



Consultation:

National 14–16 Qualifications in Built Environment, Engineering and Health and Social Care, and Childcare

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Introduction

In response to the introduction of the Curriculum for Wales, Qualifications Wales is reshaping the National Qualifications offer. This work is underpinned by a set of guiding principles.

These are that all National Qualifications:

- relate to and support Curriculum for Wales
- are available in both Cymraeg and English
- contribute to an inclusive and coherent qualifications offer

Consultation overview

New National Qualifications for 14 to 16-year-olds will be introduced between 2025 and 2027, to support the ambition of the Curriculum for Wales.

This consultation asks for views on whether new qualifications for this age group, in 'built environment', 'engineering' and 'health and social care, and childcare' should be designed as VCSEs (Vocational Certificate of Secondary Education) or as GCSEs.

We have previously published GCSE approval criteria for planned new GCSEs in these three subjects, but we are now seeking your views on whether these subjects should be developed, instead, as VCSEs.

The Full Offer and VCSEs

In 2023 we consulted on our proposals for a wide range of qualifications (the 'Full 14-16 Qualifications Offer') that would sit alongside GCSEs to form the new National Qualifications offer. As part of this consultation, we proposed the development of a suite of bilingual pre-vocational qualifications designed for delivery to learners from entry level to level 2, in a range of broad occupational areas.

Earlier this year [we published our decisions on that consultation](#), which included our intention to call these new pre-vocational qualifications VCSEs.

VCSE brand

Our introduction of a new range of VCSE qualifications is an opportunity to raise the profile of vocational learning, assessment and qualifications in the 14 to 16 space. This coherent vocational brand will bring recognition to qualifications that are offered to learners aged 14 to 16 regardless of the awarding body that delivers them.

VCSEs will have consistent design elements, such as their purpose, size and grading structure. They are also all likely to have an element of external assessment.

It will be simpler and more straightforward for learners and stakeholders to interpret these, than is currently the case across a wide range of vocational qualifications.

New VCSE subjects

We have already confirmed that the following subjects will be available as VCSEs.

- agriculture, horticulture and forestry
- animal care
- business, accounting and finance
- creative and media production, and technology
- environmental conservation
- hair and beauty
- hospitality and catering
- motor vehicle maintenance
- performing arts
- public services
- retail and customer service
- sport, leisure and recreation
- travel and tourism

GCSEs and VCSEs

In 2023, we also consulted on a range of new Made-for-Wales GCSEs. As part of this process, we confirmed that there would be GCSE qualifications in:

- built environment
- engineering
- health and social care, and childcare

Given this decision, we did not propose, in our second consultation, for there to be new pre-vocational qualifications at level 1/level 2 in these three subjects.

However, following developments in the [National Qualifications](#) offer, most notably the establishment of the new VSCE brand, it is now necessary to decide whether they might be better placed as part of the new VCSE offer. This was a view expressed by some stakeholders responding to our latest 14-16 qualifications consultation. For example, each of them is closely linked to an occupational area and two of them have the potential to contain a significant component of practical and applied content.

In this new consultation we are seeking views as to whether any or all these subjects should be offered as a VCSE or remain as GCSEs.

We are only seeking views on these three subjects and not on other subjects, such as digital technology, where no such concerns were raised by stakeholders. Digital competence is one of the Curriculum's cross-curricular skills and, unlike the three subjects in this consultation, is embedded across a broad range of occupational areas.

The table below is a summary of some of the similarities and differences between VCSEs and GCSEs.

Feature	VCSE	GCSE
Size	120-140 guided learning hours (GLH)	120 -140 GLH (for single awards)
Level	Level 1 / 2	Level 1 / 2
Grading	Pass / Merit / Distinction / Distinction* (to be confirmed)	A*-G
Area of focus	Broad occupational areas	Subject disciplines within the Curriculum's areas of learning and experience
Degree of prescription	Greater scope for awarding bodies to have flexibility in the content and assessment of these qualifications	Detailed content prescribed in approval criteria with limited scope for flexibility within qualifications by awarding bodies
Assessment	Lower proportion of external assessment (working assumption is that the permissible proportion of externally marked assessment per qualification will be between 20% and 40%)	Typically, higher levels of control in internal assessment with external exams being a common feature in almost all subjects (ranging from 60% to 100% in all subjects other than in art and design)
Progression	Support progression into post-16 study, or work-based learning	Support progression into post-16 study, or work-based learning

Assessing impacts

In considering these three subjects and the type of qualification they should be, we have considered several options, ranging from keeping them all as GCSEs (as previously intended), to developing all three as VCSEs.

We have also looked at each qualification separately and considered taking different approaches for the different subjects.

As part of this process, we completed an [integrated impact assessment](#).

Benefits of the VCSE option

There would be a number of benefits to developing the three subjects as VCSEs, including:

- less prescriptive content and assessment methods
- fewer constraints on awarding bodies, potentially leading to more innovative and creative qualifications
- potentially more practical assessment
- less granular grading scales leading to greater flexibility in assessment methods

Additionally, if these subjects were to be developed as VCSEs, then there would be greater connection and coherence between the new foundation qualifications, relating to occupational areas, as they would all have a common progression route towards a VCSE.

The three subjects in question provide a particularly good basis for learners to progress to post-16 courses in related vocational areas. Whereas GCSEs are only being developed by one awarding body, the development of VCSEs is likely to involve a number of different awarding bodies. We will require each of those awarding bodies to engage with post-16 learning providers to ensure that the qualifications support post-16 progression into vocational subjects.

The three subjects have more in common with other VCSE subjects than with other GCSE subjects. Consequently, a further benefit is that the subjects would bring a greater coherence to the VCSE suite as a whole. There is a risk that, if the three subjects are developed as GCSEs rather than VCSEs, the suite of VCSEs will look incomplete, leading to perceptions that the GCSE offer is a better choice.

Drawbacks of the VCSE option

Despite the clear benefits of developing these qualifications as VCSEs there are some potential drawbacks which need to be considered.

GCSEs in these subjects are scheduled for first teaching from September 2026. If these subjects were to become VCSEs they would be taught first in September 2027. To mitigate this, the existing qualifications in these subjects could be extended for an additional year

It was originally a recommendation of our sector reviews that we should introduce GCSEs in these subjects. Changing the qualification type to a VCSE could therefore be seen by some as losing a benefit recently gained. However, at the time the original decisions were made, there was no option to use the new brand of VCSE.

Given the clear purpose and focus of VCSEs, it now seems important to consider which qualification type is the better fit.

If these subjects were to become VCSEs then the existing GCSE approval criteria for these subjects would be removed or changed. We intend to be less prescriptive about detailed content and assessment requirements for VCSEs than for GCSEs. This could be frustrating for stakeholders who participated in the co-creation of these qualifications. However, part of this process involved considering how the design requirements for these subjects would relate to and support the Curriculum. Much of this valuable work would also be relevant for VCSEs. If we decide to proceed with these qualifications as VCSEs, we will consider which aspects of the content and assessment requirements could, and should, be adopted into the VCSEs.

GCSE is an established brand that is well recognised and understood. It has currency and portability across Wales and beyond. Therefore, we appreciate that some stakeholders may perceive switching these subjects to VCSEs as downgrading them or reducing their status. To mitigate this perception, we are exploring whether all VCSE qualifications should contain an element of external assessment (such as a minimum of between 20% and 40%). Having an element of external assessment could help contribute to the rigour and robustness of VCSEs and ensure they have an appropriate degree of reliability.

Comparability

VCSEs will be comparable in size to GCSEs and span both level 1 and level 2 on the [Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales](#). Having these qualifications as VCSEs instead of GCSEs should not impact on the amount of time centres allocate to delivering them or the outcome (in terms of level) they can attain from the qualifications.

In relation to public awareness of VCSEs we know, from experience with the Welsh Baccalaureate and Skills Challenge Certificate, that it takes time to build a qualifications brand and for it to gain awareness and recognition. With clear, targeted and sustained messaging, engagement and communication this is possible. We will be working on this during the next phase of the project for all VCSE qualifications and the new National Qualifications offer in its entirety.

Subject specific considerations

Built Environment

The current GCSE Built Environment was awarded for the first time in summer 2023, but so far it has only been taken by a small number of learners. One of the reasons cited by centres for this low take up was that the GCSE has been perceived to be “too academic” and not practical enough to meet the needs of some of the learners in this area. Making the qualification a VCSE could address this concern.

There are a number of other factors which may have contributed to the low take up of this qualification such as:

- the qualification was introduced while schools were facing significant disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic
- additionally established qualifications in built environment continued to be offered by WJEC alongside the GCSE
- there was little incentive for centres to change to the newer qualifications rather than stay with a familiar existing qualification

If we were to proceed with a VCSE Built Environment instead of a GCSE, this could have an impact on the newly created A Level Built Environment, given that the progression routes onto this qualification may be less obvious.

In summer 2023 there were very few entries for the AS Level Built Environment and, without a GCSE in the subject, there is the potential that this could reduce even further. On the other hand, learners taking the VCSE may be encouraged to take the A level as part of their learning progression. As with other A level subjects, it is not a pre-requisite for learners taking A Level Built Environment, to have taken a built environment qualification at 16.

A VCSE Built Environment qualification may meet learners’ expectations about the level of practical activity within the subject. Engagement between awarding bodies and further education providers in the development of VCSEs, could provide opportunities to offer a smoother transition to the structure of craft-based learning in further education than a GCSE qualification.

We have considered the option of having both a GCSE and VCSE in built environment. Given the nature of the subject we are not convinced that there would be a sufficiently clear distinction between a GCSE and a VCSE to be able to justify allowing both to co-exist in this subject. There would be a risk of too much overlap and duplication between the two, as well as concerns over the viability of both, given the small cohorts of learners in Wales.

Engineering

The clear demand for a GCSE in engineering was identified within our [sector review of engineering, advanced manufacturing and energy](#), which found that engineering qualifications currently offered in secondary schools tend not to attract, or be offered to, more academically able learners. The reasons given relate to these qualifications not being GCSEs or seen to be on a par with GCSEs. This view was also echoed by some of the employers who contributed to the sector review.

However, that review pre-dates our decision to create VCSEs, one of the key benefits of which is that they will have parity with GCSEs and be offered to learners of all abilities.

The decision to create a GCSE in engineering was received positively by many schools as a way of raising the profile of the subject and encouraging it to be offered to a wider range of learners. However, other stakeholders including some schools raised the issue that GCSEs are not always able to offer the same level of practical learning as other types of qualifications due to the constraints in the design requirements of GCSEs.

There may be a case for offering both a GCSE in engineering, and a VCSE in the related area of manufacturing. For example, a VCSE in manufacturing could offer a distinctive progression route to post-16 courses in manufacturing and production. We are interested in stakeholders' views on whether separate qualifications in these two areas would be desirable. Key considerations are whether there would be enough uptake to support viability and sufficient distinction between the two to warrant separate qualifications.

Health and Social Care, and Childcare

Health and social care, and childcare is a well-established GCSE. The subject has been offered as a GCSE since 2009 and is popular with centres and learners.

We are aware that this qualification currently requires knowledge and understanding of this broad occupational area. However, the existing GCSE qualification does not offer practical or applied learning in either health, social care or childcare settings.

Some stakeholders, including teachers who work in all-through schools (which provide both primary and secondary education) with learners aged 3 to 16 or 3 to 18, have expressed an interest in there being a new VCSE qualification in childcare, alongside a GCSE in health and social care, and childcare. The VCSE in this subject area could have more of a practical element in terms of giving learners experience of helping to look after children aged 3 and over, for example in a school nursery or reception class.

While there is some merit in this, it is worth noting that in the last academic year there were only 27 all-through schools in Wales, compared to 178 maintained secondary schools. Therefore any such qualification would be limited to a narrow range of schools.

It is also important to note that within our new [Skills for Life qualification](#) there will be a unit called 'Looking after Others'. Centres will have the opportunity to offer this unit to learners who have an interest in this area. This unit could be combined with a number of other relevant units (eg Teamwork, Basic First Aid, and Food Planning and Preparation), to underpin a child-focused skills course for learners.