
A levels in sixth forms and further education colleges

November 2018

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Introduction

This report is in response to a request for advice in the Cabinet Secretary's annual remit letter to Estyn for 2017-2018. It reports on standards, provision and leadership of GCE Advanced Levels (A levels) in school sixth forms and further education colleges. It considers a range of factors, such as standards at A level and how these are measured, the quality of teaching and assessment, the nature of the A level curriculum offer and strategic leadership, including partnership working.

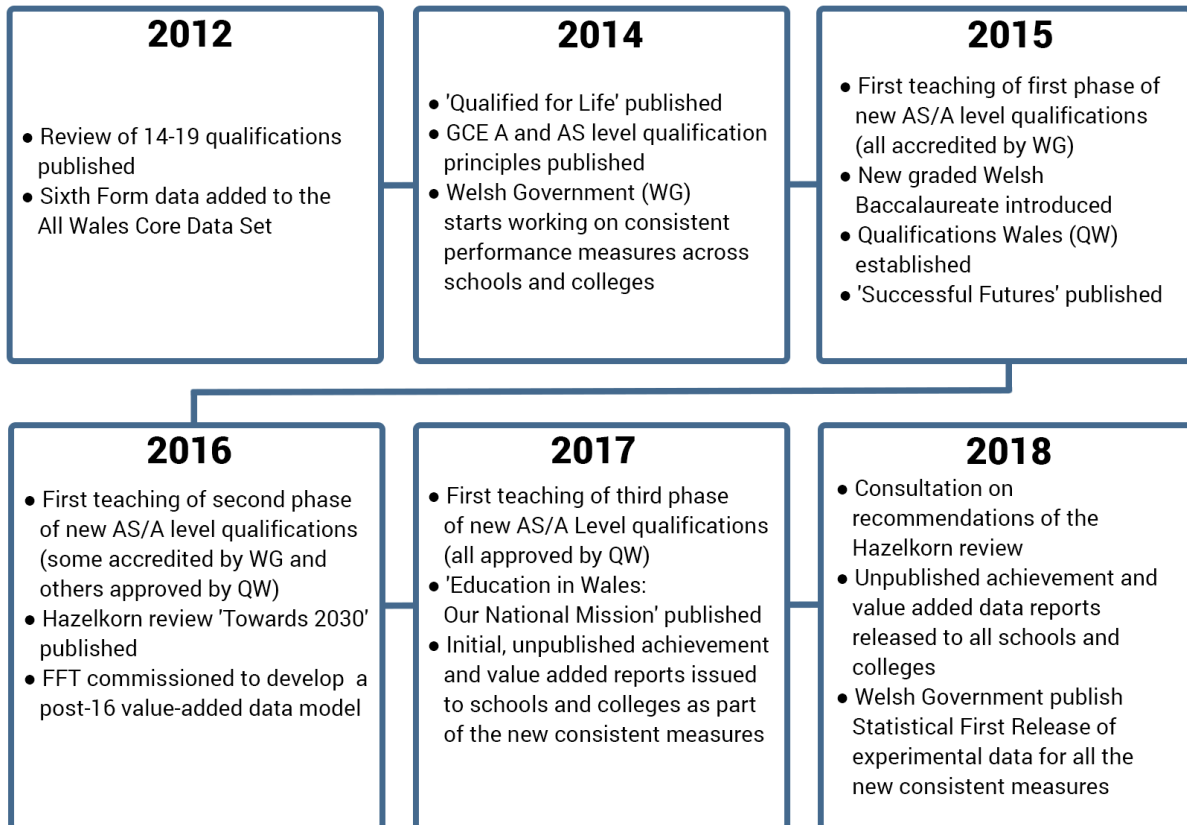
The intended audience for this report is the Welsh Government, headteachers, principals and teachers in secondary schools and colleges, local authority officers and regional consortia. The report draws on evidence from secondary school and college inspections and from visits to 23 secondary schools and colleges.

Background

A level reform

A levels are subject-based qualifications studied at post-16 in Wales, England and Northern Ireland, as well as other parts of the world. Learners usually study between three and five A levels over two years and are able to study for A levels in school sixth forms or in further education colleges. Since September 2015, A levels in Wales differ from those in England and are offered mainly by one awarding body, the Welsh Joint Education Council (WJEC). In Wales, the first year of an A level counts for 40% of the overall qualification and results in an AS grade. Learners must complete the remaining year (known as A2) in order to gain the full A level. A levels are graded A*-E while AS levels are graded A-E.

Over recent years, A levels in Wales have developed against a background of significant change in terms of reviews of pre-16 and post-16 provision, government reform affecting education, reform of the A and AS level curriculum and qualifications in both England and Wales and changes to post-16 performance measures. This is captured in the diagram below:



In 2012, the Welsh Government published ‘*Review of Qualifications for 14 to 19-year-olds in Wales: Final report and recommendations*’ (Welsh Government, 2012). The review concluded that reform was needed for the national qualification system for 14-19 year-olds in Wales. The report made the following recommendations relating to A levels:

The Welsh Government should retain A levels as the main Level 3 general qualifications at 16 to 19. The Welsh Government should:

- *maintain the same A levels as England and Northern Ireland where possible, but allow variation where necessary to meet the needs of learners in Wales*
- *ensure that employer groups in Wales are appropriately involved in the development and/or accreditation of A levels relevant to them ensure that higher education institutions in Wales are appropriately involved in the development and/or accreditation of A levels.*

Details will need to be discussed with fellow regulators, but evidence from the Review indicates that the Welsh Government should work to:

- *retain the AS/A2 structure*
- *allow only one resit opportunity, with the higher mark counting*
- *recognise the range of views expressed by stakeholders about the continued use of units within AS and A2 and January assessment opportunities. (Welsh Government, 2012, p.12).*

The 14-19 review also recommended that a new regulatory body for non-degree qualifications in Wales be established. Following the Qualifications Wales Act 2015

(National Assembly for Wales, 2015), Qualifications Wales came into being. They now regulate and monitor any awarding body offering non-degree qualifications, including A levels, in Wales and 'approve' qualifications as eligible for use on publicly funded programmes of learning (Qualifications Wales, 2016, p.5).

The 14-19 review recommended that A levels in Wales should align with those offered in England. Wholesale reforms to A levels in England were then announced, with first teaching from September 2015. As a result, Wales also reformed all A levels along the same timeline in order to align with England. In October 2014, in response to the 14-19 review, the Welsh Government published '*Qualified for Life: An education improvement plan for 3 to 19-year-olds in Wales*' (Welsh Government, 2014a). This set out the government's reform programme for 14-19 education. It included a plan to introduce new A level qualifications from September 2015 which retained the AS/A2 structure.

In August 2014, the Welsh Government published a paper setting out changes for A levels in Wales: '*GCE AS and A level qualification principles*' (Welsh Government, 2014b). This paper sets out the overarching principles for all GCE AS and A levels developed for teaching in Wales from September 2015 onwards. The paper identifies key differences between A levels in England and those in Wales, namely retaining AS levels, which would now count for 40% (previously 50%) of the overall qualification, and allowing opportunities for resits.

Prior to September 2015, schools and colleges could choose A level specifications from a range of awarding bodies as the same specifications were studied in Wales and England. However, the differences set out in the AS and A level qualification principles meant that awarding bodies would have to develop specifications for A levels in Wales that were different to those in England. All awarding bodies across England and Wales were invited to present specifications. Most of the awarding bodies declined to develop Wales only specifications, and WJEC became the only awarding body for Wales only A and AS levels. The content of A and AS level courses was also reformed.

Changes to A and AS levels were introduced in three phases (also known as 'waves') in September of each year from 2015 to 2017. As Qualifications Wales were not in existence when the first phase of qualifications were being developed, these were accredited by the Welsh Government. The Welsh Government produced qualification principles for each subject and the examination board had to submit an assessment summary, a specification and sample assessment materials in three stages before accreditation could take place. At the same time, there was wholesale reform of A levels in England. Both Qualifications Wales and the Welsh Government were involved in the approval or accreditation of courses introduced in the second phase in September 2016. All qualifications since September 2017 have been approved by Qualifications Wales. Both the accreditation and approval processes extend over a considerable length of time. However, draft specifications are available online during the process.

Curriculum reform

In March 2014, The Welsh Government asked Professor Graham Donaldson to

conduct an Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales. In February 2015, *'Successful Futures'* (Donaldson, 2015) was published and in June 2015 the Welsh Government accepted all the recommendations in the report. The report sets out four purposes for the curriculum in Wales, namely that children and young people develop as:

- ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives
- enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work
- ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world
- healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society. (Donaldson, 2015, p.29)

These four overarching purposes encompass what children and young people should become and achieve during their time in school and are the guiding principles of the report. While the four purposes are intended to prepare learners for post-16 education and adult life, the report itself and the resulting reform covers education in Wales up to the age of 16, but does not cover post-compulsory provision or A levels.

Seren

In 2014, the Welsh Government established the Seren Network of regional hubs to support Wales' brightest pupils to gain access to leading UK universities, and to address the decline in Welsh applications and admissions to Oxford and Cambridge Universities. In 2018, a formative and process evaluation of the Seren Network programme's first full year of delivery was published (Bryer, Davies and Ynus, 2018). The evaluation found that:

'Seren makes a positive contribution to raising aspirations, boosting confidence and encouraging students to think more ambitiously about their university choices' (p.4).

The evaluation also found that Seren had been of value in helping participants make better decisions about their preferred university course and to make them realise the importance of reading widely around their subject area. Participants point to the most useful aspect of the Seren Network provision as being presentations delivered by guest speakers (p.4). However, the report also found that:

'very little data was available to evidence the difference made by the Seren Network upon the number of students applying to higher tariff universities due to the fact that 2017/18 represents the first full year of delivery and the absence of any robust counterfactual data.' (p.4).

Despite this, the report states that:

'recently published UCAS data points to a recent increase in the number of Welsh domiciled students applying to these institutions and courses during 2017/18.' (p.6).

The report makes a number of recommendations and found that there was significant variation across Seren hubs in terms of entry criteria for participants and clarity around the purpose of the programme.

Post-compulsory education and training reforms

Oversight of sixth forms and A level outcomes in the Welsh Government resides between the Department for Education's Curriculum and Assessment Division and Pedagogy, Leadership and Professional Learning Division. The School Improvement Branch organised two A level Improvement Summit meetings in July and November 2017. The funding of sixth form provision, through local authority allocations, and the development of the new post-16 consistent performance measures, resides with the Welsh Government's Skills, Higher Education and Lifelong Learning Directorate.

In October 2015, the Welsh Government asked Professor Ellen Hazelkorn to conduct a review of the oversight of post-compulsory education in Wales, with special reference to the future role and function of the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). The report, '*Towards 2030: A framework for building a world-class post-compulsory education system for Wales*' (Hazelkorn, 2016), was published in March 2016. The report suggests that consideration should be given to whether oversight of sixth form education should continue to reside within the remit of post-secondary education or be included within the remit of a proposed new tertiary education authority. The Welsh Government accepted the recommendations of the report and published a white paper consultation on the proposals for reform in June 2017 (Welsh Government, 2017a) followed by a technical consultation in April 2018 (Welsh Government, 2018a). The report summarising the responses from this consultation was published in October 2018 (Welsh Government, 2018f).

In September 2017 the Welsh Government published '*Education in Wales: Our national mission Action Plan 2017-21*' in which the government commits to the '*new reformed and rigorous GCSEs and A levels*' (Welsh Government 2017b, p.14). This builds on the publication '*Qualified for life: An education improvement plan for 3 to 19-year-olds in Wales*' (Welsh Government, 2014a) and '*Successful Futures*' (Donaldson, 2015).

A level data

This thematic report considers outcomes at A level over a period of five years. Due to the changes introduced in recent years, year-on-year comparisons of outcomes in Wales as well as comparisons with those in England are difficult and 'should be made with caution' (Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ), 2018a, p.2). Analysis of A level performance is complicated by the fact that schools and colleges deliver the same A levels but, currently, their success in terms of outcomes is not measured in the same way. Around 70% of publicly funded A level delivery in Wales is undertaken by school sixth forms and the remaining 30% by colleges. Details regarding the differences in data collection and analysis between schools and colleges, and the Welsh Government's work on developing a common approach, through post-16 consistent performance measures, are included in appendix 1.

Main findings

Standards

- 1 Many A level learners make strong progress in their knowledge and understanding. These learners have secure recall of previous learning and apply their prior knowledge and skills confidently to new situations. A few learners make insufficient progress. In some cases, and particularly for learners with modest levels of academic achievement at GCSE, this is because they do not have the background knowledge, depth of understanding or the level of skill required to study at advanced level. In other cases, learners lack the perseverance and motivation to do well and do not have sufficient interest in their studies.
- 2 Most learners enjoy their A level studies, although finding them much more difficult than GCSEs. They appreciate the level of intellectual challenge and the opportunity to study a limited range of subjects of their choice. Many also gain a sense of achievement and pride because they have to do more for themselves and display a clear sense of ambition regarding the grades that they hope to achieve.
- 3 Well-developed independent learning skills are crucial to success at A level. Many learners develop these skills well during their A level studies, but a majority lack strong enough independent learning skills when they start their A level courses and a minority remain too dependent on others for support. On the whole, current GCSEs do not prepare learners well enough for the level of independent study required to study A levels. Many learners organise their work and their time efficiently, though a few, particularly boys, have weak organisational skills and struggle to keep up with the demands of their studies.
- 4 Most learners find studying A levels stressful because they feel that A levels are ‘high tariff’ qualifications that have serious implications for the rest of their lives. The demands of studying three or four subjects as well as an additional qualification such as the Welsh Baccalaureate adds to this stress, especially as around half of learners have additional responsibilities such as part-time jobs or caring responsibilities.
- 5 Studying A levels is not the most suitable option for all learners who study these qualifications. Around 20% of Year 12 learners fail to progress from AS to A levels. Learners with low attainment at GCSE are more likely to not complete Year 12 or not progress to Year 13 than other learners. In most cases, A level courses were not the best option for these learners.
- 6 Between 2014 and 2016 there was a flatlining in performance at A level in Wales. During this time, Wales was the poorest performing region in the UK in terms of A levels. In 2017, A level results in Wales showed strong improvements and these were, on the whole, sustained in 2018. However, comparisons with England and Northern Ireland are increasingly difficult to make because of growing differences in the regulations and assessment protocols between these countries. There has also been a decline over five years in the number of entries for both AS levels and A levels. This is largely due to the reduction in size of the 18 and 17-year old population groups. It can also be partially attributed to a fall in the average number

of A and AS level qualifications taken by learners, with many taking fewer A and AS levels, partly because they study the Welsh Baccalaureate (Qualifications Wales, 2018).

- 7 There is a notable difference between outcomes at A and AS level, with A level performance being markedly stronger. In particular, a high number of U grades are awarded at AS level. There are many more entries for AS levels than A levels.
- 8 Girls in Wales generally outperform boys at both A and AS level. The poor performance of boys at AS level is a concern. At AS level nearly 92% of all subject entries by girls in 2018 gained A-E grades while the equivalent figure for boys is around 88%. In each of the past five years, there are around 4000 more entries for A levels by girls than boys.
- 9 Differences in approach to collecting, analysing and publishing post-16 data in schools and colleges has meant that it has not been possible to make straightforward comparisons across these sectors or between providers, although they deliver the same A level qualifications. Currently, there is no published national 'value-added' data that shows how well learners progress from their starting points. A new suite of post-16 'consistent measures' in development intends to address these difficulties. However, schools and colleges are not yet sufficiently aware of the new measures and are not using them to evaluate their provision enough.
- 10 Many A level learners successfully progress to university. A few secure places at highly competitive universities such as Oxford or Cambridge and a minority gain places at Russell Group universities. However, the collection of data regarding the destinations of A level learners is inconsistent and does not give a clear picture.

Provision

- 11 A passion for the subject, secure subject knowledge, and a thorough understanding of examination requirements are features of effective A level teaching. Successful A level teachers also facilitate independent learning particularly well.
- 12 Many teachers encourage wider reading around specific topics or texts but not so much around the subject in general. In many cases, and often due to time restrictions, all learning is linked to examinations. Conversely, a few teachers stray too far beyond the syllabus and do not focus sufficiently on the requirements of the examinations. There is a lack of a general, wide-ranging consideration of the subject often required by universities.
- 13 Over recent years there has been considerable reform to A levels in Wales. This has also been a time of great change at key stages 3 and 4, including changes to GCSEs. The pace and degree of change means that there is a concern that curriculum reform and planning for progression from key stage 3 and across GCSE and A levels is not always planned in a cohesive manner to provide learners with the breadth and depth of knowledge required for A level study.
- 14 There are considerable differences across the country in the choice of A level subjects available to learners. The range of subjects offered at A level varies according to geographical location, staff expertise, language medium, provider size, whether or not there are partnerships with other centres, and between schools and colleges. Most centres offer vocational qualifications as well as A levels, though, in

most schools the choice of vocational qualifications is more limited than the choice of A levels.

- 15 While most learners are offered an apparently 'free choice' in terms of A level subjects, their choices are restricted by a number of factors. These include centres often appropriately setting minimum grades for study or requiring learners to study more subjects than they wish.
- 16 While many learners and their parents are happy with the quality of advice and guidance they have received, in reality they do not have access to clear information about which are the best A level providers in their locality.
- 17 Advice and guidance for a few learners, mainly those with low attainment at GCSE, are unsuitable. These learners are more likely not to complete Year 12 or not to progress to Year 13 than other learners. In general, advice and guidance is too focused on academic routes such as A levels and university, at the expense of other career paths. In schools with sixth forms, advice and guidance is often focused on keeping learners in their sixth form.
- 18 Many leaders and teachers have expressed concerns over the lateness of the availability of courses and materials to support their teaching such as examination specifications and specimen papers.

Leadership

- 19 The limitations of current A level data (as outlined in appendix 1) has meant that it has been difficult for schools and colleges to know how well they are performing, for learners and their parents to compare providers, and for centres to be held to account for their A level outcomes. As a result, the main focus of the accountability system for secondary schools has been on key stage 4 outcomes and until recently there has been relatively little focus on post-16 outcomes. The Welsh Government has recognised that the current performance indicators at post-16, in schools and colleges, are not fit for purpose and do not give a clear picture of performance. The new set of 'consistent measures', designed to address these shortcomings, are in the final stages of development.
- 20 In a majority of schools, self-evaluation and improvement planning processes do not focus sufficiently on provision and leadership or on the impact on outcomes. In many colleges, self-assessment and improvement planning processes focus too heavily on success rates and not on the grades learners attain.
- 21 Schools and colleges do not collaborate enough in terms of sharing good practice and improving teachers' subject expertise. There is a lack of professional learning opportunities for A level teaching and subject specialisms.
- 22 A level funding drives certain behaviours in schools and colleges that have negative unintended consequences. For example, where funding is allocated per A level, centres may encourage learners to study more A levels or relax entry requirements for learners with low attainment at GCSE, although this may not be the most suitable option for these learners. This contributes to weaker attainment and a higher 'drop out' rate.

Recommendations

Schools and colleges should:

- R1 Improve A level outcomes, particularly at AS level and especially those of boys
- R2 Improve the advice and guidance given to learners by:
 - a. considering carefully learners' levels of educational attainment at GCSE when giving advice and guidance
 - b. providing learners with accurate and up-to-date information about the full range of sixth form, further education and apprenticeship opportunities open to them
 - c. giving advice on the best combinations of subjects for them
 - d. developing a clear policy on progression from AS to A level
 - e. considering carefully the number of qualifications taken by each learner, taking into consideration the likely progression route of each learner
- R3 Improve the independent learning skills of pre-16 learners in order to prepare them for A level studies
- R4 Work together to improve professional learning opportunities linked to A level teaching
- R5 Give due attention to outcomes and provision at A and AS level in self-evaluation and improvement planning processes

Local authorities and regional consortia should:

- R6 Facilitate networks of professional learning related to A level across schools and colleges
- R7 Help schools to evaluate the effectiveness of their A level provision

The Welsh Government should:

- R8 Monitor the success of the new consistent measures data sets across schools and colleges
- R9 Ensure that changes to the curriculum and qualifications secure continuity and progression
- R10 Review the funding formula for A levels in schools and colleges, and its application across authorities, with the aim of eliminating unintended consequences, such as encouraging learners who are not best suited to study A levels to do so
- R11 Develop a way to communicate to learners and their parents clear information about A level attainment and provision in individual centres

Standards

Learners' standards and progress

- 23 Many A level learners make strong progress in their knowledge and understanding. These learners have secure recall of previous learning and apply their prior knowledge and skills confidently to new situations. Many successfully apply their learning broadly across all areas of the subjects they study and do not learn 'in units'. They build on their learning consistently throughout the year. A few learners make insufficient progress. In some cases, and particularly for learners with modest levels of academic achievement at GCSE, this is because they do not have the depth of understanding or the level of skill required to study at advanced level. In other cases, learners lack the perseverance and motivation to do well and do not have sufficient interest in their studies.
- 24 A majority of A level learners feel that they did not have strong independent learning skills when they embarked on their A level studies. Despite this, many learners make rapid progress in developing these skills during their time studying A levels. These learners manage their time efficiently and persevere when faced with difficult problems. They produce well-organised, comprehensive notes which support their studies effectively. A minority rely too heavily on copying from notes and textbooks and are overly dependent on their teachers for support. These learners do not possess the resilience or initiative needed to solve problems independently.
- 25 Many learners have secure problem solving skills which they apply confidently to tasks such as poetry analysis or chemistry experiments and a few are creative and original in their approach to tasks. A majority make perceptive connections between different topics and make effective use of their general knowledge to deepen their understanding of subject content. These learners often make astute links between the different subjects that they study, such as the connections between art movements, historical events and literature. A few learners are insufficiently proactive and rely too heavily on support from others.
- 26 Many learners have sound literacy and numeracy skills. However their use of information and communication technology (ICT) skills, which are important beyond school or college, is often limited to basic word processing or preparation of simple presentations.
- 27 Most learners listen carefully to their teachers and peers, and many are thoughtful in their responses to others' viewpoints. A majority of learners ask intelligent questions which reflect their sense of curiosity and their interest in the subjects that they study. These learners are confident in challenging the information that they receive and offer alternative interpretations which show their ability to approach their learning from different angles. A few learners are too passive and tend to accept information without due consideration or rely too heavily on the interpretations of others.
- 28 Many learners speak confidently and make perceptive, well-considered points in class discussions. They engage maturely in debates and discussions and come to

well-reasoned conclusions. A minority are particularly articulate and express sophisticated viewpoints based on a balanced consideration of evidence. These learners develop valuable debating and discussion skills that will benefit them in the future.

- 29 Many have a range of reading skills and use these deftly to meet the demands of different tasks. For example, they skim and scan efficiently when given introductory reading material then analyse with skill historical sources or statistical information. Many write fluently and accurately and possess a broad general and subject-specific vocabulary, which they employ with confidence. However, many learners feel that, in general, their GCSEs did not prepare them well enough for the demands of essay writing at A level as few of their GCSE subjects required them to write at length and in this format.

Wellbeing and attitudes to learning

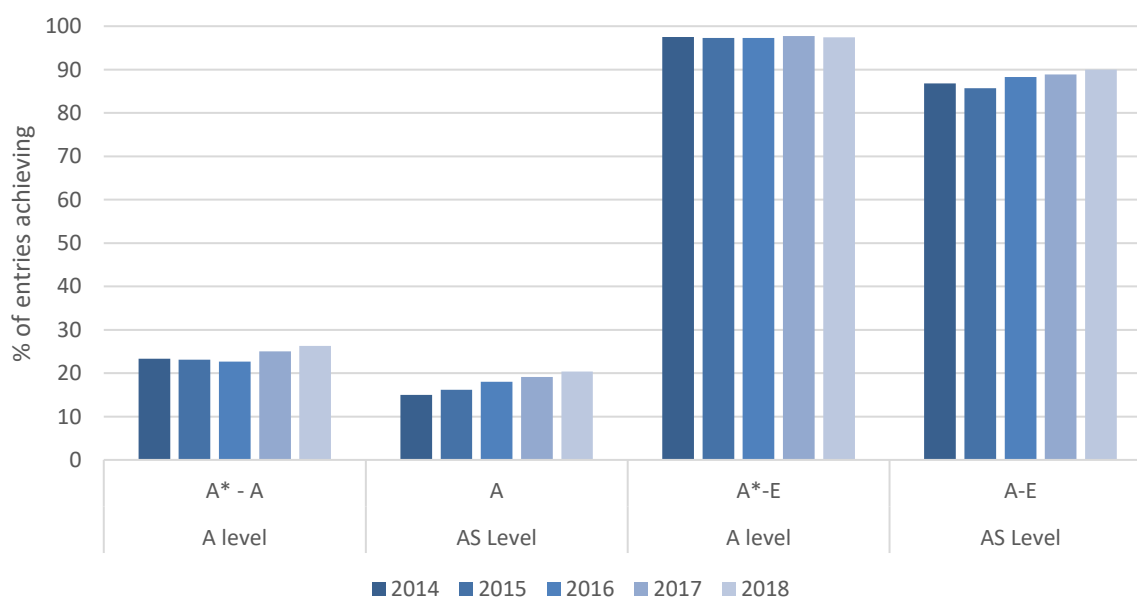
- 30 Most learners enjoy their studies and appreciate being able to focus in depth on a few subjects which interest them. Many are inquisitive and well-motivated, and display a keen interest in their learning. Many are ambitious regarding A level achievement and their futures, and their attendance is good. Many learners relish the challenge and intellectual stimulus provided by A level studies. They feel a distinct sense of pride and achievement in having to work more independently than at GCSE and be responsible for their own progress.
- 31 Many learners feel that the learning at A level is more intense and demanding than at GCSE and that they have to do more for themselves. For example, they are required to do more background research or read notes in advance of lessons. These learners are resilient and have a well-developed work ethic. Many organise their work and their time efficiently, though a few, particularly boys, have weak organisational skills and struggle to keep up with the demands of their studies.
- 32 Most A level learners feel under considerable stress. The stress that they feel is brought about by a number of factors:
- The feeling that A levels are ‘high tariff’ qualifications which have serious implications for the rest of their lives and, in many ways, determine their future
 - The demands of studying three or four subjects as well as an additional qualification such as the Welsh Baccalaureate, and the challenge of meeting many deadlines and not having many study periods
 - Additional responsibilities outside of school or college such as a part-time job or caring responsibilities for siblings or other family members
- 33 Many current A level learners feel frustrated at the fact that they have experienced several significant changes to the education system throughout their school career. They feel that they have been the first to experience developments such as the reading and numeracy tests, new specifications at GCSE and now the new reformed AS and A levels.
- 34 A few learners lose motivation during their A level studies. In many cases, this is because they were not best suited to study A levels in the first place. This could be

due to achieving relatively modest grades at GCSE, because their choice of subjects was unsuitable or because there was a lack of alternative provision. However, many schools and colleges say that the increasing prevalence of very low or unconditional university offers does not help to motivate learners and does not encourage them to maintain their commitment to gaining the best possible grades to the end of their course.

A level performance

- 35 Between 2014 and 2016 there was a flatlining in the proportion of A levels awarded at grades A*-A, A*-C and A*-E in Wales. The percentage of entries gaining A*-E grades was 97.5% in 2014 and was 97.3% for the following two years. In 2017, A level results in Wales were the strongest for several years but there was a decline in the number of entries (JCQ, 2015 & 2017b). This is largely due to the reduction in size of the 18 or 17-year old population groups. It can also be attributed to a fall in the average number of A and AS level qualifications taken by learners, with many taking fewer A and AS levels, partly because they study the Welsh Baccalaureate (Qualifications Wales, 2018).
- 36 In 2017, the percentage of A* grades awarded at A level increased from 6.6% in 2016 to 8.3% and the percentage of A*-A grades also increased from 22.7% to 25.0%. The A*-E figure increased from 97.3% in 2016 to 97.7%. In 2018, the percentage of A* and A*-A grades increased to 26.3% and the percentage of A*-E grades dropped slightly but remains stable. However, the number of entries for both AS and A levels has continued to fall. (JCQ, 2018b).

Figure 1: A and AS Level outcomes 2014-2018



Source: JCQ, 2015, 2017, 2018

- 37 2017 was the first year of the reformed A levels in Wales, with AS contributing 40% to the A level in Wales and Northern Ireland but not contributing at all in England. In Wales, learners are also able to re-sit modules once, whereas in England they are

not. 2017 A level results in Wales were closer to UK national figures than those in previous years. 2018 results are also in line with UK figures, with Wales achieving the best results for A*, 0.7 percentage points higher than the UK average (JCQ, 2018). Until 2017, Wales was overall the weakest performing country in the UK in terms of A level outcomes but, due to the differences between the regions, comparisons are more difficult to make.

- 38 As shown in figure 1, there are differences between attainment at AS level and attainment at A level, with A level attainment being markedly stronger. Over the past five years, the percentage of A* and A grades awarded at A level ranges between 22.7% and 26.3% but the percentage achieving A grades at AS levels ranges between 15.9% and 20.4%, though this figure has improved year on year (figure 1). In 2018, there is a 5.9% point difference between the percentage gaining A grades at AS and those gaining A*/A grades at A level. This figure has remained broadly similar over the past five years.
- 39 There is a similar pattern in comparing A*-E at A level and A-E at AS level. Over the past five years, fewer than 3% of A level entries have gained an unclassified (U) grade, while the equivalent figure for AS level is around 12%. In 2018, 97.4% of learners gained A*-E grades at A level while only 90.0% gained A-E grades at AS level. This difference has ranged between 7.4 percentage points and 8.8 percentage points over the past five years.
- 40 Year 12, the AS year, sees far more variation in achievement than Year 13. There are more entries for AS levels than A levels. Many learners 'drop' at least one AS subject and around 20% of learners every year continue to 'drop out' in Year 12 or fail to progress from Year 12 to Year 13 (Welsh Government, 2017c). In Year 12, a minority of learners study inappropriate courses or stretch themselves too widely with their range of subjects and therefore do not achieve highly at AS level. Learners who continue to Year 13 for the A level year are generally more successful because they study fewer subjects and are more academically suited and committed to their studies. In addition, schools, colleges and local authorities have differing policies on 'cashing in' AS results. The process of 'cashing in' an AS involves accepting an exam result, which then generates a grade. If the AS result is not 'cashed in' the results remain 'in the bank' and can be 'cashed in' at a later date. Results can also be rejected if a candidate achieves a better result on re-sitting or decides they do not want to continue with the subject or be awarded a grade in that subject. AS results are also not 'cashed in' if candidates do not wish to declare these results on their university application forms. The fact that some centres do not 'cash in' AS results means that the data set for AS results is not comprehensive and does not reflect the attainment of all those who sat AS examinations.
- 41 There is a marked difference between the number of unclassified (U) grades awarded at AS and A level. In schools, the overall percentage of U grades at A level over the past four years is 1%, whereas it is 17% at AS (Welsh Examinations Database, 2017¹). There is a similar pattern in colleges, with an overall percentage of 2% of U grades at A level and 13% at AS. (Lifelong Learning Wales Record, 2017²).

¹ Unpublished data collected by Welsh Government, calculations completed by Estyn

² *ibid*

- 42 In the four years up to 2017, the percentage of U grades awarded for AS levels taken in schools (in subjects with over 1,000 entries), has exceeded 20% in the following subjects:
- Information and communication technology (ICT)
 - Social studies (including psychology, sociology and law)
 - Physics
 - Mathematics
 - Biological sciences
 - Craft, design and technology
 - Chemistry
 - Economics
 - Business studies
- 43 However, for A levels taken in schools, no subject has more than 4% of U grades and nearly all only have between 0 and 2%. In schools, in most of the subjects listed above, the number of entries almost halves between AS and A level. (Welsh Examinations Database, 2017³).
- 44 For AS levels taken in colleges (in subjects with over 300 entries), the highest percentage of U grades over the four years up to 2017 have been in:
- Physical education
 - Mathematics
 - Computing
 - Accounting
 - ICT
 - Law
 - Psychology
 - Physics
 - Geology
- 45 For A levels taken in colleges (in subjects with more than 300 entries over four years), the highest percentage of U grades is in ICT (7%) and physical education (5%) and around two thirds of subjects have between 0% and 2% of U grades. (Lifelong Learning Wales Record, 2017⁴).
- 46 The discrepancy between the number of U grades at AS and A level can be partly explained by the fact that many learners take four AS subjects, with the intention of reducing to three A levels and therefore give little attention to one of their subjects or may find one of their subjects more difficult. In addition, a notable number of learners are not best suited to studying at advanced level, particularly in subjects which are science or mathematics based. As a result of these factors there is a notable reduction in the number of entries between AS and A level, especially in subjects with a high percentage of U grades at AS level. The biggest drops in the number of entries between AS and A levels are in business studies, chemistry, physics,

³ ibid

⁴ ibid

economics, biological sciences, French and ICT (Welsh Examinations Database, 2017⁵).

- 47 In the four years to 2017 in schools and colleges, the highest percentage of ‘top’ grades (A*/A-C) have been awarded in the following subjects:

Figure 2: Subjects with the highest percentages of A*/A-C grades at A and AS level in schools and colleges (2014-2017)

A levels taken in schools (subjects with more than 1,000 entries over four years)		AS levels taken in schools (subjects with more than 1,000 entries over four years)	
Highest percentage of A*-A grades:	Highest percentage of A*-C grades:	Highest percentage of A grades:	Highest percentage of A-C grades:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mathematics • Chemistry • French • Art • Physics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History • Mathematics • Drama • Religious studies • Art • Film studies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welsh • Mathematics • Art • French • Geography 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welsh • Drama • History • Art • Welsh second language
A levels in colleges (subjects with more than 300 entries over four years)		AS levels in colleges (subjects with more than 300 entries over four years)	
Highest percentage of A*-A grades:	Highest percentage of A*-C grades:	Highest percentage of A grades:	Highest percentage of A-C grades:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further mathematics • Mathematics • Chemistry • Economics • Law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drama • Religious studies • History • Law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further mathematics • Electronics • Mathematics • World Development • French 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drama • Film studies • Art and design • Welsh second language • Further mathematics

Source: Welsh Examinations Database, 2017⁶ and Lifelong Learning Wales Record, 2017⁷

- 48 Many of the subjects with a high percentage of A-C grades at AS level mirror those at A level. However, there are notable exceptions. A high percentage of A*-C and A*-A grades are awarded in mathematics at A level but around 13% of the grades awarded at AS level are U grades. A similar polarisation is seen in chemistry and physics, with a high percentage of A*/A grades being awarded at A level but over 10% of the AS grades being U grades. The number of entries between A and AS level falls by around a third in chemistry and around a fifth in mathematics. (JCQ, 2018b). This suggests that a number of AS candidates are not best suited to take

⁵ ibid

⁶ ibid

⁷ ibid

these subjects due to lack of academic ability, lack of commitment or taking too many subjects, but that many of those who continue to study at A level are very committed and able, and as a result, achieve well.

Outcomes for groups of learners

- 49 In Wales, girls generally outperform boys at A and AS level. Boys in Wales outperformed girls at grades A*- A at A level in 2018 and 2017, which was not the case at A grade at AS level. However, girls outperform boys at other grades and at the overall A*-E measure. The performance of boys at AS level is of particular concern. At AS level nearly 92% of all subject entries by girls gained A-E grades whilst the equivalent figure for boys is around 88%. At A level 98% of entries by girls gained A*-E compared to almost 97% of entries by boys. The gap between girls' and boys' performance was widest at grade B, with girls 4.2 percentage points ahead of boys at A level and nearly four percentage points ahead at AS level. (JCQ, 2018b).
- 50 There is a distinct pattern of female and male dominated subjects at A level, as seen in figure 3. This makes it difficult to compare the performance of boys and girls across and within subjects. For example, in 2018, 78% of the entries for physics were by boys. Girls performed better than boys at A*-C and A*-A, but there were far fewer entries by girls. In subjects which attract boys and girls in fairly equal numbers, such as geography and history, girls generally perform better than boys. Meaningful analysis is complicated further by the fact that there are more A level entries by girls than boys every year. In 2018, there were 14,284 entries by males in comparison with 18,161 by females, which mirrors the pattern in 2017 (14,677 males v 18, 617 females) (JCQ, 2018b) and in previous years.

Figure 3: Most popular A level subjects by gender

Male dominated subjects include:	Female dominated subjects include:	Subjects which attract boys and girls in fairly equal numbers include:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physics • Economics • ICT and Computing • Mathematics (including further mathematics) • Physical education • Design and technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welsh (first and second language) • Religious studies • English (language and literature and both combined) • Art and design • Modern foreign languages • Law • Sociology • Psychology • Drama 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geography • Chemistry • Music • Business studies

Source: JCQ, 2018b

- 51 There are difficulties in analysing the A level performance of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds because free school meal status does not apply to learners after compulsory schooling. Some data is collected for schools which

includes information regarding learners' eligibility for free school meals when they were in Year 11, not their current circumstances. This information is not available for colleges. Based on learner eligibility for free school meals when they were in Year 11, there are far fewer learners eligible for free school meals in the post-16 school system than in compulsory pre-16 education. In 2017, around 6% of all A level learners were eligible for free school meals when in Year 11 in 2015. This is compared with a free school meal average of around 16% when in 11-16 education. (Welsh Examinations Database, 2017⁸, Pupil Level Annual School Census, 2015⁹). The small numbers of learners involved make it difficult to make statistically valid general statements. However, visits to schools and colleges, along with research, suggest that learners from economically disadvantaged circumstances perform less well at A level than their counterparts from more privileged backgrounds, (Welsh Government, 2017c, p.41) as is also the case at key stage four.

Outcomes in schools and colleges

- 52 A clear relationship exists between success rates at A level within colleges and whether a college provides tertiary provision for a number of 11-16 feeder schools in a region, or is in direct competition with one or more school sixth forms. Outcomes, measured by successful completion rates, are strongest for colleges that provide post-16 provision in areas where there are few school sixth forms. Where colleges are in direct competition for A level learners with 11-18 schools, learners' successful completion rates are lower. This is partly because these colleges often take on a high proportion of learners who have not met the entry criteria for A level places at their schools. Within a very few colleges, both situations exist, where one campus acts as the tertiary provider for the area, and another campus competes for learners with school sixth forms.

Entries

- 53 Over recent years, there has been a steady decline in the number of entries for both AS and A levels, with the difference in the number of entries between A and AS levels also reducing. In 2018 the total number of A level examination entries in Wales reduced by 2.6% compared with 2017 figures, following a reduction of 6% the previous year (JCQ, 2018b).

⁸ ibid

⁹ ibid

Figure 4: Number of learners taking 1 or more A/AS levels in schools or colleges, 2014-2017

	Schools		Colleges	
	A Levels	AS Levels	A Levels	AS Levels
2014	10,933	16,623	3,850	6,907
2015	10,997	16,039	3,733	6,003
2016	10,792	15,257	3,640	5702
2017	10,052	13,886	3,525	6064

Source: Welsh Examinations Database, 2017¹⁰ and Lifelong Learning Wales Record, 2017¹¹

- 54 The most recent Welsh Government figures for the destinations of key stage 4 leavers (2014/15 leavers) show that around 50% of leavers progressed to AS/A level courses at a school sixth form or a college (Welsh Government, 2018b).
- 55 There are more entries for AS levels than A levels. In 2018, there were over 10,000 more entries for AS levels than A levels and almost 15,000 more entries in 2017. The difference in the number of entries has reduced over time. (Qualifications Wales, 2018). The difference in terms of entries is partly explained by the fact that many learners take four AS levels in Year 12 and drop to three A levels in Year 13. In sixth forms, approximately 20% of learners do not continue from Year 12 to Year 13 (Welsh Government, 2017c).
- 56 Some A level subjects are more frequently required for entry to degree courses at university than others. These are commonly known as 'facilitating subjects' because they open a wide range of options for university study. These subjects are: biology; chemistry; English literature; geography; history; mathematics and further mathematics; modern and classical languages; physics.
- 57 Many of the most popular subjects in both schools and colleges are the facilitating subjects. In schools, the most popular A level subjects over the past four years are shown in figure 5 below. In colleges, the most popular subjects are similar to those in schools. (Lifelong Learning Wales Record, 2017¹²).

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ ibid

¹² ibid

Figure 5: Most popular A level subjects in schools 2014-2017 (in order of popularity)

A level	AS level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mathematics • History • Social studies (including psychology, sociology and law) • Biology • English literature • Chemistry • Religious studies • Art and design • Geography • Physics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social studies (including psychology, sociology and law) • Mathematics • Biological sciences • Chemistry • History • English literature • Physics • Religious studies • Art and design

Source: Welsh Examinations Database, 2017¹³

- 58 In 2018 and 2017, many A and AS level subjects saw a decrease in entries. In 2018 a small number of subjects saw an increase, the biggest percentage increases of which were in further mathematics at AS and other modern languages at A level. (Qualifications Wales, 2018). Over the past four years in schools, the biggest reduction in A level entries has been in, English language, French, biological science, music and chemistry, whereas business studies has seen an increase. At AS level, the picture is relatively similar with business studies seeing the increase, and other science, French, English language, English literature, French and German seeing the decreases. It is difficult to complete a similar analysis for colleges as the numbers are much smaller, meaning there will be larger fluctuations (Welsh Examinations Database, 2017¹⁴).
- 59 Entry policies for studying A levels have a notable impact on the key performance indicators. In general, centres that require learners to have six or seven A*C grades at GCSE to study A levels perform better in these indicators than those that require fewer A*-C grades. However, these indicators do not take account of how much progress learners have made from their starting points, only if they achieve particular grades or not.

Retention and progression

- 60 In colleges, generally around 80% of AS level enrolments lead to successful completion, whereas at A level, around 95% of enrolments lead to successful completion. (Lifelong Learning Wales Record, 2017¹⁵). Corresponding information is not available for schools only. However, visits to schools reveal that, similarly, a few learners, around 20%, every year fail to complete Year 12 or fail to progress from Year 12 to Year 13. Schools and colleges report that the main reason for this failure is that the learners had low levels of educational attainment at GCSE and were therefore not necessarily best suited to A level study. These learners often transfer

¹³ ibid

¹⁴ ibid

¹⁵ ibid

to a vocational course or go into employment or training. In 2017, 7% of A level learners in schools in Wales did not achieve the level 2 threshold including English/Welsh and mathematics. The equivalent information for colleges is not available. Experimental statistics published by Welsh Government in September 2018 show that, across all providers, 83% of learners who enrolled to study AS levels in 2015-16 completed the AS year. Of these, around 75% returned to the second (A level) year in 2016-17. Nearly all those who returned completed the A level year, but of those who initially enrolled at the beginning of 2015-16, 60% completed the full two year course. (Welsh Government, 2018c).

- 61 Learners with low levels of educational attainment at GCSE are far more likely to 'drop out' of their AS/A level courses or fail them later on. There are a number of reasons why these learners end up studying A level qualifications. These include:
- A lack of choice of options other than A levels, this could be due to geographical location or a lack of other options through the medium of Welsh
 - A reluctance among learners to leave their school because they know all the teachers and the teachers know them, coupled with an inclusive ethos in the school and a commitment to equality of opportunity for all learners, regardless of academic ability
 - Strong parental and learner preference for the 'tradition' of studying A levels as opposed to any other level 3 courses on offer or courses at a lower level
 - Family or part-time work commitments requiring learners to be close to home
- 62 In addition, post-16 funding formulas which are based on the number of learners studying in each institution encourage schools, in particular, to increase their numbers. An unintended consequence of this situation is that learners who are not best suited to study A levels are allowed to do so in order to increase numbers. Learners from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, along with males and those with special educational needs, among other groups, are also more likely not to progress from Year 12 to Year 13 (Welsh Government, 2017c, p.11).
- 63 Many A level learners successfully progress to university, with a few securing places at highly competitive universities such as Oxford or Cambridge and a minority gaining places at Russell Group universities. Around 80% of Year 13 school leavers continue in full time education. Of these a very few take a gap year, around 20% continue their education in school or college and around 80% progress to higher education. (Careers Wales, 2018). The situation in colleges is different, with around 40% of A level (Year 13) leavers progressing to higher education, with a further 27% remaining in education. The destinations of the remainder of learners are unknown. (Welsh Government, 2018b, pp.2-4). Experimental data published by Welsh Government in September 2018 show that 90% of school and college learners who completed their A level studies in 2015-16 had a sustained positive destination. This means that they continued their learning at the same or a higher level or went into employment. Of all school and college learners who left in 2015-16, 83% had a sustained positive destination and 57% of these learners stayed in education. Female learners had a higher sustained positive learning destination than male learners (84% compared with 81%) (Welsh Government, 2018d).

- 64 The collection of data regarding the destinations of A level learners is currently very inconsistent and does not give a clear picture. All schools and colleges track the destinations of their learners who apply to university via the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) application process. However, practices for capturing actual destinations of learners who do not apply via UCAS are variable. Many schools and colleges survey learners before they leave to record their intended destinations but only a very few contact leavers a number of months after they leave school or college to record actual progression destinations. As a result of this lack of checking, it is difficult to gain an accurate picture of destinations and the number of learners who do not progress successfully can easily be underestimated.

Provision

Curriculum

- 65 Most A level providers offer a range of A levels which include subjects often known as ‘facilitating’ subjects such as mathematics, English and history. These subjects are more frequently required for entry to degree courses at university than others. Subjects that are less commonly offered include law, electronics, psychology and engineering. There are considerable differences across the country in the choices available to learners in both English and Welsh-medium settings.
- 66 The range of subjects offered at A level varies according to geographical location, staff expertise, language medium, provider size, whether or not there are partnerships with other centres and between schools and colleges. In general, colleges and large schools offer a broader range of subjects than smaller providers, most of whom depend on partnership arrangements to offer a wider range of subjects. Most centres offer vocational qualifications as well as A levels, though, in most schools the choice of vocational qualifications is far more limited than the choice of A levels.
- 67 Most centres offer an initial free choice of A level subjects to learners, and option blocks are then formulated based on the findings of the free choice exercise. Most A level learners are happy with the range of subjects offered to them and feel that they are able to study the subjects they wish to, though this may entail studying one subject at another centre.
- 68 While most learners who choose to study A levels are apparently offered a ‘free choice’ in terms of A level subjects, their choices are in reality restricted by a number of factors. This is particularly the case in areas or centres where post-16 options other than A levels are limited. These factors include centres requiring learners to study more subjects than they wish to and centres not offering particular subjects due to a lack of subject expertise or poor results in a subject over time. In a few cases, learners are reluctant to travel to other centres. Many centres stipulate, often appropriately, minimum grades for studying certain subjects. This particularly affects learners of relatively modest achievement at GCSE because their choices are very much restricted by entry requirements for individual subjects and leave them with a limited range of choices which may not match their needs or interests. These factors often lead to a few learners choosing a course they haven’t studied before, such as psychology, without fully understanding the demands of the subject or choosing subjects in which they have little interest. In these circumstances, the curriculum offer does not match the needs or the interests of the learners well enough.
- 69 Class sizes vary dramatically across centres, from one to about 30 learners. In very small classes, it is difficult to hold productive discussions and for learners to learn from each other. However, very large classes pose challenges in terms of teacher workload and it is difficult for teachers to give individual learners sufficient attention.

- 70 Over the past two years there has been significant reform affecting A levels. At the same time, there has been great change at key stage 3 and key stage 4. This has had a significant effect on the workload of secondary school teachers who have to meet the demands of a changing curriculum at all key stages simultaneously. They also have to teach old and new A level specifications concurrently.
- 71 The pace of reform and the volume of change affecting A levels have been challenging for schools, colleges and the organisations involved with these reforms including the Welsh Government, Qualifications Wales and the WJEC. The tight timeframe was a result of England's decision to reform their examinations and the recommendation in the review of qualifications that parity with English A levels be retained. This also coincided with reforms to GCSEs. Many A levels were reformed either before or at the same time as the GCSEs in the same subject. In addition to the reforms to A levels and GCSEs, the key stage 3 curriculum is also being reformed in the light of the Successful Futures report. These reforms cover progression from the ages of 3 to 16, but do not extend to post-16 education. Consequently, in many subjects there has been a lack of a co-ordinated approach and clear, detailed planning for progression in skills and knowledge from key stage 3 to GCSE and then to A level. Due to a lack of a continuum leading to A levels, Year 11 pupils are not always sufficiently prepared for the demands of A level study, though this varies from subject to subject. For example, in English language and literature, learners are required to have knowledge of spoken language theory but this does not feature at all at GCSE. Similarly, learners' oracy skills are assessed at GCSE but this does not feature at A level. In some subjects such as design and technology, the reforms of A levels and GCSEs were completed in parallel, allowing for continuity across the qualifications, whereas in other subjects this was not the case and therefore there was far less planning for progression from GCSE to A level.
- 72 The pace and degree of change mean that there is a concern that curriculum reform and planning for progression from key stage 3 and across GCSE and A levels is not always planned cohesively in order to provide learners with the breadth and depth of knowledge required for A level study.
- 73 The pace of reform, and the lengthy timeframe involved in accreditation or approval of qualifications has affected the timely availability of resources. The WJEC and commercial publishers were unable to proceed with the publication of resources until qualifications were approved or accredited. In particular, it has led to problems with Welsh-medium resources as they are translated and go through a checking process following completion of English-medium resources. This has been exacerbated by the fact that publishers are now less willing to publish resources for Wales only qualifications as the commercial market is much smaller than it was when candidates in Wales and England studied the same qualifications.
- 74 In general, while GCSEs provide a suitable basic grounding for A levels they do not prepare learners well enough for the level of independent study required at A level. At GCSE learners tend to be given a great deal of notes and revision materials and are guided through these by their teachers. They also frequently have mock examinations and tests. Targeted learners are given additional help and extra lessons. At A level, learners are expected to complete their own research and make their own notes or go over those given to them in their own time. They are expected

to test themselves and to revise on their own. Most schools and colleges do not have the financial resources to provide additional support or sessions to A level learners who are struggling. The pace of learning and volume of work required at A level is also much greater than at GCSE.

Advice and guidance

- 75 In general, many learners and their parents feel that they received high-quality advice and guidance before embarking on A levels. However, advice and guidance for a few AS learners, particularly those who only achieve the minimum entry requirements for studying A levels, is not always helpful as A levels are generally not the best option for them. Most schools and colleges provide open evenings for learners and their parents to explain A level choices and many offer one to one interviews. In the best examples, the process of choosing A levels is very carefully managed by the centre. Pupils have individual interviews in Year 11 and on results days, parents are closely involved in the process, staff consider predicted grades and career aspirations and give advice on combinations of subjects. However, advice and guidance is of better quality for those wanting to study A levels than for those choosing other courses or routes.

Case study 1: St David's Catholic Sixth Form College, Cardiff – advice and guidance

St David's Catholic Sixth Form College in Cardiff offers mainly A level provision alongside a range of level 2 and 3 vocational qualifications. It has around 1,500 learners and offers over 30 A level courses.

The college works closely with parents and schools to help guide learners into making informed choices about their future courses. Prior to enrolment, all college applicants are invited to a 'guidance session', often held on a Saturday. In these sessions, college staff discuss with prospective applicants their course choices, their current school report and their ambitions. When giving advice, they consider each learner's current attainment and their progress at school as well as their future educational and career aspirations. They also take account of information relating to universities and requirements for specific courses and future career aspirations. In addition, they provide useful guidance as to supportive subject combinations such as mathematics with physics or biology with physical education. The college uses subject specialists to provide this advice and all applications are checked for suitability of choices by a senior member of staff

A sixth form prospectus provides comprehensive information about provision at the college and each individual A level course, as well as the vocational options offered by the college.

Several open evenings are held throughout the year. These allow prospective learners and their parents to discuss course expectations and requirements with subject specialist teaching staff and to learn about the services offered by the college, such as careers advice or student support.

These evenings also enable prospective learners to meet current students and to experience a tour of the college. They are supplemented by a series of open afternoons where applicants are given a presentation by the Assistant Principal for admissions and a tour of the college.

Each July, all applicants are invited to taster sessions where they experience teaching in the AS level subjects of their choice. In 2018 these were offered through 'subject clusters'. For example the literature and culture subject cluster included English literature, English language and literature, film studies and media. These sessions provide learners with a valuable insight into AS subject lessons, particularly those that are new to them.

Once learners start their courses their progress is monitored carefully through the college's electronic individual learning plan, which is also open to parents. Learner Coaches use this information to identify learners who are at greatest risk of 'dropping out'. Where this is the case they target support and intervention or suggest alternative pathways where practicable.

The college has close links with four partner Catholic secondary schools and college representatives provide advice and guidance and taster sessions to Year 10 and Year 11 learners in these schools, and others.

The college's AS and A level results have been consistently strong over the past four years and compare very favourably with those in other further education colleges. The college conducts a survey of its enrolment process and in the most recent survey 100% of respondents reported that they were given appropriate advice and guidance and that their own requirements and thoughts were given due consideration.

- 76 While many learners and their parents are happy with the quality of advice and guidance they have received, in reality, current data reporting at post-16 does not enable them to gain a clear picture of which are the best A level providers in their locality. 'My Local School' is a Welsh Government website that provides information on all schools in Wales. It provides information on all key stages but does not provide any information on sixth form outcomes, such as A levels. Similarly, there is no equivalent 'My Local College' website. This means that there is no reliable source of information on performance at A level. This is compounded by the fact that outcomes are measured differently in schools and colleges and that there is minimal reporting of 'pure' A or AS level data.
- 77 When publicising their achievements, many centres 'cherry pick' the data they include in media releases and the messages can be misleading. For example a banner publicising a '99% A level pass rate' could merely indicate that nearly all the learners who stayed until the end of their course gained at least an E grade. It does not give an indication of attainment at the higher grades, give 'drop out' rates or details of AS performance, which is often much weaker than A level performance. This is confusing for learners and parents, because while the information may be technically correct, it gives a misleading impression of the reality of studying A levels, suggesting that nearly all who attend the centre will pass their courses.

78 A recent thematic report by Estyn on Careers found that:

Most schools provide pupils with a range of general information about post-16 options. However, a minority of schools do not use sufficiently up-to-date information or resources to guide pupils' decisions. In general, 11-18 schools place too much emphasis on promoting their own sixth form rather than exploring fully the range of other options available to pupils across a range of providers. (Estyn, 2017, p.4).

79 On the whole, advice and guidance in schools regarding vocational pathways in the sixth form and post A levels is limited. In many schools, most advice and guidance is geared towards the study of A levels, and that is generally within the school if they have a sixth form. Schools without sixth forms tend to give more impartial advice and have strong links with local colleges. A majority of schools talk to learners about apprenticeships, though not in much depth. Colleges encourage learners to study with them but often offer a broader range of choices which include A levels and vocational options.

80 Advice and guidance on pathways following A level studies focuses heavily on going to university. This is particularly the case in schools. Many centres work well with local universities, make good use of visiting speakers and offer valuable opportunities for mock interviews. Most centres support learners well through the UCAS university application process. Many centres are beginning to make learners more aware of opportunities such as higher apprenticeships. College learners benefit from specialist careers services that help learners explore the full range of progression options including university, apprenticeship, work and entrepreneurial venture. However, on the whole, advice and guidance on pathways other than going to university is generally limited.

81 There are broadly suitable systems in most schools and colleges for giving advice prior to and after studying A levels. However, the quality of advice and guidance during A level studies is more variable, particularly during and at the end of Year 12. Colleges and a minority of schools allow learners a fixed initial period when they are able to change courses. A few schools require learners to study four AS subjects initially but allow learners to drop one subject quite early so that they end up with a better match between their interests and subjects. However, in a minority of centres there is a lack of timely advice and helpful guidance.

82 Many centres are becoming increasingly aware of rising levels of anxiety and mental health issues among A level learners. They are aware of the pressure to do well that learners feel under, the general anxiety felt by young people in a world increasingly dominated by social media and the difficulties of balancing a heavy workload with additional responsibilities. The majority of centres are starting to put support in place. This includes support from counsellors, guidance on managing workload and lessons and assemblies about how to deal with mental health issues.

Entry policies

83 Entry requirements to study A levels vary from centre to centre and tend to be far more flexible in small settings, located far from other centres or in centres that are the only Welsh-medium providers in a locality. Many centres require five grades A*-

C at GCSE or equivalent, a few centres accept four and a few require six or seven A*-C grades. Most centres also have specific requirements for individual subjects, for example B grades in mathematics and science to study those subject at A level. However, many centres do not apply these requirements uniformly, particularly when the learner is known to them or where funding is allocated based on numbers not outcomes. In many centres, and in schools in particular, the process of ensuring that learners are on suitable courses is not robust enough and there is generally too much flexibility in the application of entry requirements. In addition, there is a general perception among parents and learners that A levels are the best option post-GCSE.

- 84 Such flexibility in the application of entry requirements and a narrow focus on A levels as the only post-16 option is not necessarily helpful, particularly for learners who have only just or not quite achieved the minimum entry requirements for studying A levels, as studying at advanced level is not always the best option for them. Around 20% of learners every year continue to 'drop out' in Year 12 or fail to progress from Year 12 to Year 13 and there are significant discrepancies in terms of attainment at A and AS level, with A level outcomes being much stronger (Welsh Government, 2017c). In a minority of centres, the choices of options available, restrictions affecting those choices and limited consideration of the academic ability of each learner mean that the needs and interests of learners are not met suitably by studying A levels.
- 85 Over recent years, schools and colleges have become increasingly aware of the importance of ensuring that all learners studying A levels are suitably qualified to do so and make choices that suit their needs and interests. In colleges, any transfers or withdrawals from courses during the first eight weeks of teaching do not affect the completion or success performance data. Colleges have become increasingly proactive in focusing additional advice and guidance and reviews of learning programmes during this period. Success rates are generally highest in colleges that undertake such reviews rigorously.
- 86 The number of AS levels that centres require learners to study varies. Most centres require Year 12 learners to take at least three AS levels, but many require them to take four or three AS levels as well as another qualification such as the Welsh Baccalaureate. The funding formula for A level studies often influences the number of A levels a centre requires learners to study. A minority of learners study two A levels, sometimes with another qualification, though this is usually after the learner has 'dropped' one or two A levels. The Welsh Baccalaureate supplements learners' diet with a broader range of experiences than those offered by A level study alone, but requires learners to study an additional qualification and therefore requires curriculum and study time. This has led to increased pressure on the time allocation for all A level subjects and higher expectations of A level learners in terms of the number of subjects studied.
- 87 The requirement to study four or five subjects (inclusive of the Welsh Baccalaureate) and the resulting increased workload and lack of study periods is a significant factor in causing stress amongst A level learners. It also raises concerns among learners and their parents regarding the fact that learners in Wales are competing for university places against their counterparts in England who, in the main, study three A levels only and can devote more time to fewer subjects. Universities require a maximum of three A levels or equivalent qualifications for entry.

- 88 Entry requirements for progressing from Year 12 to Year 13 are vaguer than those for entering Year 12 and vary widely across centres. On the whole, if a learner has gained U grades in all subjects most centres do not allow them to progress to A level study. However, other than this, policies for progressing from Year 12 to Year 13 are unclear. In many centres, a few learners study A levels over three years. These learners may re-sit Year 12 and start their studies again, sometimes with the same A levels and sometimes with new subjects. Other learners continue into Year 13 with one or two subjects but start one or two new AS levels afresh. A few of these learners complete the AS and A2 simultaneously in one year.

Teaching and assessment

- 89 Positive and respectful working relationships between teachers and learners characterise most A level lessons. Learners often comment on an atmosphere of mutual respect in lessons and feel that they are treated differently to when they were in Year 11 and more like adults.
- 90 A passion for the subject, secure subject knowledge and assured understanding of the requirements of the examinations are key characteristics of effective A level teaching and feature in the majority of lessons. The most effective A level teachers deploy interesting and often creative methods to engage learners and to help them achieve the highest standards. While these teachers prepare learners exceptionally well for the requirements of examinations, they also set the learning in a broader context, both in terms of the subject itself and a wider general context. They are successful in balancing the demands of the examinations and the need to provide a broader canvass to the learning.
- 91 Many teachers encourage wider reading around specific topics or texts but not so much around the subject in general. In many cases, and often due to time restrictions, all learning is linked to examinations. Conversely, a few teachers stray too far beyond the syllabus and do not focus sufficiently on the requirements of the examinations. There is a lack of a general, wide-ranging consideration of the subject often required by universities. However, covering the subject content of A level syllabi and teaching the required skills within a tight time frame is challenging and can lead to a narrow focus on examination content and skills.

Case study 2: Ysgol Y Strade, Llanelli – Using creative methods to analyse poetry in a Year 12 A level Welsh lesson

In a Year 12 A level Welsh lesson, learners worked independently and collaboratively to analyse a poem about the writer and Welsh language activist, Saunders Lewis. The teacher had planned the lesson carefully and used a variety of creative methods to engage the learners and help them to analyse the poem in sufficient depth. The teacher used artefacts once owned by Saunders Lewis and clips of his famous 'Tynged yr Iaith' (The fate of the [Welsh] language) speech to create successfully a sense of his character and his importance to Wales. When asked how they would describe Saunders Lewis' voice to a deaf person, learners described sensitively the nature of his voice and were perceptive in their analysis of his tone and choice of words. They later applied this learning skilfully to their own analysis of the poem.

The teacher facilitated the learners' independent learning skills particularly well. For example, learners had to arrange a cut up version of the first verse of the poem so that it made sense to them. Learners explained their reasoning maturely and used their knowledge of metre effectively to create an accurate version of the verse.

A notable feature of the lesson was the way in which the teacher maximised every learning opportunity and set the learning in a broader context. For example, when considering a description of the metre of the poem, learners were required to discuss the content of the paragraph and any omissions but were also asked to correct the deliberate spelling and grammar mistakes and explain why they were incorrect. Learners applied their prior knowledge skilfully to this and other tasks and were confident in their use of subject specific terminology. Similarly, when focusing on specific lines of the poem, learners were probed about their knowledge of the particular form of alliteration known as 'cynghanedd', as well as their grasp of the meaning and style of the lines. Learners were knowledgeable about the metres of Welsh poetry and the various forms of 'cynghanedd' and combined their prior knowledge and new understanding most effectively.

All learners were fully engaged in the lesson and conveyed a sincere interest in the poem and its subject matter. They were inquisitive and thoughtful in their consideration of the poem and asked well-considered questions. Most wrote well-crafted responses to the poem, using sophisticated and carefully chosen vocabulary. The teacher had established a positive and supportive learning environment that was characterised by touches of humour combined with challenging and thought-provoking questions and tasks. The teacher's subject knowledge was comprehensive and she conveyed a passion for the subject which clearly engaged and interested the learners.

- 92 Many A level teachers have high expectations of learners, they plan carefully to meet the needs of individual learners, particularly those of higher ability and use helpful resources which engage learners effectively. They provide detailed notes and guide learners skilfully through their courses. They are responsive to learners' needs and interests and adapt their lessons deftly. These teachers plan lessons that challenge learners and develop a variety of valuable skills effectively. These include independent and collaborative learning, problem solving and creative skills.
- 93 Facilitating independent learning successfully is a particular strength of many A level teachers. For example, teachers plan activities that require learners to independently make connections and transfer their skills between different aspects of their course. In other examples, teachers make learners responsible for 'teaching' specific sections of a lesson to their peers or give them specific roles in order that they run their own debate. In these lessons, learners make strong progress.

Case study 3: Eirias High School, Conwy – a stimulating debate in a Year 13 A level economics lesson

In a Year 13 A level economics lesson, learners engaged in a lively and exceptionally well run formal debate of the motion that ‘it is essential for the UK government to reduce the public sector deficit’. The teacher facilitated the session professionally by acting as ‘the speaker’ to make sure that learners followed similar protocols to those used in parliamentary debates.

All learners made useful contributions to the debate and most were confident and articulate. Many learners made effective use of specialist terminology to highlight links between taxation, public spending, aggregate demand, public sector borrowing, inflation, unemployment and economic growth. One pupil drew a comparison with economic difficulties experienced in Greece while another intervened to emphasise that the UK’s credit rating had been reduced as a result of low growth and economic uncertainty. Other topical issues which learners included in their contributions included the potential impact of Brexit, the fall in the value of the pound, public sector job losses and the potential economic costs and benefits of the HS2 high speed train link.

Learners clearly enjoyed the opportunity to draw on previously acquired knowledge and understanding to put forward well-reasoned lines of argument and many used language powerfully to maximise the persuasive impact of their contributions.

At the end of the debate all participants voted independently either for or against the motion and learners then reflected on the impact the debate had on their pre-conceived views held before the debate. As a follow up task learners were also required to answer a past examination question which asked candidates to discuss whether it is essential for the government to cut public spending and raise taxes to reduce the public sector deficit.

- 94 A few A level teachers do too much for learners and do not enable them to learn for themselves. These teachers also let a few pupils, generally the more able, dominate the lesson in terms of answering questions and leading discussions. As independent learning skills are crucial to success at A level, this hampers learners’ progress. A very few teachers have weak subject knowledge and an insufficient understanding of the requirements of examinations.
- 95 Many teachers pose thought-provoking questions to the whole class and follow this up with probing questions targeted at individuals. They offer high-quality verbal feedback during questioning sessions and while circulating. In a few cases, teachers’ questioning does not challenge learners sufficiently or encourage them to expand on their answers. In addition, these teachers tend to answer their own questions or explain answers rather than leading learners through the process of coming to a conclusion. As a result, a few learners become too passive and do not develop their thinking skills well enough.

- 96 In many cases, teachers test and probe learners' knowledge and understanding frequently and thoroughly through in-class monitoring and careful assessment of learners' work, as well as through effective questioning. The assessment strategies employed by these teachers enable them to gain a clear picture of learners' progress. These teachers' written feedback is precise and of good quality. This feedback is linked clearly to examination mark schemes and highlights specific aspects in need of improvement, often through focused annotation of learners' work. In a few effective examples in relevant subjects, aspects in need of improvement are fed into the next assessment piece and teachers convey a clear expectation that the learner should address these weaknesses in their next piece of work. However, this practice is not always suitable in subjects in which the assessment is heavily focused on subject knowledge, such as biology.
- 97 A few teachers do not question or test learners' understanding effectively enough and the feedback they offer is too superficial and vague. In these cases, teachers' expectations of the amount of work learners should produce are too low.
- 98 A majority of teachers enable learners to understand how to assess their own work accurately and improve it. They prepare structured self-assessment tasks that are linked clearly to assessment criteria and provide valuable opportunities for learners to revisit questions or pieces of work.

Teaching and learning strategies that learners find helpful

- Discussion and debate, as these pull together many skills
- Teacher makes learners write down everything they know at the beginning of a topic and plans initial learning around this
- Re-drafting responses or parts of answers or answering questions again and these being re-marked
- Exemplar materials such as essays and model answers
- Tables or glossaries of terminology
- Extra questions on specific topics they find difficult
- Being given mark schemes or success criteria checklists and going through them with the teacher before attempting questions
- Structured and planned use of past papers, as opposed to merely giving learners too many past papers
- Topic packs or notes which bring together notes, exam questions and mark schemes on specific topics, and being given these at the beginning of a topic
- Use of mock examinations and tests, including end of topic tests, but only when learners have covered enough in lessons to be able to attempt them
- Highlighting which assessment objectives they have met well and which they haven't, for example by breaking up the marks according to different assessment objectives

Monitoring of progress

- 99 In many centres, learners understand clearly how well they are progressing in their A level studies and what their target grades are. Learners and their parents receive regular progress reports about their overall progress and, in a minority of cases, they have access to live, interactive information through apps or websites. In many centres, learners have tracking sheets in individual subjects and find these helpful in providing detailed information about specific aspects of their progress in these subjects. In the most successful centres, leaders routinely set aspirational target grades for learners based on their prior attainment at GCSE and the abilities they demonstrate. Leaders revise these targets upwards when a learner is making particularly strong progress. These centres monitor learners' progress carefully and learners and their teachers work together well to identify and address any areas for development. In a majority of centres, tracking and monitoring systems have only recently been strengthened and it is too early to assess their impact.
- 100 A majority of leaders make appropriate use of the information gained from tracking and monitoring systems to identify underachievement and learners who are making good progress. The degree of intervention, support and resources put into supporting pupils at key stage 4 is not replicated at A level. This is because schools and colleges expect learners to be more responsible for their own learning. While this is appropriate, it can be challenging for learners who received a great deal of support at key stage 4.

Case study 4: Stanwell School – tracking and monitoring of learner progress

Stanwell School is an English-medium, mixed 11 to 18 comprehensive school in Penarth, Vale of Glamorgan. There are 2,000 pupils on roll including around 500 in the sixth form. Around 5% of pupils are eligible for free school meals.

The school has a robust system for tracking and monitoring learner progress and uses a range of useful internal and external data to set targets and monitor progress. Middle and senior leaders have a strong understanding of data, including value-added data. Responsibility for target setting lies with departments, who use the data provided to them by the school to set targets for each learner.

Rigorous tracking of learner progress occurs through the pastoral and departmental structures. This careful tracking has created a culture of highly motivated learners who aspire to achieve their target grades and beyond. Heads of department produce half-termly reports on A level learners' progress against their targets. These are used by senior leadership links to monitor departmental progress at A level and by heads of year to monitor individual learner progress. Following these link meetings, subject leaders have discussions with targeted learners. Subject teachers formally report to parents on progress twice a year. They indicate how likely each learner is to achieve the attainment grade that they give them. This gives leaders valuable detail about learner progress.

The pastoral team review progress data after every formal data collection. Appropriate pastoral team intervention such as mentoring is then implemented for learners who may be performing lower than expectations across a range of subjects. Departments also review the data after every formal data collection and implement learner specific departmental interventions for underperforming learners.

The school carries out annual departmental review meetings where the performance of the previous year's learners is evaluated and targets for the forthcoming year are discussed. This facilitates an appropriate level of challenge and support for staff and learners.

Over time, the school has sustained strong learner outcomes at AS and A level.

More able learners

- 101 Outcomes at A*-A in Wales improved in 2017 and 2018, but this follows several years of decline in the percentage of learners in Wales achieving the top grades (JCQ, 2018b).
- 102 In most centres, provision for more able learners is now focused around the Seren programme. Learners are generally very positive about their experience of the programme. They enjoy meeting like-minded young people and having the opportunity to have additional sessions on a specific area that is of interest to them. Those aspiring to study a science-based subject at university, such as medicine or dentistry, have found the programme particularly beneficial. Learners also find the support afforded to them to apply to university valuable. The programme focuses mainly on raising aspirations and preparing learners for university. It is not a programme designed to boost attainment at A level.
- 103 A few centres have provision for more able learners which extends beyond the Seren programme. These centres track carefully the progress of more able learners and provide challenging work and experiences that ensure that these learners achieve their potential. These include masterclass activities such as specialist lectures by guest speakers and special interest clubs for high achieving learners. A few centres who lack the staff qualified to deliver further mathematics at A level work in partnership with Welsh universities to deliver the course.

Welsh-medium provision

- 104 In Welsh-medium schools, learners are able to study many, but not necessarily all of their subjects through the medium of Welsh. Mathematics and science based subjects are far more likely to be taught through the medium of English than other subjects. In a few settings, learners are taught bilingually throughout their course and are able to choose in which language to sit their examinations. This method enables all the learners in the class to become familiar with subject specific terminology in both languages and prepares them for studying at a higher level in either language.

Leadership

Leadership

105 There is no common pattern across Wales in terms of leadership of A levels in schools and colleges. The role of 'Head of Sixth Form' differs greatly from school to school. In some cases, the Head of Sixth Form is a full member of the senior leadership team and is responsible for all aspects in the sixth form, including standards at A level. In others, the role is primarily a pastoral one or is related to delivery of the Welsh Baccalaureate. Nearly all schools have departments or faculties which are led by middle leaders who are subject specialists, therefore they also have responsibility for AS and A level standards within their subjects. Colleges do not tend to have specific separate roles related to A levels, though a few colleges have recently introduced a strategic lead role with responsibility for A levels. A levels in colleges sit within subject 'areas' or 'departments' which include a range of qualifications related to similar subjects such as 'business and economics'. Leadership is broader in colleges because vocational qualifications and relevant A levels are often included in the same learning area or there is a general leader for all A levels.

Self-evaluation and improvement planning

- 106 The limitations of post-16 data have made it difficult for schools and colleges to evaluate their own performance at A level accurately. A minority of schools and colleges have suitable, dedicated sixth form or A level self-evaluation and improvement planning processes.
- 107 Many college leaders have effective arrangements in place to recognise and hold middle leaders and teachers to account for success rates at AS and A level. They are able to identify courses where withdrawal and failure rates are too high and they implement timely intervention measures. In general, the majority of colleges' self-assessment judgments for outcomes at A level rely too much on success rate ranking and do not focus enough on the grades learners achieve or on the qualitative data from observing lessons and scrutinising learners' work.
- 108 A minority of college middle leaders are overly positive in judging the standards that AS and A level learners achieve. This is because:
- they do not have an accurate picture of the standards learners achieve in lessons and the standard of work within their folders/books
 - they do not include rigorous and accurate evaluation of the grades learners achieve within their A level self-assessment activities
- 109 As a result, improvement planning is ineffective in a minority of instances.
- 110 In a majority of schools, performance at A level does not feature prominently in processes for self-evaluation or planning for improvement. In many schools, there is minimal focus on AS outcomes. School self-evaluation and improvement planning

processes tend to focus heavily on performance at key stage 4. In a majority of schools they involve cursory reflections on a very few indicators in the sixth form, or none at all. These schools do not analyse the performance of groups of learners in the sixth form and pay little attention to A level attainment in individual subjects. Local authority reports and school visits also tend to mirror this pattern. Where schools have been using a commercial package to analyse A level outcomes for some time, the level of engagement with A level performance tends to be greater.

- 111 Most leaders in colleges and a majority of schools observe A level lessons and scrutinise learners' work. A minority of schools do not do so or have only started recently. On the whole, a minority of schools and colleges do not make enough use of the findings from these activities. When observing lessons and scrutinising work at A level, many centres have realised the importance of using subject specialists in order to gain an accurate view of learners' standards and progress and the quality of teaching. Where this has been problematic, a few schools have worked with other providers to ensure subject specialists observe lessons.

Case study 5: Ysgol Eirias – self-evaluation and improvement planning

Ysgol Eirias is an English-medium, mixed 11 to 18 comprehensive school in Colwyn Bay, Conwy. There are 1,360 pupils on roll including 270 in the sixth form. Around 13% of pupils are eligible for free school meals.

The school views the sixth form as a major strength and a great deal of emphasis is placed on it within whole-school self-evaluation and improvement planning processes. All faculty improvement planning and self-evaluation processes focus on A level progress towards faculty data targets alongside the four overarching targets of the school.

The school uses a range of robust internal and external data to evaluate performance and to formulate strategic action plans for A level performance at whole-school and faculty level. Leaders also make effective use of findings from lesson observations, work scrutiny, and conversations with sixth form learners to evaluate their performance and provision at A level.

All Heads of Faculty are required to complete departmental AS and A level data analysis reports annually. The leadership group compare targets and outcomes and review the performance of each A level subject and this is subsequently reviewed by the governing body. The Headteacher presents annually to the governing body on faculty responses to queries from the governors. Progress towards faculty action plans and AS and A level targets are reviewed and challenged through line manager meetings. Sixth form progress is a regular agenda item on leadership group line manager meetings.

Over time, the school has sustained strong learner outcomes at A level across most performance indicators.

Partnerships

- 112 A majority of schools and colleges work in partnership with one or more A level providers to provide a broader range of subject choices for learners and to ensure that courses are financially viable. Many Welsh-medium centres collaborate to offer subjects through the medium of Welsh, though, in some cases, the distance between centres is too great to enable such collaboration and not all courses are available through the medium of Welsh. In a few cases, schools and colleges work with Welsh universities to deliver further mathematics courses.
- 113 Fewer English-medium schools work in partnerships than in the past and a minority of centres have abandoned previous partnerships. This is usually due to communication and cooperation issues or lack of funding, particularly linked to transport. There has been a general decline in partnerships since the removal of 14-19 learning pathways funding which encouraged collaboration and partnerships in order to provide learners with a wider range of learning pathways and options.
- 114 Partnership delivery of A level courses is most successful when:
- there are strong relationships and good communication systems between centres
 - centres deliver the courses which match their expertise and best outcomes and don't change the subjects they offer every year
 - centres align their timetables to ensure ease of movement for learners and minimal transfers
 - transport is accessible and travel times are not too long
 - there are robust quality assurance arrangements in place
- 115 Quality assurance arrangements for courses delivered in partnership are very varied. Only a few partnerships have robust quality assurance arrangements, which involve joint lesson observations and sharing of data. This marks a deterioration in practice as this was much more common in the past. In many cases, quality assurance is left to the delivering centre, which means that centres who send their learners to the delivering centre are entirely dependent on their judgement.

Case study 6: LINC Conwy and Arfon partnerships

LINC Conwy was established in 2011 and involves seven secondary schools and one further education college in the Conwy area. The Arfon partnership involves six secondary schools and two further education colleges in the Arfon and surrounding area.

Both partnerships were established to increase opportunities for bilingual and Welsh-medium provision and to increase the range of options available to post-16 learners in the local areas in North Wales. They enable learners to study from a range of AS, A level and vocational courses at any of the centres involved. The partnerships were also set up in response to the fact that there were too many financially unviable courses in many of the schools. In addition, schools were experiencing difficulty recruiting subject specialists and providing courses in a suitably wide range of subjects.

In both partnerships, the centres have aligned their timetables and free transport is provided for all learners who undertake courses through the partnership. In the LINC Conwy partnership courses delivered through the partnership are available on one specific full day each week. This minimises the amount of travel involved and allows learners to focus fully on their LINC course on that day. This arrangement also means that teachers can arrange trips and invite visitors without affecting their other studies.

In the Arfon partnership every department produces a self-evaluation report which provides information on specific quality indicators. Partnership leaders consider these reports and use them to decide where the best practice lies and whether there are any areas of underperformance. Underperforming courses are changed or stopped.

The LINC Conwy partnership is co-ordinated centrally by a LINC co-ordinator. The effectiveness of the partnership is monitored regularly through a series of review meetings which include termly meetings where each centre reports on progress in the courses they offer. LINC Conwy provision and outcomes are regularly addressed as meeting agenda items at 14-19 curriculum planner meetings. There is also a strategic partnership board which plans future developments. Learners' attendance and progress is monitored through a secure site which is accessible to all centres. Self-assessment reports are produced on each of the courses offered. Any subjects which are causing concern are required to produce an improvement plan. These are then discussed and regularly reviewed by partnership leaders. A learner survey is also completed annually.

Both partnerships have been successful in broadening the range of choices available to learners through Welsh and English. They also have sound quality assurance arrangements.

- 116 The current system for attributing results through partnership arrangements does not provide a sufficiently robust accountability model. Learners' results are not counted in the results of the school or college if they come from other centres. The results are counted with those of the 'home' centre, despite the fact that they have not delivered the course. This makes evaluating quality challenging and does not give due credit for success.
- 117 On the whole, learners who travel to other sites for one course do not like the fact that they have to travel. In a minority of cases, learners appreciate the opportunity to meet new people and be taught in a different place. In most centres, only a few learners travel to other sites to study their A level courses.

Professional learning

- 118 There is a general lack of professional learning opportunities that concentrate on A level teaching and subject specialism. There are few formally organised local and national networks of professional practice to support A level teaching. In a few

regional consortia and across many Welsh-medium providers there are working groups of practitioners who all teach the same A level, but this is not common practice across Wales and subject coverage is patchy. In most cases, any collaboration is informal and established through friendships.

- 119 Despite the relatively small number of specialist A level teachers, in general, schools and colleges do not work together on aspects such as joint professional development or sharing of resources. This is even the case when there is cooperation on the delivery of courses through partnerships. Competition for students has made schools and colleges reluctant to work together and therefore there are very few systems in place to facilitate co-operation. In the past, 14-19 funding arrangements enabled more collaboration between schools and colleges, though this tended to focus on the delivery of courses as opposed to shared professional development.

Case study 7: Coleg Cambria – professional learning

Coleg Cambria is a further education college offering a range of full and part-time courses over six sites in North East Wales. It has over 6,000 full-time and over 10,000 part-time learners. Around 1,000 of learners study A levels. It offers around 35 A level courses at two centres – Yale Sixth in Wrexham and Deeside Sixth in Connah's Quay. These two sixth form centres deliver tertiary provision in the area as most of the local secondary schools are for 11 to 16-year-olds.

The college devotes substantial time and resources to professional learning. A level teachers take part in an extensive range of training opportunities. The training covers a range of aspects which include teaching and learning, use of digital technology, pastoral issues and leadership training. Recent training on teaching and learning and digital technology included:

- A Level masterclass on effective revision strategies
- Effective literacy strategies for A level teaching
- Embedding Mathematics – practical approaches
- Formative Assessment Conference
- Motivating learners
- Questioning techniques
- Pace, stretch and challenge
- Planning effective learning
- Digital literacy
- Use of new technologies, including tablets

A level teachers have regular access to awarding body subject training. The college also supports teachers financially to undertake Masters qualifications.

There are regular opportunities for staff to share good practice and their professional learning experiences through team meetings. Staff also share good practice across subject disciplines and campuses via a range of 'Bring and Share' events and cross-site staff team days. In addition, there are internal standardisation and cross-marking events. Each summer there is

dedicated time for training and conferences and for teams to come together for reflection and planning. These opportunities involve all A level teachers.

There are professional networks in place with other further education colleges and with professional bodies such as the Royal Geographical Society, the Royal Society of Chemistry and the University of Law. Many subject areas have links with university departments and there are links with important regional employers including Chetwood (Financial Technology Services) and Theatr Clwyd.

College leaders plan the professional learning programme carefully to ensure that it is focused on quality improvement and delivers maximum value for money. Learning walks are aligned to the professional learning programme and help support evidence of impact and improved practice.

- 120 The main form of professional learning linked to A level teaching is focused on examination requirements and is delivered by the examination board. Most schools and colleges have prioritised allowing their staff to attend examination board courses on the new A level specifications, though the combined cost of attending the courses, travel and supply cover can be prohibitive.
- 121 Many centres have a few A level examiners across a range of subjects and a minority have chief examiners. This is a valuable professional learning experience for teachers which enriches their teaching and enhances their expertise.
- 122 There is general confusion among teachers and school and college leaders regarding the timely availability of resources and materials in all A level subjects and who has ultimate responsibility for this. Many have expressed concerns over the lateness of the availability of WJEC courses and materials to support their teaching such as examination specifications and specimen papers. This is particularly the case in subjects like religious studies, history, French and physical education and for Welsh-medium materials. There are also complaints about the sparsity of support materials and the vague nature of mark schemes in a few subjects. These issues are largely due to the rapid pace of change and the delays in the accreditation/approval system for A levels, but there is a general lack of understanding of these processes and the resulting impact on the preparation and publication of resources.
- 123 As a result of a lack of clear information, teachers and leaders are not fully aware of the differing responsibilities of Welsh Government, Qualifications Wales and WJEC with regards to A levels. For example, WJEC does not publish textbooks but does work with commercial publishers to produce textbooks to support their specifications. Although many teachers perceive delays affecting the publication of textbooks as a failing of the examination board, any delays are largely due to commercial issues from the publishers. As Wales now has its own A level specifications, which are only taught in Wales, the market for commercially produced resources is smaller than it once was.

124 In a majority of schools and a few colleges, expertise in teaching a subject to A level standard can be restricted to a few teachers, often those who are heads of department. In small schools there is a lack of opportunity for all teachers to teach A level and in many schools there is only one A level class in each subject. In a majority of cases, individual teachers teach certain aspects of the course or specific papers and this does not tend to change unless the specification changes or the head of department deems it appropriate. This can lead to problems when teachers are absent for long periods as none of the other teachers in the department have experience of teaching particular papers or aspects of the course. Therefore, the pool of teachers with A level expertise is relatively small, particularly in rural areas and in less popular subjects.

Recruitment and staffing

- 125 Many schools do not have difficulty in recruiting A level teachers in many subjects and the opportunity to teach at A level often attracts candidates. A very few schools require candidates to answer A level questions as part of their recruitment process. However, recruitment in subjects such as the sciences, mathematics, computing and ICT can be difficult, particularly in Welsh-medium settings and rural areas.
- 126 Many schools and colleges experience difficulty in finding suitably qualified supply staff to cover planned and unplanned teacher absences. This has become more challenging since the introduction of the new specifications at A level because supply teachers are not familiar with the new specifications and do not feel confident enough to teach them.
- 127 In many schools and colleges, A level lessons are not covered if a teacher is absent for short periods but work is provided for learners, often by email or a digital learning platform. In a few cases, this means that learners can experience days without teaching.

Resources and funding

- 128 In 2014, the Welsh Government asked local authorities to consider a consistent methodology for funding sixth forms, including A levels. Funding for schools is allocated initially to local authorities each financial year, and they then delegate it to schools. Although the Welsh Government wants a consistent methodology, the way local authorities allocate funding to schools for A levels and sixth forms varies across Wales and within local authorities from year to year. Some authorities fund pupil numbers, others fund courses, and others programmes of study. There are various reasons why funding formulas vary in this way. For example, in some rural areas, local authorities have chosen to fund per course because the geographical distances between centres and the sparsity of the population mean that minimum numbers would never be achieved and partnership delivery would be impractical. Funding formulas for colleges are different from those in schools. Colleges receive funding directly from the Welsh Government and it is allocated per academic year, whereas schools receive funding per financial year.
- 129 In schools and colleges, funding formulas often drive behaviours and have unintended consequences. For example, if a school is funded according to the

number of courses studied by each learner then some leaders encourage learners to take a high number of courses, whether this is appropriate for each individual or not. Similarly, leaders have been confused about the funding for the Welsh Baccalaureate, with some leaders making this qualification compulsory because they believed it to be linked to funding. In some cases and in some years this was the case, but not in others.

- 130 Over recent years, schools and colleges have been under increased pressure to ensure the financial viability of A level courses. The number of teaching hours given to A levels varies between seven and 10 hours a fortnight, though most centres allocate eight or nine hours a fortnight. Class sizes vary dramatically across centres, from just one learner to about 30 learners. Schools have been under additional pressure to ensure that sixth form funding does not subsidise the provision for younger pupils. This has led to providers seeking solutions such as securing minimum numbers in A level classes before allowing them to run, combining Year 12 and Year 13 classes, and cutting the number of teaching hours. These solutions may impact on provision or affect the breadth of choice.

Reporting and analysis of A level data

- 131 The fact that A level data is currently collected, reported and analysed differently in schools and colleges (as detailed in appendix 1) is confusing and makes it difficult for schools and colleges to analyse their own performance against that of others and for parents and learners to compare providers. The Welsh Government has recognised that the current performance indicators at post-16, in schools and colleges, are not fit for purpose and do not give a clear picture of performance. The new set of consistent measures, which are designed to address these shortcomings, are in the last stages of development.
- 132 There is data available regarding the percentage of learners gaining different grades across all A levels and in separate subjects across Wales. However, comparing school or college performance with national averages does not give sufficient consideration to contextual factors. Most schools and colleges have bought into commercially produced data reports which generally include value added data. This data gives an indication of how well learners have progressed from their starting points. However, not all centres use the same packages and it is a fairly recent development in a majority of centres. In addition, the data is not externally verified nor comprehensive as centres can select which learners to include in the data set and which to leave out, which has the potential for skewing the data and outcomes. Leaders are starting to make effective use of this data to set targets, monitor progress and analyse performance.
- 133 The Welsh Government are in the process of introducing their own value-added data for post-16 provision through the post-16 consistent measures. However, as it stands, there is no consistency across centres in terms of value added data, which makes it difficult for centres to know how well learners are progressing from their starting points compared with similar learners in other centres.
- 134 Subject level completion and success rates are available for each individual college along with corresponding national comparators. The majority of colleges use this information well to help evaluate outcomes accurately at course level and plan for improvements.

- 135 Examination boards provide valuable detailed data on individual learners' and centres' performance in each A level examination question. This data, known as 'item level data', provides a detailed picture of each individual and each class' strengths and weaknesses in terms of examination performance. It is used well in the majority of centres and provides particularly valuable information for class teachers and subject leaders. However, a minority of providers do not use this information well enough to identify weaknesses and plan for improvement.

Accountability

- 136 The background of significant reform, along with unreliable and limited data sets and a lack of consistent measures or value-added data across schools and colleges, has made it difficult for national bodies, school and college leaders and learners and parents to judge how well individual institutions are performing at post-16, including A level. It has also made it difficult to have a robust internal and external accountability system relating to A level performance. In schools, the main focus has been on key stage 4 outcomes, where there is more reliable data, and in colleges it has been on overall success rates and far less about A or AS levels. Consequently, there has been little emphasis on A level performance in the national 'accountability agenda' in Wales and this has been replicated by local authorities and regional consortia and within schools and colleges.
- 137 There has been an increased focus on A level provision in terms of external accountability from the Welsh Government, regional consortia and Estyn since September 2017 in particular, and Estyn increased its focus on A level provision in college inspections in 2016. This has been welcomed by many headteachers and college leaders. Many headteachers report that local authority challenge advisors now address sixth form outcomes and provision in their visits and reports, whereas this was not the case in the past. Many colleges have been paying for commercial value-added data packages for several years. In recent years, most local authorities have been buying into commercial packages to analyse A level performance in schools. Although it is too early to judge how well this information is used to support and challenge schools, it does indicate a renewed focus on this aspect.
- 138 Estyn secondary school inspection reports have always commented on outcomes for sixth form students and aspects of provision but the lack of consistent measures and reliable data has made more detailed analysis challenging. In addition, not all schools have sixth forms. Estyn inspections of colleges have also considered outcomes at A levels, and, since September 2016, have reported separately on A level provision. Since the introduction of new inspection arrangements in September 2017, Estyn has increased its focus on inspecting sixth form provision in secondary school and all-age school inspections.
- 139 Despite the relative sparsity of formal external accountability, a majority of schools and colleges have always experienced high levels of pressure around A level outcomes and provision. The most common sources of this pressure are parental interest, partnership quality assurance systems or competition from other schools or colleges.

140 The relative lack of challenge relating to A level outcomes has been mirrored by a lack of support. While there is a wide range of programmes and structures to support improvement at key stage 4 there are no national programmes, apart from the Seren network, and very few regional programmes to support improvement at post-16. There are a number of groups across Wales where heads of sixth forms meet to discuss relevant issues. Each regional consortium now has an officer dedicated to sixth form or post-16. However, a few of these appointments are very recent and the roles and responsibilities linked to these posts are not clear. The relationship between regional consortia and schools is well-established but that with colleges is not statutory and therefore it is unclear whether or not colleges will benefit from this role.

Appendix 1 – Data collection and analysis

School sixth form data

In schools, sixth form outcomes are reported in terms of:

- how many learners achieve the level 3 threshold (2 A levels or equivalent at grades A*-E)
- how many achieve 3 A levels or equivalent at grades A*-A
- how many achieve 3 A levels or equivalent at grades A*-C
- the average points score

There are limitations to these performance measures. The level 3 indicator is not particularly useful as it only includes 2 A level or equivalent grades at A*-E and the 3 A*-A measure is also a narrow measure. The 3 or more A levels or equivalent at A*-C indicator has been calculated differently from year to year and therefore this data is unreliable. There is a general lack of clarity among secondary school leaders around the performance indicators. They are unsure about which qualifications count and which do not, the weighting given to different qualifications and how the data is calculated. This is largely due to the fact that there are no clear guidelines on how the performance measures are calculated.

Sixth form data was added to the Welsh Government's All Wales Core Data Sets (AWCDS) for schools in 2012. The sixth form performance measures include A levels and other qualifications which have equivalent value, such as the Welsh Baccalaureate and vocational qualifications including BTEC. In 2007 the Welsh Baccalaureate was introduced as a sixth form qualification. At advanced level, this was equivalent to one A level at grade A. The qualification was reformed following recommendations from the 2012 Review of Qualifications and the new Welsh Baccalaureate has been taught since September 2015. The Advanced Skills Challenge Certificate element of the new baccalaureate is graded A*-E and has an equivalent value to the same grades at A level. BTECs and other vocational qualifications also have equivalent values. The fact that a range of qualifications that are very different from one another in content and assessment contributes to performance measures makes it difficult to gain a clear picture of A level only performance. In addition, AS level performance is not reported at all.

Performance measures in school sixth forms focus on learners who are aged 17 in the September of each academic year. This means that if a learner is re-sitting Year 12 and therefore taking AS and not A level exams their results are included in the outcomes for A levels because they are aged 17 in September. However, when learners who re-sat Year 12 take their A levels their results are not included because they are aged 18 in September. The data is based on learners who complete courses, but does not take into account those who started courses but did not finish them.

The Welsh Government publishes average national figures for the sixth form performance measures. These provide a benchmark of sorts for schools, but data sets that take account of a range of contextual factors, which would provide a more meaningful point of comparison for schools, are not currently available. The WJEC publishes national average grade attainment figures for separate subjects.

The Welsh Government's All Wales Core Data Set compares each school's performance against a group of nine or ten other schools which have broadly similar contexts, known as the 'family of schools'. All schools with a sixth form are in a family where four or five of the other schools in the family also have a sixth form, although the size of each sixth form can vary greatly and the number of schools with which they can compare themselves is small.

Further education data

In the further education sector, providers have been using LLWR (Lifelong Learning Wales Record) data reports. In colleges, performance measures are based on learners who start, and complete, courses. Outcomes in colleges are reported in terms of:

- 'completion rates' (how many learners who start AS and A level courses stay until the end of the academic year)
- 'success rates' (how many learners who start an A level course successfully complete them and achieve grades A*-E)

College data sets are more accurate in terms of taking account of those who start and complete courses but are much more limited in scope than those in schools.

National comparators for these performance measures, based upon average performance across Wales are available for colleges to use to compare their performance with the sector in Wales. Each college is able to view their success rate ranking among the other ten colleges in Wales that offer A level provision. However, these established performance measures reflect only whether learners attain, fail or withdraw from their courses. They do not reflect the strength of grade attainment or combined attainment in more than one A level. They also do not reflect the proportion of learners that continues from AS to A level. Neither do they capture the proportion of learners withdrawing within the first eight weeks of their studies.

As a result of the performance measures, historically, there has been less of a focus in colleges on grades and more emphasis on completion. Conversely, schools have focused on grades and have not placed much emphasis on completion.

The way data is collected and analysed differs between the LLWR and AWCDS reports. This has meant that comparing outcomes for A levels across schools and colleges has not been possible.

Developing a joint approach to data in schools and colleges

In 2016, following a flatlining in A level results at A*-A, A*-C and A*-E over three years, the Welsh Government's two departments, the Department of Education and the Skills, Higher Education, and Lifelong Learning, focused their work more closely on A level outcomes. This work has involved working with regional consortia, colleges, reviewing performance measures and holding two A level summit meetings.

In June 2014 Welsh Government announced that it would be introducing a set of consistent measures across all post-16 providers, and made the following statement in February 2016 (Welsh Government, 2016, p.1):

The current measures for learner outcomes in FE and sixth forms are entirely separate:

- *In FE, the main measure is 'learning activity success' which is based on all terminated learning activities, and therefore combines learner completion and attainment but without taking any account of grades or qualification points scores.*
- *In sixth forms, measures are based only on pupils who are entered for examinations; they therefore do not include retention/completion, but do take account of grades and points scores.*

This lack of consistency means that colleges and schools cannot be held accountable for outcomes in the same way, or compared on a 'level playing field', even where learners are doing the same qualifications in different settings. It also means that learners cannot make an informed choice about studying at school or college.

In order to address these issues, the Welsh Government have introduced a set of post-16 consistent measures across schools and colleges (Welsh Government, 2018e). The new measures consist of the following:

- learner achievement – which shows whether learners stayed until the end of their courses and achieved their qualification aim
- post-16 value-added – which shows the progress learners made based on their previous attainment
- learner destinations – which shows whether, after leaving learning, learners successfully progressed into further learning or employment

This suite of measures is in the final stages of development and the first statistical release of experimental data for the three new measures (which does not include all providers) was published in September 2018 (Welsh Government 2018c, 2018d). Unpublished achievement data has been issued to schools and colleges, though there have been issues with the accuracy and reliability of the data provided by schools and colleges. The new post-16 value-added data set will provide information on how well learners achieve in relation to their prior attainment. This information has not been previously available through the All Wales Core Data Set or LLWR. Following a procurement exercise, Welsh Government contracted Fischer Family Trust Education Ltd to develop, pilot and implement a Welsh post-16 value added model, as part of the new consistent performance measures. This model was piloted in 2016-2017 and a first full set of value added reports was issued to schools and colleges in autumn 2017. These reports are unpublished and are still in development. The learner destinations data is also in development, with the first release of experimental data for learner destinations published in September 2018 (Welsh Government, 2018d).

Evidence base

The findings and recommendations in this report draw on:

- evidence from the inspection of all secondary schools and further education colleges since 2010
- visits to 20 secondary schools and three further education colleges
- evidence gathered from focused activities during seven core secondary school inspections in Spring 2018 and four core further education college inspections since September 2016:
 - Aberdare Community School, Rhondda Cynon Taf
 - Bishop of Llandaff Church in Wales High School, Cardiff
 - Bishop Vaughan School, Swansea
 - Croesyceiliog School, Torfaen
 - Lewis School Pengam, Caerphilly
 - Olchfa School, Swansea
 - St Joseph's RC High School, Newport
 - Grŵp Llandrillo Menai
 - The College, Merthyr Tydfil
 - Coleg y Cymoedd
 - Gower College Swansea
- interviews with WJEC officers
- interviews with Qualifications Wales officers
- examination outcomes at A and AS level
- a review of relevant literature including Welsh Government policies and updates, research papers, evaluations of government programmes.
- Analysis of data from the following sources:
 - The Welsh Government's All Wales Core Data Sets (AWCDS) for sixth forms
 - Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR) data
 - Joint Council for Qualifications data
 - Wales Examinations Database (WED)
 - Pupil Level Annual Schools Census (PLASC)

Schools and colleges were selected following an analysis of data, consideration of inspection findings and feedback from HMI. The sample is as diverse as possible, based on a proportionate number of English-medium and Welsh-medium schools, geographical location and socio economic factors.

The visits involved:

- interviews with senior leaders and sixth form/A level leaders
- lesson observations to evaluate quality of teaching and learning in a wide variety of subjects
- meetings with learners to discuss their work and to gather their views on the quality of provision in their school or college
- scrutiny of learners' work
- scrutiny of school or college documents, including the most recent school, college and departmental self-evaluation reports and improvement plans

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- Crickhowell High School, Powys
- Eirias High School, Conwy
- Hawthorn High School, Rhondda Cynon Taf
- Lewis Girls' Comprehensive School, Caerphilly
- Llantwit Major School, The Vale of Glamorgan
- Maesteg Comprehensive School, Bridgend
- Monmouth Comprehensive School, Monmouthshire
- Prestatyn High School, Denbighshire
- Stanwell School, The Vale of Glamorgan
- St. Albans R.C. High School, Torfaen
- St David's College, Cardiff
- Ysgol Bro Teifi, Ceredigion
- Ysgol Brynrefail, Gwynedd
- Ysgol Y Creuddyn, Conwy
- Ysgol Dyffryn Conwy, Conwy
- Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Glantaf, Cardiff
- Ysgol Gyfun Y Strade, Carmarthenshire
- Ysgol Maes Garmon, Flintshire

Glossary

Average points score	Each AS, A level and Welsh Bacallaureate grade is equivalent to a specific number of points. The total number of points for each learner in a centre is added up and divided by the number of learners to give the average points score.
AWCDS	The All Wales Core Data Sets
BTEC	BTECs are vocational qualifications offered at a range of levels. BTEC Nationals are available from level 3 and have a similar 'points value' to A levels.
Completion rates	How many learners who start AS and A level courses stay until the end of the academic year
GCE A levels	General Certificate of Education Advanced Levels
GCE AS levels	General Certificate of Education Advanced Subsidiary Levels
LLWR	Lifelong Learning Wales Record
Level 2 threshold including English or Welsh and mathematics	Five GCSEs or equivalent qualifications at grades A*-C, including English or Welsh and mathematics
Level 3 threshold	Two A levels or equivalent qualifications at grades A*-E
Success rates	The proportion of A level learning activities that were successfully completed and attained at grades A*-E
UCAS	The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) is a UK-based organisation whose main role is to operate the application process for British universities.
Value-added data	Value-added data is used to estimate how much of a positive (or negative) effect teaching and provision has had on individual learners by showing how much progress they have made from their starting points, based on prior attainment and other contextual factors. For example, if a learner is predicted to achieve a C grade at GCSE but achieves an A grade then the value-added for that learner is 2 grades.

Numbers – quantities and proportions

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

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