



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

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# Vocational Qualifications Review: Government response

Our response to the Vocational Qualifications Review on offer to learners and employers.

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# Report overview

The [report from the independently-commissioned Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales](#) was published in September 2023. The Review was chaired by Sharron Lusher, ex-principal of Pembrokeshire College, who was supported by a steering group consisting of senior leaders from the education and business sectors.

Commissioning the review was part of this Government's commitment to work with Plaid Cymru, as part of the Co-operation Agreement, to realise our joint ambitions to reform qualifications in Wales. It was also driven by the need to be clear about the purpose of vocational qualifications and assess how well the current range on offer in Wales serves the needs of learners and the wider community.

The report sets out 33 recommendations for the Welsh Government, the new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER) and Qualifications Wales. The recommendations for those organisations are listed at Annex A. Collaborative working is key to many, if not all, of these recommendations. We will work closely with both organisations, and with other stakeholders, including providers of vocational education and training, to progress the ambitions of the Review.

We have accepted the recommendations that are aimed at the Welsh Government, including those that involve working with either Qualifications Wales and/or CTER. This report sets out our response to those recommendations. Whilst the Welsh Government cannot speak on behalf of these organisations, it will work with both of them to progress the recommendations. Those organisations will also need to consider how they respond to the report's recommendations themselves.

Qualifications Wales representatives acted as independent advisors to the

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steering group. As the independent regulator of non-degree qualifications in Wales, the organisation works closely with the Welsh Government in its sector reviews, qualification reform programmes and the Welsh Government's apprenticeship reviews. Qualifications Wales is also working with awarding bodies and learning providers to identify and manage the risks to Wales of policy changes in England and to fill any gaps in the availability of vocational qualifications where they arise.

CTER, which will become fully operational on 1 August 2024, is empowered to ensure that our tertiary education and research sector is organised to meet the needs of learners, our education and training providers, employers and the Welsh economy. It is essential in realising our strategic vision for the post compulsory education and training sector in Wales. CTER is well placed to work effectively and consistently across the tertiary education system, and with our education partners, to provide a co-ordinated approach to how post-16 provision at all levels is delivered across Wales.

Several of the themes covered by the Review were also reflected in Hefin David's report, **Transitions to Employment**. Both reports present recommendations for post-16 education and training, including apprenticeships policy and frameworks. We are working to address these.

The report makes it clear that there are strengths that we can build on with regard to how vocational qualifications operate in Wales. These include:

- the wide range of such qualifications, offering choice to learners, employers and providers
- overall, learner satisfaction with chosen courses
- embedding vocational qualifications in programmes of learning is sufficiently flexible to allow tailoring for learners
- strong support from, and links with, industry in their development and delivery
- increasing number of vocational qualifications are available through the

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medium of Welsh or bilingually

- the generally positive reaction to new ‘made-for-Wales’ qualifications

We will be looking for opportunities to build on these as we implement the report’s recommendations.

## Recommendations for the Welsh Government

### National strategy for vocational education

**Recommendation 1:** The Welsh Government should develop a national strategy for vocational education and training, which would in turn inform the strategic direction for vocational qualifications. This strategy should form part of a wider post-compulsory education and training strategy.

**Recommendation 2:** The Welsh Government, as part of its strategy for vocational education and training, should adopt the purpose and principles as defined.

We accept the need for the Welsh Government to provide a clear strategic lead. We will develop a short, action-focused policy statement on post-16 education which provides a particular focus on vocational education and training. This will also align with related Government strategic commitments, including net zero and, of course, our refreshed economic mission.

We also accept the purpose and principles set out by the review as follows:

### Purpose of vocational qualifications

Vocational qualifications assess knowledge, understanding, competencies,

capabilities or skills that relate to the world of work. They are designed to assess the knowledge, understanding and skills that will support learners to be:

- ambitious, aspirational, independent and motivated individuals, resilient, and able to respond to the changing nature of work and society throughout their lives
- ethical, engaged, confident citizens whose familiarity with the principles of fair work, wellbeing and just transition make them effective social partners
- active members of, and capable of contributing to, a knowledgeable and skilled workforce, which will meet the needs of, and grow the Welsh and global economies
- able to progress to further learning and/or employment which is flexible, accessible and inclusive

## **Principles underpinning vocational qualifications**

Vocational qualifications should:

- be inspirational for learners
- reflect and respond to the needs of a rapidly changing economy and society which values fair work and social partnership
- include opportunities for the accumulation of knowledge, competencies, capabilities and habits of mind and development of skills, both practical and integral skills
- prepare learners to join a bilingual workforce by promoting opportunities to learn and be assessed through the medium of Welsh
- be designed to be flexible in delivery to encourage lifelong learning
- be assessed in a way which is appropriate for the qualification
- be reflective of the values expressed in the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act and the nature of contemporary Welsh society, economy and culture
- be inclusive, accessible and portable
- promote progression within a clear and simple progression framework

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## Future skills needs

**Recommendation 3:** The Welsh Government should commission work to define the future demand nationally for occupational and skills needs in Wales. This will inform curriculum development, alongside clearly articulated regional and local needs framed by Regional Skills Partnerships, and support Qualifications Wales in assessment of the priorities for vocational qualifications.

**Recommendation 4:** The Welsh Government should expedite work identifying not only enrolment trends of learners, but destinations of learners, to understand if learners progress into an industry related to their vocational qualification. These trends should be mapped against the labour market demands articulated in recommendation 3 above, to determine whether Wales is succeeding in filling its occupation and skills gaps to meet future aspirations.

**Recommendation 14:** Given the decrease seen in the number of learners undertaking vocational qualifications over the last five years, that Welsh Government and the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research consider whether this trend accords with labour market and skills requirements for the future and identifies action should it be necessary.

We accept these recommendations, noting that implementation of recommendation 14 will require close working with CTER. We will continue to work with Careers Wales to determine how we can best ensure young people at key transition points have access to impartial careers guidance, ensuring they are aware of all the option routes.

We are working to determine how we best use data, including the Employer Skills Survey, to define the future demand regionally and nationally for occupational and skills needs in Wales, and to better understand if learners progress into an industry related to their vocational qualification.

We will continue to work with the Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs) to identify regional and sub-regional skills priorities, based upon robust labour market intelligence informed by employers. We have a Programme for Government commitment to strengthen RSPs and we will continue to build on the positive relationship between them and stakeholders across Wales. The regional employment and skills plans produced by RSPs, inform our approach to National Occupational Standards, apprenticeships and further education delivery as well as other priorities such as net zero skills, employability, digital skills and Welsh Language. Their intelligence and recommendations, together with other relevant sources, are key to informing policy development, the design of our programmes and deployment of skills funding. RSPs are also supporting City Deal and Growth Deals across Wales, acting as strategic partnerships on all matters relating to employability and skills.

We have received detailed Welsh data from the Employer Skills Survey which shows areas of skills deficiencies and the generic skills employers have difficulty obtaining in Wales. These results will be considered against projected future employment demands to determine the relationship between future employment demand and skills deficiencies across sectors and occupations in Wales.

Our Plan for Employability and Skills, published in March 2022, sets out the actions we are taking to help everyone, particularly those furthest from the labour market, to navigate and respond to work-related challenges they may face, whether that is through training, upskilling, changing career or starting a business. The Plan sets out how we are supporting individuals with all aspects of employability needs, including breaking down barriers to employment and support for physical and mental health, as well as ensuring those with protected characteristics have equality of opportunity and the right support in place. We will ensure that the review's recommendations are integrated with the priorities set out in the Plan as ensuring vocational pathways are encouraged and available is a key aspect.

The economic landscape in Wales has been shaped in recent times by many

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challenges, not only from the lasting legacy of Brexit, Covid and the ongoing impacts of the cost-of-living crisis, but more specifically for Wales, higher than expected economic inactivity figures for Wales.

The Economic Mission is clear about improving the well-being of everyone in Wales. To be a more equal place to live, the mission highlights the productive potential of all people in communities, where there is a fair distribution of opportunities and people have decent and secure employment. This means considering where there should be a focus to address Welsh economic challenges, to ensure we are targeting our initiatives where we can make the greatest impact for the Welsh economy to continue to advance our overarching aims as outlined in the Mission.

## Employer and sector needs

**Recommendation 8:** That the Welsh Government, Commission for Tertiary Education and Research and Qualifications Wales improve co-ordination between sector reviews and apprenticeship framework reviews, and consider using Qualifications Wales' sector qualifications groups and evidence from Estyn's thematic reviews to inform the process.

We accept this recommendation and will work with Qualifications Wales to take it forward. Apprenticeships are a key component of our skills system. We have published an [apprenticeships policy statement](#), which sets out our high-level strategic aims for the programme.

There is currently no direct relationship between sector reviews and apprenticeship framework reviews. We are discussing with Qualifications Wales how apprenticeship framework reviews could align with the longer timescale associated with sector reviews.

Qualifications Wales has been conducting a programme of [Sector Reviews](#)

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since 2015. These are far broader in scope, covering qualifications across FE and apprenticeships. In order to ensure apprenticeship frameworks and pathways continue to be responsive to employer demand, we need to review them far more often, making sure that the qualification content meets the changing needs of industry.

**Recommendation 9:** That the Welsh Government explore the risks associated with changes in alignment between National Occupational Standards and Occupational Standards in England.

We accept this recommendation on the basis that it is interpreted that the Welsh Government should explore the risks associated with changes in England, including rejection of alignment to National Occupational Standards (NOS). We are taking action to minimise the impact of policy changes in England and continue to keep a watching brief and engage with England on developments as they emerge.

Unlike the English Standards, NOS are developed by employers of varying sizes and from a range of geographical locations across the whole of the UK and also take account of the views of other key stakeholders, for example, trade unions, trade and professional bodies, awarding bodies, third sector, education and training providers. This does not preclude employers in England using NOS. In Wales, consultation takes place with a representative sample of employers and includes an assessment of demand for Welsh translation, to ensure Welsh employers retain a voice in UK-wide statements of occupational competence.

NOS support social mobility and permit the transferability and movement of skills across companies, sectors and borders. They support our cross-cutting Programme for Government Commitments to:

- build an economy based on the principles of fair work, sustainability and the industries and services of the future
- strengthen and increase our Welsh language education provision

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- create 125,000 all-age apprenticeships
- continue our long-term programme of education reform and ensure education inequalities narrow and standards rise

NOS also support wider commitments within the Programme for Government, by ensuring that standards which underpin vocational qualifications are developed and remain up to date to reflect new working practices and technologies introduced, for example in the healthcare sector and those relating to decarbonisation.

We have published a three-nation National Occupational Standards Strategy with Scotland and Northern Ireland. The Strategy outlines the Devolved Governments' priority to continue to pursue clearer alignment with other standards and systems, avoid unnecessary duplication and take account of other standards and qualifications architecture. The NOS Quality Criteria require NOS developers to take account of other standards, such as those in England, to ensure NOS and subsequent vocational qualifications are representative and transferable across the UK, even where there is a divergence of skills policies.

Officials are working with Department for Education consultants on proposals to develop a UK Skills Classification Scheme (which aims to offer linkages across the UK skills landscape) to understand the role NOS can play and ensure the Welsh Language is considered. There are benefits in having a central repository for skills information to further support alignment of the UK skills system which has become splintered as a result of policy changes in England.

## Work placement opportunities

**Recommendation 10:** That the Welsh Government extend work placement opportunities to all level 3 learners who do not have work placement as a mandatory part of their qualification.

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We accept this recommendation. Hefin David's report, Transitions to Employment, also made recommendations about the availability of meaningful work placements for 14 to 18-year-olds. Through the Placement Enhanced Programme and community, learner, industry focus CLIF element of all full-time programmes we are providing opportunities for all level 3 learners to access work experience as part of their programme of study, but we are aware that in some areas of Wales the availability of relevant work placements may be limited.

The Placement Enhanced Programme is one of four pilot programmes funded through the £5.8 million Innovation Fund and mainstreamed in 2023 to 2024. The programme offers Level 3 learners the opportunity to access up to 100 hours of industry relevant work experience through academic or vocational programmes.

All full-time programmes for learners in FE institutions and school sixth forms include a funded CLIF component. This allows providers to tailor the programme content to meet specific needs of the community, learner or specific industry which can include providing opportunities for learners to access relevant work placements.

## Learner pathways

**Recommendation 13:** That the Welsh Government, Commission for Tertiary Education and Research and Qualifications Wales consider the terminology used in connection with qualifications, and set up a task and finish group to identify ways to strengthen the promotion, and awareness of the value of vocational education, training and qualifications, to learners and employers.

**Recommendation 22:** That dependent upon the outcome of the consultation on the 'Full 14 to 16 Qualification Offer', Welsh Government and Qualifications Wales should work with learning providers and awarding bodies to ensure that

the purpose of pre-vocational qualifications is understood by learners, that the delivery of those qualifications is consistent with expectations and that there is integrity of progression between pre vocational qualifications and post-16 vocational qualifications.

**Recommendation 27:** The Welsh Government and the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research should work with all relevant stakeholders to explore progression through vocational provision onto level 6 provision, with particular emphasis on degree apprenticeships. Critical within this progression model should be vertical integration between levels.

We accept these recommendations and will work collaboratively with CTER and Qualifications Wales in responding to them. Our priority is for all learners to have a positive learning experience, ensuring they can progress confidently to their next steps in education and/or employment.

Pre-16 vocational qualifications have been taken in schools for many years, by many learners. The introduction of VCSEs is intended to allow learners to build an understanding of a range of occupational areas that are central to the future Welsh economy. They provide an opportunity to raise the profile of vocational education in Wales for 14 to 16-year-olds, while also simplifying the current mix of qualifications available.

We want to support the development of strong partnerships between schools and colleges in relation to how those VCSEs are delivered, so that we can make sure that they are delivered effectively. I want to see, and Qualifications Wales has already committed to this, close working between Qualifications Wales and colleges in Wales to ensure that those qualifications, when they come forward, are both well designed and well delivered.

The development of the Full Offer of 14 to 16 qualifications provides opportunities for schools and colleges to build on the good practice that already exists and help facilitate closer working between them, for the benefit of all

learners.

## Learner advice and guidance

**Recommendation 15:** That Welsh Government ensure, as the Curriculum for Wales is embedded, that all learners receive equitable and impartial advice on, and access to the opportunities available to them in post-compulsory education and training, and consider how best to support this aim specifically for learners with disabilities and learning difficulties.

**Recommendation 16:** That Welsh Government should ensure that providers of post-16 education and training have appropriate access to pre-16 learners for the purposes of providing progression information for learners.

We accept these recommendations. We recognise the need to support providers to work collaboratively to share good practice and develop effective career pathways for learners. We believe that learners should have impartial and equitable access to information and guidance materials to help inform their future education and careers pathways.

On behalf of Welsh Ministers, Careers Wales provides careers, education and guidance service to individuals and organisations, and links education and businesses. We will continue to work with Careers Wales to ensure young people at key transition points have access to impartial careers information, advice and guidance, ensuring they are aware of all of their option routes, including learners with disabilities and learning difficulties. Careers Wales work closely with every secondary school, special school and PRU across Wales.

We want to work with CTER and the tertiary sector to improve partnership working across the education sector, including between schools and colleges. We are also developing statutory guidance regarding the local curriculum for 16 to 19-year-olds, which will underpin much of CTER's work in relation to planning

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and delivery and will encourage collaborative activity between providers.

The Welsh Government does not have legislative powers to 'ensure' that all learners receive advice as set out in recommendation 15. However, it can issue guidance which stresses our expectations of providers and will consider how this can be strengthened.

We have published **draft statutory guidance** on 14 to 16 learning in the Curriculum for Wales as part of the development of our policy on 14 to 19 pathways. Both general and vocational qualifications will always be an important part of this. The 14 to 16 learning guidance puts specific emphasis on the need for learners to be supported in considering post-16 choices.

We expect learning about careers and work-related experiences to be explored across the whole curriculum, as these skills are transferable, highly valued and sought after by employers. Learning about careers and work-related experience (CWRE) is fundamental to developing skills for work and life. CWRE helps learners to understand the relationship between their learning and the world of work.

Careers Wales delivers the national professional careers information, advice and guidance service for all ages. It offers a free, bilingual and impartial service, underpinned by access to impartial careers guidance and coaching from professionally qualified careers advisers. Careers Wales helps young people and adults to plan their career, prepare to get a job, and find and apply for the right apprenticeships, courses, training and employment. It delivers services to young people and adults in a variety of methods including face to face careers guidance to help explore career ideas and options, group work, employer engagement events and activities and through a range of digital channels such as webchat, telephone and via the website.

## Curriculum planning

**Recommendation 21:** That the Welsh Government and learning providers should work together to consider innovative ways to offer a wider curriculum offer for learners where choice is more limited, or where the number of learners is small.

We accept this recommendation. We are developing updated statutory guidance to support the 16 to 19 curriculum so that that it follows the principles of the pre-16 curriculum but in a way that is appropriate for the options available to learners in the post-16 sector. CTER will be well placed to work effectively and consistently across the tertiary education system, and with our education partners, when it becomes fully operational. That will include supporting a co-ordinated approach to how post-16 provision at all levels is delivered across Wales, in support of the statutory guidance. We would expect to see a key aspect of that planning role to involve consideration of how the tertiary system can ensure that Welsh current and future skills needs are met most effectively. CTER will have opportunities to facilitate more collaboration and cohesion, and provide further opportunities to build clear pathways for learners into different areas of provision or into employment.

## Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

**Recommendation 26:** That Welsh Government, Qualifications Wales and learning providers work together to explore whether the arrangements currently applied for Recognition of Prior Learning remain appropriate, and consider the merits of consistency of application throughout Wales.

We accept this recommendation. We are already making progress in this area and are giving consideration to the high-level principles of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)



recognises the importance and benefits of RPL, which aims to reduce instances of duplication in training programmes and allows for regulated qualifications to be obtained, in full or part, through the RPL.

There is currently no formal RPL policy in Wales. However, the CQFW Advisory Group is leading work to agree recommendations on processes relating to the management and quality assurance of prior skills recognition. We will work with CTER in progressing this work.

## Vocational qualifications for Wales

**Recommendation 29:** That Wales does not adopt the same approach as in England in the implementation of T Levels, but that it does keep a watching brief as the qualifications mature.

We accept this recommendation. We are not adopting T Levels in Wales and are looking for approaches that best suit Wales. T levels are a very specific UK Government product that respond to the needs of employers in England.

With regard to the UK Government's announcement to replace A Levels and T Levels with an Advanced British Standard qualification, Wales already leads the way in this area. The Advanced Skills Baccalaureate was introduced in Wales in September 2023 and will be taken by the majority of 16 to 18 A-Level-learners. It provides a wider breadth of knowledge and skills beyond three A Levels, including literacy and numeracy. The qualification is well regarded by colleges and universities and most consider it as equivalent to an A-level. Learners in Wales are already expected to make progress in numeracy and literacy after the age of 16 through the Skills Challenge Certificate, GCSE resits or an Essential Skills Wales qualification.

**Recommendation 28:** That Wales retains an open market in relation to vocational qualifications, and does not pursue the creation of a single national

awarding body.

We accept this recommendation. Any advantages in establishing a single national awarding body for Wales are outweighed by the scale of the costs involved in creating such a body, the structural changes involved and the likelihood of few tangible improvements for learners or learner outcomes. We aim to maintain, as far as is practicable, learner choice in relation to the range of qualifications on offer. We also need to ensure that such qualifications are portable and recognised outside Wales.

**Recommendation 31:** That the phrase made for Wales becomes the accepted terminology, and that the definition of made for Wales qualifications be adopted.

We accept this recommendation. The Review recommended adoption of the term ‘made for Wales’ rather than ‘made in Wales’. This is a sensible and pragmatic approach, which will lessen confusion and ambiguity. For example, confusion over whether awarding bodies which operate, but are not based, in Wales, would still be able to do so, with a risk that long established and respected vocational qualifications might cease to be offered for Welsh learners. ‘Made for Wales’ has already become a familiar term. For example, Qualifications Wales introduced new ‘made-in-Wales’ Health and Social Care (September 2019) and Construction (September 2021) vocational qualifications as a result of the Sector Review Programme. It has undertaken ‘rapid reviews of both suites of qualifications, to address concerns raised by learning providers regarding the design and implementation of some of the new qualifications.

We accept the report’s definition of made-for-Wales qualifications, endorsed by 85% of senior leaders across the education and business sectors at a stakeholder engagement event in June 2023, as qualifications that:

- are designed or adapted to meet the specific needs of learners, employers and providers in Wales
- have Welsh stakeholders included in the design, development and review of

qualifications

- have content which is sufficiently flexible to relate to the Welsh context, its priorities and policies
- are available bilingually

We agree that made-for-Wales qualifications should be the ‘best’ on offer, in terms of content reflecting the most up-to-date and emerging employer and industrial practices, be engaging in approach, allow providers to be innovative and creative in delivery, and adopt assessment methodologies that best reflect the vocational area in question and purpose of the qualification. We also agree that any such qualifications must be widely recognised by employers and universities and must gain acceptance nationally and internationally where appropriate.

We recognise the need for pragmatism in exploring opportunities to further develop made-for-Wales vocational qualifications. This will mean reviewing new and existing qualifications to ensure that they are fit for purpose, meet the needs of learners, employers and providers, and are available bilingually. It will also mean maintaining, as far as possible, learner choice, whilst recognising the need to ensure that we have the right skills to support our economic priorities.

## **Annex A: Recommendations for Qualifications Wales and CTER**

### **Recommendations for Qualifications Wales**

Recommendation 5: That Qualifications Wales renews its approach to sector reviews, revisiting where necessary sectors already considered. This work should be aligned to the vocational education and training strategy referenced in recommendation 1, and to the analysis of future occupation and skills

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requirements referenced in recommendation 3.

Recommendation 6: That Qualifications Wales expand the remit of sector qualifications groups to advise on future requirements, supplementing these groups as and when appropriate with other stakeholders.

Recommendation 7: That Qualifications Wales present the findings and proposals of all sector reviews to its Board, to provide an opportunity for scrutiny and challenge of proposals made prior to publication.

Recommendation 11: That Qualifications Wales explore with stakeholders how best to recognise generic work-place learning.

Recommendation 12: That Qualification Wales, in considering the approval of qualifications and the assessments regimes within those qualifications give increased consideration to the manageability of assessments, from a learner and learning provider perspective.

Recommendation 19: That Qualifications Wales, working with Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol publish its plan to increase the number of vocational qualifications through the medium of Welsh and bilingually, recognising that this may focus on the qualifications with the largest enrolments and Welsh language demand.

Recommendation 20: That Qualifications Wales develop its Qualifications in Wales database further to provide more detail on vocational qualifications available through the medium of Welsh.

Recommendation 23: That Qualifications Wales works with stakeholders to produce vocational qualification 'route maps' to enable learners to identify progression opportunities in each sector.

Recommendation 24: That learning providers promote single or multiple units of vocational qualifications to employers where appropriate to do so, and that Qualifications Wales encourage awarding bodies to make unit certification

available to meet demand.

Recommendation 30: As a short to medium term measure, that Qualifications Wales should continue to work with awarding bodies to extend the typical final start date of qualifications where appropriate to do so, and should keep learning providers updated regarding potential changes to qualifications through clear and regular communications.

Recommendation 32: That where new qualifications are commissioned by Qualifications Wales, Qualifications Wales works with Welsh Government and representative bodies of learning providers to establish professional development and resource implications, and collectively develop an implementation plan.

Recommendation 33: That Qualifications Wales renews its approach to sector reviews by developing a 10-year plan, to include thematic reviews, and the identification of qualifications which should be 'made for Wales'. Where qualification reform is necessary, Qualifications Wales should consider first the options for existing qualifications to be revised or adapted, and should only restrict and commission new qualifications where it is necessary to secure the commitment of awarding bodies.

## Recommendations for CTER

Recommendation 17: That the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research convene a task and finish group to consider entry requirements onto vocational programmes of learning to understand the current differences in requirements, and to determine the best options for learners in Wales. This will necessarily consider equity across entry requirements for all qualifications.

Recommendation 18: That the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research work with Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol to develop a way in which staff able to

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speaking Welsh can, if willing, support a variety of learning providers.

Recommendation 25: That the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research provide a 'rapid response' fund to learning providers, based on identified needs and sustainable outcomes, to allow them to respond rapidly to industry requirements.

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