



Ms Lynne Neagle AM
Chair - Children, Young People and Education Committee
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By Email: Lynne.Neagle@assembly.wales

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Dear Lynne

Thank you for copying Qualifications Wales into your recent letter to Gareth Pierce at WJEC regarding the availability of text books for reformed GCSE and A level courses; in particular A Level Religious Studies. Whilst we were copied into this letter for information, we believe that it is useful for us to provide you with our perspective as you consider this issue.

As described in our scrutiny session with the Committee last December, text books are provided by commercial publishers, not directly by awarding bodies, and as such their availability sits outside of our regulation. We understand that WJEC have worked closely with publishers to promote the availability of text books to support courses in Wales, which they often go on to endorse. This includes the provision of translation services so that text books can be made available through the medium of Welsh.

The reform timetable in Wales was set by Welsh Government to necessarily mirror the timetable established by reforms in England. This has proven to be extremely challenging for all involved. The provision of resources such as text books cannot be initiated until late in the process of developing and approving the new specification for a reformed qualification, when the specifications are in final or near final form. This has placed pressure on those providing these resources that must not be repeated in future reforms.

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As the independent regulator for qualifications we will guard against the delay in the availability of resources in future reforms. To do this, we will ensure that the period between approval of the new specification and first teaching is not compressed as in recent reforms. This means that the future timetable for reform needs to be set with more time for resources to be made available and for teachers to prepare themselves ahead of first teaching – this will be easier in future reforms as Wales will not be tied to a timetable established in England. It is worth noting that there are issues in relation to the availability of some text books in England.

Stakeholder feedback suggests that at least 12 months is required between approval of the qualification's specification and first teaching. We have a working assumption that this period will be needed for future reforms, but will keep this under review, and if necessary we will delay the date of first teaching to allow time for resources to be made available.

Returning to the more immediate issue of this summer's examinations, and in particular A Level Religious Studies. We have a role as the regulator to ensure that standards are maintained in the qualification and learners are not disadvantaged, or advantaged, because they are in the first cohort to take a reformed qualification. We will continue to use the comparable outcomes approach, which is designed to compensate for a likely small drop in performance when reformed qualifications are introduced. This approach is well established and was used successfully last summer when awarding the reformed AS and A level qualifications. The comparable outcomes approach is applied at whole cohort level and will ensure that variability in outcomes at the national level is limited.

There will always be some year-on-year variation in the results for individual schools and colleges, even when there are no changes to qualifications. This can be due to a variety of factors including a change in entry strategy or a change in approach to delivering a qualification. When a qualification changes, factors such as a lack of familiarity with new examination requirements can lead to more year-on-year variability than usual in the results for individual schools and colleges.

We have an extensive programme of monitoring planned for this summer's examinations, focusing on reformed qualifications that will be awarded for the first time. As part of this work, we will be monitoring WJEC's key meetings for A level Religious Studies to ensure that we are content that the grade boundaries set by WJEC are appropriate and that standards have been maintained. Over the coming months we will work with WJEC to detail additional monitoring requirements including statistical data looking at learner performance and centre variability – our focus will be on fairness in the final award of grades for this summer's learners.

As indicated at the Committee last December, we are also starting a piece of work to establish schools' resource requirements for future reforms, including their expectations in relation to text books. This will inform our view on the regulatory requirement for awarding bodies to provide 'sufficient' resources. This may well vary by subject, as for some the content of the qualification may remain relatively unchanged. We will also be aware of the

unintended consequences of over reliance on text books, which may lead to a culture of 'teaching to the test'.

Yours sincerely



Ann Evans
Chair



Philip Blaker
Chief Executive