that these were difficult times and that people were working with great dedication under demanding and highly pressurised conditions. Nevertheless, a whole-programme approach would have brought together the various strands of work, and a single oversight group focused on the changes needed throughout the sector and their implementation would have ensured risks were properly considered and mitigated across all elements. Such an approach could have ensured that the interests of everyone in the system, from government to learner, were properly reflected and that co-ordinated and focused communication plans were in place to ensure understanding of the need for and shape of the changes.
- 6.4 We are aware of the Welsh Government's work to maintain an overview of the impact of Covid-19 across the education sector, but this work and the risk register associated with it was at too high a level to have been able to provide the degree of focus needed on assessment change and implementation alone.
- 6.5 Learning the lessons from 2020 is important. For 2021 a different approach is needed with emphasis on co-ordination, co-operation and delivery, putting learner interests at the heart and ensuring system development issues are addressed in a coherent manner under clear leadership that builds confidence and certainty.
- 6.6 The Panel therefore **recommends** to the Minister that an overarching Delivery Board be established immediately with professional programme management and communications support from Welsh Government. The Board would oversee the co-ordination of work between responsible bodies, who would themselves be working to the remits set for them by the Education Minister. It would act in a task and finish capacity to drive forward the changes needed.

6.7 We believe that such a co-ordinated leadership structure is vitally important to the successful delivery of any agreed approach to awarding grades for summer 2021 and its work should cover GCSEs, AS and A levels, Skills Challenge Certificate and Approved Vocational Qualifications designed for Wales.

6.8 The Delivery Board would be responsible for providing the Minister with assurance that:

- the expertise of all in the education sector in Wales is drawn on in developing options for awarding qualifications in Wales in 2021;
- decisions on ways forward have considered the interests of all those who will be affected;
- a comprehensive and open communication plan is in place to ensure all who need to understand the changes being introduced do so and are able to seek assurance and further information where appropriate;
- all elements of the changes needed are being co-ordinated and delivered to schedule;
- risks to successful delivery are kept under review and mitigating actions are identified and enacted;
- lessons from 2020 and 2021 are carried through into future years and into the development of qualifications in Wales.

6.9 The Panel further recommends that the Delivery Board has an independent chair to enable all parties to maintain the integrity of their roles and responsibilities. The independence of the chair will also reassure all parties that their contributions are equally valued and will help to rebuild trust. In addition to Welsh Government, Qualifications Wales and examining bodies, membership of the Board should be constituted with regard to diversity in representation and should include:

- a member of the Youth Senedd and the Children's Commissioner for Wales – ensuring that the learner voice is represented;
- school and college leaders as well as representatives from those organisations supporting education delivery – recognising the breadth and depth of expertise in the teaching and education profession that will enable the Board to ensure that sound principles and policy directions can be enacted on the ground;
- representatives from universities and employers –building confidence in the qualification awards.

6.10 We are well aware that there is rapid work that needs to be done to:

- (i) develop the assessment approach, resits and appeals process;
- (ii) consider arrangements for private/home-schooled candidates;
- (iii) identify risks and appropriate mitigating actions;
- (iv) design, develop and implement validation and external moderation processes;
- (v) put in place training and development delivery for practitioners.

To gain most effective input and greatest sense of shared ownership from all interested parties, we therefore suggest that the Delivery Board champion and sponsor a workshop approach to designing the way forward in each of the above areas. The approach will need to be agile and focused. Rapid-design workshops, run online, supported by the expertise of QW and WJEC and engaging expertise from across the sector would ensure co-design, ownership and confidence in the approach for awarding grades in 2021.

6.11 The Independent Review Panel is clear that a different approach is needed in 2021. Significant innovation is needed in a short amount of time and the will and engagement of many across the

education sector in Wales is needed to make that happen. Structures and past practices need to be challenged, and new approaches adopted to avoid the difficulties of 2020.

- 6.12 The learners who are facing qualifications in 2021 deserve to have their efforts recognised and rewarded in the context of the particular and unique circumstances they have faced. Wales can also reflect on how to take the lessons learned from both 2020 and 2021 into future practices and see this as the beginning of developing an approach that will also serve the new Curriculum for Wales. There is now a real opportunity to move forward with professional dialogue and action regarding assessment in a way that will benefit learners in Wales not only in 2021 but also in future years. As one of the respondents to our survey put it:

...measures across Wales cannot go back to the way they were prior to 2020. Out of the most difficult circumstances come opportunities. The opportunity here is to stabilise secondary schools by removing pressures and forging a more learner centred model rather than a model that crunches numbers.

(Source: online questionnaire response from school/college leader)

The Next Phase of the Review

- 7.1 We have concentrated to date on bringing a series of recommendations forward at the earliest opportunity to provide certainty that enables learners to focus effort on learning and enables the professionals to focus on teaching and on developing the full approach to assessment in 2021.
- 7.2 The Panel continues to listen to the views of stakeholders gathered via meetings and written submissions. The responses to the online questionnaire have provided a wealth of views and suggestions that we have been unable to consider in full in this interim report. However, we do not expect further evidence to substantively change the recommendations above. We do expect that the further evidence will increase our understanding of 2020 and inform more detailed recommendations on implementation that will follow in the Final Report and can be shared more widely with those working on the future system.
- 7.3 The Final Report will provide a more in-depth analysis of the events of 2020 and cover the full breadth of our terms of reference. In particular, we will take the mid to long term view of qualifications in Wales considering the on-going impact on learners of disruption to learning caused by the pandemic and considering the transition to curriculum reform.

Appendix 1

Terms of Reference and Membership

Remit and objectives:

- Recognising there was no alternative but to cancel the 2020 summer exam series (GCSEs, AS levels, A levels and Skills Challenge Certificate, and approved vocational qualifications designed for Wales) in light of the public health pandemic and the anxiety that the uncertainty was creating for learners, their families and practitioners, this independent review should consider the key issues which emerged from the arrangements which were developed and implemented.
- The review should consider the challenges resulting from the 2020 experience and (in the context of future Covid uncertainty) the challenges for learners in the summer 2021 exam series.
- Key lessons from the experience this year should be drawn specifically to provide recommendations and considerations of a possible approach to prepare for 2021 which prioritises the needs of learners and their progression, and has regard to the continued need to maintain the standards and integrity of the education system and awarding of qualifications.
- This review is intended to provide recommendations and considerations for the Minister for Education, with recognition of the multiple partners involved in supporting learners in Wales.

Scope of review and questions to be addressed

Welsh Government principles and priorities

- In setting the policy for the cancellation of the exams and subsequent development of arrangements to award grades to learners, the Welsh Government prioritised the following principles:
 - a) Enabling the future progression of all learners and recognising their hard-work by awarding grades
 - b) Ensuring learners are not disadvantaged, particularly in relation to those elsewhere in the UK
 - c) Delivering a robust and fair approach, that is fair for past, present and future learners
 - d) Maintaining confidence in and credibility of the qualifications system.
- Were these priorities clearly understood and shared by all delivery partners?
- Were they given the right weighting?

Challenges of operationalisation

- What were the key issues and challenges in the operationalisation of the arrangements in 2020, recognising the constraints within which all parts of the sector were working?
- Were the approaches adopted, and those alternatives not adopted, robustly tested and evaluated against the intended policy directions?
- Were the approaches adopted, and those alternatives not adopted, robustly tested and evaluated against equality, diversity and inclusivity criteria to ensure fairness?

Organisational roles, responsibilities and relationships

- Is there clarity in the different responsibilities within the Welsh education sector for supporting the delivery of qualifications?
- Were the respective roles played this year in the awarding of grades appropriately enacted, well understood and communicated by the parties concerned?
- Was the emphasis placed on the interdependencies across the UK, and the impact for Wales of different approaches taken elsewhere in the UK in the consideration and operationalisation of arrangements for 2020, appropriate?

Transparency and learner voice

- Was there sufficient engagement, communication and transparency with stakeholders to develop and deliver the arrangements in 2020 and was the learner voice appropriately represented?

Challenges and options for 2021

- Given the challenges for the 2020/21 cohort in terms of progression and achievement, and achieving fairness and credibility both in the context of the wider UK qualifications system and for individual learners, what assessment approaches might be considered for 2021 that would help achieve the Welsh Government priorities set out above?

In considering the above, the Review is particularly invited to consider the following questions:

- What learning is there from the operationalisation of the standardisation process from 2020, and what should be considered in agreeing the criteria or principles for any standardisation process in 2021?
- How can the voice of learners and their well-being be recognised and prioritised in any future approach?
- Is there a role for a greater teacher and centre assessment contribution, which is proportionate to the need to prioritise teaching and learning time?
- Is there a possible model of moderation across clusters/centres, supported by professional learning provision, and could practitioners, Estyn, local authorities or regional education consortia play a greater role in ensuring consistency of approach between schools?
- What role should there be for any appeals process, and how might the responsibilities from school through to regulator level be considered in any future process?
- What further analysis is needed to understand the impact of events this summer on cohorts in following years?

Further areas for consideration

- The review may also note areas for further consideration and exploration as we start the transition to curriculum reform. This can include, but is not limited to, areas relating to: practitioners' approach to assessment and professional judgement, the role of accountability systems and the behaviour the drive, and the future role and design of qualifications.
- The review may also consider learning that we can draw from approaches taken to assessment and awarding of qualifications internationally.

Operation of the review and timing

- The Chair will consider membership of the review team and will bring in partners and stakeholders to provide contributions and reflections. Welsh Government officials will provide the secretariat.
- Given the pressing need to put measures in place to ensure the deliverability of the 2021 exam series alongside the development of contingency arrangements in case of further disruption, the review should report in two phases:
 - an interim report containing key findings and factors to be addressed will be presented to the Minister by the end of October 2020;
 - a final report with full recommendations will be presented to the Minister by mid-December 2020.

Appendix 2

Contributors to the Review

The Panel has met with:

- Kirsty Williams, MS, Minister for Education, Welsh Government
- Welsh Government Education Department
- Qualifications Wales
- Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC)
- Sir Alasdair Macdonald, Adviser to the Welsh Government and Pupil Premium Advocate
- Learners, Headteachers, Teachers, Additional Learning Needs Coordinators, Exam Officers and Governors from School settings:
 - Bishop Hedley High School
 - Prestatyn High School
 - St Cenydd Community School
 - Ysgol Bro Teifi
- Learners with BAME backgrounds and youth workers with the Chair of Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team Wales (EYST)
- Learners, Head, lecturers and governors from an FE setting:
 - Cardiff and Vale College
- Welsh Youth Parliament/Senedd Ieunctorid Cymru
- Headteachers from a representative group of Schools across Wales:
 - Bishop Hedley High School
 - Bishop Vaughan Catholic School
 - Cathedral School Cardiff
 - St Cenydd Community School
 - Pontarddulais Comprehensive School
 - Prestatyn High School
 - The River Centre Learning Community
 - Ysgol Alun
 - Ysgol Bro Teifi
 - Ysgol Brynrefail
 - Ysgol Gyfun Cwm Rhymney
 - Ysgol Llanhari
 - Ysgol y Deri
- Representatives of FE college leaders and Colegau Cymru:
 - Cardiff and Vale College
 - Grwp Llandrillo Menai (Coleg Menai / Coleg Meirion Dwyfor)
 - Gower College
 - Chief Executive, Colegau Cymru
- All Regional Consortia Managing Directors (EAS, ERW, CSC and GWE)
- Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW) /Local Authority and Diocesan Authority representatives
- Trade Unions and representative bodies (all invited but not all able to attend due to time pressures of the Review):
 - ASCL
 - GMB
 - NAHT
 - NASUWT
 - UCAC
 - UCU
- Estyn
- Children's Commissioner for Wales
- Equality and Human Rights Commissioner for Wales
- Welsh University representatives involved in recruitment and Universities Wales:
 - Aberystwyth University
 - Cardiff University
 - University of South Wales
 - Swansea University
 - Director, Universities Wales
- English University representatives involved in recruitment:
 - Loughborough University
 - University of West England

Written submissions have also been invited from a range of other stakeholders (including all approved vocational qualification awarding bodies, work-based learning providers and OfQual) and responses are still being received to inform the final report.

Written submissions from learners, parents/carers, education professionals and a wide range of other stakeholders have also been invited by an online questionnaire with almost 4,000 responses received.

The Panel would like to thank all those who have provided input to the Review to date.