Ensuring readiness for delivering new qualifications: The perspective of college curriculum leaders in post-16 education in Wales

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A Research & Development Project

Submitted for the MSc Educational Assessment 2020

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Abstract

This study considers the impact upon curriculum leaders in further education colleges in Wales of the introduction of new, nationally mandated, vocational qualifications. Drawing upon the introduction of new, Wales-only, qualifications in the area of Health and Social Care and Childcare in 2019, the study sought the views of curriculum leaders about the impact that those qualifications had upon them and their work. Three key research questions are addressed:

A. What factors do college curriculum leaders take into account before, and when, new qualifications are introduced in Wales?
B. How have curriculum leaders, in further education colleges in Wales, been impacted in their role by the introduction of new qualifications in Health and Social Care in 2019?
C. How, potentially, might the qualifications regulator, awarding bodies, senior leaders and other relevant bodies in Wales improve upon past practice in relation to ensuring the manageability, for further education colleges in Wales, of the second phase of qualification reform in 2021?

The research to underpin the study took place in late May and June 2020 and consisted of hour-long interviews with senior curriculum leaders from eight of the twelve further education colleges in Wales.

The key findings of the study are that it is essential for policy makers and qualification developers to engage with, and understand the needs of, the institutions who will be delivering the qualifications to learners, at a strategic and

operational level rather than, solely, at a subject level. Nine key factors are identified as being of importance to curriculum leaders and clarification is provided about the timescales which need to be followed in order to underpin successful implementation. Lessons learned from the implementation of the first suite of vocational qualifications to be reformed under the aegis of the qualifications' regulator for Wales since its establishment in 2015 are identified in time for improvements in the implementation phase of the second major suite.

The study occurred during the height of the COVID19 pandemic of 2020 and, as such, introduces an additional dimension to the consideration of the manageability of assessment in the context of a highly unusual set of circumstances and the lessons that might be learned from these.

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Glossary of acronyms used within the dissertation

CBE	Construction and the Built Environment.
CCCQ	The Colegau Cymru network of curriculum and quality leaders.
CL	Curriculum leader (used to attribute quotes to interviewees).
EQA	External quality assurance/assurer.
FE	Further Education.
HSCC	Health and Social Care, including Childcare.
IQA	Internal quality assurance/assurer.
LAP	Learning Area Programme (an FE programme of study funded by Welsh Government).
MERV	Manageable, Engaging, Reliable and Valid – a model being developed by Qualifications Wales to underpin qualification design.
SME	Small to medium enterprise.
VET	Vocational education and training.
VQs	Vocational Qualifications.
QW	Qualifications Wales.
WG	Welsh Government.

Chapter 1: Introduction – context and background

1.1 Context

This study is set in the context of an ongoing programme of the review and reform of vocational qualifications in Wales that is being undertaken by the regulator of qualifications, Qualifications Wales ('QW'). QW was established in 2015 as the regulator of non-degree qualifications in Wales. The Qualifications Wales Act (2015) ('the Act') gave the new body overall responsibility for ensuring the effectiveness of qualifications, and the qualifications system, in meeting the needs of learners in Wales. The responsibilities of QW are wider than its counterpart in England, Ofqual, in that they include the range, nature, content and assessment of qualifications as well as for maintaining standards in those qualifications.

Further education in England has been subject to much turmoil and change, notably through the changes brought about in response to major reviews commissioned by the UK Government including Leitch (2006), Wolf (2011) and Sainsbury (2016). Public policy on education is a devolved matter in Wales and since devolution, Wales has been developing its own policies in relation to Further Education (FE). These policies were significantly influenced by the 'Webb Review' of further education in Wales (Welsh Government, 2007), following which a period of consolidation and merger resulted in a reduction of the number of FE colleges from 23 in 2007 to the current 12. However, Wales has felt the impact of changes in England due to its dependence, to a great extent, upon vocational qualifications ('VQs') that have been developed to meet the policy requirements for England of the UK government. More recently, QW published its VQ Strategy (QW, 2016), which set out a national programme of

sector reviews to consider whether qualifications in a series of occupational sectors were effective in meeting the needs of learners and employers. The first sector review considered qualifications in health and social care, and childcare ('HSCC'), and initiated, in 2016, the development of a new suite of national qualifications (QW, 2016b). Using its powers of restriction, QW commissioned an awarding body partnership to develop these qualifications, which would be the only qualifications to be eligible for use on publicly funded courses in this sector in Wales. The report of the second sector review, of qualifications in Construction and the Built Environment ('CBE'), was published in 2018 (QW, 2018) and resulted, similarly, in the commissioning by QW of a new suite of qualifications to meet the needs of that sector.

1.2 Background to the study

I am employed as Director of Qualifications Policy and Reform at QW and have worked for QW since 2015. I have responsibility for the continuing implementation of the organisation's vocational qualifications (VQ) strategy *(QW, 2016)*. My position as a researcher and at QW will be discussed further in section 3.5.

Early in the autumn term of 2019 I received feedback from a meeting of the Colegau Cymru network of curriculum and quality leaders in further education (CCCQ). Colegau Cymru is a member-led body of which all twelve FE colleges in Wales are members. It hosts a range of networks one of which is CCCQ, at which FE colleges are represented by the senior leaders with a responsibility for curriculum and quality. The feedback indicated that curriculum leaders had concerns that they were insufficiently aware of the developments that were

underway in relation to CBE qualifications and that they had concerns about the potential manageability of the proposed new qualifications.

The expression of these concerns coincided with the initiation of a programme of work which was already underway within QW to develop a model for qualification development based on four key dimensions. Known as 'MERV', the model suggests that the relative balance of manageability, engagement, reliability and validity needs to be considered in the development and reform of each qualification:

> *Building on our approach to improving quality in qualifications, we will continue to develop our innovative model, 'MERV', as a tool for considering the extent to which assessments and qualifications are Manageable, Engaging, Reliable and Valid. (QW, 2020b, p7)*

While much research has been conducted into reliability and validity in assessment there is significantly less understanding of manageability and engagement in the context of qualifications or assessment, particularly in the context of further education and vocational qualifications. The concerns raised by CCCQ presented the opportunity to conduct research into an aspect of manageability that was not well understood. QW, at that time, had very little information upon which to base its understanding of the impact of qualification reforms upon FE colleges, or, more particularly, upon those with a responsibility for curriculum leadership. Moreover, Raffe (2015, p151) recognised that 'the processes by which reforms of vocational qualifications are initiated, developed and implemented are as important as the content of those reforms', and implied that successive national programmes of reform in this field had paid insufficient attention to the implementation of qualifications in educational settings and to the impact of continual changes in qualifications upon those educational settings.

As such, this research study considers the extent to which the needs and priorities of curriculum leaders within FE colleges, have been identified in relation to the introduction of new and reformed qualifications. The available literature, discussed further in Chapter 2, does not appear to have focused upon these matters highlighting a gap in understanding which this study seeks to remedy. Through the gathering and analysis of qualitative evidence, drawing directly on the experiences and insights of curriculum leaders within FE colleges in Wales, the study aims both to add to existing knowledge and understanding around the development and introduction of new VQs but also to provide important information to QW to inform the shaping and implementation of future qualification reforms.

Wales is not alone amongst the four nations of the United Kingdom, in taking forward vocational qualification reform. Consequently, the findings from this study are likely to be of value to policy-makers and awarding bodies in other nations in considering how best to ensure that, in the future implementation of reformed qualifications, the concerns and needs of curriculum leaders in FE are taken into account.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Context and limitations of the literature review

Conducting this literature review presented some challenges. Firstly, the extent of research that has been conducted in this area of study is limited; there are significant gaps. Furthermore, due, in part, to the COVID19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 as well as the remote nature of the study programme itself, it was necessary to conduct the literature review entirely online meaning that access to some literature which may have proved useful was not possible. Even

so, researchers for the Centre of Labour Market Studies concluded that 'the research-based literature on VQs is thin' (Unwin et al, 2004, p4). While there is more literature available in 2020 than there was in 2004, the field of study does not appear to have expanded significantly since this time and the literature relevant to the aim of this study is limited.

Moreover, in the context of educational assessment, less is written about VQs than about academic qualifications; less is written about education in further education than about education in schools and less is written about the manageability of assessment than about its validity and reliability. Where VQs are discussed in the literature, more research focuses upon the importance of the views of employers than about the importance of the views of college managers; and where educational change is written about, more emphasis is placed on structural change in schools and colleges than about the change brought about by qualification changes. Nevertheless, in the limited literature that is available, there appears to be a strong and recurring theme of disconnection between the development of qualification reforms and of the implementation of those reforms, which lends weight to the need for, and potential value of, this study.

2.2 The disconnect between policy and implementation

Within the field of VQs, there is significant focus, in the literature, upon the qualification system and of the seemingly constant change and churn to which it is subjected (Hodgson & Spours, 2007 and 2016; Raffe, 2015; Keep, 2015). Studies tend to focus heavily on the policy context in England, paying only limited attention to the situation in Wales. This was perhaps unsurprising given that, prior to the introduction of new HSCC qualifications in 2019 there was a comparative absence of any distinct vocational qualification policy in Wales;

learning providers simply adopted qualifications that had been developed to meet the policy requirements of England. There was some suggestion in the literature that the policy context and relationships were different in Wales to England and that 'providers such as college leaders feel closer to policy-makers than in England' (Gunning & Raffe, 2011, p254).

In so far as there has been any reflection on this policy colonisation, Raffe (2015) has written on the historic propensity of successive UK governments to initiate change in the field of vocational education, especially in England. He believed that successive national programmes of reform in this field paid insufficient attention to the implementation of qualifications, and to the impact of continual changes in qualifications, upon those educational settings. Having, in earlier work, reviewed the effectiveness of national qualification frameworks, coming to the conclusion that the benefits of these may have been overstated (Raffe, 2013), Raffe subsequently conveyed an air of cynicism in describing the disconnect he perceived between the aims of policy-makers and the realities facing educational institutions:

> *The mere creation of new qualifications does not, for example, summon into existence the teachers and trainers, the institutions and the resources to deliver the learning and skills that they recognise (Raffe, 2015, p154).*

To the extent that Raffe's work sets out some of the considerations that may be relevant for college leaders, such as staffing and resources, he also highlighted a number of potential tensions between the different expectations that were placed upon the introduction of new qualifications where policy makers have a range of aims and purposes for those qualifications. He gives, as exemplification, the conflict between the use of qualifications for funding or performance measures and the desire for improved standards or quality of learning. Moreover, he suggested that the degree of 'churn' in responsibilities

for national qualifications policy and the relatively short lifespan of a range of government agencies has led to a loss of policy memory and expertise (Raffe, 2015). This point is pertinent to this study, given that the qualification reforms in Wales were initiated by QW only a short time after its establishment in 2015.

Interestingly, as critical as Raffe was, Keep's work on the relationship between English policy-makers and the vocational education and training ('VET') system is, arguably, more scathing. Keep focussed more upon wider education policy and less on qualifications, suggesting almost wilful neglect by policy makers of the need to engage with learning institutions when initiating reform:

> *The norm for many years has been that government will enact changes in VET without any serious attempt to involve the institutions that deliver VET or those who work within them…. As a result, national policy makers have very little knowledge or understanding of frontline practice or how their policies play out in the real world. (Keep, 2015, p469)*

Or as Coffield, perhaps more poetically, denounced:

> *It is all very well for hyperactive politicians and policy-makers to devise strategy upon strategy in Wonderland; principals and SMTs must be able to enact them successfully in Sunderland and all points north, south east and west of it (Coffield, 2008, p50)*

These authors are not alone. In a number of studies, Unwin (Unwin et al, 2004; Unwin, 2010) reflected similar views, including that VQs had typically been developed 'in a way that is sometimes too detached from both employers and providers of VET' (Unwin et al, 2004, p30) and recommended further studies on 'the roles of and relationship between the key VQ stakeholders' (ibid, p96). This suggestion echoed the complaint by Dalin (1978, p7) that the relationship between the different parts of the education system was rarely managed successfully. Similarly, when reviewing the impact of the introduction of GNVQs in the 1990s, Yeomans (1998) suggested that the developers of those

qualifications did not understand, or consider effectively, research about teaching, learning and the organisation of school, colleges and curricula. Yet between then and 2013, there was a growing acknowledgement of the significance of qualifications in shaping the delivery of learning in further education. In a text-book for teachers in further education, Huddleston and Unwin suggest that 'qualifications now frame much of what happens within colleges' (Huddleston & Unwin, 2013, p47) and reflected that, in effect, the developers of qualifications were the developers of the college curriculum.

These issues are not only relevant to FE. In reviewing a range of systemic failures within national organisations responsible for national assessments in schools, Baird and Coxall (2009, p8) stressed the importance of the 'awareness of the likely range of stakeholder perspectives'. In addition, in reviewing a project embedding vocational learning into university courses, and McLaughlin and Mills (2010, p124) acknowledged that 'the goodwill and additional support of a wide range of people from the Pro-Vice Chancellor, to Heads of Schools, co-ordinators and administrators' was necessary for the success of the project'.

2.3 Change management in education

While the managerial discipline of 'change management' is typically considered as a function internal to organisations, the impacts of national qualification reforms are likely to engender or require change within the organisations delivering the courses leading to those qualifications. The literature on change management, particularly within an education context has, therefore, some relevance. Writing about change within FE colleges in England, Hannagan et al (2007) emphasised that leadership is important in taking forward change and developed Newman's (2002) view that it is insufficient simply to convey the

message that change is necessary without addressing some of the complexities and 'messiness' of that change. The inference from this is that, to be successful in imposing change upon organisations, an understanding of the operational impact of that change upon said organisations is essential. This is not a new concept; writing over forty years ago, Dalin (1978, p28) suggested that the cause of failure to implement educational change effectively was usually:

> *a lack of understanding of political, legal, administrative and financial constraints, including the in-built reward and punishment structure, all of which have been created to maintain the existing system and not to serve an innovative function.*

It would seem, therefore, that writers have, over several decades, raised concerns about the disconnect between educational and qualification policy and the implementation of that policy through the management of change across, and within institutions. The 'manageability' of assessment is a concept which is formalised by its listing, alongside validity and reliability, in the rulebooks of the national qualifications regulators in Wales and England and which is defined as a process which 'places reasonable demands on centres and learners' (QW, 2020a; Ofqual, 2020). However, research on the manageability of assessment is hard to find; those few references that are available suggest that manageability is an unfortunate barrier, or counter-balance to high quality assessment, rather than an aspect worthy of further study in itself. Stobart (2008), for example, delineates, through his depiction of a one-handed-clock, the need for a 'trade-off' between reliability, validity and manageability. His concern is that neither manageability, nor reliability, should be overly influential on construct validity and his discussion of manageability is somewhat cursorily confined to 'affordability'. It would appear, therefore, that the educational assessment profession may benefit from a clearer understanding of the nature of manageability from the perspective of the learning provider.

While the literature illuminates neither the precise nature of the needs of colleges or of the particular concerns that policy-makers might better understand, it has, nevertheless, been possible to identify in the literature a number of potential issues relating to manageability and it is these issues which are the focus of this study:

- The size of qualifications in relation to the available funding
- Timetabling
- Lead-in time
- Physical resources
- Staff capacity and capabilities
- Awarding body support
- Quality assurance responsibilities
- Meeting learners' needs.

Each of these will be addressed in turn below.

2.4 Size of qualifications and the available funding

A recent policy research publication by the qualification regulator in England, Ofqual helpfully articulates the findings of some research conducted on the drivers of centres' choices for qualifications (Price et al, 2020b). It is interesting that, of ten factors affecting centres' choices of qualifications identified by Ofqual, 'the qualification attracts good funding' scored lowest. The report observes that:

> *In line with a focus on learners' needs and interests, centres seem dedicated to offering a choice even when it means incurring financial burdens by continuing to offer courses that are not commercially viable (Price et al, 2020, p32).*

This was in contrast with the concerns expressed by CCCQ to QW (p8 above) which had placed a strong emphasis on the affordability of new qualifications.

The literature is surprisingly quiet on the impact of changes to qualifications upon college budgets, although reflecting on the introduction of GNVQs in FE colleges, Sieminski (2010) describes colleges feeling under pressure to deliver cost-effective courses and over-recruiting to sustain the viability of the courses while McCrystal and McAleer (2003) highlight the difficulties that unintended increases in administrative burden of a new form of assessment can place upon the institution.

2.5 Timetabling

Given the great extent to which VQs dictate the curriculum of a FE college (Huddleston & Unwin, 2013), the introduction of new VQs can present more challenges to college timetables than academic qualifications where, perhaps, the content is updated and questions in examinations revised. This may particularly be the case when there is a requirement for practical skills to be demonstrated or for work experience to take place (Huddleston & Laczik, 2012). However, given the structure of the qualifications system across the UK, where commercial awarding bodies develop qualifications to meet government and/or regulators' requirements for assessment, responsibility for the practical implications of new qualifications has no clear ownership. As Dalin (1978, p33) suggested, 'questions about the operational specificity of the objectives for reform, have long plagued planners, implementors and administrators'. Moreover, Gardner et al (2008) note that innovations in assessment in one area of the curriculum have a relationship with the curriculum as a whole and that the impact of that innovation upon other aspects of delivery is an important consideration for policy development.

2.6 Lead-in time

A potential significant factor in the success, or otherwise, of the implementation of qualification reforms is the time period between the availability of qualification specifications and the first teaching of the qualification. A frequent observation of those evaluating the introduction of new qualifications is the conflict between government intentions to enact policy within a timescale dictated by political imperative and the time needed for learning providers to prepare to deliver the new qualifications (Barrance & Elwood, 2015; Cadwallader & Tremain, 2013; Baird & Coxall, 2009). Perhaps the most visual analogy, however, is provided by Raffe (2015, p151):

> *A qualification is not like an electrical component which is fully operational as soon as it is plugged in and switched on. Qualifications need to be nurtured and given the time and the conditions in which to grow.*

In the context of VQs, this appears to have been the case in relation to the introduction of GNVQs in the 1990s (Benett, 1996; Yeomans, 1998) and of the 14-19 Diploma in 2010 (Senior, 2015). There are regular criticisms of the lack of piloting before qualifications are introduced (Elwood, 2012; Oates, 2007; Pring, 2013) although the challenges presented by piloting secure assessments are not always considered.

2.7 Physical resources

Similarly to the size and costs of delivering a qualification, the literature gives surprisingly little coverage to the impact of new qualifications upon physical resourcing in colleges. Vitello and Williamson (2017) note that non-examination assessment may increase the demands on centres for the physical environment and resources compared with examined assessment. Others suggest that, if the resource requirements are too high, whether that be in equipment or in the

space required for teaching, then centres may decide not to offer the qualification (Parmeshwaran & Thomson, 2015; Dalin,1978).

2.8 Staff capacity and capabilities

Several sources note the importance of the capacity and capabilities of teaching staff to adapt to changes in qualifications although in very few sources is this considered in depth. For example, difficulties in recruiting and retaining 'dual professionals', that is teaching staff with both subject expertise in a vocational area and teaching and/or assessment expertise, are reported as being a particular challenge in a social care setting (Schmidt, 2019) while Hanley and Orr (2019) set out some of the challenges in an engineering and construction context in England. They conclude that:

> *If the most fundamental concern of having properly experienced and qualified teachers in colleges is ignored then the comprehensive vision of technical pathways and qualifications that the Sainsbury Report and the Post-16 Skills Plan described might remain just that, a vision. (Hanley & Orr, 2019, p113)*

Other research focussing upon staffing, however, refer to either the mental stress that new specifications and change can place upon staff (Molway, 2019) or to the challenges of finding time for, or sourcing, appropriate staff development (Haynes & Lynch, 2013; Senior, 2015). Outside the academic literature (the reforms are new and not yet the subject of much published research), concerns are also emerging in the media in relation to the capacity of staff within colleges to deliver the forthcoming T level qualifications in England (Venis, 2018).

2.9 Awarding body support

Linked to the capabilities of teaching staff is the nature and availability of support provided by the commercial awarding bodies who develop and award VQs in the UK. The market structure of qualifications is peculiar to the UK and leads to a position whereby course content and the assessment regimes of publicly funded post-16 learning are determined, at least in part, by an independent commercial body. In order to ensure that teaching and assessment staff are capable to deliver qualifications, responsibility for 'teacher training' rests, to a great extent with the awarding body (Molway, 2019). Consequently, the training teachers receive in relation to new qualifications may have a tendency to focus mainly, or entirely on 'how to deal with the assessment' rather than how to teach the course, as illustrated by Daly et al. (2012, p153), who note that, in relation to school-based evidence,

> *Given that they were accustomed to a plethora of past papers for the old exams, teachers particularly wanted to know what kind of responses would be rewarded by examiners of the new papers.*

2.10 Quality assurance responsibilities

Much of the assessment of VQs takes the form of 'internal' or 'centre-based' assessment, which is subject to two rounds of quality assurance, firstly by the centre itself and secondly by the awarding body. The introduction of new qualifications, which may have significantly different forms of assessment, is bound to place new requirements upon colleges who are tasked with ensuring that quality assurance requirements are fit for purpose. Writing in a school context, Molway (2019, p107) expresses concerns that focusing efforts on conformity through quality assurance regimes can 'stifle teachers' autonomy and creativity', while Raffe (2013, p152) sounds a warning bell that 'effective quality assurance may be undermined by complex governance arrangements'.

The inference is that the introduction of new qualifications, with new and different quality assurance requirements, is likely to have an impact upon the delivery of the curriculum and of the resourcing of activities which are, in turn, likely to be a concern of curriculum leaders.

2.11 Meeting learners' needs

Given that Ofqual's study (Price et al, 2020) indicated that learning providers' choice of VQs was motivated most highly by meeting learners' needs, it is appropriate to consider the impact of learners' needs upon the role of curriculum leaders in preparing to offer new qualifications in colleges. Coffield (2008) suggests that government policy requirements for qualifications have a strong tendency to disregard the needs of learners while Vitello and Williamson (2017) suggests that some learners taking VQs may be disadvantaged by the form of assessment, particularly examinations, and the conditions under which such assessment is taken. Acquah and Huddleston (2012), echoing Wolf (2011), stress the importance of qualifications providing clear and sustainable progression routes for learners; they 'must lead somewhere'.

2.12 Summary and Research Questions

The discussion above allows the formation of a hypothetical range of factors which may be important to curriculum leaders in FE colleges and which may have prompted the concerns that were raised with QW in the autumn of 2019. The period between the introduction of the first phase of vocational qualification reform in Wales in 2019 (for HSCC) and the second phase in 2021 (for CBE) provides a timely period in which to consider the following key research questions:

A. What factors do curriculum leaders, in further education colleges in Wales, take into account before, and when, new qualifications are introduced?
B. How have curriculum leaders, in further education colleges in Wales, been impacted in their role by the introduction of new qualifications in Health and Social Care in 2019?
C. How, potentially, might the qualifications regulator, awarding bodies, curriculum leaders and other relevant bodies in Wales improve upon past practice in relation to ensuring the manageability, for further education colleges in Wales, of the second phase of qualification reform in 2021?

The next chapter explains the methodology that was used to answer the research questions.

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Qualitative study

Given that the first indication to QW that curriculum leaders had concerns about the impact of the introduction of new qualifications from CCCQ (see p. 8), it was appropriate to consider the twelve members of this group as potential subjects for the study. As such this project lent itself particularly well to a qualitative methodology as the focus was on understanding curriculum leaders' perceptions and experiences (Hammarman et al, 2016). While responding to the initial concerns I mooted the possibility, with the group, of conducting a research study and asked whether members would be willing to participate in the study. There was an inherent motivation to do so in that it would provide an opportunity for members to express their views and to inform the future policy of QW in introducing new VQs. The group indicated a general willingness to participate.

3.2 Data collection method – semi-structured interviews

Having identified the target group for the study, it was determined that semi-structured interviews would be the most logical data collection method. Whilst it may have been possible to elicit these views through more structured methods such as a survey or a more interactive method such as a focused discussion group, the selection of semi-structured interviews accords with Adams' (2015) suggestions that these may be most appropriate when interviewees have an interest in the outcome of the research. It would be within the CCCQ members' interests for factors relevant to them in the introduction of qualifications to be known and understood by the qualifications' regulator. Moreover, specifically, semi-structured interviews are useful when open-ended questions are needed to prompt independent thought as well as to avoid any

inhibitions which may affect individuals' contributions within a group (Adams, 2015). This was an important consideration given that the group were accustomed to meeting together and were, potentially, at risk of succumbing 'groupthink' (Janis, 1982). Furthermore, although it may have proved possible to engage with the subjects in a group environment, the ability of each interviewee to contribute as fully as in a one-to-one interview would have been relatively limited and the time allocated to elicit the views of each individual would have been severely curtailed. In practical terms it would have proved administratively challenging to find a suitable time in which to gather this group together for sufficient time to conduct such a discussion, whereas identifying an hour in each individual's calendar proved less challenging.

3.3 The sample

The sample consisted of curriculum leaders from two thirds of the 12 FE colleges in Wales (n=8). It was originally planned to conduct the interviews on a one-to-one face-to-face basis at each of the participating colleges. However, during the planning phase, the international COVID19 pandemic developed. Wales, like other nations, entered an extended period of 'lockdown' and educational settings closed. This rendered face-to-face interviews impossible, necessitating a switch to on-screen interviews using Microsoft Teams. Initially, the availability and willingness to participate of the intended interviewees was thrown into question in the context of the cancellation of examinations and the development of contingency strategies for the award of qualifications. These arrangements were more complicated for VQs than for 'general' qualifications. Curriculum and quality leaders were faced with a range of challenging and unprecedented actions and decisions to take. A risk therefore emerged that it would not be possible to undertake the interviews or that interviewees would

not be willing to give up the time needed or to focus sufficiently on the questions being asked.

Fortunately, however, informal conversations with members of CCCQ revealed a willingness to contribute and recognition of the longer-term benefits of identifying and addressing the issues in question. An email to all members of the group in early May 2020 asking for volunteers elicited four quick responses and appointments were made for interviews. The target number of interviews was set at six, representing 50% of the target population. A follow-up email a week later, asking for two further volunteers, elicited four further responses and appointments were made. Information sheets and consent forms were sent to all interviewees who returned these, indicating their consent, including to the recording and transcription of the interview. Eight interviews were conducted over a period of four weeks in May and June 2020. The eight interviewees were all members of CCCQ, representing their colleges on matters relating to the curriculum and quality. Their titles included three 'vice principals', three 'deputy principals', one 'assistant principal', and one 'executive director'. Four job titles also referenced 'academic services' while three referenced curriculum, quality, teaching and/or learning.

3.4 Interviews

The interviews ranged in duration from 46 minutes to one hour and two minutes which aligns with the recommendation for semi-structured interviews that an hour 'is a reasonable maximum length… to minimize fatigue for both interviewer and respondent' (Adams, 2015, p493).

An outline discussion guide was developed (Appendix 1) using a combination of open questions to elicit a free response followed by loosely structured prompts to draw out the relative importance of the different factors that had been

identified in the literature review (p16 above refers) and to enable a rough comparison of these across the responses. While it was not possible to test the discussion guide with a sub-set of the target population, given the small size of that population, it was sense-checked with colleagues within QW and, where a few ambiguities were identified, adjustments were made to clarify the questions which were being asked. During the first interview, a further ambiguity became apparent and the question was adjusted for subsequent interviews to reflect the clarification that was provided to the first interviewee.

The format of the interviews consisted of introductions and the confirming of consent for recording, as well as a recap on the purposes of and likely subsequent use of the research, and then the interviews fell naturally into three sections:

1. The first section of the interview consisted of two open questions which asked interviewees firstly to describe their interest in, and responsibility for, qualifications and secondly to identify the factors which were important to them when new qualifications became available. In the live interviews all interviewees spoke articulately and with fluidity in response to these first two questions, yielding rich data for the study.
2. This middle section of the interview used a series of ten prompts of pre-selected factors, identified from the literature and from issues that had been suggested in earlier discussions. Interviewees were asked to rate the importance of these factors to themselves in their role, on a relative scale of high, medium, low or no importance and to elucidate on the reason for that response. Using these prompts ensured that all interviews covered each of the themes which had been identified beforehand and enabled a comparison of the relative importance of each factor for each interviewee and across the group of interviewees. Most interviewees gave a mixture of

response types, either giving a rating first and then commenting, or commenting first and then (sometimes following prompting), a rating. They were then asked if any other factors were important.

3. The third section of the interview consisted of a series of open questions asking interviewees to reflect on their specific experience with the introduction of HSCC qualifications in 2019, and to consider what steps various key organisations could have taken to improve upon that experience when the second major suite of reformed VQs is implemented in 2021. This was asked in relation to QW, awarding bodies, any other key organisations and then in relation to themselves and their college. Framing this set of questions as 'what could be improved?' is considered more likely to minimise defensiveness than 'what was bad?' (Adams, 2015).

A final set of questions asked interviewees if there were any other points they wished to raise. Interviewees were then thanked for their time and reminded that they would be sent a copy of a report that would be prepared by QW following the study.

It is important to note that one limitation of the methodology was that, while the answers to the interview questions enabled a direct comparison of the relative importance of the factors which had been pre-identified, it did not enable comparison of any additional factors raised subsequently, as it was not within the scope of the study to return to earlier interviewees to rate these subsequent suggestions. One particular factor (meeting the needs of employers) had not been identified beforehand as a relevant factor for this group of leaders but was mentioned spontaneously by most interviewees. Had it been possible to test the interview questions beforehand, this factor could have been included from the outset.

With the permission of the interviewees, the interviews were conducted and recorded using Microsoft Teams and the voice recorder on a laptop. These interviews were transcribed by an independent transcription company. There are a range of views about the relative benefit of researchers transcribing their own interviews, providing an ability to identify cross-cutting themes more readily and to focus on the nuances of responses (Tessier, 2012). However, the decision was taken that external transcription would provide savings in time and, potentially, in accuracy, particularly given the impact of COVID19 on the timescale and conditions of the study. Transcripts were quality assured by sampling against the audio recordings.

3.5 Researcher positionality

One of the considerations in the planning of the interviews was that interviewees may be inhibited in providing a full and honest response to the questions asked given that I was known to them as a Director of QW. A judgement was made that any such inhibitions would be unlikely given the willingness in other contexts to raise concerns with me and my colleagues from QW. Furthermore, the fact that I was known to the interviewees in a work context made it less likely that social inhibitions involved in speaking with an unknown interviewer would render the early stage of the interview less fluid (Merton, 1972).

3.6 Ethical considerations

A research proposal was submitted to the CUREC of the University of Oxford and formal approval for the study to proceed is attached at Appendix 2. The study was developed and conducted following the guidelines of the British

Educational Research Association. For example, information about the study was provided in advance and consent was sought and granted before each interview took place. Interviewees were advised that they would be provided with a summary of the findings and outcomes of the study in due course. Anonymity of the interviewees is preserved throughout the study where they are referenced simply as CL1 to CL8.

3.7 External influences

An unexpected and a-typical influence on the study was the influence and impact of COVID19. While interviewees, for the most part, remained focused on the generic factors associated with qualifications reform, their answers were, at times, affected by considerations which would not have arisen had it not been for the ongoing situation. It was clear that the impact of COVID19 on colleges had influenced the thinking and perspective of interviewees. It was not possible to identify whether this was a temporary influence or whether it would have a longer-lasting impact upon the needs and concerns of FE colleges. For this reason, the study must be considered in the context of the very specific time period in which it was conducted.

3.8 Analysis

The transcripts were analysed to extract data for the research study. As each of the interviewees had remained focused on the issues being discussed there was very little extraneous material not used to answer the research questions. The first transcripts arrived for review before the later interviews had been conducted and, in themselves, enabled me to hone the interview technique but also to begin the iterative process of analysis (Srivesta and Hopwood, 2009).

Specifically, during the analysis, I made use of readily available tools, creating a workbook in Microsoft Excel to store and sort the data by theme. Themes which had not been identified prior to the interviews were added as they appeared. During the interviews I kept a tick-box record of the score of 'high', 'medium', 'low' or 'no' importance for each pre-identified factor and tabulated this within the workbook. I used a fourth sheet within the workbook to post responses to the questions about the impacts of HSCC qualifications and about opportunities for improvement.

While the Excel workbook provided a useful tool to sort the data into themes and in which to store the raw data, Excel is not flexible for use in drafting, so once the initial sorting of data was complete, I created a OneNote notebook with a page per theme. I dropped each column from the spreadsheet into the relevant page so that the overall coverage of each theme could be viewed and annotated freely. I colour-coded data by interviewee, so that I could readily identify whether any interviewees were being over-represented in the report and count the number of similar responses.

The qualitative processes outlined above, including the use of semi-structured interviews, the transcription and analysis of responses, generated a rich and informative set of data. The findings from this data are presented in Chapters 4 to 6 below.

Chapter 4 – Findings: Research Question A

What factors do college curriculum leaders take into account before, and when, new qualifications are introduced in Wales?

4.1 Extent and purpose of curriculum leaders' interest in qualifications

It was important at the outset to understand the nature of the curriculum leaders' interest in the introduction of new qualifications in order to provide context for their responses. Interviewees provided a broad range of responses to this question but there were several common themes. Most (6) referred to the importance of meeting learner needs, in terms both of progression routes and of the form of assessment. Several referred to meeting employer needs (5), managing resources and budgets (4) and determining staffing requirements (5). One respondent described the link between these different elements:

> *When we [have] a good curriculum it's because we've got student interest, we've got employers who can stand in a room in front of those students and say 'This is the qualification we want you to have', and then you've also got teaching staff and the right resource sitting behind it, so when you put those three things together, that tends to be where we get a good curriculum. (CL6)*

There appeared to be an intrinsic link between qualifications and the curriculum with interviewees tending to refer to qualifications as a proxy for the curriculum. As one respondent explained:

> *Any change in curriculum affects the business in two ways, the quality of our teaching and learning and how effectively we're able to do that and secondly from a resourcing perspective, how we're able to deliver the qualifications within budget. (CL8)*

These responses, and those of others, indicate that qualifications are central to the concerns of curriculum leaders and illustrate that the impact the reform of

qualifications has upon college leadership extends beyond considerations of assessment.

With the context for their interest in qualifications established, interviewees were asked to identify the key factors they take into account, in their role, when new VQs are introduced. While interviewees were aware that a list of pre-identified factors would be discussed, they were not aware of what these factors were. The frequency of the unprompted mentions of each factor are set out in table 2 below:

Table 2: Count of mentions of factors (n=8)

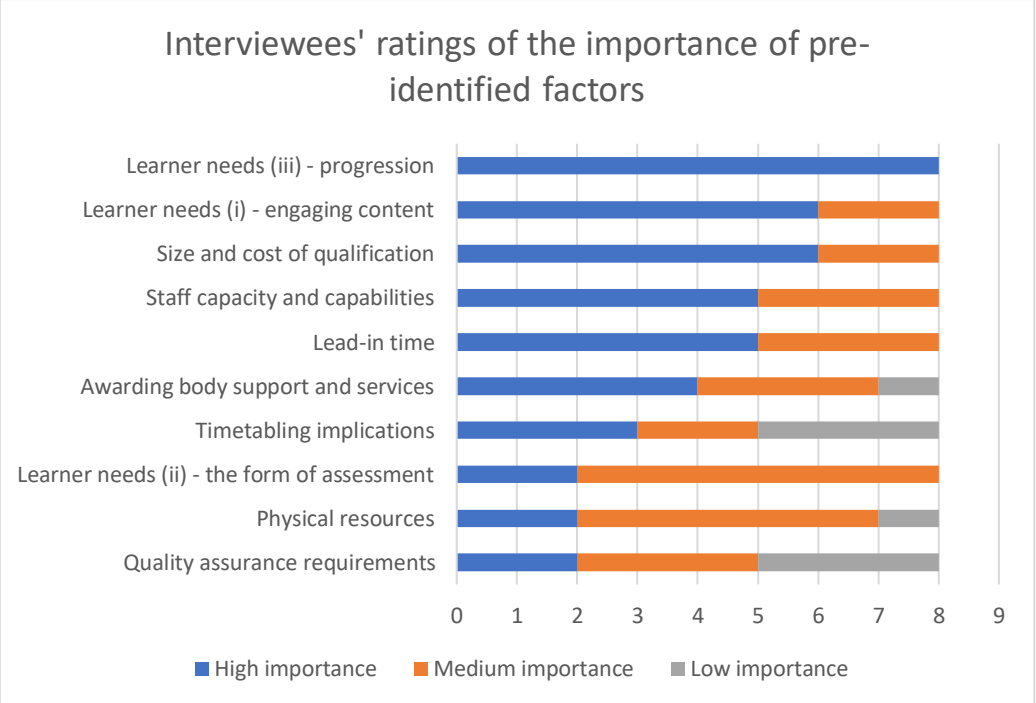
Factor	Unprompted mentions
Factors included on the pre-selected list	
Size and cost of qualification in relation to funding	7
Staff capacity and capabilities	5
Meeting learner needs: progression routes	4
Meeting learner needs: the content of the qualification	2
Meeting learner needs: the form of assessment	2
Lead-in time	2
Physical resources	2
Quality assurance requirements	1
Awarding body support and services	0
Timetabling	0
Factors not included on the pre-selected list	
Meeting employer/regional skills needs	5
Issues relating to COVID19	4

Most of the factors suggested by interviewees matched factors which had been pre-identified. This was useful in that it confirmed that at least some of the factors identified during the literature review were, indeed, relevant. Of these, the size and cost of a qualification in relation to funding was the most frequent factor mentioned. Three of the pre-identified factors were not mentioned at all

in the unprompted part of the discussion. Two additional factors, not included in the pre-identified list, were raised by several interviewees. The first was the extent to which qualifications met the needs of local employers; the second being the impact of COVID19, which suggests, firstly, that consideration of curriculum leaders' needs is not an entirely separate consideration to the need for vocational qualifications to meet employers' needs but also that an element of business continuity planning may need to be incorporated into future plans for assessment.

In addition, interviewees were asked to respond to the pre-identified factors from the literature. Interviewees were asked to categorise each of those factors as being of high, medium, low or no importance to them and to provide further commentary if they wished. In the event, no factors were rated as being of 'no importance' by any interviewee and this category is therefore excluded from Table 3 below which summarises the categorisations.

Table 3: summary of importance-ratings of pre-identified factors (n=8)



Interestingly, each of the factors, identified from the literature, were rated as being of medium or high importance by over 60% the interviewees while six factors were rated medium or high by every interviewee. The narrative provided by the interviewees on both the unprompted, and prompted factors, was rich in detail and is summarised below by factor.

4.2 Size and funding of the qualification(s)

In discussing the importance of the 'size' of a new qualification, as defined by the number of anticipated teaching and assessment hours, it was clear that curriculum leaders were concerned with the curriculum of the college as a whole. Introducing a larger qualification to replace a smaller legacy qualification has an impact on the wider operation of the college. FE colleges in Wales are funded by the Welsh Government ('WG'). Learning area programmes ('LAPs') which specify the qualifications and other components that make up the programme of learning for a typical full-time learner, are agreed by CCCQ and then submitted to WG for approval by Ministers. While a new programme can be agreed that includes qualifications with more 'guided learning hours' than a predecessor qualification, the overall funding envelope for FE colleges will not increase. Accordingly, an increase in the size of one qualification (assuming the number of learners remains the same) will typically need to be compensated for by lower expenditure on another qualification:

> *Because our funding position is such that, if the LAP value is increased for qualifications in construction, we're not going to get any extra money for it, so the LAP value for something else has got to decrease to pay for it. (CL1)*

The observations of Gardner et al (2008) about the impact on one aspect of the curriculum upon the whole curriculum are borne out in this study: it seems clear that qualification developers should be cognisant of the size of any predecessor

qualifications that are being replaced and aware that larger qualifications may have a displacement effect upon wider provision.

Four interviewees made the distinction between the considerations that they needed to make in their college-wide role compared with the considerations of a subject-head, suggesting that they believed that the design of qualifications may have been over-influenced by the latter:

> *When you're talking to subject specialists, they'll say, 'Oh, well, I need 1,000 hours to do that,' or, 'I need 2,000 hours to do it.' Well, ultimately, yes, we'd all like loads and loads of hours, but there's only so much you can afford to do. (CL2)*

Another interviewee attributed responsibility to awarding bodies for increasing qualification size:

> *It's pointless the awarding body saying, 'Okay, this is 700 hours now,' when we only get funding for 580 or whatever, because it's just not going to work. (CL7)*

However, those interviewees who categorised 'size and funding' as being of only medium importance seemed less concerned than others about this factor. They were clear they did not want to stand in the way of progress and improvements to qualifications and that, where qualifications genuinely did need more hours attached to them, that should (and could) be provided for – as long as there was time and notice provided to do so:

> *If you're doing an electrical installation course, and there is only one employer-required qualification, you could deliver it regardless of whether it's going to cost you more or less, but we need forward planning time to be able to adjust the resource base behind it. (CL3)*

Interviewees' concerns around the size of qualifications appeared to be made sharper by recent experiences with the HSCC qualifications which were

significantly larger than legacy qualifications but are highly relevant in the context of the CBE developments where a new, large, foundation qualification will replace qualifications of various smaller sizes.

4.3 Staff capacity and capabilities

The impact upon staff of the introduction of new qualifications was mentioned by several interviewees as a key factor in the interviews (six rated it with high importance, two with medium). All interviewees provided substantial responses on this topic when prompted to do so and discussed the challenges of securing the right balance of occupational and teaching/assessing expertise – recognising that there were long-standing challenges relating to dual professionalism in the FE sector. The inherent challenges of recruiting staff to teach the relevant vocational area were compounded by the specific requirements of awarding bodies for assessment staff to have specified occupational and assessment expertise and qualifications. One respondent suggested that such requirements from awarding bodies could sometimes be unreasonable and did not take account of the wider application of generic expertise across occupational sectors (for example, the relevance of sport therapy staff's knowledge of physiology for aspects of health and social care courses). Another raised a concern that staff were expected to keep up their professional status (such as nursing registration) which they could not do if they took up a full-time teaching job:

> *It would be difficult for them… because they couldn't just rock up at the nearest hospital and say, 'Can I have two hours nursing, please, on a Tuesday evening?'(CL1)*

However, most interviewees expressed the view that their present staffing profile ought not to be a block to the introduction of new qualifications:

> *I think qualifications should be bold, and I think we should design the right qualification, but there has to be an understanding from all of us, we ain't*

> *got waiting in the wings a group of people… Because if we need to change the workforce to match what we need to these young people… then that's what we need to do. (CL6)*

Most were ready to recruit additional staff to fill knowledge gaps, but emphasised that they needed time to do so, and that recent reforms had not allowed them sufficient time to ensure that they had appropriate staff resources in place:

> *I think if the response from the awarding bodies was, 'Ok, we'll give you a year to get that person a bit more industrially updated'… maybe to do some qualifications through the Open University, which is what we've been doing with some of our staff, or maybe work on a work placement programme, then that's fine. But we were having these conversations in July last year … for a teaching start at the end of August and, you know, we can't conjure the staff out of mid-air to cover the needs. (CL1)*

One interviewee gave an indication of just how long it might take to recruit staff to fill gaps brought about by a recently adopted new qualification:

> *I mean the planning, the lead-in time took a year …for us to identify the different skills that were needed on each different part of the qualification. It was new to us as an organisation and we very quickly realised that our existing talent pool couldn't deliver it. It required something really different. (CL4)*

These findings suggest that the timing of qualification reforms combined with the requirements placed upon colleges by awarding bodies, can create difficulties for curriculum leaders if there is insufficient time to recruit and/or train suitable staff to address the requirements. Any assumption that time merely needs to be provided for existing staff to familiarise themselves with new qualifications may be inappropriate if colleges find themselves in the position of having to recruit new and different expertise.

4.4 Timetabling

The impact of new qualifications upon timetabling arrangements was not mentioned in the unprompted responses as a key factor and it ranked relatively low in the prompted ratings (two ranked it as high, three as medium, two as low). A range of views were expressed which differed according to the ratings interviewees had given. Those who rated timetabling as low or medium tended to articulate the view that whatever was required, the college could be flexible enough to accommodate it, although one acknowledged this was easier for larger colleges than for smaller ones:

> *I think the larger the institution, the more flexibility is inbuilt into it. So ... that's not been an issue for us. (CL1)*

Conversely, one interviewee, whose college covered several more rural locations, articulated some of the practical problems that qualifications with a high element of work placement, or controlled assessments taking several hours, created:

> *Students come in on the school buses. So we can't start until half past nine. And they have to finish by half past three, four o'clock in the afternoon. So it has huge implications... our timetables are really restricted. (CL7)*

Another interviewee, who considered timetabling to be a highly important factor, also linked that concern to the inclusion of placements:

> *Health and Social Care, and Childcare, are both prime examples of that, because they have been a bit of a nightmare with regards to timetabling in order to ensure that the learners get access to the right number of hours for their case studies, or for their placement hours. (CL5)*

A further suggestion was that complexity in the design of a qualification, with optional pathways, could lead to timetabling challenges:

> *What would cause us significant issues is if a qualification was designed that had lots of strands and lots of options that learners could choose, which would then mean that from an efficiency perspective that was difficult for us to do. (CL8)*

This concern was counter-balanced by the same interviewee's view that an increasing use of innovative technology could help to overcome timetabling challenges:

> *I can see some opportunities to be really innovative, and actually in Construction you can start to see some examples of where virtual reality could be used to augment the traditional lecture-based approach, and to create quite an interesting environment for students. (CL8)*

It can thus be seen that, while the impact of the qualification upon the timetabling of the curriculum was not at the forefront of interviewees' minds when considering factors of importance, there were a number of aspects of qualification design that could have an impact upon the manageability of new qualifications. These factors include, for example, the length of the college day (such as if learners are required to take an assessment over an extended period of time), the number of optional routes that are provided and whether there are opportunities for some aspects of the learning and/or assessment to be delivered remotely.

4.5 Physical resources

Two interviewees mentioned physical resources, rating this factor as being of high importance. Four interviewees rated this factor as being of medium importance and the other two as of low importance. Some suggested that colleges had sufficient budgets to handle reasonable investment in new resources, indicating that they were fairly relaxed about the forthcoming CBE qualifications:

> *We don't think that there's going to be a significant capital ask from the new Construction courses as they come in. However, there may be on some campuses… the need to re-equip some of the workshops to offer more of the routes because of the move to two trades. But we're not worried about that… annually we have a capital budget and the level of re-equipping for Construction doesn't appear to be that concerning. (CL8)*

Five interviewees indicated that the importance of physical resources depended upon the subject, citing the introduction of new digital or engineering qualifications as examples of those that may have significant resource implications for the college:

> *When we get more digital courses or cyber security, which has quite a lot of investment in terms of technology, then we just need to be aware of that sooner rather than later, and it could impact on whether we'd run the qualification or not … if we felt that the resources required were too much. (CL4)*

It would seem, therefore, that the demands placed upon colleges by new qualifications will depend to a great extent upon the subject matter of the qualification and the extent to which any new technology is required, and/or to how different the physical resources are to those of predecessor qualifications. Any specific resource requirements should be identified in good time so that colleges have the opportunity to identify the need for future investment or to take the decision, if appropriate, whether to offer the qualification.

4.6 Awarding body support and services

Across the UK, the VQs delivered in FE colleges are typically delivered by commercial organisations (some of whom are educational charities). In Wales, the statutory description is 'awarding body' (the Act). Historically, awarding bodies have competed for the business of learning providers, such as colleges, who choose qualifications to offer to learners. QW, in commissioning HSCC

qualifications and, subsequently, CBE qualifications, intervened to move the point of choice of these qualifications to a national level, rather than a college level. Typically, in introducing a new qualification, awarding bodies provide training or support to learning providers to introduce the new specification and a requirement to do this forms part of QW's contract with awarding bodies for commissioned qualifications.

None of the interviewees mentioned the support provided by awarding bodies in the unprompted section of the interview, which is perhaps unsurprising given that such support is typically targeted at subject specialists. However, once prompted, half of the interviewees categorised such support as 'highly important', while three opted for 'medium' importance. One interviewee expressed disappointment at the choice of awarding body (one of a consortium) that QW had made for HSCC, on the basis of that awarding body's reputation and experience:

> *I think that some of the awarding bodies that are more vocational, have got a much better reputation in terms of knowing and understanding the type of learners that we get and the industry. (CL1)*

Conversely, another interviewee described the greater control of VQs in Wales by QW as a positive step:

> *Obviously, we're now regulating many of our qualifications. To me, that's a huge positive for the area, for the sector. (CL2)*

Several stressed the importance of a good relationship between the awarding body and staff, with one describing this as 'vitally important'. Interviewees described their expectations using terms such as 'guidance', 'advice' and 'support' and suggested that it was important that awarding body staff made themselves available to provide this. Some interviewees suggested that, in

recent years, the quality or amount of support had dwindled, particularly from awarding bodies based in England:

> *What I find with some of the examining bodies now is that you haven't got that personalisation to it, it's become a little bit like a call centre. (CL2)*

Some expressed the view that it would be helpful to have a regional (or Wales-specific) representative – and where this was available it was valued:

> *What is more important is that there is a dedicated one person that you can go to for support and guidance… somebody that can be a dedicated support person for your institution. (CL5)*

Some interviewees' perceptions of awarding body support were coloured by their recent and ongoing engagement in relation to awarding arrangements due to the COVID19 situation. For Wales-only qualifications, such as HSCC qualifications, decisions had been able to be made specifically in Wales, whereas for qualifications regulated in England, decisions were being made by Ofqual. Three interviewees commented favourably on the handling of the Wales-only qualifications compared with other qualifications. Several stressed the importance of timely and focused communication to support the introduction of new qualifications:

> *Going out during the implementation phase, and making sure that as early as possible, you include different numbers of people in the training programme, so that they're clear about the messages they're taking back to colleges, and the message needs to change at different points. (CL8)*

One interviewee expressed concerns about the consistency of advice provided by quality assurance staff from awarding bodies, suggesting that this could be variable depending upon different personnel and two expressed cynicism about the value of awarding bodies at all, one describing them as a 'necessary evil'

and the other suggesting that they had 'taken our money and dished out the instructions, and haven't always been very helpful'.(*CL7)*

It would appear, therefore, that awarding bodies have a key role to play in assuring the manageability of their qualifications for curriculum leaders by contributing to the readiness of teaching and assessment staff in a timely manner and by providing ongoing support and advice in an accessible manner.

4.7 Quality assurance

For VQs, external quality assurance ('EQA') is conducted by awarding bodies while colleges are responsible for fulfilling internal quality assurance ('IQA') requirements. The administrative requirements for this can be extensive which might suggest that this should be an important factor to impact upon curriculum leaders. However, of the pre-identified factors quality assurance received the lowest rating (two 'highs', three 'mediums' and three 'lows'). Only one of the interviewees mentioned it without prompting, saying that it was important '*for quality assurance purposes, to make sure we've got a good IQA process in place with relevant trained staff*' *(CL4).*

Interviewees expressed a range of views about the importance of quality assurance as a factor. Four suggested that while quality assurance was a 'necessity' it was not something in which they were particularly interested, in their role. They suggested that it was not a driver of choice, or a major consideration, but that they would fit whatever requirements there were, for new qualifications, into the existing college systems, working with the awarding body to adjust the systems accordingly: 'it's important that awarding organisations work with colleges, test our internal systems' *(CL5).* These interviewees also stressed that it was important that awarding bodies provided clarity about their expectations.

Of the two interviewees who rated quality assurance as being a highly important factor, one had only recently updated the college's quality assurance strategy and the other had recently commissioned an external consultancy to audit the quality assurance function within the college. At the other extreme, one interviewee admitted that, while quality assurance should be an important consideration, it was often overlooked:

> *It's often internally the last thing that we kind of look at, 'cause we go straight for what's the content, how are we going to engage the young people, and then it's only while it's up and running you then get some poor person from quality going, 'Have you any idea what input that's having?' and you go, 'Oh.' (CL6)*

One interviewee suggested that it was unhelpful if awarding body quality assurance staff only visited one site of the centre when large colleges had multiple campuses. Conversely, another interviewee complained that different EQA staff from the same awarding body had given conflicting advice on two different campuses of the same college. Some other interviewees also stressed the importance of consistency in the quality assurance process.

It was clear, therefore, that curriculum leaders acknowledged the balance of responsibilities for quality assurance between their own institutions and awarding bodies but that they would benefit from early insight into the quality assurance requirements for new qualifications together with a reminder of the need to ensure that internal systems are compliant with the expectations of awarding bodies.

4.8 Lead-in time for qualifications

The lead-in time for qualifications often presented itself in the literature as a discrete concern. It was one of the factors that CCCQ had raised with QW before this study. Moreover, although only mentioned by two of the

interviewees during the interview it was rated as highly important by five and as of medium importance by three in the prompted response section. As a factor, however, it differs from the other factors in that it is not an inherent feature of the qualification, rather it relates to the timeliness of centres being able to act upon, or take account of, any of the other factors. When discussing the other factors, interviewees frequently commented to the effect that 'providing we have time to prepare, we can accommodate [factor x]'. Consideration of lead-in time needs, therefore, to be understood in this context.

Interviewees talked at length about this factor, particularly in response to the prompted questions. Their responses were, in several cases, influenced by the recent introduction of HSCC qualifications where qualification specifications had been published much later than the scheduled dates due to the need for multiple submissions to the regulator prior to approval of the qualifications. Interviewees expressed a range of views, when probed, as to the ideal lead-in time between final qualifications and sample assessment materials being published, and first teaching. However, across the responses as a whole, a broad sequence of requirements emerged according to the different purposes for which information about the new qualifications was required.

The first set of needs identified related to information to support the development of LAPs. For these, the broad size and shape of the qualifications was needed. Some interviewees contrasted the timescale for HSCC qualifications where one of the LAPs (for first teaching in September 2020) had still not been finalised (resulting in funding allocations being determined at the legacy rates) with the more advanced stage of development of the CBE qualifications for Wales, for which LAPs were already being considered in advance of first teaching in September 2021. Interviewees noted that this was a positive development. However, some interviewees expressed the view that, for HSCC, information about the new qualifications had been discussed with CCCQ

at too late a point for them to have any influence, that they were presented with what felt like a 'done deal'. They stressed that engagement with that group at an earlier point would be important for future qualification reform.

Secondly, interviewees explained the need to provide information for prospective students and their parents about a year before starting the course. A range of dates, between August and November, were suggested as to when prospectuses needed to be prepared or ready. Several interviewees acknowledged that the information needed at this point did not to be the full specification and assessment details, although being able to explain the overall approach to assessment to learners and their parents was important:

> *You wouldn't need the nitty-gritty and exact wording ... but you would like to be able to tell them that it's going to be this many hours of a work placement, two external exams...and a whatever. If you study A-levels, you get that, don't you? It often feels to me with vocational stuff, those students just don't seem to have the same level of information. (CL6)*

However, one interviewee, who expressed concerns about the risks of the qualification system being inflexible and unresponsive, commented that:

> *I would hate to say we would be slowing down qualification reform because we're worried about our prospectus. (CL2)*

The third set of needs identified by interviewees related to the operational planning of timetabling, staffing and resources. Information to support these kinds of decisions, it was suggested, would be needed by January prior to the September of first teaching:

> *If you're on about curriculum managers and programme leaders that need to coordinate staff, they need, again, not the detail of the units, but they need the big, broad brushstrokes tied down, not moving, probably by January. (CL6)*

The final set of needs were for teachers to be able to make the detailed preparations to teach and assess the new qualifications. There were a range of views about when teachers would begin to prepare to teach new qualifications. Some suggested that this would, typically, take place after Easter and in the summer:

> *They would probably prepare the actual schemes of work, and there would be staff development internally, within the institution, from the Easter, but I think the, the time between December and April should be awarding organisation staff development time, and then the time between Easter and September is institutional staff development time. (CL5).*

Despite a clear view emerging of the need to have information sufficiently in advance of first teaching, some expressed a pragmatic view and recognised that there had been occasions where faster preparation had been accommodated. One interviewee concluded:

> *It's not always ideal, and the more time we have the better, but, yeah, we always manage to get through. (CL7)*

Three interviewees raised some more specific issues about the handling, by the awarding bodies and regulators, of the lead-in time. For example, one suggested that late, or multiple, changes to draft specifications that had already been published were problematic and stressful for teaching staff to accommodate. However, when probed, the same interviewee still expressed a preference for any information to be published as soon as possible. Another stressed the need, in developing qualifications, to get the balance right between being flexible and responsive on the one hand and consulting with stakeholders on the other.

As the literature suggests, timescales and lead-in times are an important factor in the introduction of new qualifications, and this was reflected keenly by the views of interviewees. However, it is interesting that there were no suggestions

that qualifications should be piloted in advance, (cf Elwood, 2012; Oates, 2007 and Pring, 2013). The desire, instead, was for a careful, informative and well-managed introduction of new qualifications. The inference was, if anything, that piloting would bring further complexity and different challenges, given the heavy investment in staffing and resources that some new qualifications required. What was being requested was, put simply, a more pragmatic approach to enabling leaders to plan for what they needed to be able to deliver and to be able to do so in good time. College leaders recognised that changes to qualifications might mean changes to staffing structures, staff profiles, resources or even new buildings, but they appeared to take this in their stride, providing that they had sufficient notice with which to make the changes.

Molway's (2019) reflections on the stress and impact on mental well-being that the introduction of new qualifications can place upon teaching staff are reflected in some of the observations of interviewees, but there were also suggestions about how this can be mitigated, with clearer, more consistent messaging and well-managed lead-in time. If policy makers keep curriculum leaders in the picture and are informed by their views, in turn the curriculum leaders can play their part in managing staff wellbeing.

4.9 Meeting learner needs (i) – whether the qualification content is engaging

While the focus of the study derived from an interest in the manageability of qualifications, several of the factors identified as being of interest to curriculum leaders focused on the extent to which qualifications are engaging to learners. In one sense it could be considered that engagement is an important aspect of manageability – the implicit logic suggesting that it is easier to manage a curriculum if learners are likely to be engaged with it than the reverse.

Although only two interviewees mentioned the suitability of the content of the qualification for learners in the unprompted discussion, it was the second highest rated prompted factor, with six rating it as 'high' and two as 'medium' importance. Most of those who rated this factor as high stressed the importance of re-engaging previously dis-engaged learners, who often took VQs, particularly at level 2. They suggested that the subject-matter, or content, of a qualification was important in securing learners' re-engagement with learning suggesting that engaging content also improved the learning experience by enriching teaching:

> *If you engage them straight away, get them into the subject, it's the most important thing you possibly could do. And also it's not just for learners. I suppose if you get engagement and it enthuses the teachers, that enthusiasm of the teachers will pass on onto the learners as well. (CL2)*

Conversely, one of the interviewees who considered this factor to be of only medium importance, suggested that it was more important for the content to be relevant to the needs of employers than to be engaging in itself. Engagement, they argued, came from the teaching rather than the content:

> *The content needs to meet the industry and HE sector's needs, not be engaging content. The engagement comes from the delivery, and that's our basket. (CL5)*

The importance of a qualification having engaging content in order to attract learners to take the qualification in the first place was stressed by three interviewees. This was particularly important when encouraging learners to take qualifications which they may not have been considering but were needed to fulfil regional skills needs:

> *I think it's about finding the right curriculum that can convince some of those people that actually they do want to pick up something that is a*

sector priority, because you can make that curriculum exciting and interesting for them. (CL6)

Two others provided a context for their interest in qualification content being engaging in that it provided a direct link to, and influence upon, the retention targets set by WG, for which they were responsible, once learners had started a course.

The way in which we see that normally is probably in terms of learner retention and behavioural issues rather than curriculum related issues. (CL1)

Two different examples of barriers to engagement were given in relation to the HSCC qualifications. One interviewee suggested that the level of intellectual demand of some content, such as the need to understand the legislative context, was unnecessarily challenging for learners whose first language was not English. They noted that this barrier could have a negative effect locally where there was a high demand for qualified care workers. Another suggested that some of the content in the qualifications was challenging in the context of the emotional maturity of young learners:

Talking about adult social care, some of the things that you see on the frontline require a level of emotional maturity that some of our 16, 17-year-olds simply don't have. I think there's some careful thought needed to having a qualification which has the same emotional expectations of a 16-year-old as it does of a 36-year-old because they're not the same thing. (CL1)

It would appear, therefore, that the extent to which qualification content is engaging is a direct concern to curriculum leaders for a number of reasons: it supports recruitment onto the course and it helps to retain learners' interest while on the course – which in turn, contributes to the college achieving its retention targets. In designing qualification content, the responses from

interviewees suggest that awarding bodies should carefully consider the needs and abilities of the targeted learners.

4.10 Meeting learner needs (ii) – the form of assessment

The form of assessment was one of the lower ranking factors of importance to those interviewed. Only two interviewees mentioned this factor in the un-prompted section of the interview and a further two rated it as high in the prompted section: the remainder all indicated that it was of medium importance. Despite this, interviewees tended to express quite strong views about the topic and there was a strong degree of alignment of these views across all interviewees. The most strongly expressed view was that externally assessed examinations were not the best form of assessment for level 2 learners taking VQs. All interviewees suggested this to some extent. Two attributed the unsuitability of examinations for level 2 learners to the negative experiences of those learners with examinations at school and to the detrimental effect this had had upon their confidence:

> *I think that the external testing elements, we all understand the rationale for them, but… especially at Level 2, that has proved to be a challenge because you've got a cohort of learners who haven't been particularly successful in their school setting with external assessment. (CL1)*

Comparing the timing of continual assessment throughout the course with examinations at the end of the course, three interviewees suggested that the former was more likely to retain the engagement of the learners over time, compared with examinations where learners may disengage until the end of the course when the examination approaches:

> *With continual assessment and other forms of assessment and practical assessment, I feel learners have to be quite switched on all the time. (CL2)*

One interviewee suggested that unengaging assessment could even negate the benefits of engaging content:

> *If you're going to say, 'We're teaching this and it's really exciting, but it's all going to be then assessed via exam,' well that would be a disaster for vocational learners. (CL6)*

Interestingly, several interviewees made an explicit link between the form of assessment and the skills being tested, suggesting that written examinations were not the best way of testing vocational skills. However, one suggested that variety was important; that examinations had a place but should not be the only form of assessment:

> *I think there has to be a bit more variety…in assessment practices... I'm not an advocate of never sitting an exam… I don't see any problem in an expectation that we build that into some of the assessment strategies, but equally, if I've got somebody who is going to be looking after my children, I want to know that they're good with children and that they understand, practically, what it is like to work with children. (CL3)*

This sense of a need for balance was also acknowledged by another interviewee expressing concerns about examined assessment whereby there had, in the past, been an over-emphasis on course-work:

> *We all understand the move away from coursework, solely centre-marked and moderated provision. (CL1)*

A clear distinction was made by two interviewees between the 'levels' of qualifications and the appropriateness of written examinations – while another suggested that it was appropriate for those learners looking to progress to higher education to have some experience of examinations at level 3:

> *I think it's important that the form of assessment prepares the learner for the progression into whatever aspect they're moving onto, so whether*

> *they're moving into industry or into HE, the mode of assessment should reflect and should prepare learners for that progression. (CL5)*

While discussing assessment two interviewees commented on the ongoing considerations in the context of COVID19, where they noted how it had been possible to determine for examination-based subjects that teacher judgement would be used, whereas for continually assessed and practical qualifications it was deemed to be more important that assessment be, at least partially, completed:

> *I think this has proven to me, this crisis and when they made the decisions to close the exams, how meaningless it all is. And maybe we all need to consider that with the exams. Because how quickly were we able to turn around and have a centre-assessed grading? (CL2)*

Overall, the responses on the importance of engaging assessment indicated a clear concern that learners' needs may not be met if the form of assessment presents an inappropriate and unintentional barrier to learners. Their views suggest that, in selecting a form of assessment, awarding bodies should consider both the motivations and past experiences of the target group of learners and their intended destinations.

4.11 Meeting learner needs (iii) – the progression routes of the qualification

The extent to which new qualifications addressed the progression needs of learners was the highest rated factor in the prompted section of the interview: all eight interviewees rated it as being of high importance. It was also mentioned by four interviewees in the unprompted section of the interview while four interviewees described how progression routes for learners were at the heart of their college's strategy for curriculum and how they felt that qualifications were central to this:

> *It is knowing what's the purpose of the qualification. Is it for employment? Is it for onward progression to future study, whether it's at HE or FE? …And therefore does it have credibility with employers and with universities? (CL3)*

However, the relationship of the qualification to learner progression depended, some felt, on the level of the qualification. Two interviewees suggested that learners, especially at level 2, have often not fixed on a career-choice, so it was important for the qualification to develop broader, transferable skills. One described a concern that too much focus was placed, too soon, on the occupational progression route when learners may use it as a stepping-stone to progression in another direction:

> *It very much feels like we're focusing people's minds at the very beginning of a programme, in terms of 'this is where the end point might be'. That worries me, as an educationalist, if I'm honest, because I think we can all quote hundreds, if not thousands, of stories of people who perhaps did a Performing Arts course and then ended up being an excellent primary school teacher, because of the transferrable skills that taught them. (CL6)*

Several interviewees (4) focused on the need, as they perceived it, for level 3 qualifications to allow for learners to progress either into employment or into higher education. One set out the differentiated considerations for progression at each level:

> *At Level 1, I would only expect progression to be internal…a stepping-stone to a higher level within FE. At Level 2 I would be expecting the progression to allow learner an exit strategy into a form of employment, or onto a Level 3 programme. And at Level 3, I would expect there to be a progression route into either HE or into employment. (CL5)*

Two interviewees expressed concerns that, with the reforms to HSCC qualifications, too much emphasis had been placed on one progression route, employment into social care, rather than on progression into nursing degrees

for which the legacy qualifications had been used as a springboard, suggesting that qualifications may be taken for a range of purposes other than that primarily identified by the qualifications regulator or awarding body. Moreover, several interviewees described their college's approach to providing clear information on the progression routes for learners, which most referred to as 'progression routes', although one used the term 'career course trees':

> *With our career course trees we've got routes into employment at every level and what jobs they'd expect to have at those levels as well. (CL7)*

It was important, interviewees suggested, to be clear about both the qualifications that were required for progression into certain jobs, as well as the range of options for progression that may be provided by each qualification. Identifying the intended progression routes for learners of new qualifications would appear, therefore, to be a critical factor for awarding bodies and policy makers to consider before launching new qualifications. Clarity on these routes is important for curriculum leaders in promoting the qualifications but also in ensuring that the range of progression routes were considered.

Taken as a whole, the range of findings across the identified factors increases our understanding of the aspects of manageability and learner engagement that were important to FE curriculum leaders. QW's MERV model (QW, 2020b) builds upon Stobart's (2008) 'one-handed-clock' approach to seeking balance in assessment design and sees the 'trade-off' as being four-dimensional rather than three. The findings of this study illustrate that the concept of manageability is far broader than the administrative convenience, or otherwise, of staging the assessment which appears to be the focus of Stobart's concerns. The findings also suggest that manageability and the engagement of learners are intricately connected and suggest that it is of significant concern to curriculum leaders that qualifications should be engaging to learners both in

their content and in the form of assessment. If qualifications are not engaging, then there are serious implications for college finances and success rates but also to the quality of learning and the future progression chances for learners.

4.12 Meeting employers' needs

The need for qualifications to meet the needs of employers was not one of the pre-identified factors of importance for curriculum leaders. With the benefit of hindsight, this was an omission that probably derived from a desire to counter-balance the more prolific writings on the needs of employers than exists on the needs of educational institutions. What had not been sufficiently recognised in advance was the inextricably linked nature of those needs. Four interviewees incorporated employers' needs into their discussion of learners' progression needs whereas others considered it to be a separate issue. The link between qualifications to employers' needs was articulated from several different perspectives.

Firstly, two interviewees wanted reassurance that new qualifications had been designed to be relevant to a wide range of employers, not just those of large companies and not just those based in England, or even in just the cities of Wales. It was recognised that this could be challenging, given the diversity of industry:

> *The employers that contribute to qualification reviews are large employers, and quite often what they want is not relevant to a lot of smaller SMEs*[1]*… So they need to be relevant, but how[can] a qualification be relevant to thousands of different employers? Take engineering. Every engineering employer wants something slightly different, and it's really challenging. (CL7)*

[1] Small or medium sized enterprises.

Furthermore, one interviewee identified that it would be helpful to colleges if awarding bodies could provide clear endorsements from employers which would provide reassurance to other employers that the qualification was relevant. Recognising that 'one size does not fit all', two interviewees also wanted to be able understand the *extent* to which qualifications met employers' needs and whether additional specialised training or qualifications were needed to top up a main qualification.

One interviewee expressed doubts as to whether qualifications could be sufficiently flexible, or awarding bodies sufficiently responsive, to address rapidly developing technologies, such as, for example, renewable energies:

> *We're being asked to develop curriculum even though no one's asking for it, because Welsh Government are saying that it is coming, and when it comes there is going to need to be courses set up ready to go to help people reach that demand. (CL6)*

Concerns were also expressed by two interviewees about whether awarding bodies would be able, or interested enough, to meet training needs that were specific to Wales, and one interviewee suggested that awarding bodies may consider the market for Wales-specific qualifications to be too small. Another suggested that new training needs may arise in Wales following the significant impact of company closures following the COVID19 pandemic (such as in the aerospace industry) and questioned whether awarding bodies would be able to respond quickly to develop qualifications to fit these needs.

4.13 The impact of the COVID19 pandemic

Indeed, the impact that the COVID19 pandemic would have upon qualifications was one factor that could not have been anticipated in initial scoping the study. The interviews were originally planned for April 2020 but due to the closure of

colleges and the significant impact of this upon decisions about qualification outcomes, were rescheduled to late May and early June to allow curriculum leaders to focus on more pressing concerns. However, events relating to COVID19 were very much on interviewees' minds and it is unsurprising that references featured in every interview. The impact of COVID19 upon curriculum leaders' perceptions about qualifications would, doubtless, be worthy of an entirely separate study. For the most part, interviewees remained focused on the longer term, wider issues and most of their COVID19-related comments have been included in earlier sections above. However, three concerns that were relevant to the study are summarised below.

Firstly, where qualifications include requirements for work placements this presents a risk for colleges and learners in the event that learners are unable to access the workplace. To some extent this has always been a risk where employers may cease trading, but never on such a massive scale as within the pandemic. In some cases, adaptations to qualifications could be made to address this issue, but it was particularly problematic where a number of hours of work placement were specified:

> *We can manage getting them back in [to college] and fulfilling workshop and salon elements, although it's going to be difficult and it's going to involve small numbers. We don't have any flexibility at all when it comes to work placement because a lot of the placements are closed. (CL1)*

The developers of qualifications may wish to consider the extent to which learners' achievements on college-based courses are dependent upon time spent with employers. Such a requirement builds a dependency upon employers whose ability to accommodate learners may be affected by a range of unanticipated factors.

Secondly, as discussed above, interviewees were concerned that examination-based assessment was particularly challenging for some level 2 learners. These concerns were compounded, given that those learners had been unable to take their examinations in 2020, meaning that they could be progressing to higher level examined courses without any experience of successfully taking examinations.

A third set of concerns related to the response of awarding bodies themselves during the pandemic. While many awarding body staff were being furloughed, it meant that colleges felt unsupported in a time of uncertainty and need. While it would have been impossible to plan in advance for the precise circumstances of the COVID19 it may be helpful to reflect upon the impact that it had upon the assessment of qualifications in 2020.

Chapter 5 – Findings: Research question B

How have curriculum leaders, in further education colleges in Wales, been impacted in their role by the introduction of new qualifications in Health and Social Care in 2019?

5.1 Impacts of HSCC reforms on interviewees

Interviewees were asked to describe the impact upon their work of the introduction of the new qualifications and there was a range of responses. Several reported that the introduction had a significant impact upon them, some speaking at some length to share their concerns. Others appeared to have been more distanced from, or relaxed about, the changes. More reported what appeared to be relatively significant impacts than reported a low impact.

Four interviewees spoke of the key role they had played in supporting their senior staff to implement change and that the introduction of the new qualifications had been stressful for their staff. The scale and complexity of the changes was cited as one of the reasons for the increased stress:

> *It hasn't been an easy process, and still isn't an easy process, it still feels like we're not quite there yet. I think people underestimated the scale of change. I think people thought, 'Oh yeah, they're looking at the qualifications,' which happens all the time, doesn't it? I don't think people had bargained for how much of a change that was going to be, even though it had been quite clear that it was, and I think that was still a huge shock to some people. (CL6)*

Moreover, one interviewee reported that, due to the scale and complexity of change they, as a curriculum leader, needed to be more closely involved with the awarding bodies than they would ordinarily. Others (2) suggested that the increased stress was due to the later than expected approval of the

qualifications by the regulator, which had a knock-on impact on the timing of training and development for staff:

> *Staff training and development, so late in the day, impacted on the wellbeing of those staff, and therefore has impacted on senior leadership and management of the institution…there has been quite a bit of staff sickness in that area, possibly as a result of the stress that they were under with the fast turnaround and the lack of syllabus and resources available for the planning phase in term 3. (CL5)*

Expressing concerns about the impact of the new qualifications on funds, one interviewee reported that, although more funding had been allocated to the delivery of HSCC qualifications, this had been recuperated from other spending areas:

> *Whilst on paper it looks like we're getting paid more for Health and Social Care, it doesn't mean anything anyway. (CL6)*

Concerns about the cost of delivering the qualifications also extended to the amount of IQA work that was required which was perceived to be greater than the legacy qualifications while a further area for concern related to a perceived change in the size and level of demand of the qualifications. One interviewee suggested that the design and size of the level 2 qualification demonstrated a lack of understanding of the type of learner that FE colleges recruit for level two, implying that it could be overwhelming for those learners. Another suggested that they were recruiting fewer learners than for legacy qualifications:

> *I know that if we were running the old Childcare qualification we were putting on three groups, and my Head of Department is telling me that actually the new qualification, the type of learners that we are attracting won't be able to go onto it, and we're only putting one group in now. (CL4)*

Some interviewees reported an impact on the organisational structure of the new qualifications, with one specifying the need to employ an additional four assessors while another had restructured the staff teams and working locations:

> *Our work-based learning care assessor team sat under work-based learning, and our care team, they were a separate team... we've merged those teams now as a result of this change…they're delivering the same qualification, just in different settings. (CL4)*

There was one suggestion that the development of the qualifications had not sufficiently taken into consideration the needs of FE colleges and had been overly influenced by the needs of the occupational sector, with too great an expectation placed upon FE to meet employers' training needs:

> *It can't all be FE's problem, can it? We can't now be responsible for developing [staff], the employer's got to be there somewhere, and I know that placement element happens, but actually when someone gets a job, don't you train them on the job? (CL6)*

While most interviewees described challenges impacting upon their work, one also reflected a more positive view:

> *In terms of the Health and Social Care this year, that seems to have gone well, and in fact we were one of the few that when we were asked if we wanted another extra year on the old qualification we said, 'No, we've already moved to the new qualification.' (CL4)*

In summary, curriculum leaders' experiences with the introduction of the HSCC qualifications reflected the factors discussed in Chapter 4 above. In particular, the experiences interviewees emphasised the importance of the size and funding for qualifications; of staffing and timetabling requirements; of the need for a sufficient lead-in time; of support provided by awarding bodies; of the importance of engaging content and assessment for learners and of the need to consider the range of progression opportunities. While acknowledging the challenges that had faced QW in implementing this first major programme of VQ reform, interviewees gave a clear sense of the negative impact, upon staffing and, potentially, upon learners, that insufficient consideration of these key factors may have caused.

Chapter 6 – Findings: Research question C

How, potentially, might the qualifications regulator, awarding bodies, curriculum leaders and other relevant bodies in Wales improve upon past practice in relation to ensuring the manageability, for further education colleges in Wales, of the second phase of qualification reform in 2021?

In the final section of the interview, interviewees were asked to reflect upon how they thought QW, awarding bodies, any other relevant bodies and their own institutions could learn from the experience of introducing the new HSCC qualifications – and what could be done differently in the context of the new CBE qualifications being introduced in 2021.

6.1 Qualifications Wales

Several interviewees expressed the view that QW was already taking steps in the right direction for improvement, by engaging more closely and regularly with curriculum leaders:

> *I think keeping the senior curriculum staff informed … about deadlines and what's going on and who you're consulting with, has been a really positive feature in the last sort of eight months or so. (CL1)*

One interviewee commented that the interview itself was a useful step to be taking. Two others stressed that it was important that curriculum leaders had a broad understanding of the size and shape of the qualification, its content and assessment, to enable them to think about the impact on staffing and resourcing, and on the distribution of their funding:

> *With the construction one, we know now that we're looking at 2021. We're already looking at LAPs, so I'm assuming we'll have LAP values out very soon… So to me that one has gone much better. (CL3)*

More direct engagement between QW and CCCQ, they felt, would provide clarity of understanding at the appropriate level and avoid the risks of concerns escalating through rumours spreading. One interviewee suggested that having a representative of CCCQ on any stakeholder groups for subsequent reforms would strengthen that link while two others emphasised the importance of having a timescale and sticking to it, so that colleges were able to plan, train, and be prepared for the new qualifications. However, one added that, if the timetable needed to change, it was important to 'be brave enough to say, "Actually, we need to delay it." Rather than trying to rush it through'. *(CL5)*

A further suggestion by one interviewee was that QW should encourage awarding bodies to be more innovative and make better use of digital technology. They made the link to COVID19 challenges and commented that digital portfolios and records were much easier to access in those circumstances than paper assessments and portfolios. In turn, this led to comments about consistency with one interviewee suggesting that the regulator should encourage consistent approaches between awarding bodies, particularly when they were acting in a consortium, while another expressed a preference for consistency in the size and form of qualifications.

In summary, the advice to QW appeared to be to keep CCCQ informed, to be clear and honest about timescales, to consider the use of digital technology in qualifications and to promote consistency across awarding bodies and qualifications. The factors identified and discussed in chapter 4 form a useful basis upon which QW should be well placed to respond to such advice with timely information for curriculum leaders. Keep's (2015) suggestion that there had been no serious attempt by the UK government (as the policy makers in

England) to involve institutions in qualification or curriculum development did not appear to have been the case in Wales. Interviewees acknowledged that attempts had been made by QW (the maker of policy about qualifications in Wales) and the awarding bodies to involve FE colleges in qualification development, but suggested that this engagement had not included a critical tier of college managers in the discussions until it was too late for them to be able to make a difference. The findings of the study suggest that it is important for the regulator and awarding bodies to engage with colleges at both the subject level and the curriculum leadership level and that each group has different needs.

6.2 Awarding bodies

Moving on to suggestions about how awarding bodies might improve upon their performance in qualification reform, several interviewees identified that the most important improvement would be to adhere to appropriate timescales for publishing qualifications, specifying quality assurance procedures and delivering training. Moreover, interviewees expressed the wish that awarding bodies would develop a better understanding of the operational needs of colleges and of the impact of qualification reform upon them:

> *Appreciate that we need to start planning curriculum, getting staff in place and marketing to learners. (CL1)*

Furthermore, some interviewees suggested that awarding bodies could develop a more supportive approach to colleges, providing better customer service and being more reachable in times of difficulty:

> *They need to be your critical friend. I don't think they are your critical friend anymore. I think sometimes they feel like the enemy and they're trying to catch you out. (CL2)*

Building on this concept, one interviewee suggested that awarding body training sessions could run more effectively and efficiently in colleges rather than in conference venues. They suggested that single sessions for colleges, where many staff could attend at once, would be more effective than one person attending a series of events and having to cascade the information to fellow staff.

Reflecting on the specific experience of the HSCC reforms, two interviewees suggested that there appeared to have been some tensions between the two awarding bodies working in the consortium for HSCC and some inconsistencies between them. They felt that care should be taken to avoid such inconsistencies in future.

In summary, curriculum leaders' advice for awarding bodies, as for QW, focused particularly upon timeliness and of the need to understand colleges' requirements. Additionally, leaders acknowledged the more operational role of awarding bodies in preparing college staff to teach particular qualifications.

In stating that it was important that both QW and awarding bodies understood their needs and constraints, interviewees were echoing the perspective of Dalin (1978, p34) that 'one highly practical and obvious factor that seldom is successfully managed is the relationship between the various sectors of the educational system'. There is some limited evidence that, as Gunning and Raffe (2011) suggested, college leaders feel closer to policy makers in Wales than in England – or at least that steps are being taken to bring about a closer relationship and that this is starting to reap benefits. Interviewees indicated that they already felt more engaged in, and aware of, the process of developing the second suite of reformed qualifications than they had with the first and there were several comments which favourably compared the position in Wales with that in England. It is perhaps unsurprising that opportunities exist for

relationships be closer between policy makers and colleges in Wales, given that there are only twelve colleges in Wales:

> *Collaboration has particular prominence in Wales where it has been at the heart of the Welsh Government's overarching framework for public service reform (Entwistle, 2014).*

An emphasis on collaboration is a strong feature of Welsh public affairs.

6.3 Other organisations

Interviewees had relatively few suggestions to make about how other organisations might improve their contribution to qualification development and reform, with individual interviewees each commenting on a different body, if any. Consistent with the emerging theme that all organisations in the system needed to better understand the needs of each other, one interviewee suggested that WG should become involved sooner in qualification reform and thus better aware of the funding implications. Another suggested that the colleges themselves, including through CCCQ and Colegau Cymru, should get more involved to represent their views.

Reflecting upon employer engagement, one interviewee stressed the importance of involving SMEs, as well as larger employers, in discussions about qualification reform, for example through employers' representative bodies. Unwin's (2010) and Wolf's (2011) concerns that the development of VQs may be detached from employers were echoed to a limited extent by some interviewees, who expressed the view that SMEs and employers outside cities may be excluded from the qualification development process. However, an alternative view emerged that, in some cases, employers (or sector bodies) may have too much of a say in the way qualifications are designed. The study shows that curriculum leaders are very mindful of the importance of meeting the

needs of employers and this rang through the narrative. However, interviewees provided a useful counterbalance to this by emphasising that qualifications needed to meet the needs of learners taking the qualifications and that not all learners taking a vocational qualification are planning to progress into the related occupation (or actually do so). One interviewee suggested that occupational sector bodies could show more of an understanding of the operation of FE colleges by acknowledging this. It was important, they argued, to ensure that requirements for workplace experience and competence did not act as barriers to learning. The inference that can be drawn from these observations is that, if qualifications are not attractive, or accessible, to learners in either the subject matter, or form of assessment, then learners may either not apply to take the qualifications in the first place, or not succeed in taking them. Substantial failure in this respect is likely, ultimately, to fail to meet the needs of employers for qualified applicants, so the needs are interconnected.

6.4 Curriculum leaders and their colleges

There was a broad consensus amongst interviewees about the steps they would be taking to improve on the implementation of the CBE reforms, with most responding that they would be getting more involved, sooner, including through CCCQ but also more directly with their middle managers. The importance of middle managers was emphasised by several – for example, two said they had chosen to send more senior staff to the relevant subject network meetings and to require them to feed back:

> *Well, we've already done something differently, because our representative at that subject network level is a middle manager, rather than a subject leader. There is already more of an operational level of management involved, rather than a teaching level of consultation. (CL5)*

Other suggestions included that leaders would ask awarding bodies to attend the college to train their staff or that they would create opportunities for colleges across Wales to share best practice and ideas for improvement.

6.5 Summary of findings

The findings, as a whole, appear to underpin Raffe's (2015) observations that the development of new qualifications is incomplete without considering the staff and resources needed in the institutions that deliver them. This view was echoed across the discussion topics, for example in the words of one interviewee who asked that awarding bodies 'appreciate that we need to start planning curriculum, getting staff in place and marketing to learners' (CL1). The findings go some way towards identifying and expanding upon the specific factors that need to be considered by college leaders. While it is not, ultimately, the responsibility of awarding bodies, qualifications regulators or other policy makers to fully address issues of resourcing and preparedness. Engaging in a timely and informative way with those who do have to solve those problems may contribute to an improved likelihood of qualification reforms being implemented successfully. McLaughlin and Mills (2010) reflected on the need to harness the goodwill and support of a wide range of stakeholders across learning providers, and this rings particularly true for these qualification reforms.

The emphasis of Hannagan et el (2007) on the importance of leadership in taking forward change is also borne out in the findings – given interviewees' keenness to be able to lead the changes brought about from qualification reform from a strategic perspective, while Newman's (2002) emphasis on the need to understand the 'messiness' of operational change is relevant when

considering the wide-ranging impacts of reform and some of the unintended consequences.

Huddleston and Unwin's (2013) suggestion that qualifications frame much of what happens in colleges and that the developers of qualifications are, in effect, the developers of the curriculum, would appear to be borne out in the findings of this study. It was clear from the interviewees' responses that the planning, marketing, delivery and assessment of learning; staffing structures and recruitment; training and development; quality assurance processes and the allocation of rooms and equipment were all, ultimately, driven by the nature of the qualifications.

Chapter 7 –Contribution of the study to research and practice

The underlying aim of the study was to understand the factors of qualification reform that had an impact upon the manageability of qualification reform for curriculum leaders in Wales. Although it was possible to identify potential factors from the literature there was little information about the specific concerns. Through qualitative research the study tested those potential factors in the context of recent qualification reform in order to develop an understanding of the impact that those recent reforms had upon curriculum leaders and to identify ways in which future reforms might take better account of their needs. From the study, which involved two thirds of the curriculum leaders of FE colleges in Wales, it is clear that the introduction of new qualifications has a significant impact upon curriculum leaders in a wide range of strategic and operational contexts.

7.1 Engagement and involvement of curriculum leaders in qualification reform

The findings of this study suggest a difference in emphasis to the findings of Ofqual's (Price et al, 2020) study on the factors drive of qualification choice. While, as for the respondents of Ofqual's survey, the interviewees of this study were concerned about meeting the needs of learners, they appeared to place a greater emphasis on the size of a qualification, the resources it requires and the staffing implications than did Ofqual's respondents. While at first glance this may be indicative of a difference between England and Wales it is not possible to draw direct comparisons because the purposes and subjects of each study were different. Although Ofqual's study did include vice principals and principals, by far the highest number of responses were from heads of department. As interviewees in the present study were keen to stress, heads of department and subject heads have a different perspective on qualifications

than do curriculum leaders. If anything, the Ofqual study may provide corroboration for this difference in emphasis.

Perhaps the central message of the study is that it is essential for the instigators of vocational qualification reform to engage early and regularly with curriculum leaders. The strong wish to engage in this way was stated frequently by interviewees but also illustrated by their willingness to give up time during an exceptionally busy and challenging period, during the COVID19 pandemic, to conduct the interviews. While it was recognised that QW and awarding bodies had, in previous reforms, engaged with more junior colleagues within colleges, at a subject level, and whilst that level of engagement was also essential, it was important that the different concerns of curriculum leaders were also taken into account. This engagement was requested, not only to enable them to contribute to the developments but also to inform their development of strategic and operational plans which accommodate the changes.

While assessment specialists who develop qualifications are increasingly well-versed in the requirement for qualifications to be valid and reliable (there is a large volume of literature to support understanding of these aspects), there is significantly less literature to support the understanding of the manageability of qualifications. The study identifies some of the key factors, relating to manageability, which are important to curriculum leaders.

7.2 Manageability and lead-in time

One of the underlying themes of the findings was that sufficient time should be allowed to enable all of the necessary decisions to be taken by curriculum leaders. In the past, the focus of QW and awarding bodies has been, to an extent, on a single publication date of a fully approved qualification, with all its sample assessment materials. Whilst it has generally been the aim to have

these published a year in advance, this has rarely been achieved. Even where awarding bodies made first submissions for approval on time, the volume of amendments required following review for approval could be extensive and time-consuming.

This study, however, has highlighted the different stages at which curriculum leaders need information to support planning, as well as the purposes to which this information is put. The information required at each stage need not include the full intricacies of assessments, which may not be considered in detail by teachers until the term before first teaching. From the evidence provided by interviewees, it has been possible to propose an outline timescale which may be used by QW and awarding bodies to identify the information that is required by colleges, at different key stages and for different purposes. This is set out in table 4 below.

Table 4: information required by colleges prior to first teaching of vocational qualifications

Timescale	Nature of information	Purposes
Approx.18 months prior to first teaching of new qualifications *(where significantly different to legacy qualifications).*	The name, size and outline form of the qualification.	For college leaders to determine whether, and to what extent they will be able to offer a qualification. For CCCQ to develop and approve LAPs prior to submission to WG to secure funding for the qualification.
Approx.13 months prior to first teaching.	An outline of the qualification purpose (including progression routes), content and form of assessment.	For colleges to prepare a prospectus and market the qualification to prospective learners and parents.
Approx. 9 months before first teaching	A well-developed outline of the qualification, its assessment and quality assurance regime, any physical resources required and any special requirements for staff skills, qualifications and experience.	To identify and acquire any additional physical resources. To allocate, recruit and/or train staff to deliver the qualification. To plan timetabling.
Approx. 8 months before first teaching.	Awarding body training for staff delivering the qualification. Approval of centres to deliver the qualification (including quality assurance processes).	To begin to prepare staff effectively for first teaching and ensure appropriate quality assurance processes are in place.
Approx. 5 months before first teaching.	Full details of the content and assessment requirements.	To enable staff to prepare for first teaching and assessment.

7.3 Engaging learners

While the underpinning concern of the study was, essentially, on the *manageability* of the introduction of new VQs, from the perspective of curriculum leaders, the findings shed light on the other under-researched aspect of QW's (2020b) 'MERV' model, namely learners' engagement with qualifications and assessment. Interviewees showed a strong interest in all three elements of learners' needs that were included in the prompted factors in the discussion: the extent to which the *content* of the qualification is engaging for learners, the extent to which *assessment* is engaging for learners and, rated most highly, the *progression* routes for learners.

Considering first the content of the qualification, the focus of the commissioners and developers of VQs has, in recent years, been on the relevance of subject matter to meeting the needs of employers. Whilst interviewees did not dispute this priority, and indeed several explicitly supported it, suggestions were that it was also important to engage learners' interest in the subject matter, whether or not the learner wishes to pursue a career in that area. The extent to which qualification content is engaging is a factor to consider in attracting learners to take the qualification in the first place, as well as encouraging them to complete their course. While the role of teaching staff in making any course content engaging for learners should not be understated, it may be worthwhile for qualification developers to identify what it is about a qualification that makes it interesting and enjoyable for learners to learn.

Turning to the assessment of VQs, the key message from the study is that there is a strong view held by curriculum leaders that externally assessed written examinations, particularly for learners taking level 2 qualifications in FE colleges, are not an ideal form of assessment. Many of these learners were taking level 2

qualifications partly as a consequence of not having succeeded in written examinations in school. The practical nature of vocational learning was felt to be a good way of re-engaging them with learning but the form of assessment could be a barrier to success preventing learners with the aptitude and ability to perform well in practical roles from being able to progress into their chosen career.

Having clear progression routes to, and from, qualifications was the single most important factor identified by curriculum leaders. The learning here, for the developers of qualifications, is to firstly ensure the acceptance of qualifications by employers (of all sizes) for progression into apprenticeships and/or employment but also to be able to provide clear and unambiguous outlines of progression routes into, between, and beyond the qualifications that are offered. In streamlining the VQs that it 'approves' as eligible for use on publicly funded courses, QW has a key role to play in improving the clarity of the progression routes and choices that are available.

7.4 Lessons learned from the reform of HSC qualifications in Wales

There was a shared sense, from interviewees, that the development of the HSC qualifications as the first major development of VQs on a national scale in Wales, had been a challenging experience but one which had been, ultimately, worthwhile. The experience provided opportunities to improve upon practice in time for the second phase of CBE reforms. Several commented that they saw the value of the new qualifications and that they were better qualifications – but that the journey had been painful.

Interviewees were also clear, however, that they could already see improvements in the process for developing the CBE qualifications: LAPs were already being considered, over a year in advance of first teaching; details of the

new qualifications were being considered; plans were forming to restructure staffing and conversations were taking place, regularly, between QW and CCCQ. If the factors identified and discussed within the study were increasingly considered by QW and the awarding bodies, and if QW used its powers to hold awarding bodies to account, there was a sense of optimism that things could be better second time around.

7.5 Future research

This study begins to address an under-researched aspect of assessment design and delivery with a particular focus on the manageability of qualifications. Due to its size and scale, however, it can only be a 'toe in the ocean' of study in this area. It focuses on a small group of curriculum leaders in a small nation, Wales.

There are many opportunities for further research to increase the understanding of the manageability of qualifications and assessment – and there are overlaps with more general studies of education management. For example, the inter-relationship of qualifications and assessment with the curriculum in post-16 education is particularly close. Further studies could extend the considerations of this study to other nations in the UK to identify similarities and differences. A similar study could be conducted in Wales with the managers of work-based-learning training providers, and/or with Head teachers in schools, particularly in advance of the introduction of new qualifications to address the needs of the new curriculum in schools in Wales.

Aspects of learners' engagement with qualifications, particularly with different forms of assessment, are also under-researched. There is a wide range of research on learners' interaction with learning and teaching but very little on their engagement with assessment. QW is conducting some preliminary research in this area at the time of writing but it remains largely unexplored.

The COVID19 pandemic has brought assessment methodologies into a closer focus than ever before and there was a strong sense from the study that it provided the opportunity to give much greater, and perhaps overdue, consideration to innovative, digital forms of assessment.

7.6 Considerations

This was a small study, involving only eight interviewees, and caution therefore needs to be taken when drawing substantive conclusions from the findings. However, the interviewees represented two thirds of the curriculum leaders of the FE colleges in Wales, including coverage of north, mid and south Wales. As an indication of the views of that category of leader the findings are likely to be reasonably representative and to provide a useful stepping-stone for understanding an under-researched topic. The extent to which the findings are representative of the whole group of curriculum leaders is indicated by the considerable overlap between the views expressed.

The study draws conclusions which relate specifically to curriculum leaders in FE colleges in Wales. However, other types of learning provider, such as schools and work-based learning centres, were impacted by the introduction of the new HSCC qualifications. While some of the findings might also be relevant to leaders in those groups, we do not know this. An MSc dissertation is necessarily limited in scale and a further, wider study may have uncovered other important factors for these groups.

These considerations should be borne in mind when interpreting the findings, but, nevertheless, the study provides a useful insight into the perspective of this particular group of leaders in the context of vocational qualification reform in Wales.

7.7 Conclusion

Ensuring the readiness of learning providers for the delivery of new qualifications should be at the forefront of the minds of those charged with reforming assessments and qualifications at a national level. In a policy context it is often an under-considered aspect of reform, particularly at the level of curriculum leadership in FE colleges. It is hoped that this study provides some pointers for researchers, policy-makers, regulators and awarding bodies about nine key factors that need to be considered in order to support the successful introduction of vocational qualifications, namely:

i) the size and cost of the qualification in relation to the available funding;
ii) the impact on staffing, in terms of capacity and capabilities;
iii) the impact on timetabling arrangements;
iv) the physical resources required;
v) the quality assurance arrangements;
vi) the support and services provided by awarding body(ies);
vii) the extent to which learners' needs are addressed by the content, assessment and progression routes of the qualifications;
viii) the extent to which employers' needs are addressed; and
ix) the lead-in time allowed for introducing the qualifications.

In addition, there may be a need, in future, for those developing assessments to consider the potential impact of significant national disruption to assessment arrangements such as those brought about by COVID19.

Beyond the immediate relevance to qualifications regulators and policy makers, it is also hoped that there may be wider applications for this increased understanding. Moreover, the overarching need for the qualifications regulator

and awarding bodies to engage effectively with different levels of management within FE colleges has been emphasised – without which the successful implementation of qualifications and assessment reform is unlikely to be achieved.

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Appendix 1 – Outline discussion guide

1. Thank for willingness to be interviewed. Interview should last just under an hour. Explain that anonymity will be preserved.
2. Confirm consent form completed.
3. Check consent with recording – start recording.
4. For the record, name, job role, institution.
5. Introduce purpose of the research.

   This research is being conducted in collaboration with Qualifications Wales to inform a dissertation that will be submitted as part of a programme of study for an MSc in Educational Assessment with the University of Oxford. In the context of the ongoing programme of reform of vocational qualifications in Wales the it has become apparent that the views of a key group of stakeholders may have been insufficiently considered in the implementation of new and reformed qualifications, namely curriculum leaders within further education colleges. The interests, concerns and considerations of this group of education professionals are insufficiently articulated both in educational research and in the ongoing review and reform work of Qualifications Wales. It is important to better understand this perspective so that it may be considered in the design, implementation and delivery of new and reformed suites of vocational qualifications in Wales. Views of a sample of such leaders will be collected through a series of semi-structured interviews, and analysed and reported both through the submission of a dissertation to the University of Oxford but also through presentation to the Reform Board of Qualifications Wales.

6. The context of research is the recent and ongoing introduction of new Health and Social Care and Childcare qualifications into further education colleges and the forthcoming introduction of Construction and Built Environment qualifications in 2021. Qualifications Wales is developing a model of four principles, known as MERV, reliability and validity are well researched but manageability and engagement less so. The focus of this interview is on the manageability of introducing new qualifications and the concerns of managers. When you're answering, you may wish to reflect on your answers in the context of Health and Social Care but please don't feel limited to that for your exemplification.

7. So to kick off, could you briefly outline the extent to which, and for what purposes, you are interested, in your role in the introduction of new vocational qualifications in Wales.

8. What are the key factors that you take into account, in your role as a curriculum leader, before, and when, new qualifications are introduced?

9. Prompts:

   To what extent are the following aspects of new qualifications important to you (high, medium, low, not important)? For each, comments.

Aspect	H	M	L	N	Comment
Size of qualification(s) and impact on funding					
Timetabling					
Lead-in time					
Physical resources					
Learner needs: whether content is engaging					
Learner needs: the form of assessment					
Learner needs: the progression routes					
Fit with staff capabilities *Supplementary – challenges of dual professionalism*					
Awarding body support and services					
Quality assurance requirements					
Anything else?					

10. How have you been impacted in your role by the introduction of new qualifications in Health and Social Care in 2019?

11. What could the regulator (QW) do better?

12. What could the awarding body do better?

13. Could anybody else do something better?

14. Will you be doing anything differently for CBE?

15. Anything else you'd like to say?

Thank and close

Appendix 2 – Ethical approval

27/03/2020

Dear

Ensuring readiness for delivering new qualifications: the perspective of a selection of College leaders in post-16 education in Wales - CUREC Approval Reference ED-CIA-20-160

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the procedures laid down by the University for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to inform you that, on the basis of the information provided to DREC, the proposed research has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards, and accordingly, approval has been granted.

Should there be any subsequent changes to the project which raise ethical issues not covered in the original application you should submit details to research.office@education.ox.ac.uk for consideration.

Good luck with your research study.

With kind regards,

Dr. Sandra Mathers
Department of Education
University of Oxford