

Petition P-05-1025 – “Ensure fairness for students in 2021” National Education Union Cymru

Background

NEU Cymru welcomes that the Petitions Committee are considering our petition (P-05-1025) on the 13th October and welcomes the opportunity to provide information to the Committee. We would be happy to give evidence to the Petitions Committee in person.

We think it would be remiss of us to comment on the attached document, without first highlighting that the impact on young people of the situation around exams this summer cannot be underestimated, and it is very important for our members that the situation in 2021 is hugely different. Grades need to reflect a learner’s achievements, not their background or the school they attended. The Minister’s letter is welcome, and highlights the actions Welsh Government are taking, though we still have some concerns, which we have set out below.

We would highlight that whilst the Senedd is currently considering the Curriculum and Assessment Bill, there is an opportunity to think now about how we measure learner performance for next year. This year has shown us we can’t rely on exams taking place next year, and need to put a system in place for moderated teacher assessment.

We have attempted to respond to your questions below:

*** What are your thoughts on the attached document?**

We welcome the measures which the Education Minister has highlighted in her letter. Our specific comments are set out below.

Independent Review

With regards to the Independent Review this is welcome. We especially welcome:

- reviewing what assessment methods are appropriate/fair for 2021
- considering whether there is “a role for a greater teacher and centre assessment contribution, which is proportionate to the need to prioritise teaching and learning time”
- looking at what they can learn from approaches taken to assessment and awarding of qualifications internationally

However, we would highlight the review may not give schools enough time to make adjustments for summer 2021. Any changes to be

implemented from January would leave schools no more than the equivalent of three months (given half term and Easter holidays) before the current scheduled exam season starts.

With regards to our second bullet point above, in our response to Qualifications Wales' consultation in April on the arrangements for the summer 2020 exam series, our response to Question 6 was:

“We have serious concerns about the use of statistical standardisation models in relation to the setting of grade boundaries for GCSE and would seek reassurance about the robustness of the model to be applied. It must be noted that the academic ability of different cohort years in schools can vary considerably and that this must be considered when awarding the grades. This could mean that the current year 11 cohort might have considerably different estimated grades than those from the previous year. Failure to account for this could put the 2020 cohort of pupils at a disadvantage. Variation at centre level also happens in many years for reasons outside a centre or student's control and these factors will not be accounted for simply by considering historical centre outcomes. Education professionals know their students better than any historical data and therefore greater weight should be placed on the judgements of professionals.”

However, Qualifications Wales (QW) decision was as follows:

“Having considered all the options available to us, and to ensure that grades being awarded, are as fair as possible given the extraordinary circumstances of this summer, we have decided that it would not be appropriate to allow centres to provide qualitative evidence to set out any exceptional circumstances they feel should be considered.”

Also QW has said:

“There is a significant risk that if we give more weight to centre assessment grades to seek to mitigate these shortcomings, we will create a degree of unfairness for all centres and their learners.”¹

The decision to revert to centre assessment grades, rather than award the standardised grades, shows that more emphasis should be placed

¹ <https://www.qualificationswales.org/media/6181/arrangements-for-summer-2020-exam-series-decisions-taken-following-consultation.pdf> (Response to Aim 3 – pages 14 - 18)

on the judgements of education professionals rather than a standardisation model.

Duty

We also note the duty associated with powers under the Covid Act, relating to Curriculum and assessment. We welcome that duties have been changed for September to 'reasonable endeavours'.² We would be concerned that the level of disruptions in schools associated with Covid-19 means there will be ongoing disruption to learning this school year, which must be reflected in curriculum content and exams.

Minister's letter

Whilst we believe the Minister's letter answers many of our members' concerns, there are still some issues which need addressing.

With regard to our second bullet point in our Petition, we would highlight that exams may need to be cancelled again next year:

- Working with educators and trade unions to develop a Welsh system of moderated centre assessed grades in case there is further disruption to exams next summer.

Whilst it is welcome that there is work underway, we understand that the Minister is focusing on exams going ahead next year. It would be our belief that this needs to operate alongside a plan for moderated centre assessed grades.

We believe that more attention also needs to be given to our third ask: “• Using this opportunity to develop a robust system which ensures young people are rewarded for their achievements and not held back due to their background.”

We know that the Curriculum and Assessment Bill is currently at Stage 1, and have given evidence to the Children, Young People and Education Committee. Whilst we support this Bill in principle, we remain concerned that there needs to be an open and honest debate about assessment, especially the methodology used in moderation of exams.

Our members know that exams cannot be compared year-on-year. And yet it is often the case that exams are used as part of an accountability regime. More public engagement is needed to ensure that they understand the exams system is essentially a quota system, which allows a certain number of students to gain certain grades. Grade

² <https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s104872/CLA5-25-20%20Paper%2031.pdf>

boundaries move every year. We believe this needs to be fully understood before we can seriously begin to look at what the exams system looks like in the future.

* **Do you have further questions in response?**

We recognise that WJEC and QW have worked to reduce content across the exam suite³. However, we would highlight that there is a need for the WJEC to look again at GCSE and A level exams and ensure that each and every one has reduced curriculum content. We do not, for example, understand how you can reduce the content of A level French, but not any of the English exams?⁴ Young people will need acknowledgement that they have missed time in school regardless of the subject they are studying.

We would welcome that WJEC has been asked to adapt exams for next year to “seek to ensure learners are not disadvantaged”. However, we would take issue with the following two principles, as we do not feel they are in-keeping with the other principles, and we believe will result in more unfairness:

“3. WJEC must seek to ensure that qualification content, in general, is not reduced; however, content can be restructured so it can reasonably be streamlined, such as in relation to optional units.

4. WJEC must seek to ensure that the manageability of assessment is maximised, where this will allow for an increase in teaching time in order to minimise the impact on outcomes.”⁵

Again, we would highlight that students have had a significantly difficult time in the past few months, and everything must now be done to ensure they are not disadvantaged. If content isn't being reduced, the degree of optionality in the examination papers should be increased.

We would also be concerned that the number of young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET⁶) is high in Wales. We would be concerned that the current situation with Covid-19 and uncertainty around exams may make this situation worse. We believe that raising the compulsory school age to 18 should be considered.

Vocational Qualifications

³ <https://www.wjec.co.uk/home/summer-2021-adaptations/>

⁴ <https://www.wjec.co.uk/media/gvldboy/wjec-gce-adaptations-booklet-e-01-09-20.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.wjec.co.uk/media/2blh1b3n/gcse-adaptations-booklet-public-website-e-230920.pdf>

⁶ <https://gov.wales/young-people-not-education-employment-or-training-neet-april-2019-march-2020-html>

Whilst we know Wales doesn't have control over the vast majority of vocational qualifications, they are none-the-less undertaken by students here in Wales. We have urged Welsh Government to work with colleagues across the border, colleges, accrediting bodies and Qualifications Wales, as appropriate, to ensure that the situation doesn't happen again next year. Fitness to practice qualifications must be appropriately amended to ensure that students enrolled on these courses are able to complete them in a safe way – including consideration on length of placements. Decisions and information is needed quickly on this, to ensure settings have the ability to plan and deliver any changes needed.

*** Is there anything additional that you would like the Committee to know at this stage, either in response to this document or as an update to the Committee?**

NEU Cymru has raised the issues highlighted in our petition with Welsh Government and is represented on the WJEC Wales Advisory Group; the WG reference group on qualifications; and Teaching Unions and Representative Organisations (TURO) group.