



**Senedd Cymru:  
Children, Young People and Education  
Committee**

**Summer 2020 qualification results**

17 August 2020

## 1. Introduction

1.1 ColegauCymru welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Senedd’s Children, Young People and Education Committee’s call for evidence on exam results in summer 2020.

1.2 ColegauCymru is a post-compulsory education charity; we promote the public benefit of post compulsory education and learning. We also convene the Further Education (FE) Principals’ Forum, which represents Further Education colleges and FE institutions (FEIs) in Wales. ColegauCymru also undertakes research, policy development and provides practical support to FE colleges in Wales, including on work-based learning (WBL) which is a key part of FE college activity.

1.3 ColegauCymru acknowledges the difficulties of assessing the summer 2020 cohort of learners in the absence of the usual examination and assessment arrangements. The challenges of finding a method that was not starkly out of keeping with previous trends, enables confidence in qualifications awarded this year and that is fair to learners and the staff who have supported them is not confined to one country or one government. Wales, Scotland, England and Northern Ireland all struggled with this issue and no-one set out to build a system that was not fit for purpose or that was deliberately unfair. What matters now is how we address the injustices that have arisen as a result of this year’s system, minimise the negative consequences, including the mental health impact on learners, and learn lessons for the future.

1.4 In this light, ColegauCymru welcomes the Education Minister’s announcement on 17 August 2020 that Centre Assessed Grades (CAGs) will now be used for summer 2020 examination results. This is not a solution without problems but is likely to be the best available that minimises the impact and stress on learners and staff under the circumstances.

## 2. The picture in numbers *prior to move to CAGs*

**AS and A Level 2015-2019: Number of qualifications taken:**

	AS	A Level
<b>2020</b>	45,435	30,450
<b>2019</b>	39,645	31,485
<b>2018</b>	42,915	32,445
<b>2017</b>	46,130	33,295
<b>2016</b>	49,145	35,535
<b>2015</b>	52,770	36,035

### Headline figures 2020 – A Level:

- 29.9% achieved A\*- A, up 2.9% on previous year
- 98.6% achieved A\*- E, up 1% on previous year

### Cumulative Grades Awarded

	A*	A*-A	A*-E
2020	3,100	9,110	30,030

### Difference between Centre Assessed Grades (CAGs) and grades actually awarded: A Level

	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
Grades	15	165	1,555	11,110	16,225	1,225	25	5
Percentage	-	0.5	5.1	36.7	53.5	4	0.1	-

### Headline Figures 2020 – AS Level:

- A - 22.2%, up 1.9% on previous year
- A-E - 91.4%, up 1.4% on previous year

### Cumulative Grades Awarded:

	A	A-E	Number Sat
2020	10,070	41,540	45,435

### Final AS Grades in relation to CAGs

	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2
Grades	35	765	4120	14,340	24,545	1030	25
Percentage	0.1	1.7	9.2	32	54.7	2.3	0.1

All the above data is from: [Overview of AS, A level and Advanced Skills Challenge Certificate results in Wales – Summer 2020](#)

Although overall grade analysis was better than historical trend, this trend was not reflected across all centres where this would have been a reasonable expectation, for example, Coleg Meirion Dwyfor.

### **3. Process of awarding grades, including Centre Assessment Grades (CAGs) element**

3.1 Following the cancellation of the summer 2020 exam series, the FE sector in Wales worked with Qualifications Wales, WJEC and other awarding bodies (including a number of vocational awarding bodies) and responded to the relevant consultations, including those from Ofqual, where relevant. Colleges meticulously followed both the guidance set and their own robust internal processes to ensure the fair and accurate grading of qualifications. The WJEC have recognised the validity of these professional judgements: “The centre assessment grade is a professional judgement, based on a broad range of objective evidence, of the most likely grade a learner would have achieved if they had sat the exams.”<sup>1</sup>

3.2 In response to the Qualifications Wales consultation on the summer 2020 exam series, ColegauCymru and individual colleges expressed some reservations about ensuring that outcomes for summer 2020 should be broadly similar to those in previous years, highlighting some of the potential problems with this. These comments were made by a number of different respondents to the consultation and are reflected in the Qualifications Wales published response to the consultation.<sup>2</sup> While we accept that Qualifications Wales consulted the education sector and the wider public on their proposals, this in itself did not mean that the process chosen could not therefore be flawed.

3.3 In addition, the summer 2020 series of results was inevitably going to be impacted by some unique circumstances. For example, using the end of March 2020 as a cut-off date and awarding all learners attending courses at this point a grade meant that a greater proportion of learners would achieve a result; it was not possible to account for those who would have left courses for a variety of different circumstances after the end of March 2020, but before summer assessment. This would likely be in the region of 5-8 per cent. All colleges would expect to have a greater number of learners in March each year than in June.

3.4 Likewise, every year, there are learners who again, for a variety of personal circumstances do not achieve the results of which they are capable during exam assessment. This does not mean that they were not capable of achieving their predicted results, only that they did not do so at the time of assessment. While recognising that this is inevitable, it is not possible to predict which learners would have experienced this. As a result, the move to award CAGs seems the fairest route available, although it also leaves some challenges.

3.5 Overall, Centre Assessed Grades were always likely to be higher than actual grades because of the timing of the CAGs. In practice, colleges report particularly with AS Levels, that around Easter, many students make their own decisions in terms of the courses or subjects where they will prioritise their efforts. For some courses, certain students may just

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wjec.co.uk/media/ugf00dy/wjec-guide-to-results-and-appeals-v10-4.pdf>, page 6.

<sup>2</sup> <https://qualificationswales.org/media/6182/arrangements-for-summer-2020-exam-series-findings-from-the-consultation.pdf>

stop revising or possibly not turn up for the exam, resulting in E or U grades. Asking colleges to assess as at March 2020 means that they conducted assessments on performance to date. This almost certainly reduced the numbers of low grades that would have been achieved.

3.6 In a June 2020 meeting with ColegauCymru and Qualifications Wales, WJEC said that they would contact colleges if there was a significant discrepancy between CAGs and the moderated results. One college originally saw their A-C results at AS reduced by 18 per cent but were not contacted. There was also no scope for a narrative to explain trends. Again, one college saw their best ever A Level results in 2020 whereas their AS results were more like 2017. In 2019 they had improving A2s and the best ever AS results. The algorithm for AS had not been able to recognise changes such as improvements to quality and raising entry requirements. This must be taken into account in any future attempts to develop standardisation models.

3.7 Public assertions that teaching staff were overly generous in predicting grades were neither helpful nor accurate. They called into question the integrity and professionalism of not only teachers but managers and senior staff who oversaw the moderation process for every course in their college. Such statements may not have been intended to cause further distress but have done so and should be avoided in future.

3.8 ColegauCymru is not aware of any discussions of a process of external verification of CAGs rather than use of standardisation algorithm. This would have been a useful option to explore or to understand why such a process was ruled out.

## **4. Appeals**

4.1 ColegauCymru had called for Qualifications Wales, WJEC and Welsh Government to clarify the appeals process for those learners whose A Level grades were lower than their predicted, centre assessed grades, but higher than their AS results. In light of the Education Minister's announcement on 17 August, this is no longer necessary.

4.2 The Education Minister's prior announcement that no learner would receive an A Level grade below their AS grade, without the need for appeal, was welcome but brings the anomaly whereby there is no A\* grade at AS Level, while there is at A Level, into sharp relief. This anomaly must be rectified in future years. Despite the AS safety net, colleges had already reported significant numbers of appeals, and likely far in excess of being able to respond to university place requests as swiftly as necessary.

4.3 Qualifications Wales have told us that WJEC will issue final grades to learners whose grades have changed on Tuesday 18 August. Given the Education Minister's announcement regarding the move to CAGs, further clarification of this date might still be required.

4.4 Qualifications Wales had widened the appeals process to include "4. there is evidence of internal assessment that has been judged by the school or college to be at a higher grade than the calculated grade awarded".<sup>3</sup> As demonstrated in the data shown earlier in this

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<sup>3</sup> <https://qualificationswales.org/english/results-2020/appeals-explained/>

submission, this included a large number of learners. It is not clear how such appeals would have been decided. If appeals reverted to the CAGs, it is not clear why this should not be applied to all learners. If appeals did not revert to CAGs, how would such decisions have been made?

4.5 It is important to remember that while appeals would have been necessary and understandable in the current circumstances, they would inevitably have necessitated a large amount of staff time. This would have been during a period when colleges and schools are preparing to welcome returning and new cohorts of learners and adjusting to the changes mandated as a result of Covid-19. It would have put additional pressure on staff who have already spent considerable time undertaking activity such as contacting universities to explain CAGs awarded to students and trying to support learners who had seen their results downgraded to still be able to attend the institution of their choice or access the apprenticeship of their choice.

4.6 We understand that Ofqual had previously confirmed that students could not challenge their individual centre assessment grades this year, as any appeal would have to be undertaken by someone better placed than teachers to judge their likely grade if assessments had taken place. In the unique circumstances of this summer, Ofqual did not believe there was any such person.

4.7 It would not have been acceptable for Qualifications Wales to replicate this approach, embedding the unintentional individual injustices experienced by learners into the summer 2020 results. A method that allows learners to receive fair grades must be found and ColegauCymru welcomes the Education Minister's announcement to use CAGs.

## **5. Impact on disadvantaged groups/groups with protected characteristics**

5.1 Across the four countries of the UK, it appears that learners from deprived areas were impacted more by standardisation and lowering of grades than those from more affluent areas. The impact on learners from groups with protected characteristics is yet to emerge clearly. There is more work to be undertaken to obtain a detailed and thorough picture. Research into this area should be commissioned by Welsh Government in order to learn lessons now to inform any future modelling that might be necessary. Although larger data is not yet available, the results from one college with a significant amount of learners from BAME backgrounds, suggested that these learners would have been disproportionately affected by standardisation and grade lowering.

5.2 For example:

Overall breakdown of those who sat AS and A Levels:  
70% White; 30% BAME

The impact of downgrading, if looked at statistically, matches this overall and would appear to show there was no differential impact for downgrading by 1 or 2 grades. However, learners who had results downgraded by 3 grades were all BAME.

Those downgraded by 1 grade:  
72% White; 28% BAME

Those downgraded by 2 grades:  
70% White; 30% BAME

Those downgraded by 3 grades:  
100% BAME

When looking at the impact on individual learners across their grade profiles it appears that there is evidence of greater negative impact on BAME learners:

- 1 BAME learner downgraded by 5 grades over his grade profile (studied three subjects).
- Of the learners downgraded by 4 grades over their profile - 64% BAME.
- The data for those downgraded by 3, 2 or 1 grades over their individual profiles more closely matches the overall breakdown and does not show a differential impact.
- Of those who had the most positive impact across their grade profiles – 88% were White and 12% BAME.

Examples of learners from BAME backgrounds who suffered significant negative impact:

<b>Specific examples of adjustments to CAGs</b>
A2 ICT B to E AS Business D to E AS Maths A to B -5 grade points lost overall
AS Business D to U AS Law D to U -4 grade points lost overall
AS Graphics C to D AS English D to U AS Law C to D -4 grade points lost overall
AS Sociology C to D AS Business D to E AS Law D to U -4 grade points lost overall
AS Maths C to D AS ICT E to U AS Computer Science D to U -4 grade points lost overall
AS Maths C to D AS Biology C to E

AS Chemistry C to D -4 grade points lost overall
AS Maths C to D AS Economics C to U -4 grade points lost overall
AS Computer Science B to C AS ICT D to U -3 grade points lost overall
AS Mathematics E to U AS Computer Science D to U -3 grade points lost overall
AS Law D to U A Level English Literature B to C -3 grade points lost overall
AS Mathematics D to E AS Computer Science C to E -3 grade points lost overall

## 6. Specific concerns regarding AS results

6.1 Colleges across the FE sector were deeply concerned with the impact the standardisation process had on AS results. There were considerable issues in relation to AS grades and the FE sector had serious reservations as to the reliability of the standardisation models and algorithms used by WJEC and approved by Qualifications Wales in reaching this year's outcomes. Again, we welcome the Education Minister's intervention to use CAGs for all 2020 summer examinations but recognise that this is not a perfect solution.

6.2 AS levels are qualifications in their own right and deserve to be taken seriously. They must not just be treated as the part pathway to an A Level. Qualifications Wales had clarified that if a learner was carrying on to the full A Level, the calculated AS grade from summer 2020 could not be used in the aggregation of A Level grades because it would be a grade and not a mark and that this has been made clear in all their correspondence with centres and wider stakeholders.

6.3 The Education Minister's previous announcement that for those learners applying to university for entry in September 2021, their referees would have been able add their predicted AS grades and context of the achievements was also welcome. Again, this did not change the fact that learners would have been applying with awarded AS grades that in many cases were below their predicted grades and what they had good reason to expect to achieve.

6.4 2020 AS resit grades were officially issued by WJEC to a number of learners. It was stated and then subsequently contradicted by WJEC that the upgrade or protection offered by the Education Minister only applied to 2019 AS grades. The 2020 resit grades appear to have been through the moderation process and are now official. Some clarification might still be needed here.



## 7. Vocational qualifications

7.1 The majority of attention has been focused on A and AS Level results but it is crucial to remember the large number of learners studying vocational qualifications receiving results this year. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there were fewer issues with downgrading of vocational results.

7.2 Colleges report that vocational awarding bodies mostly accepted CAGs and, if there was a query, they contacted the college to discuss. They also provided for a narrative explaining if there were differences in trend results, which was submitted at the same time as the CAGs. This meant that they took into account the individual circumstances – allowing colleges to explain, for example, that they perhaps only had a two year trend due to changes to entry qualifications and teaching, or that there were fewer Distinctions because a new qualification was adopted and the staff and learners were adapting to new specifications.

7.3 However, problems remained. Vocational results should all have been issued Thursday 13 August 2020. As of 17 August, one college reported that 200 learners still had not received grades. This has caused great distress to learners and many staff worked over the weekend to provide support. Usually in such instances, colleges receive a warning report from awarding bodies to let them know if grades are missing. This did not happen this year, possibly due to a number of awarding bodies furloughing staff.

7.4 The Education Minister’s announcement about the move to use CAGs does not clarify the situation for all vocational learners, noting “Other Awarding Bodies across the UK are involved in the determining the approach to vocational qualifications. This continues to be the case but it is important that I give assurance to GCSE, AS and A level student at the earliest opportunity.” It is vital that all vocational learners receive fair and final results as soon as possible, ending the uncertainty they face.

7.5 Lastly, as a result of the need to complete practical assessments in many cases, there remain a considerable number of learners who have yet to complete vocational qualifications that they would have expected to finish in summer 2020. The need to ensure that learners and colleges are supported to complete these assessments continues to be vitally important, and should not be forgotten despite the announcement about using CAGs for summer 2020 results.

## 8. GCSE results

8.1 The risk that similar problems were replicated with the summer 2020 GCSE results was enormous. This would have affected greater numbers of learners, and would likely have led to a considerable number of appeals. For many people in Wales, GCSE or other Level 2 qualifications, are their highest level of qualification:

	No qualifications	Below L2	L2 or above	L3 or above	L4 or above
YE 2019	8.2	12.7	79.1	59.4	38.8
YE 2018	8.4	12.7	78.9	59.1	37.8
YE 2017	8.7	12.8	78.5	58.3	37.5

Source: Stats Wales.

8.2 GCSEs are not merely a stepping stone to higher level vocational qualifications or A Levels for a sizeable proportion of the population. For this reason, it is imperative that the same mistakes were not repeated, and that learners received a fair result.

8.3 FE colleges were already committed to taking on board the professional viewpoint and recommendations of schoolteachers as the sector supported and guided those who would not, and still may not, receive the results they anticipated. In practical terms, colleges will exercise even greater flexibility in their admissions process, offering enhanced enrolment and initial assessment processes to ensure that students are placed on the most suitable course, and one that takes their choices into account as far as possible.

8.4 ColegauCymru noted the decision in Northern Ireland to award GCSEs on the basis of teacher assessments and was pleased that the Education Minister has taken the same approach in Wales.<sup>4</sup>

## **9. Wellbeing, progression and the economy**

The human cost of learners receiving results lower than those they were predicted, and had good reason to expect, should not be underestimated. This would undoubtedly have impacted their future study plans and ultimately, their career prospects, but also their mental health and wellbeing. At a time when the economy is still managing the effects of Covid-19, further disadvantaging learners who receive qualifications in summer 2020 should be avoided as far as possible. Similarly, this group of predominantly young people have undergone challenges which no previous cohort of learners has had to face, with negative impact on their mental and physical health and wellbeing. The announcement by the Education Minister about using CAGs is very welcome in this respect.

## **10. Looking ahead to 2021**

10.1 As the impact of the disruption to academic year 2019-20 flows through into 2020-21, learners, parents/carers, employers and the education sector more widely must have confidence that the lessons of 2020 will be acted on to safeguard their futures. ColegauCymru is keen to work with Qualifications Wales, WJEC and others but calls for a clear outline and plan detailing how examination and assessment will likely take place next summer. This must be in place later this autumn so that colleges and schools are able to plan and deliver effectively.

10.2 Likewise, firm plans need also to be put in place to accommodate possible future disruption in the eventuality of another flare up of Covid-19 and local or national lockdown situations.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-53802428>

## 11. Conclusion

While the Education Minister's decision to use CAGs as the basis of results for summer 2020 assessment is the best available solution, some issues remain unresolved. The next steps that need to be addressed include:

- Urgent clarification on the status of vocational awards and whether Centre Awarded Grades will also apply here.
- Addressing issues with regard to missing vocational results and ensure learners waiting to complete assessment can do so at the earliest opportunity.
- Clarity on the status of 2020 AS resit grades.
- A\* grade to be introduced at AS Level for future years.
- A review of the process of developing and awarding qualification results for summer 2020 that looks in detail at whether and why particular groups of learners had their results downgraded with a view to learning lessons and developing better data analysis and prediction in future.
- A clear outline and plan detailing how examination and assessment will likely take place in summer 2021 must be developed and agreed with colleges and schools by late autumn 2020.
- A plan, developed in conjunction with the further education sector, of how disruption to learning, including work-based learning, will be managed in the eventuality of local or national lockdown situations due to Covid-19.
- Ongoing support to the further education sector to meet the challenges of adapting to Covid-19, including but not limited to, addressing the digital divide in online and blended learning.

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