

National Assembly for Wales

Children, Young People and Education Committee

Pre Legislative scrutiny of the Qualification (Wales) Bill

Evidence from : Huw Evans

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Presentation to the children, Young People and Education Committee from ‘Qualifications Wales’

Introduction

Recommendations from the Review of Qualifications, of which I was Chair, included the establishment of ‘Qualification Wales’; a new independent qualifications body for Wales. I was subsequently invited by the Minister to Chair an independent Advisory Board to establish ‘Qualification Wales’. This role was to operate alongside a clear communication strategy and engagement process to disseminate the qualification reform programme in Wales.

The Advisory Board, supported by the Welsh Government Transition team, have worked to a demanding timescale. This has involved advising on the nature of the organisation, its functions and its operational structure including the future relationship with the Welsh Government.

The views I express are shaped by my ongoing exposure to diverse stakeholder groups and the considered opinion and advice of the Advisory Board. To this is added the large body of qualification based evidence that has been collated over the period of review.

Outlining the vision

‘Qualification Wales’ will be the key driver for delivering an innovative, flexible and rigorous approach to qualifications in Wales. However it must be seen in parallel to the evolving qualification reforms which are presently ongoing.

The need for such a national body has been clearly articulated from the research and evidence undertaken. In order to realise the opportunities inherent in a devolved educational system, there is a need to improve:

- alignment with the needs of industry
- attainment of young people including standards of literacy and numeracy
- higher level skills for progression to higher education.

These national priorities can only be realised by creating a focus for such change, improving transparency and injecting a high level of accountability within an independent framework.

‘Qualification Wales’ will have the remit for creating a qualification system that is both valued and understood not only by the people of Wales but worldwide.

Does the proposed vision and remit for Qualifications Wales present an effective organisational model?

The Review of Qualifications clearly outlined the need for Wales to take control of its qualifications and to establish a new national body, ‘Qualifications Wales’, to undertake regulatory, quality assurance and awarding functions. It also envisaged that the longer term aim would be to develop a body similar in operation to the SQA (Scottish Qualifications Authority) body as a potential model for future development.

The vision required a potential merger with the WJEC, the dominant awarding body for general qualifications operational in Wales. This would have enabled both the awarding function and the regulatory function to come together in a cost effective manner, minimising the start-up costs for ‘Qualification Wales’. Early discussions revealed the clear determination of the WJEC to retain its independence and identified a philosophical divide, which allied to the potential for legal challenge, made the initial vision very difficult to achieve. This situation was reluctantly accepted by the Advisory Board in the interests of a smooth transition.

The Advisory Board are committed to a single qualifications body and feel assured that the proposed legislation will establish ‘Qualifications Wales’ with responsibility for both the regulation of awarding bodies and the quality assurance of qualifications in Wales. Practical and risk based considerations have suggested the need for an incremental approach to change whilst retaining the long term vision of a single qualifications body.

In the first instance, ‘Qualifications Wales’ will not be a fully-fledged awarding body but will take responsibility for the design, development and awarding of its own suite of qualifications by commissioning one or more awarding bodies to perform these functions on its behalf. Initially these commissioned qualifications are likely to be GCSEs, A levels and the Welsh Baccalaureate. Other qualifications will be added over time.

Most vocational qualifications will continue to be developed and delivered as they are now by a range of awarding bodies. ‘Qualifications Wales’ will introduce new gatekeeping procedures to ensure that qualifications are fit for

purpose and meet the needs of Wales. New stakeholder arrangements will be introduced based on new Advisory Groups to build in currency and relevance. It is also envisaged that qualifications that form part of the apprenticeship experience should also be integral to the regulatory/quality assurance work of 'Qualifications Wales' to provide parity and standardisation.

'Qualifications Wales' will not only become the single expert authority on qualifications in Wales developing policy, undertaking research, providing support where required but will become the main source of data on qualifications. When established, one of its key objectives will be to establish credibility and trust in the operation of qualifications in Wales. It will develop new ways of working based on transparency, engagement and on-going dialogue with key stakeholders. Where justifiable, 'Qualification Wales' will seek to prioritise Welsh medium and bilingual provision in both academic and vocational provision.

Independence is seen as integral to the future success of the organisation and the integrity of the examinations system in Wales. Its Board and Chair will be appointed via recognised public appointment procedures and will be expected to operate as a high performing expert Board. It is envisaged that the Advisory Board will continue to provide a 'steer' to March 2015 when the 'Shadow Board' becomes operational. It is also proposed that that the governance structure will include an influential and representative stakeholder group to advise the Board.

In this context, the early appointment of the CEO designate is seen as essential to provide the continuity and strategic direction required in establishing and overseeing the transitional functions necessary to establish an effective independent body. Organisationally, this will require the transfer of a significant number of staff from the Qualifications division of the Welsh Government and the establishment of the appropriate infrastructure including corporate services.

'Qualifications Wales' will be accountable to the Welsh Ministers and the National Assembly for Wales for its expenditure and the implementation of its qualifications functions.

What good practice can be adopted from other countries on separating the roles of exam regulator and awarding organisation within one body?

Visits and studies have been undertaken to investigate the qualifications systems in other countries including Scotland, Republic of Ireland and Denmark. What was clear in all of these visits is that there is no one universal system that can be adopted but there were areas of good practice that Wales could draw on. Each country has evolved its own qualifications system in response to a particular

need, its history and location. The size of the country and the complexity of its economy are also influencing factors as each country attempted to tackle over complexity in the examinations system and drive rigour and standards as a clear national target.

The Scottish Qualifications Authority, SQA is a single national body for qualifications which combines two distinct roles into one. The larger part of SQA fulfils the awarding function for the qualifications taken by learners in maintained schools in Scotland and interacts directly, as a professional independent body, with the Scottish Government which provides core funding (as the Welsh Government will provide funding to ‘Qualifications Wales’).

The school-based examinations are not regulated by the regulatory or, as it is known, the ‘accreditation’ arm of SQA: that arm is concerned with the qualifications offered by other bodies. So, in the case of Scotland, its schools-based qualifications are not in fact regulated – they are simply, and effectively, designed, delivered and awarded by SQA as a national body with strong quality assurance systems. Welsh Government officials who spent some days with SQA officials last year, were impressed both by the strength of the quality assurance processes and by the extent to which SQA engaged continuously with teachers across Scotland at all stages of the qualification life cycle.

A fact-finding visit to the Republic of Ireland learned that a new single qualifications body had been established. The Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) however was focused almost entirely on vocational qualifications. The schools-based qualifications involved two other qualifications bodies – the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the State Examinations Council (SEC).

The role of NCCA and the SEC bears some similarity to the current proposals for Qualifications Wales in that NCCA is responsible for determining the content and nature of assessment of the schools based qualifications (as Qualifications Wales will be) while SEC delivers and administers the examinations as determined by NCCA. Parallels could be drawn between the potential future relationship between Qualifications Wales and the WJEC (and possibly other awarding bodies).

Several interesting lessons have been learned from Ireland: the national sense of ownership of the single suite of qualifications on offer – with all learners across Ireland taking the same examination for each subject and the extent to which Ireland relates to European initiatives such as credit and qualifications frameworks.

All of the countries visited placed a high value on their qualifications system. There was also a high level of trust with built in quality assurance as opposed to regulatory powers. Over reliance on regulation is seen as a UK/England approach to managing complexity and variable standards within the qualifications market. Historically, Wales has been part of this process as it has been so closely aligned.

In all the countries visited there was far greater alignment to the European qualification systems and the use of the European Qualification frameworks. This approach may well provide new direction for opportunities for ‘Qualifications Wales’.

Will the relationships between Qualifications Wales (and awarding organisations including the WJEC in the short term) and the Welsh Government work effectively?

Clearly the Chief Executive for ‘Qualifications Wales’, the Chair and the Board, once appointed, will have a key responsibility for ensuring that relationships with the Welsh Government (and with the National Assembly) and with all awarding bodies, including the WJEC, are effective.

There are a number of mechanisms by which such relationships will be supported and these include:

- the development of effective legislation which clearly sets out the respective duties and powers of the Welsh Government and Qualifications Wales;
- the establishment of an effective sponsorship unit to manage relationships between the Welsh Government and Qualifications Wales;
- the implementation of an effective organisational structure which supports core functions;
- regular dialogue between the Welsh Ministers and Qualifications Wales;
- full and informative reporting to the National Assembly by Qualifications Wales;
- the development of dual controls of a contractual relationship between Qualifications Wales and awarding bodies to design, develop and deliver the Wales-specific suite of qualifications and of the regulatory and quality assurance controls over the awarding bodies and the qualifications awarding process;

- the development of an effective communication strategy involving all stakeholders.

What will be the impact of Qualifications Wales on the accreditation of vocational qualifications (including apprenticeships)?

‘Qualifications Wales’ will have responsibility (as the Welsh Ministers currently do) for the approval of vocational qualifications in Wales – particularly where they are approved as eligible for use on publicly funded programmes of education and training.

‘Qualifications Wales’ will have responsibility for the regulation of awarding bodies offering these qualifications and for the quality assurance of the qualifications themselves – adopting a risk based approach to regulation.

It will be essential that ‘Qualifications Wales’ liaises extensively with employers and sectors to ensure that those qualifications deemed to be fit for purpose for use in Wales are confirmed to meet the needs of employers – that the skills and knowledge required are valid and current, that the assessment methodology is appropriate and that progression routes into employment are clear. The new Advisory Boards are seen as being the effective sector based interface.

Discussions are still underway about the exact nature of ‘Qualifications Wales’ future responsibilities in relation to apprenticeships but it seems sensible that ‘Qualifications Wales’ should have a responsibility for expressing a view on the appropriateness of the qualifications selected for use in apprenticeships. These qualifications must have sector credibility and develop to the same rigorous standards as any other qualifications made available for study in Wales.

Conclusion

In the first instance it is expected that Qualifications Wales will be established as an independent body by summer 2015. The new body will drive the qualification system for Wales providing qualifications that are fit for purpose and delivered in an efficient manner. It will assume responsibility for the regulation and quality assurance of qualifications delivered in Wales in a non-degree context. By summer 2017, the recommendations proposed in the Review of Qualifications will, in the main, be implemented and be the responsibility of ‘Qualification Wales’.

The Body will acquire a commissioning responsibility for qualifications resulting in a redefined relationship with awarding bodies. This will enable it to

build confidence and trust in its operations and meet the needs of young people and the Welsh economy.

It will develop the functions associated with becoming the national authority on qualifications and will demonstrate innovation and high performance practices leading to robust high quality qualifications.

All the engagement undertaken to date via schools, universities, employers and other stakeholders all indicate clear support for the direction of travel and the manner in which it has been undertaken. This must continue and must include the development of a more responsive support infrastructure for the provider network including schools, colleges and work based providers.

As stated earlier, the Advisory Board members retain a clear long-term vision for 'Qualification Wales' to become the awarding body for the majority of qualifications undertaken. This it seeks to achieve in an incremental manner, building on strengths and responding effectively to the needs of young people in Wales.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank colleagues from the Advisory Board and the Welsh Government for continued support during this period of implementation.

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Chair of the Qualifications Wales Advisory Board