

CABINET STATEMENT

Written Statement: Update on General Qualifications in 2021

Kirsty Williams, Education Minister

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The pandemic continues to present serious challenges and concerns in relation to education and wellbeing. For learners in exam years, I understand that this anxiety is particularly acute.

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In November, I stated my intention that exams would be cancelled due to the significant disruption already experienced by learners. The proposals we later presented were designed to support learner wellbeing and progression, be responsive to future disruption, and were broadly well received by the education community.

Since then, the public health crisis has worsened. Unless the rates of community transmission reduce significantly by 29 January, schools and colleges will continue remote learning for most students until the February half term. As a result we have revisited our proposals for qualifications, to reflect the impact of this on learner wellbeing and confidence.

The Design and Delivery Advisory Group (DDAG) have since reconvened and have developed revised proposals in this new context. This includes considering the recommendations of the final report of the independent review of qualifications led by Louise Casella, and which will be published on Friday 22 January.

I have now received and considered the amended DDAG proposals and accepted them as my policy on qualifications in 2021. These are summarised below.

First, it is my intention that learners undertaking GCSE, AS and A levels approved by Qualifications Wales will have their qualifications awarded through a Centre-Determined Grade model.

This means that grades will be determined by their school or college based on an assessment of the learner's work.

Schools and colleges will be able to use a range of evidence to determine the grades to be awarded to their learners, including Non-Examination Assessment elements, mock-exams, and classwork. In addition, the WJEC will offer a set of adapted past papers which can enable schools to continue to assess learning within their teaching plans, providing extra support for teachers and learners.

Qualifications Wales will work with WJEC, supported by the DDAG, to provide an assessment framework to support schools and colleges in developing their assessment plans, which should demonstrate sufficient coverage of key concepts to allow learners to progress, and detail for how the centre has determined a learner's grade. These assessment plans will be quality assured by WJEC.

Second, recognising the challenges posed by the ongoing disruption and remote learning, the deadlines and controls around non-exam assessment are being removed and it will not be moderated by the WJEC.

However where possible we would continue to encourage schools and colleges to support learners to undertake some of their Non-Examination Assessment to continue to build learning and skills. Building knowledge and skills, and covering core concepts to support progression, remains a priority and should continue to be a focus, supported by our guidance and approach to distance learning as appropriate.

Third, alongside the Assessment Framework, WJEC will publish guidance to support schools and colleges to develop internal quality assurance processes and the Design and Delivery Group will consider an approach to promote consistency across Wales.

Once quality assurance has been completed at the centre, the grade will be submitted to WJEC. There will be no intervening action on the grades. Learners will appeal to their school or college if they are unhappy with their grade, and to WJEC if they are unhappy with the process.

I have asked the Design and Delivery Advisory Group to support Qualifications Wales and WJEC in developing and setting out both the Assessment Framework and the quality assurance process. Alongside the framework and guidance, there will be training for practitioners so that processes are applied consistently, equitably, and fairly.

Where learners in Year 10 are due to complete a qualification this year then this approach will apply, but it won't apply to learners due to take individual units of assessment.

Learners in Year 12 will be awarded an AS grade that is Centre Determined. This will recognise the hard work and learning that they have undertaken this year, provide for progression into the A-level course of study, and support UCAS applications, but will not contribute to the final A level award in 2022.

I have also asked the Design and Delivery Group to consider arrangements for private candidates as a priority: we must ensure there is a clear option for them to support their progression too. I am grateful to the DDAG for their continued commitment and support as the approach to qualifications is developed.

This Centre Determined Grade approach puts trust in teachers' and lecturers' commitment to prioritise teaching and learning in the time available, and their knowledge of the quality of their learners' work.

We have sought to make the grading approach as clear as possible in the circumstances, while remaining as simple as possible. Teaching the core content and aspects of each course remains my absolute priority for learners in exam years, so they are supported to progress with certainty into their next steps, and with confidence in the grades they've been awarded.

We are working with higher education institutions to look at how they can support learners in Wales through this transition, and can provide a bridge into university courses. Initial engagement and commitment from our universities have been very positive.

Equally, we will explore with further education institutions and schools how they can support those learners currently in years 10, 11 and 12, as they move to the new academic year. It is vital that the wider education sector continues to come together to support our learners.

As we continue to work at pace to develop these proposals, I encourage learners, teachers and lecturers to continue their focus on learning in the core areas of their courses in the coming weeks. It is this learning, and the development of associated skills and knowledge, which will continue to open doors for learners in the future, even after the qualification itself has been awarded.

I want to thank each and every learner and education professional for their ongoing flexibility and adaptability in responding to the situation in which we find ourselves.

I will be making an oral statement to the Senedd on 26 January, providing an opportunity to update Members further and to respond to questions.

Design and Delivery Advisory Group

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