



Evaluation of the Assessment and Awarding Arrangements for Vocational Qualifications in Northern Ireland 2020-2021

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Executive Summary

In October 2021, CCEA Regulation was commissioned by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to conduct an evaluation of the alternative assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) that were put in place during 2020-2021. Phase one of the evaluation involved a quantitative survey of stakeholder views and comparative awarding data analysis, while phase two gave stakeholders the opportunity to further articulate their views and provide qualitative evidence.

The evaluation sets out to answer two key questions based on DfE policy objectives:

1. Did the alternative arrangements which had been put in place allow VTQ learners to obtain awards and so progress to the next stage in their learning journey?

142k certificates were issued during 2020-2021 which equates to 80% of pre-pandemic levels (2018-2019). In comparing 2020-2021, there were 4.2% more certifications for learners than in 2019-2020.

2. How far did these alternative arrangements meet the needs of all stakeholders?

The majority of respondents recorded satisfaction with the arrangements. 21% of respondents, however, recorded dissatisfaction as opposed to 79% who either recorded satisfied or 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied'¹. 75% of respondents considered that the results issued to learners were a valid representation of their performance. 78% believed that Teacher Assessed Grades (TAGs) were fair to learners in providing an accurate assessment of their performance. Similarly, 82% believed that Centre Determined Grades (CDGs) for Essential Skills were fair to learners in providing an accurate assessment of their performance. 60% of respondents found the adaptations in place were appropriate to facilitate assessment and awarding.

The report presents statistics and views from discussions with stakeholders in the context of continued disruption to assessment of vocational qualifications and concludes that collaborative working and effective communication were crucial in securing the successful implementation of the alternative arrangements and in turn successful outcomes for learners. Longitudinal monitoring of the impact of the pandemic on VTQ learners will be required, not solely in measuring results but also in assessing the effects on their emotional health and well-being.

¹93 responses were received: 66 of these were from providers, including 51% Further Education Colleges, 36% Post-primary schools, and 13% Private Training Organisations.

Section 1: Background and Methodology

1.1 Background

The Northern Ireland Context

There are currently 89 awarding organisations (AOs) operating in Northern Ireland (NI). The vast majority of these offer VTQs to NI centres and their learners. The VTQ landscape is wide ranging and diverse. There are over 2000 VTQs registered for use in NI. The nature and purpose of VTQs are more complex than that of general qualifications. For example, some VTQs are used for the same purpose as GCSEs and AS/A levels, some are competency based and some offer a licence to practise. This creates difficulties in the approach to alternative assessment and awarding when normal arrangements are suspended, as arrangements have to suit the different types of qualifications. An added challenge is that apart from a few exceptions, the AOs offering VTQs in NI are based in England and regulated by Ofqual. This makes alignment with Ofqual in assessment and awarding approaches important as it reduces risk both for the AOs in terms of systems and processes, and for the learner, in that the portability of the qualifications they take is protected.

Alignment across jurisdictions creates both challenges and opportunities. A notable challenge is that CCEA Regulation cannot set regulatory timeframes for England-based AOs' qualifications independently from the other regulators. Ofqual is required to conduct consultations when alternative assessment and awarding frameworks are developed and so this can impact the timeframes for regulatory decision making and instruction to AOs. A more operational challenge of alignment was the difference between academic terms in NI and those in England and Wales. The implementation of the alternative arrangements had a tighter timeframe in NI, where the term finishes at the end of June, than in England and Wales, where the term finishes in mid-July. This created pressure on AOs working with centres in NI, and also impacted on centres as they strove to complete the actions required by AOs within deadlines.

One positive outcome of working together across jurisdictions, was that CCEA Regulation was able to reduce the burden on AOs which in turn reduces risk for learners and alleviates pressure on the system. Alignment meant that AO communications to centres could be more straightforward and streamlined in messaging, bringing clarity to instructions and guidance issued.

Alternative Arrangements: September 2020 – January 2021

Coming out of the summer 2020 evaluation, DfE/CCEA Regulation put in place an action plan to address lessons learned, in particular the development of a communications strategy with providers and AOs. DfE introduced an NI Communications Group for stakeholders and CCEA Regulation set up regular meetings with further education (FE) colleges' Quality Managers and facilitated a dedicated communications hub on its website to host significant AO communications to providers. In addition, work was carried out on management

of risks around learners being unable to complete qualifications due to the impact of COVID-19. The continuation of the pandemic into the new academic year in September 2020 required monitoring of both its effects on teaching and learning and of the assessment arrangements for VTQs delivered in NI.

Centres offering VTQs faced enormous pressures in delivering these qualifications in the midst of public health advice and learner absenteeism due to COVID-19 illness and self-isolation. The disruption caused by the pandemic meant that, for example, learners were often unable to access work placements, which created difficulties for centres seeking to ensure their learners had opportunities to complete courses. The pandemic, therefore, continued to be significantly challenging for staff and learners in centres. For example, the knock-on effects from the previous academic year included the creation of a backlog due to delayed assessments.

From September 2020, CCEA Regulation took a targeted and risk-based approach to the monitoring of NI and English AOs' compliance with the Vocational and Technical Qualifications Contingency Regulatory Framework (VCRF), which was in place for the academic year 2020-2021.

The NI Communications Working Group and Task and Finish Group were used by DfE and CCEA Regulation to ascertain the difficulties faced by centres in delivering the VTQs in the midst of public health advice and ongoing effects of the pandemic. CCEA Regulation's meetings with FE colleges' Quality Managers allowed for monitoring the situation and developing solutions with AOs where centres faced difficulties in delivery because of the ongoing pandemic.

Cancellation of Examinations/Assessments: January 2021 – August 2021

The disruption to teaching and learning caused by the pandemic continued throughout the academic term from September to December 2020 and presented difficulties for learners to, for example, access work placements and to conduct practical assessments.

On 22 January 2021, due to the ongoing effects of the pandemic and COVID-19 restrictions on teaching and learning, the Minister for the Economy, "to provide clarity and certainty", announced the cancellation of examinations and assessments for vocational qualifications in NI, for the remainder of the 2020-2021 academic year. To protect the interests of learners and enable as many of them as possible to achieve their qualifications, the Minister instructed CCEA Regulation to require AOs operating in NI to adhere to the VCRF. This approach was put in place to ensure that learners were not disadvantaged and, where possible, received timely awards that enabled progression to further/higher education and/or employment. Furthermore, aligning with the Ofqual framework secured portability of qualifications taken by NI learners and in turn protected parity with learners from other jurisdictions and safeguarded opportunities.

CCEA Regulation represented the interests of VTQ learners in NI at regulatory level, working with Ofqual to ensure consistency of approach in the implementation of

the alternative assessment and awarding arrangements for VTQs. This was part of a twin-track strategy with DfE to ensure that NI priorities were appropriately communicated at national governmental and regulatory levels.

Under the VCRF, VTQs were categorised into A and B. Those qualifications that assess occupational or professional competency, proficiency, or act as a licence to practise were placed in category A. A Teacher Assessed Grade (TAG) was not appropriate for these qualifications and the assessments had to continue, usually conducted through a form of adaptation to the original assessment design. However, there were some category A qualifications where adaptation was not suitable and delaying the assessment was the only option. Category B qualifications were those where a TAG was suitable for an award to be made in order to assist progression.

These alternative arrangements were implemented across NI, Wales, and England. CCEA Regulation worked closely with Ofqual and Qualifications Wales (QW) to ensure consistency in maintaining standards in VTQs across the three countries and to ensure fairness for NI learners.

As part of the January 2021 ministerial announcement, Essential Skills examinations were cancelled for the remainder of the academic year. This brought parity with other level 2 qualifications used for the same purpose, in particular, GCSE. CCEA Regulation was instructed to ensure that AOs offering Essential Skills put in place suitable alternative awarding arrangements. A similar approach to that of GCSE was introduced for Essential Skills, whereby centres were asked to submit a Centre Determined Grade (CDG) for learners which was to be based on evidence of learner performance. CCEA Regulation worked with the three AOs offering this NI qualification to ensure consistency in approach and standards.

Stakeholder Engagement and Communications

CCEA Regulation also worked collaboratively with Ofqual, QW, AOs and sector bodies on additional arrangements to address challenges arising from regional variations in lockdowns and levels of disruption. By working together, solutions could be found to difficulties arising from the pandemic without compromising the integrity of the qualifications or the agreed alternative arrangements.

CCEA Regulation represented the interests of NI in strategic and operational groups at national level. In addition to regular three country regulatory meetings, the NI perspective was given by CCEA Regulation at the 3 country Standards and Technical Working Group, the VTQ Oversight Board, the Policy Implementation Advisory Group and the Cross Sector Communications Group which included AO and provider representatives.

Working with key stakeholders in NI, CCEA Regulation led a number of communications forums to ensure that the implementation of the framework by AOs met the needs of learners and ensured that standards were maintained. Stakeholder groups included the NI Awarding Organisation Group, sector groups

(which led expertise in the occupational subject field) and the Essential Skills Working Group, which offered opportunities to address any impediments to the implementation of agreed approaches to assessment and awarding. Through engagement with AOs and centre representatives, solutions were developed to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on teaching and learning without compromising the integrity of the qualification.

AO activity in NI, particularly regarding the quality and timing of communications, was monitored by CCEA Regulation. It is the responsibility of an AO to communicate its guidance and instructions around assessment and awarding directly to centres. However, as there are 89 AOs operating in NI, and given the extraordinary context brought about by COVID-19, in order to alleviate the burden on centres of the substantial number of AO communications, CCEA Regulation ensured that AO communications were placed on its website. This served as a central hub where centres could consult and reference significant AO communications.

In addition, CCEA Regulation met with the FE colleges' Quality Managers regularly throughout the implementation period to assess how the alternative arrangements were operating and whether further solutions at a regional level needed to be found within the framework.

At a more strategic level, the NI Communications Working Group served as a forum through which stakeholders could be apprised of particularly significant messages sent by AOs and raise any issues with DfE and CCEA Regulation regarding communications or the implementation of arrangements in general. The Task and Finish Group established by DfE also provided a forum through which progress of the implementation of the Minister's instruction could be monitored.

In summary, the partnership and collaborative working between government departments, regulators, AOs and education/training providers sought to ensure that communications were channelled effectively, and that the alternative assessment and awarding arrangements were implemented as smoothly as possible.

1.2 Methodology

In October 2021 following the close of the academic year 2020-2021, the Department for the Economy (DfE) commissioned CCEA Regulation to conduct an evaluation of the alternative assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications in NI during this period. The evaluation sought to determine the effectiveness of the 2020-2021 arrangements in ensuring that maximum numbers of learners achieved their awards in spite of COVID-19 restrictions, and to identify lessons learned going forward.

DfE set the policy direction for CCEA Regulation to conduct the evaluation. The evaluation was conducted in two phases to ensure an appropriate balance of qualitative and quantitative data.

Phase One

This comprised an online survey of stakeholders involved in the 2020-2021 assessment and awarding arrangements. The survey focused on stakeholder experiences, challenges faced and lessons learned.

The key stakeholders identified for the evaluation were provider groups delivering VTQs in post-primary schools, FE colleges and private training organisations (PTOs). The stakeholders identified were also employers/sector bodies and AOs offering VTQs in NI.

The VTQ 2019, 2020 and 2021 awarding data was also analysed. From this data, the number of awards made during the 2020-2021 period could be compared with those of previous academic years as an indicator of how successful policy was in ensuring that learners received certificates in order to progress.

Phase Two

In phase two of the project, the outcomes of the survey and the awarding data results were used to inform stakeholder engagement. This involved interviews with stakeholder groups to explore further the key issues and themes emerging from phase one. Stakeholder groups comprised post-primary schools, FE colleges, PTOs, AOs, regulators, and employers/sector body groups. Representatives from all stakeholders participated in the interviews.

In addition to stakeholder engagement, an analysis of experiences of the 2020-2021 alternative arrangements in NI, the rest of the UK and other countries was conducted to inform the lessons learned.

In Summary

This report records the outcomes from the evaluation of the 2020-21 alternative arrangements put in place for the assessment and awarding of VTQs delivered under the conditions of the VCRF. The NI Communications Working Group was engaged in each stage of the development process, in preparation for the report's submission to DfE.

Section 2: Survey

2.1 Approach

The survey was distributed to stakeholders through the Department for the Economy (DfE), by CCEA Marcomms to schools on behalf of DE, and by the Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB) - Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) to its AO members.

The survey was open from 3-12 November 2021. 93 survey responses were received.

The online survey comprised 26 questions. The number of questions completed by each stakeholder group depended on the relevance of the question for that group. Respondents were required to choose a rating for each question based on a five-point Likert scale. Provision was made within each of the questions for respondents to provide comment.

The questions posed focused on 6 principal areas of assessment and awarding for VTQs in the 2020- 2021 academic year. A number of questions were asked about each area. Provision was made within each of the 26 questions for respondents to provide further feedback.

The principal areas included were:

- Communications, 3 questions;
- Teacher Assessed Grade (TAG) Process, 7 questions;
- Suitability of adaptations to facilitate assessment and awarding for VTQs, 3 questions;
- Centre Determined Grade (CDG) Process for Essential Skills, 7 questions;
- Results, 5 questions; and
- General satisfaction with alternative arrangements for assessment and awarding for VTQs, 1 question.

2.2 Findings

This section details the feedback obtained from the individual and group respondents to the Evaluation Survey of Assessment and Awarding Arrangements for Vocational Qualifications in NI for 2020-2021. The 93 respondents from stakeholder groups included: Post Primary Schools (PPS), Colleges of Further Education (FE), Private Training Organisations (PTO), Awarding Organisations (AO), Employers/Sector Bodies and responses from a group categorised as 'Other'.

Please note that the value 'n' in the report is the number of actual responses to the items presented, described, or illustrated. The answers in some cases may reflect the views of more than one individual.

The responses are the views of stakeholders and although the survey facilitated expansion of the views, supporting evidence was not requested.

2.2.1 Demographics

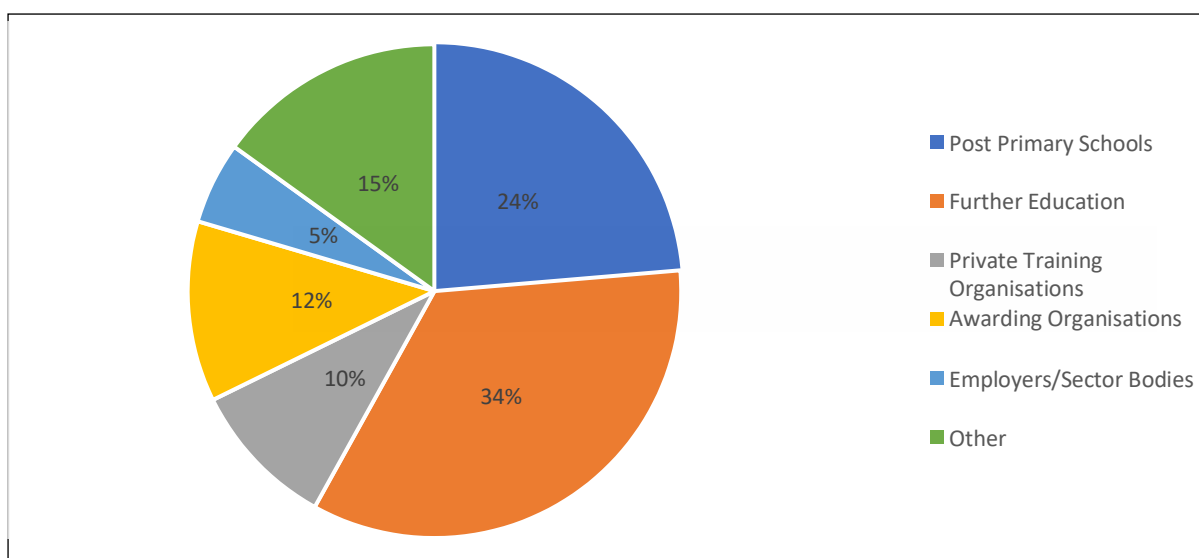


Figure 1. Breakdown of stakeholders which responded to the online survey

Most responses to the survey were provided by FE (n=32, 34%) and PPS (n=22, 24%). The remainder was made up of responses from 'Other' (n=14, 15%) AOs (n=11, 12%), PTOs (n=9, 10%) and Employers/Sector Bodies (n=5, 5%).

The group 'Other' included responses from 3 charities, 1 community group, 1 European Social Fund funded project, 6 from the NI Regulator, 1 Social Enterprise/ Charity, 1 training organisation funded by DfE/ESF programme.

2.2.2 Communications

2.2.2.1 Table 1. The communications relating to the 2020-2021 assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications were clear and easily understood.

	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	13	14
Agree	39	42
Neither agree nor disagree	13	14
Disagree	17	18
Strongly disagree	11	12
Total	93	100

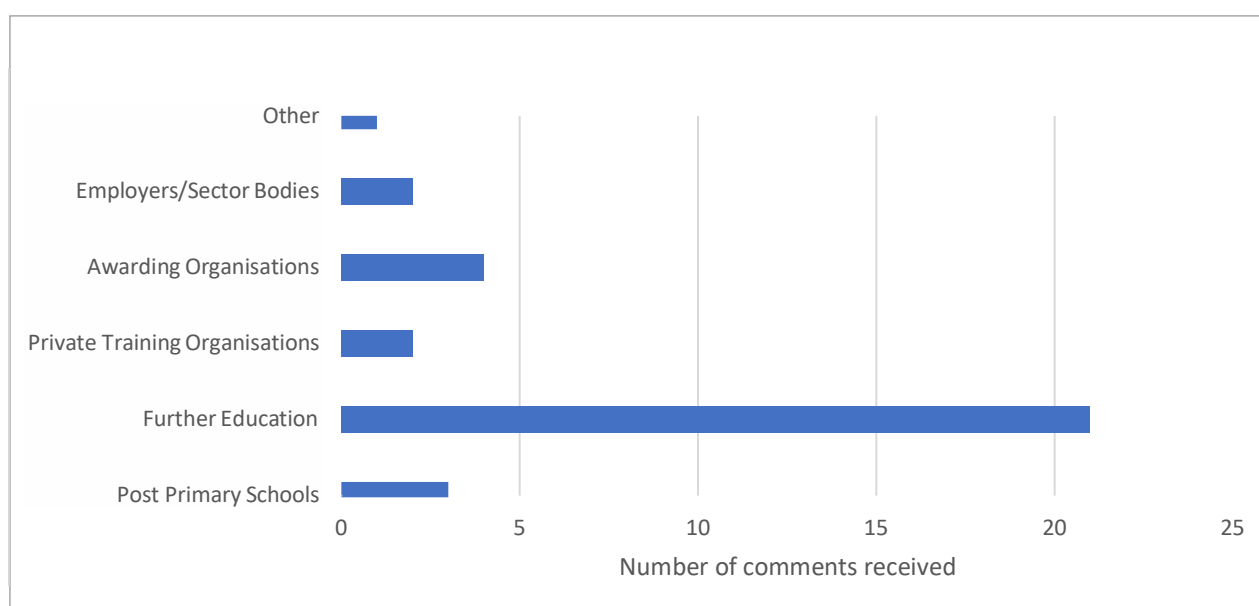
This question was relevant for all groups. Respondents were asked to consider DfE policy position, AOs' guidance for providers and regulatory communications. All respondents answered this question.

56% of respondents (n=52) agreed that communications relating to 2020-21 assessment and awarding arrangements for VTQs were clear and easily understood.

28 respondents (30%) from the PPS, FE, PTOs, and AOs disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comments. 33 respondents (35%) provided feedback. Comments were from PPS, FE, PTOs, AOs, Employers/Sector Bodies and 'Other' category.

Figure 2. Breakdown of comments received from respondents concerning the clarity and ease of understanding of communications



Comments received indicated that respondents had concerns about the volume and complexity of communications from different AOs. Several respondents identified a difference in the clarity of communications issued regarding the awarding and assessment of VTQs compared to General Qualifications (GQs). Concern was raised that information changed following issue of communication and that guidance between AOs was in some instances contradictory. One respondent indicated that in some cases AO guidance was limited due to staff being furloughed.

2.2.2.2 Table 2. The timing of communications relating to the 2020-2021 assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications was appropriate

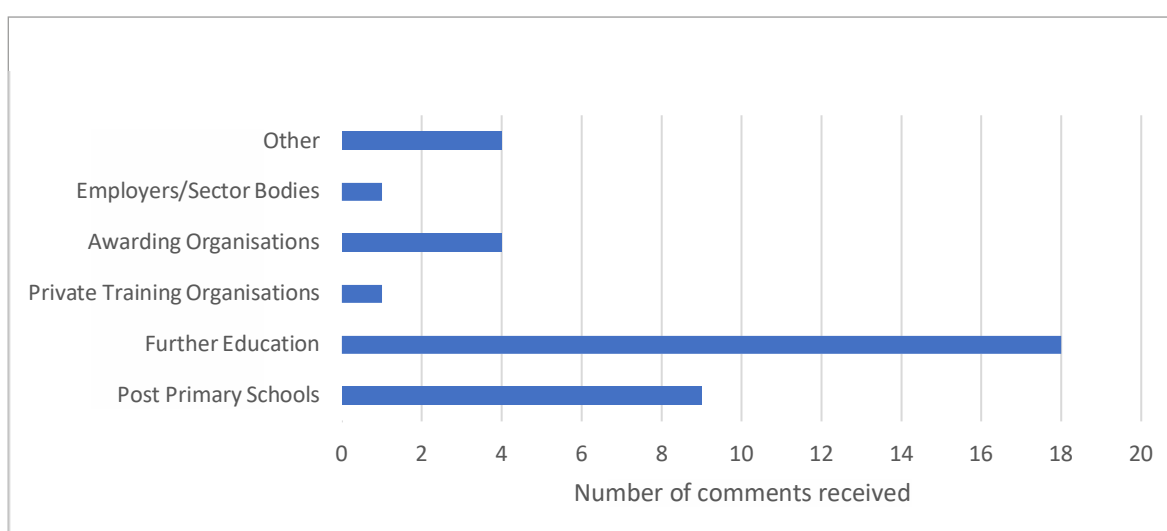
	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	4	4
Agree	37	40
Neither agree nor disagree	16	17
Disagree	19	20
Strongly disagree	17	18
Total	93	100

This question was relevant for all groups. Respondents were asked to consider DfE ministerial policy, AOs' guidance for providers and regulatory communications. All respondents answered this question.

44% of respondents (n=41) agreed that the timing of communications relating to 2020-2021 assessment and awarding arrangements was appropriate. 36 respondents (38%) from the PPS, FE, PTOs and AOs disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on the timing of communications. 37 respondents (40%) provided feedback. Comments were from PPS, FE, PTOs, AOs, Employers/Sector Bodies and 'Other' category.

Figure 3. Breakdown of comments received from respondents concerning the timing of communications.



Comments received indicated that providers had concerns about the timeliness of communications. Respondents stated that while general guidance was issued by AOs by the end of March 2021, detailed guidance was not fully communicated by all AOs until May 2021. There was a perceived difference in the timeliness of communications for GQs and VTQs. Respondents also suggested that communications from the NI AOs were much timelier than the larger English AOs. Respondents advised that timelier decisions taken by AOs, regulators and at ministerial level would have helped in reducing last minute communications.

2.2.2.3 Table 3. The communications relating to the 2020-2021 assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications were helpful

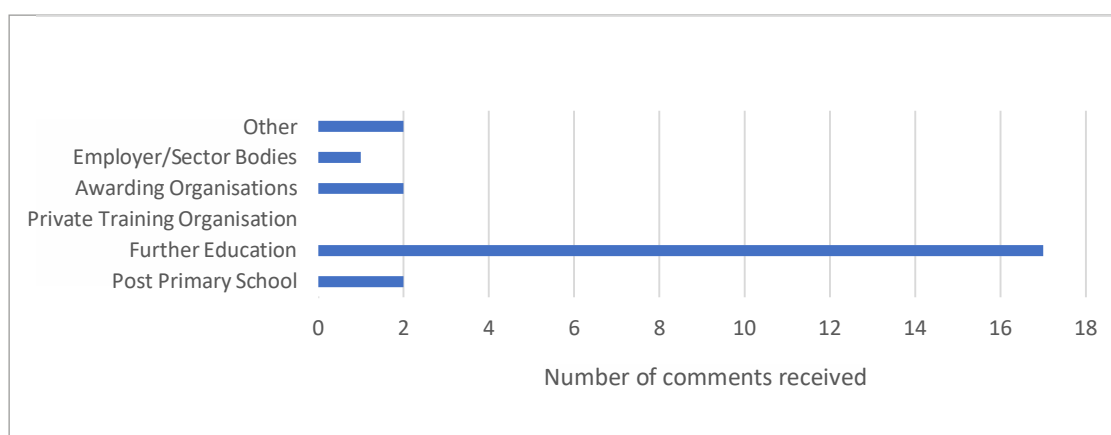
	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	10	11
Agree	42	45
Neither agree nor disagree	19	20
Disagree	11	12
Strongly disagree	11	12
Total	93	100

This question was relevant for all groups. Respondents were asked to consider DfE ministerial policy, AOs' guidance for providers and regulatory communications. All respondents answered this question.

56% of respondents (n=52) agreed that the communications relating to the 2020-2021 assessment and awarding arrangements of VTQs were helpful. 22 respondents (24%) from the PPS, FE, PTO, and AOs disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comments. 24 respondents (26%) provided feedback. Comments were received from PPS, FE, AOs, Employers/Sector Bodies and 'Other'.

Figure 4. Breakdown of comments received from respondents concerning the helpfulness of communications



The main concerns raised indicated that communications were unhelpful due to their timing rather than content. Other respondents stated that when AO communications were received, at times they were overly detailed and complicated, making it easy to miss something significant that required action. Respondents also advised there were too many iterations of communications from March to June 2021. One AO felt that CCEA Regulation's view could have been more explicit in relation to agreed/planned action in NI following arrangements announced by Ofqual.

2.2.3 Teacher Assessed Grading Process

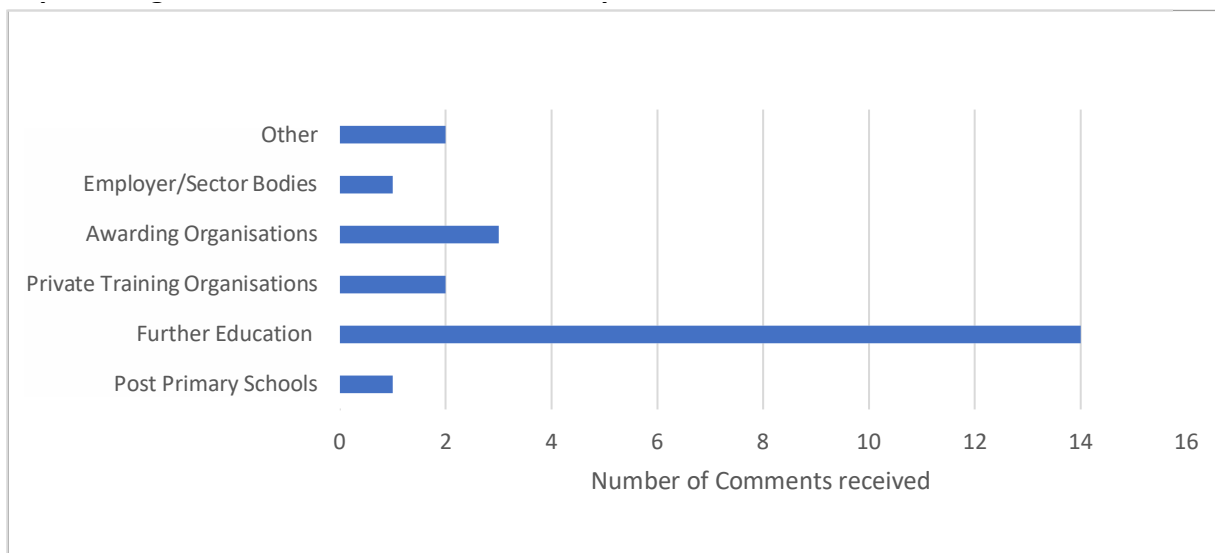
2.2.3.1 Table 4. The Teacher Assessed Grading (TAG) process was fair to learners in providing an accurate assessment of their performance.

	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	15	18%
Agree	50	60%
Neither agree nor disagree	11	13%
Disagree	5	6%
Strongly disagree	3	4%
Total	84	100%

This question was relevant for all groups. 84 respondents answered this question. 78% of respondents (n=65) agreed that the TAG process was fair to learners in providing an accurate assessment of their performance. Eight respondents (10%) from the PPS, FE, PTO, and 'Other' category disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on the fairness of the process to learners. 23 respondents, (27%) provided feedback. Comments were received from PPS, FE, PTO, AOs, Employers/Sector Bodies, and 'Other'.

Figure 5. Breakdown of comments received from respondents concerning fairness to learners in providing an accurate assessment of their performance.



Comments received in relation to the TAG process were largely positive, with several respondents stating it allowed assessment mitigations for cohorts and individual learners to be fully considered and reviewed by their entire course team of tutors/lecturers. A small number of respondents indicated that in their opinion the process enabled lower ability learners to receive higher grades. Other respondents indicated that learners develop throughout their study programme, often well into year 2, and

therefore the timing of this process may have led to an unfair assessment of the learner as well as an additional stress burden for teachers, knowing that a learner’s best performance may not have been captured because of the timing of submission.

2.2.3.2 Table 5. The TAG process was manageable

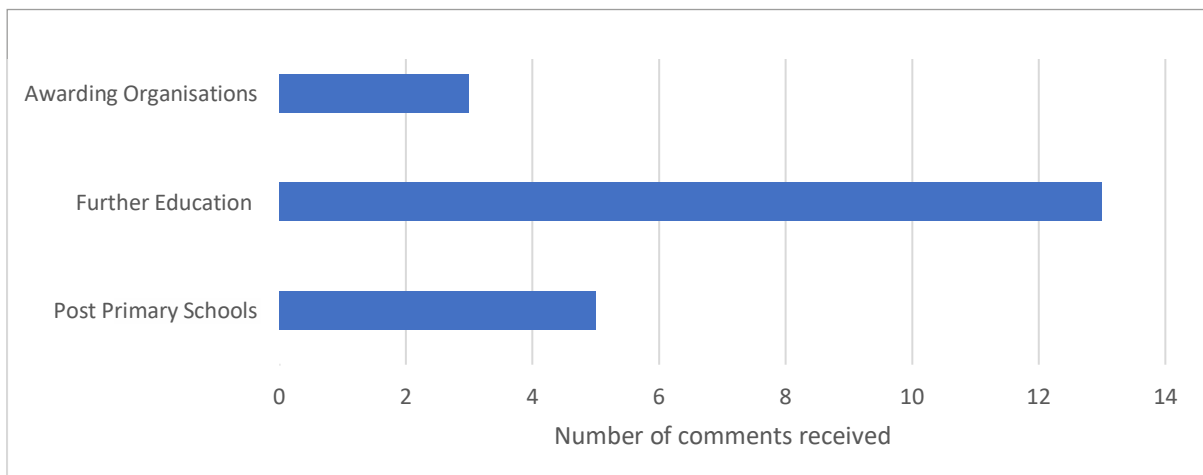
	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	6	9
Agree	29	41
Neither agree nor disagree	13	19
Disagree	12	17
Strongly disagree	10	14
Total	70	100

This question was relevant for PPS, FE, PTOs, and AOs. Respondents were asked to consider the consistency and manageability of approach across AOs. 70 respondents answered this question.

50% of respondents (n=35) agreed that this process was manageable. 22 respondents (31%) from the PPS, FE, PTO and AOs disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on the manageability of the TAG process. 21 respondents (30%) provided feedback. Comments were received from PPS, FE and AOs.

Figure 6. Breakdown of comments received from respondents concerning the manageability of the TAG process



Comments received from respondents identified three main issues which impacted on the manageability of TAGs. These were: the time required from teachers for the TAG process at an already busy time; the need for centres to allocate additional resources to achieve required outcomes; and the inconsistent approach taken by AOs in terms of sampling learners’ work. One respondent stated that VTQs worked well with the TAG process.

2.2.3.3 Table 6. The timelines for the submission of TAG information to the Awarding Organisations were manageable

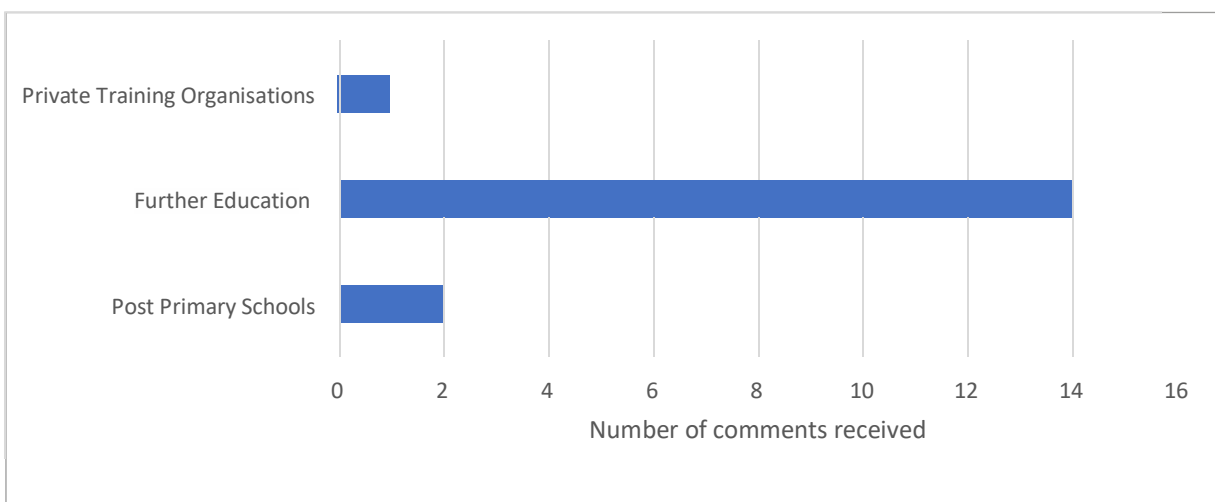
	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	3	5
Agree	28	47
Neither agree nor disagree	8	14
Disagree	6	10
Strongly disagree	14	24
Total	59	100

This question was relevant for PPS, FE and PTOs. Respondents were asked to consider the consistency and manageability of approach across AOs. 59 respondents answered this question.

52% of respondents (n=31) agreed that the timelines for the submission of TAG information to the Awarding Organisations were manageable. 20 respondents (34%) from the PPS, FE and PTOs disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on the timelines for the submission of TAG information. 17 respondents (29%) provided feedback. Comments were received from PPS, FE and PTOs.

Figure 7. Breakdown of comments received from respondents concerning the manageability of the timelines for the submission of the TAG information.



Comments received from respondents indicated that there were problems with the timelines for the submission of TAG information. Several respondents stated that problems were due to timelines not being planned or clearly communicated by the AOs and because of the timing of decisions taken by regulators and AOs. Respondents also stated that the late arrival of guidance materials followed by updates by AOs made the process confusing, and that the timing of the process was

too short, given the return dates of learners from the Easter break.

2.2.3.4 Table 7 Instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the TAG process were helpful

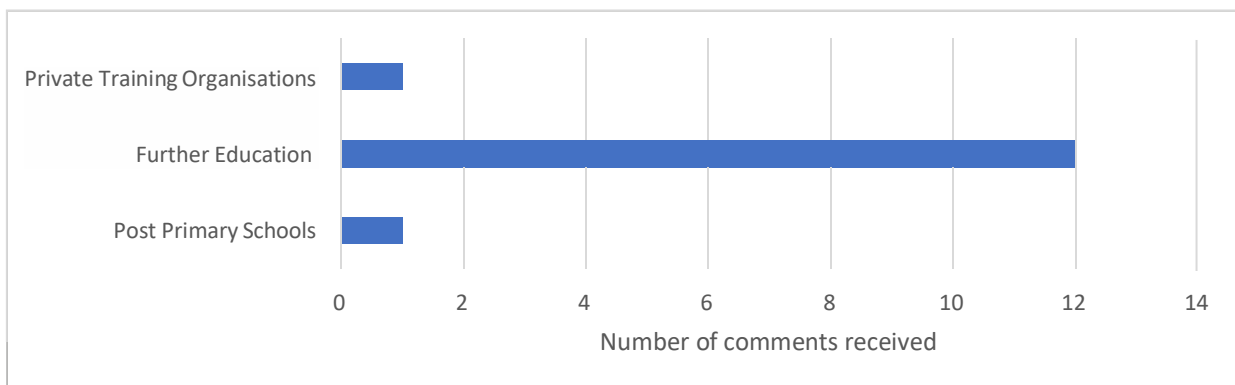
	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	5	8
Agree	24	41
Neither agree nor disagree	20	34
Disagree	7	12
Strongly disagree	3	5
Total	59	100

This question was relevant for PPS, FE and PTOs. Respondents were asked to consider the consistency and manageability of approach across AOs. 59 respondents answered this question.

49% of respondents (n=29) agreed that the instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the TAG process were helpful. 10 respondents (17%) from the PPS, FE and PTOs disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on the helpfulness of the instructions, guidance, and support from AOs. 14 respondents (24%) provided feedback. Comments were received from PPS, FE and PTOs.

Figure 8. Breakdown of comments received from respondents concerning the helpfulness of instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the TAG process



Comments from respondents indicated that while the final AO guidance was helpful, there were many iterations of it over a 2 to 3 month period which caused confusion and stress for learners and staff.

Respondents stated that significant time was spent by staff reviewing guidance and liaising with AOs in agreeing evidence, tracking and mitigations for cohorts and individual learners.

One respondent commented on the good customer care from AOs.

2.2.3.5 Table 8: Instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the TAG process were timely

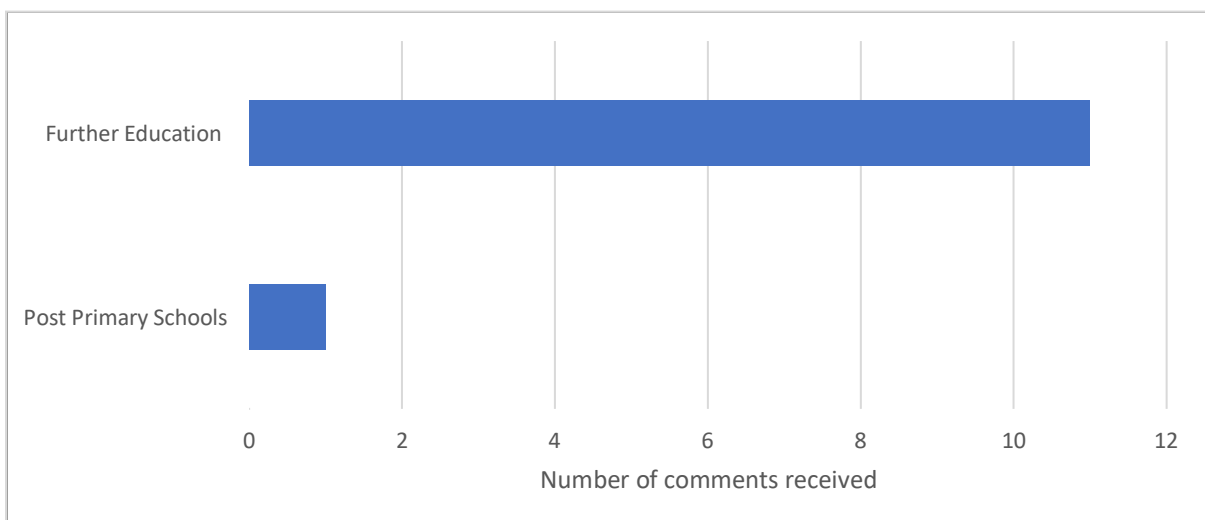
	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	5	8
Agree	18	30
Neither agree nor disagree	10	16
Disagree	10	16
Strongly disagree	18	30
Total	61	100

This question was relevant for PPS, FE and PTOs. Respondents were asked to consider the consistency and manageability of approach across AOs. 61 respondents answered this question.

38% of respondents (n=23) agreed that the instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the TAG process were timely. 28 respondents (46%) from the PPS, FE and PTOs disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on the timeliness of the instructions and guidance/support from AOs. 12 respondents (20%) provided feedback. Comments were received from PPS and FE.

Figure 9. Breakdown of comments received from respondents concerning the timeliness of instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the TAG process



Comments received from respondents indicated that instructions and guidance/support were not timely and that amendments to the guidelines throughout the process caused confusion to staff and learners. Some respondents stated that

timelines were left until late in the process and that there was poor communication by AOs.

2.2.3.6 Table 9. Providers understood the arrangements and instructions for the TAG process

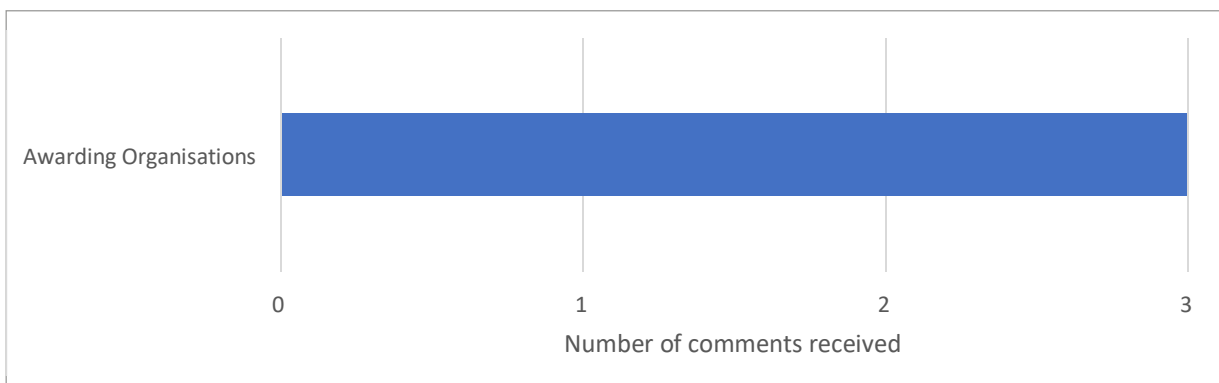
	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	1	11
Agree	4	44.5
Neither agree nor disagree	4	44.5
Disagree	0	0
Strongly disagree	0	0
Total	9	100

This question was relevant for AOs. 9 respondents answered this question.

55.5% of respondents (n=5) agreed that providers understood the arrangements and instructions for the TAG process. 44.5% of respondents (n=4) neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on whether providers understood the arrangements and instructions for the TAG process. 3 respondents (33%) provided feedback.

Figure 10. Breakdown of comments received from respondents concerning whether providers understood the arrangements and instructions for the TAG process



Comments from respondents indicated that late decision-making on policy caused unnecessary delay and confusion. Respondents recognised that centres did their best to comply with instructions, but due to different term dates in NI there were challenges with raising queries because of the absence of available personnel within centres to act on the requests made for information. Although the TAG submission deadline was before the end of term, some queries were not identified until after that date.

2.2.3.7 Table 10. Providers complied with the arrangements and timelines for gathering sources of evidence and submission of TAGs

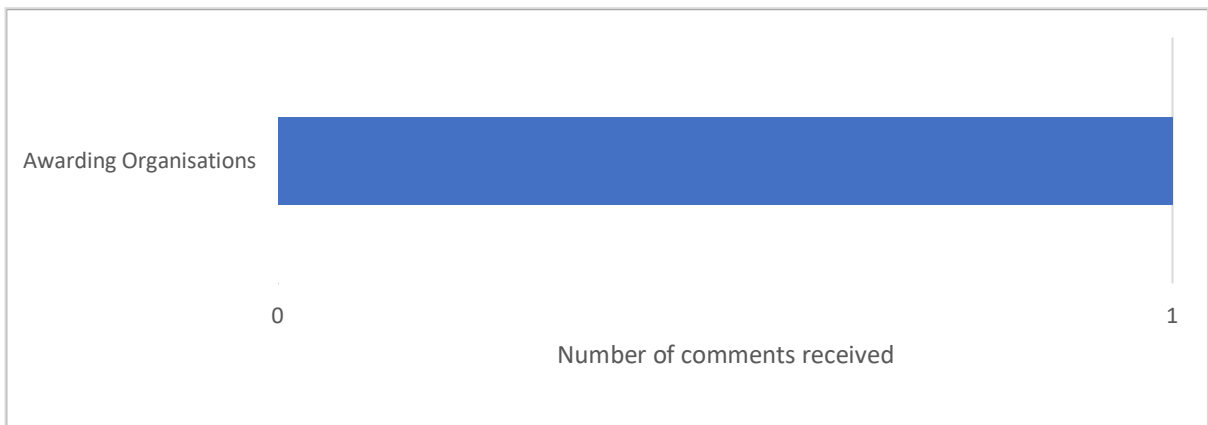
	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	0	0
Agree	7	78
Neither agree nor disagree	2	22
Disagree	0	0
Strongly disagree	0	0
Total	9	100

This question was relevant for AOs only. 9 respondents answered this question.

78% of respondents (n=7) agreed that providers complied with the arrangements and timelines for gathering sources of evidence and submission of TAGs. 22% of respondents (n=2) neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on whether providers understood the arrangements and instructions for the TAG process. One respondent (11%) provided feedback.

Figure 11. Breakdown of comments received from respondents concerning whether providers complied with the arrangements and timelines for gathering sources of evidence and submission of TAGs.



Comments received from one respondent indicated that centres endeavoured to comply with arrangements and timelines; however, challenges did emerge due to the restrictions of term time in NI centres.

2.2.4 Suitability of adaptations to facilitate assessment and awarding

2.2.4.1 Table 11: The adaptations introduced for those qualifications which assess occupational or professional competency, or those for mixed purpose, were appropriate to facilitate assessment and awarding in 2020-2021

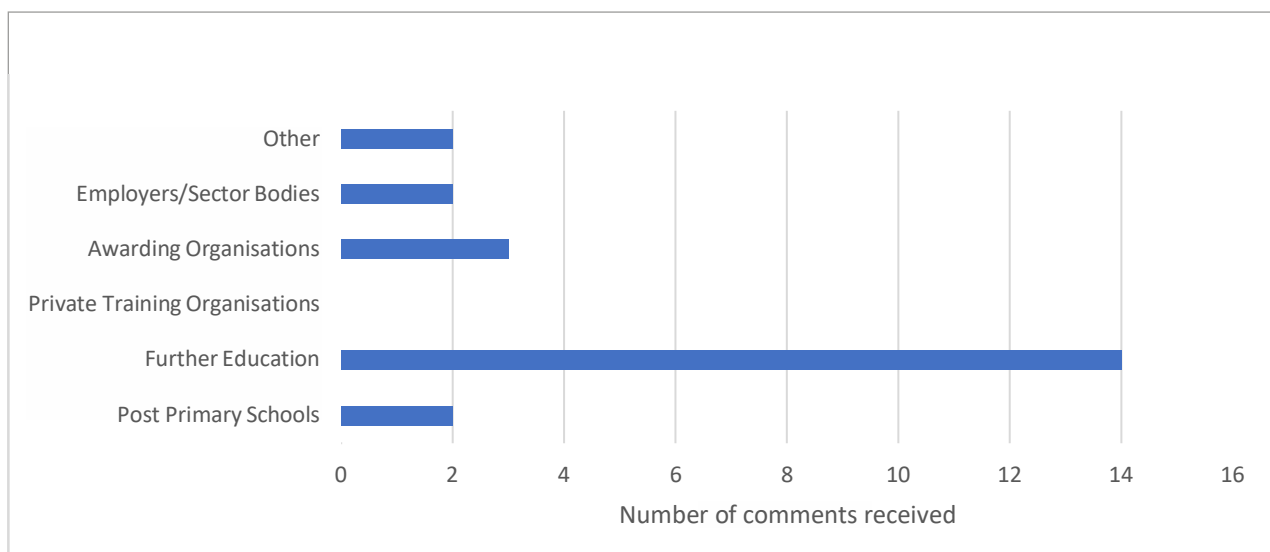
	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	6	7
Agree	45	53
Neither agree nor disagree	19	22
Disagree	6	7
Strongly disagree	9	11
Total	85	100

This question was relevant for all groups. Respondents were asked to consider the suitability of adaptations in facilitating learner progression and how these affected reliability and validity. 85 respondents answered this question.

60% of respondents (n=51) agreed that the adaptations introduced for those qualifications which assess occupational or professional competency, or those for mixed purpose, were appropriate to facilitate assessment and awarding in 2020-21. 15 respondents (18%) from PPS, FE and 'Other' disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on the adaptations introduced. 23 respondents (27%) provided feedback. Comments were received from PPS, FE, AOs, Employers/Sector Bodies and 'Other' category.

Figure 12. Breakdown of comments received from respondents concerning the appropriateness of adaptations introduced for those qualifications which assess occupational or professional competency, or those for mixed purpose, in facilitating assessment and awarding in 2020-2021



Comments received indicated that whilst adaptations were identified by some of the AOs, not all AOs provided clear guidance at unit level. For areas deemed as 'licence to practise', adaptations were not permitted, and some respondents felt that reasonable adaptations could have been introduced. Respondents stated that in some sectors there were challenges in working with industry bodies, to finalise alternative arrangements for assessments within the timelines needed for centres in NI. Respondents also stated that in some vocational areas, initial adaptations were not appropriate as they still relied heavily on a workplace/practical element which was challenging during periods of lockdown, or for learners who had to self-isolate. One respondent stated that initial adaptations from some AOs made it impossible to assess any competencies resulting in delays to candidates completing. A subsequent updating of the guidance allowed for some more flexibility with assessment.

2.2.4.2 Table 12: Instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on adaptations were helpful

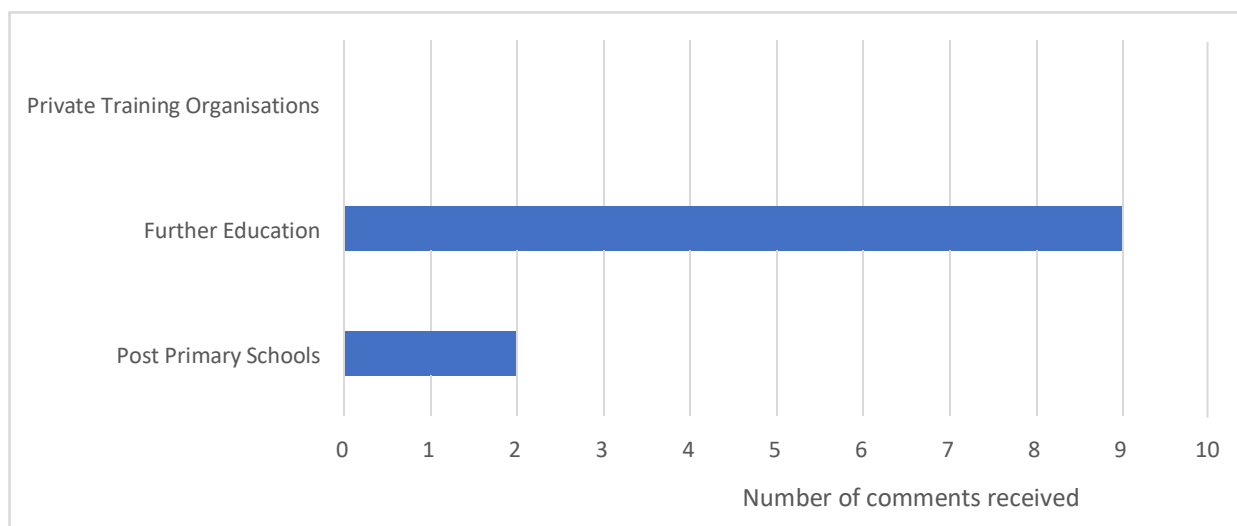
	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	4	7%
Agree	25	43%
Neither agree nor disagree	13	22%
Disagree	5	9%
Strongly disagree	11	19%
Total	58	100.00%

This question was relevant for PPS, FE and PTOs only. Respondents were asked to consider the consistency and manageability of approach across Awarding Organisations. 58 respondents within these groups answered this question.

50% of respondents (n=29) agreed that the instruction and guidance from AOs on adaptations were helpful. 16 respondents (28%) from the PPS and FE disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on the helpfulness of adaptations introduced. 11 respondents (19%) provided feedback. Comments were received from PPS and FE groups.

Figure 13. Breakdown of comments received from respondents concerning the helpfulness of instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on adaptations



Comments received from respondents indicated that, although the final AO guidance was helpful, there were several versions of guidance communicated over a 2 to 3 month period which caused confusion. This meant that it was mid-May 2021 before final guidance was agreed for most AOs/vocational areas. Respondents also indicated that significant time was spent by staff reviewing guidance and liaising with AOs' technical specialists, including their External Quality Assurance (EQA) officers in agreeing allowed adaptations.

One respondent stated that an overview document for school leaders would have been useful.

2.2.4.3 Table 13: Instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on adaptations were timely

	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	3	5%
Agree	17	29%
Neither agree nor disagree	16	28%
Disagree	10	17%
Strongly disagree	12	21%
Total	58	100%

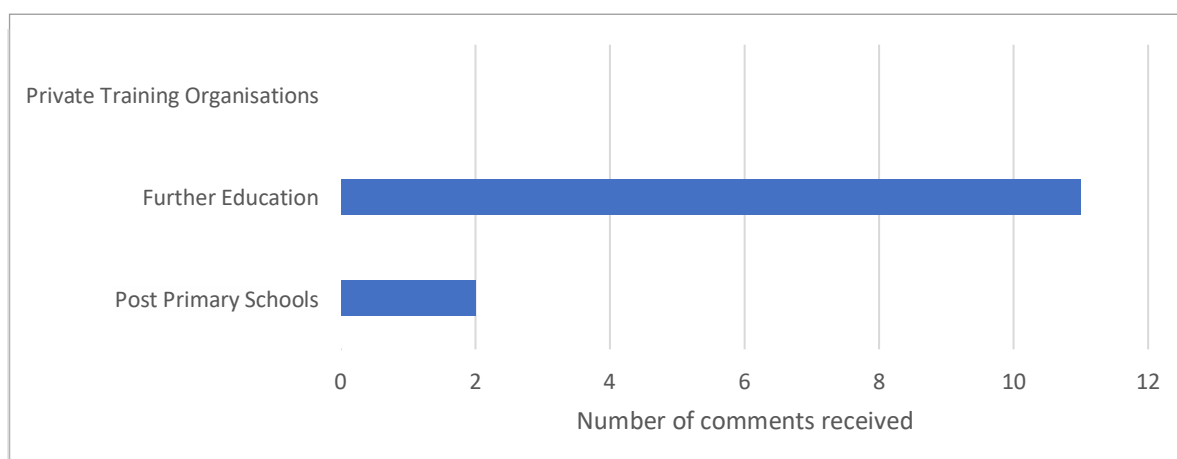
This question was relevant for PPS, FE and PTOs only. Respondents were asked to consider the consistency and manageability of approach across Awarding Organisations. 58 respondents within these groups answered this question.

34% of respondents (n=20) agreed that the instruction and guidance from AOs on

adaptations were timely. 22 respondents (38%) from the PPS, FE and PTO disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on the timeliness of adaptations introduced. 13 respondents (22%) provided feedback. Comments were received from PPS and FE group.

Figure 14. Breakdown of comments received from respondents concerning whether instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on adaptations were timely



Some comments received indicated that instructions and guidance issued by AOs were not timely. Respondents stated that high level guidance was received in March 2021, but that detailed guidance was not fully communicated until May 2021. Respondents stated that guidance was also continually being replaced with updated versions.

Some respondents stated there was a perceived lack of urgency by regulators and AOs in contingency planning for the completion of the 2020-21 awards.

2.2.5 Centre Determined Grading Process for Essential Skills

2.2.5.1. Table 14: The Centre Determined Grading (CDG) process was fair to learners in providing an accurate assessment of their performance

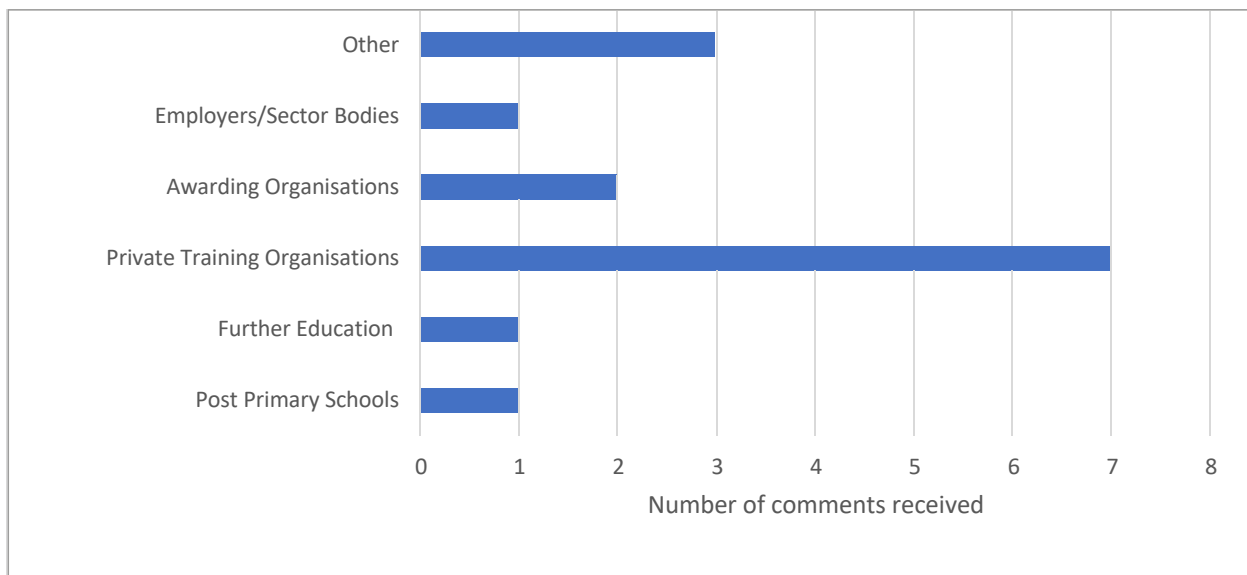
	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	9	14
Agree	44	68
Neither agree nor disagree	7	11
Disagree	3	5
Strongly disagree	2	3
Total	65	100

This question was relevant for all groups. 65 respondents within these groups answered this question.

82% of respondents (n=53) agreed that the CDG process was fair to learners in providing an accurate assessment of their performance. 5 respondents (8%) from the PPS, FE and 'Other' disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on the fairness of the process to learners. 15 respondents (23%) provided feedback. Comments were received from PPS, FE, PTO, AOs, Employers/Sector Body and 'Other' category.

Figure 15. Breakdown of comments received from respondents concerning whether the CDG process was fair to learners in providing an accurate assessment of their performance



Comments received from respondents in respect of the CDG process and fairness to learners were largely positive and agreed that learners received outcomes which were reflective of the standard at which they were working. One concern raised was that the approach made it difficult to differentiate between learners of different ability.

One PTO stated that whilst confident in the rigour of its own assessment, a good proportion of its September 2021 intake had skills significantly below qualifications 'achieved' through this process from some other centres.

2.2.5.2 Table 15. The CDG process was manageable

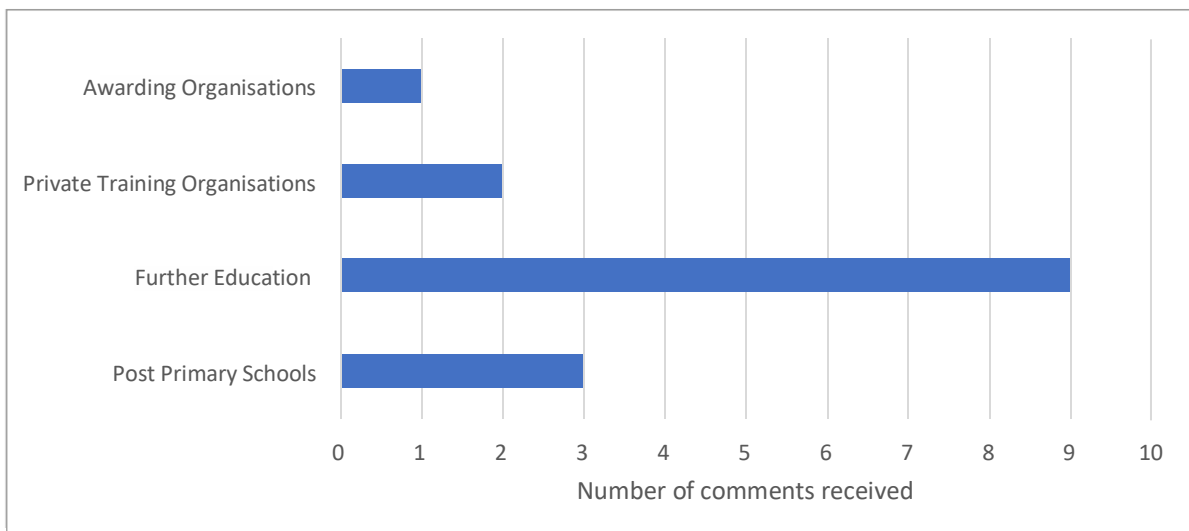
	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	3	6
Agree	27	55
Neither agree nor disagree	6	12
Disagree	5	10
Strongly disagree	8	16
Total	49	100

This question was relevant for PPS, FE, PTO and AOs. Respondents were asked to consider the manageability of the process, and consistency of approach across AOs. 49 respondents within these groups answered this question.

61% of respondents (n=30) agreed that the CDG process was manageable. 13 respondents (26%) from PPS, FE and AOs disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on the manageability of the CDG process. 15 respondents (31%) provided feedback. Comments were received from PPS, FE, PTOs and AOs.

Figure 16. Breakdown of comments received from respondents concerning the manageability of the CDG process



Comments received indicated that the CDG process was only manageable with significantly increased resources. Some respondents stated that contingencies and timelines were not planned or clearly communicated by AOs/regulators, and this added to the stress of the process. One AO stated that the introduction of the CDG process was burdensome on the centres and AOs, and it may have been better to allow examinations to run as usual. They also stated that a lot of time and resources were needed to ensure teachers were comfortable with, and understood the standards expected, before making judgements.

One AO commented that the CDG process was significantly more manageable than processes introduced for similar qualifications in England. One respondent stated that the quality assurance process for 2021 did place a greater burden on centres and AOs, compared to the CAG process in 2020. However, they felt that the quality assurance process did also provide far greater assurance that standards had been met.

2.2.5.3 Table 16. The timelines for the submission of CDGs to the Awarding Organisations were manageable

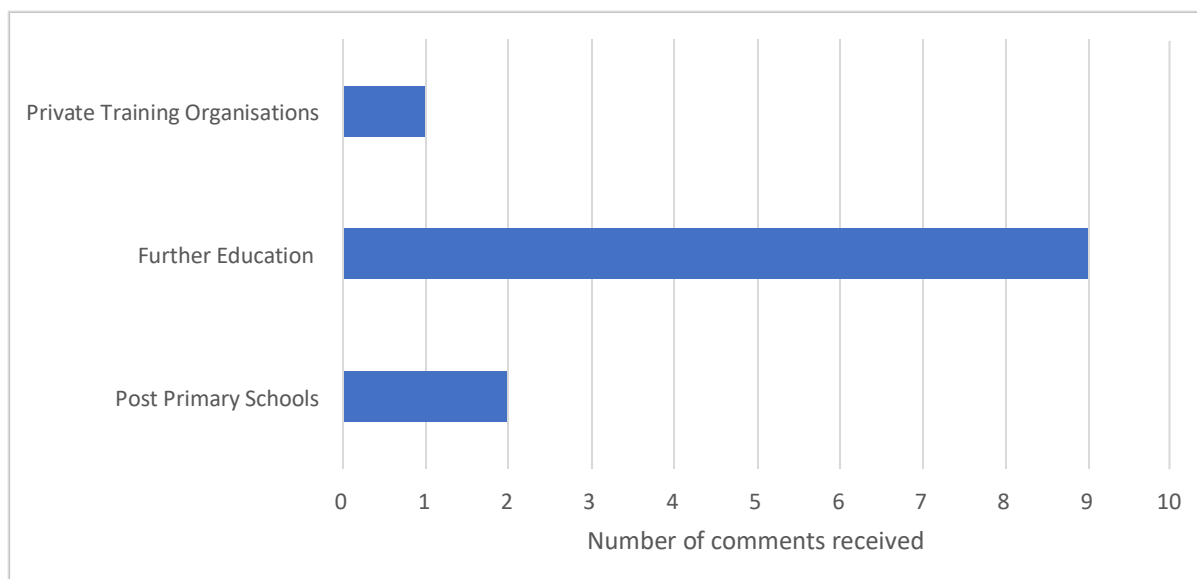
	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	4	9
Agree	19	41
Neither agree nor disagree	8	17
Disagree	6	13
Strongly disagree	9	20
Total	46	100

This question was relevant for PPS, FE and PTOs. 46 respondents within these groups answered this question.

50% of respondents (n=23) agreed that the timelines for the submission of CDGs to the AOs were manageable. 15 respondents (33%) from the PPS and FE disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on the manageability of the CDG process. 12 respondents (26%) provided feedback. Comments were received from PPS, FE and PTOs.

Figure 17. Breakdown of comments received from respondents on whether the timelines for the submission of CDGs to the Awarding Organisations were manageable



Comments received indicated that some respondents felt strongly that timelines given were not manageable, and that staff and students worked hard to meet them. Several of these respondents indicated that the reason the timelines were difficult was due to lack of planning for contingencies and poor communication. They stated that the detailed guidance on requirements for awarding of CDGs was not fully finalised until end of February 2021. This caused considerable stress for students and staff regarding the completion of their qualifications, particularly for Semester 1 students. Also, the late arrival of an Essential Skills workbook meant that the scheme of work (SOW) had to be redesigned in mid-April to accommodate mandatory completion of the Workbook.

2.2.5.4 Table 17: Instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the CDG process were helpful

	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	5	11
Agree	19	41
Neither agree nor disagree	17	37
Disagree	3	7
Strongly disagree	2	4
Total	46	100

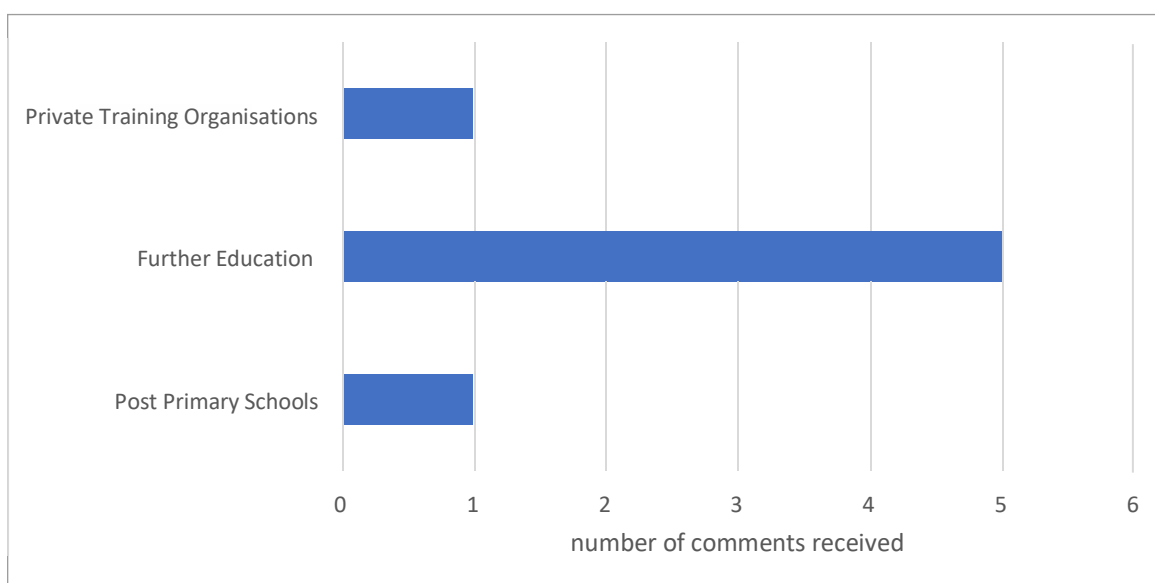
This question was relevant for PPS, FE, PTO only. 46 respondents within these groups answered this question.

52% of respondents (n=24) agreed that the instructions and guidance/support from

AOs on arrangements for the CDG process were helpful. 5 respondents (11%) from the PPS and FE disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on the instructions and guidance/support from AOs for CDG process. 7 respondents (15%) provided feedback. Comments were received from PPS, FE and PTOs.

Figure 18. Breakdown of comments received from respondents on helpfulness of instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the CDG process



Comments from respondents in relation to the helpfulness of CDG instructions and guidance/support indicated that while the final AO guidance was helpful, the release of CDG spreadsheets and then workbooks resulted in follow-up queries which caused confusion. Respondents stated that significant time was spent with staff reviewing guidance and liaising with AOs in agreeing evidence requirements.

2.2.5.5 Table 18. Instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the CDG process were timely

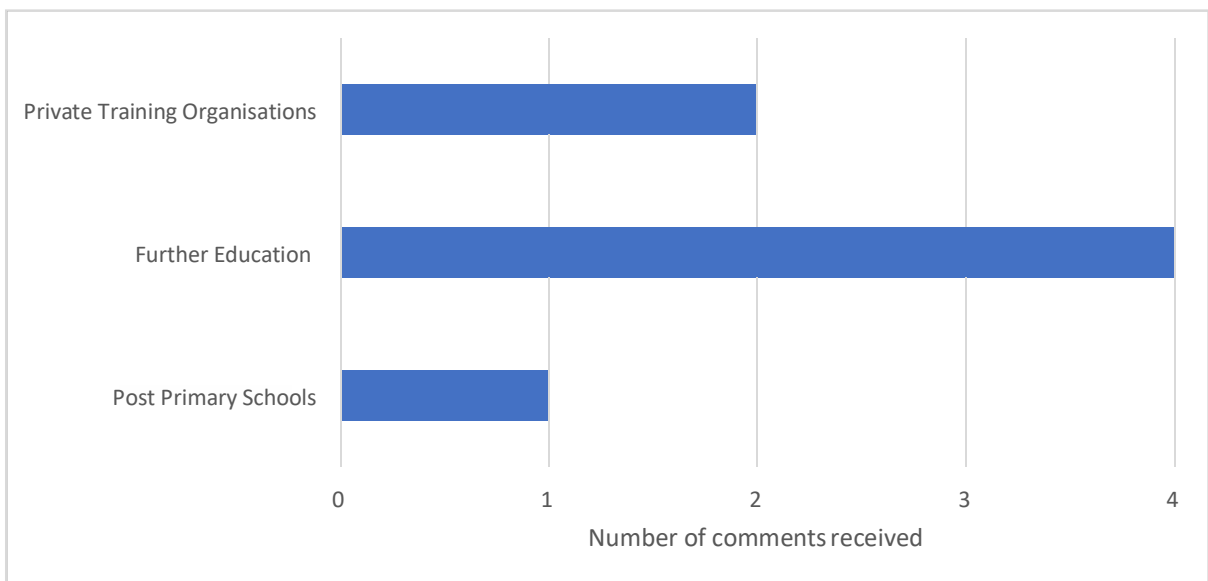
	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	3	7
Agree	14	30
Neither agree nor disagree	12	26
Disagree	9	20
Strongly disagree	8	17
Total	46	100

This question was relevant for PPS, FE, PTO only. 46 respondents within these groups answered this question.

37% of respondents (n=17) agreed that the instructions and guidance/support from AOs on arrangements for the CDG process were timely. 17 respondents (37%) from the PPS, FE and PTO disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on whether the instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the CDG process were timely. 7 respondents (15%) provided feedback. Comments were received from PPS, FE and PTOs.

Figure 19. Breakdown of comments received from respondents on the timeliness of instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the CDG process



One FE college stated that the CDG approach did not seem to recognise arrangements for semester completion of Essential Skills qualifications.

2.2.5.6 Table 19. Providers understood the arrangements and instructions for the CDG process

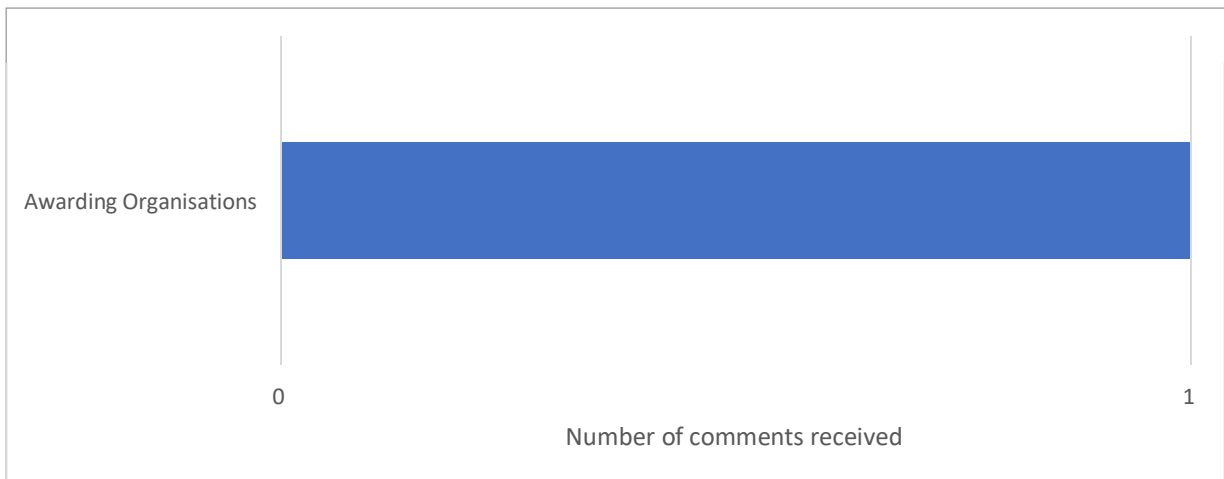
	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	1	33
Agree	2	67
Neither agree nor disagree	0	0
Disagree	0	0
Strongly disagree	0	0
Total	3	100

This question was relevant for AOs only. Three respondents within this group answered this question.

100% of respondents (n=3) agreed that providers understood the arrangements and instructions for the CDG process. No respondents disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on whether providers understood the arrangements and instructions for the CDG process. 1 respondent provided feedback.

Figure 20. Breakdown of comments received from respondents on providers' understanding of the arrangements and instructions for the CDG process



The AO's comments overall indicated that providers did understand the arrangements and instructions for the CDG process. It stated that in providing guidance to centres it was able to easily outline the examinations that were cancelled and the alternative process in place.

This AO identified that there was significantly more challenge in explaining why not all qualifications were following this process, e.g. eligibility requirements for ESOL Skills for Life.

The respondent advised that centres did require support and guidance, given they do not usually make decisions for these assessments. However, no issues were identified with the judgements made by centres.

2.2.5.7 Table 20. Providers complied with the arrangements and timelines for gathering sources of evidence and submission of CDGs

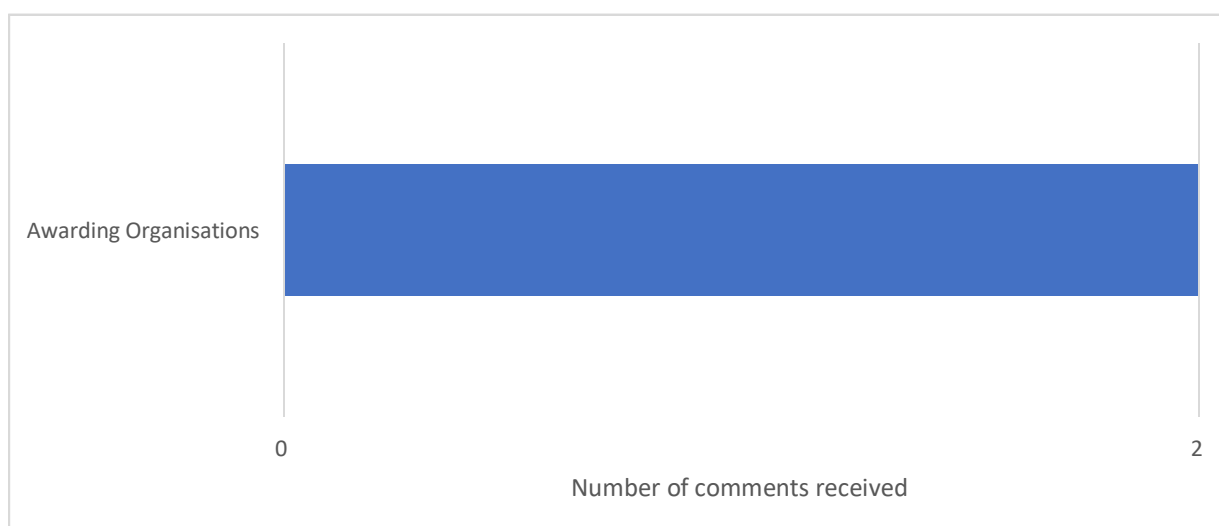
	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	1	33%
Agree	2	67%
Neither agree nor disagree	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly disagree	0	0%
Total	3	100%

This question was relevant for AOs only. 3 respondents within this group answered this question.

100% of respondents (n=3) agreed that providers complied with the arrangements and timelines for gathering sources of evidence and submission of CDGs. No respondents disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on the compliance and timelines for gathering evidence. 2 respondents provided feedback.

Figure 21. Breakdown of comments received from respondents on providers' compliance with the arrangements and timelines for gathering sources of evidence and submission of CDGs



Respondents commented that most of the education and training providers complied with the arrangements and timelines for gathering sources of evidence and submission of CDGs. However, following the submission deadline of 30 June 2021, it was difficult to gather additional supporting evidence from the PPS sector, as the vast majority in NI were closed for the summer holidays.

2.2.6 Results

2.2.6.1 Table 21. The results issued to learners under the alternative arrangements were a valid representation of their performance

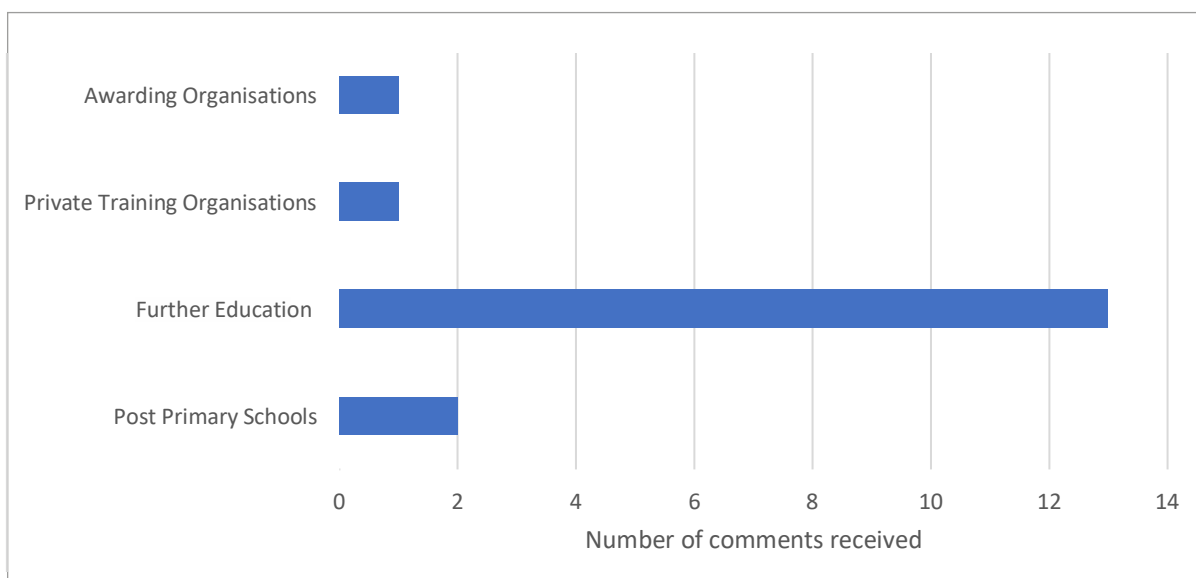
	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	18	24
Agree	38	51
Neither agree nor disagree	15	20
Disagree	1	1
Strongly disagree	2	3
Total	74	100

This question was relevant for PPS, FE, PTOs and AOs. 74 respondents answered this question.

75% of respondents (n=56) agreed that results issued to learners under the alternative arrangements were a valid representation of their performance. 3 respondents (4%) disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on the results issued to learners. 17 respondents (23%) from the PPS, FE, PTOs and AOs provided feedback.

Figure 22. Breakdown of comments received from respondents on whether results issued to learners under the alternative arrangements were a valid representation of their performance



Comments received were very positive, with respondents confirming that they believed learners received results reflective of the standard they were working at.

2.2.6.2 Table 22. The issue of results for level 3 and level 2 vocational qualifications in the same week was manageable

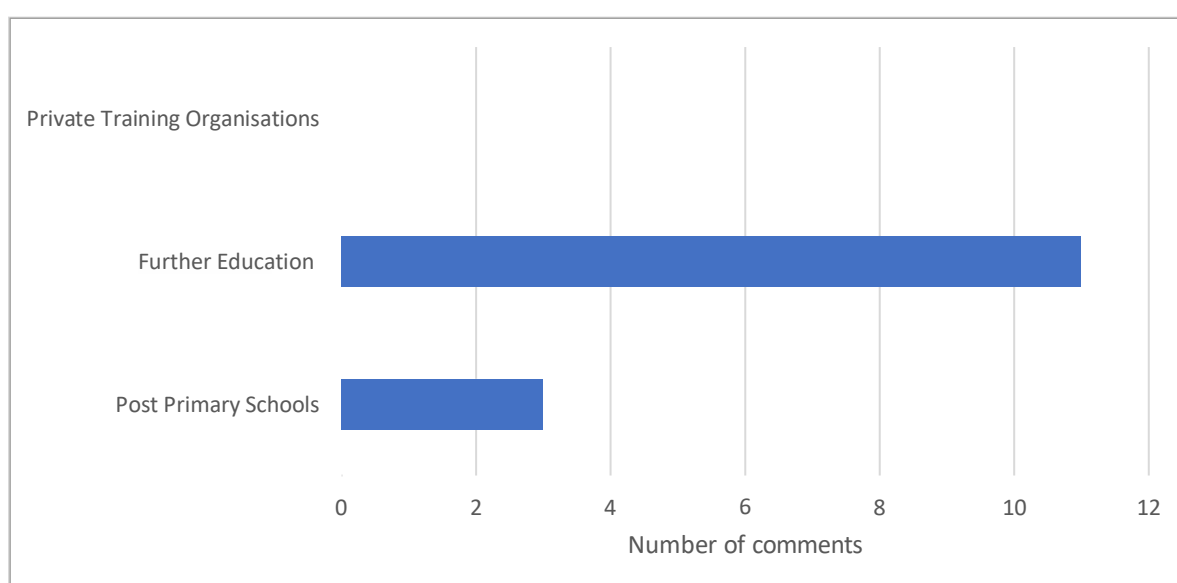
	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	4	6
Agree	34	54
Neither agree nor disagree	16	25
Disagree	6	10
Strongly disagree	3	5
Total	63	100

This question was relevant for PPS, FE, and PTOs. 63 respondents answered this question.

60% of respondents (n=38) agreed that the issue of results for level 3 and level 2 vocational qualifications in the same week was manageable. Nine respondents (15%) disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on the manageability of results issued to learners. 14 respondents (22%) from the PPS and FE provided feedback.

Figure 23. Breakdown of comments received from respondents on whether the issue of results for level 3 and level 2 vocational qualifications in the same week was manageable



Comments received indicated that respondents felt the issue of results for level 2 and 3 in one week was manageable. Most respondents stated that this allowed more time for providers to deal with post- results queries and appeals.

2.2.6.3 Table 23. Instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the issue of results were clear and helpful

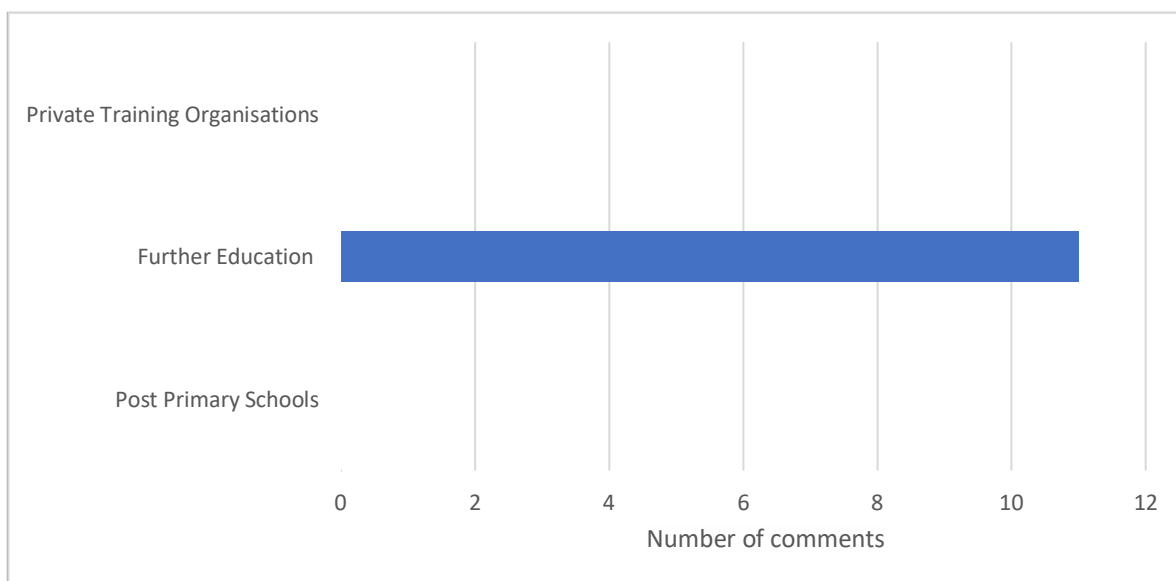
	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	2	3
Agree	33	52
Neither agree nor disagree	21	33
Disagree	4	6
Strongly disagree	3	5
Total	63	100

This question was relevant for PPS, FE, and PTOs. 63 respondents answered this question. 55% of respondents (n=35) agreed that the instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the issue of results were

clear and helpful. Seven respondents (11%) disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on results issued to learners. 11 respondents (17%) from FE provided feedback.

Figure 24. Breakdown of comments received from respondents on the helpfulness and clarity of instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the issue of results



FE respondents stated that there was a significant number of instructions and guidance from AOs between June and August 2021. Instructions and guidance/support were helpful but due to the volume of communications it was difficult to keep up with all the different processes from the different AOs.

2.2.6.4 Table 24. Instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the issue of results were timely

	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	2	3
Agree	26	41
Neither agree nor disagree	17	27
Disagree	14	22
Strongly disagree	4	6
Total	63	100

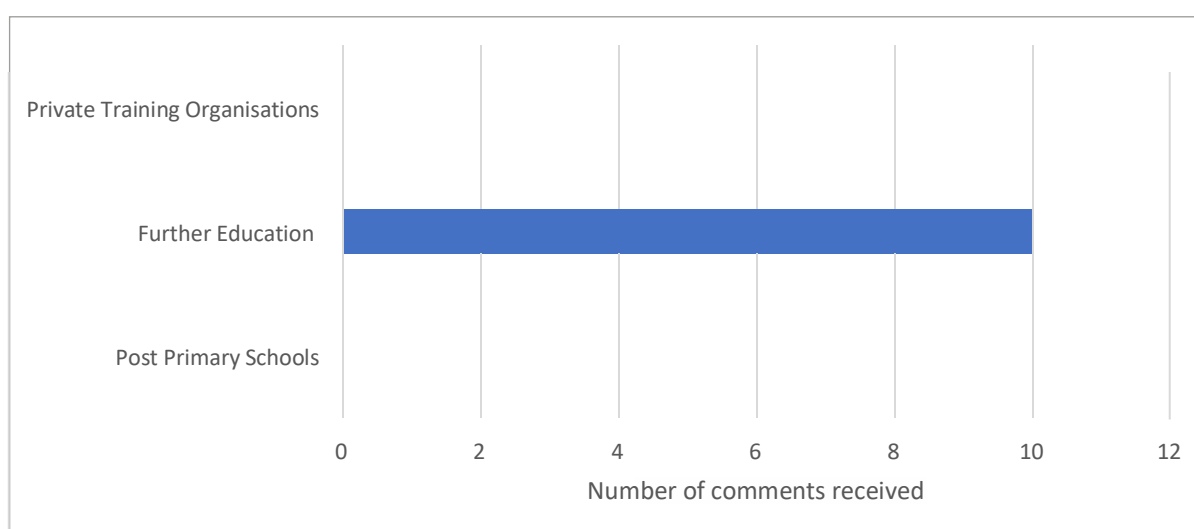
This question was relevant for PPS, FE, and PTOs. 63 respondents answered this question.

44% of respondents (n=28) agreed that the instructions and guidance/support from AOs on arrangements for the issue of results were timely. 18 respondents (28%)

disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on the timing of instructions and guidance/support for results issued to learners. 10 respondents (16%) from FE provided feedback.

Figure 25. Breakdown of comments received from respondents on the timeliness of instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the issue of results



FE respondents advised that information from JCQ/AOs regarding issue of results was received by centres in June 2021 and continued to be received until days before results were due to be released. This put a lot of pressure on examination departments in centres as changes needed to be made to processes right up to the day of issue of results.

2.2.6.5 Table 25 Alternative arrangements were manageable, allowing adequate time to meet issue of results timelines

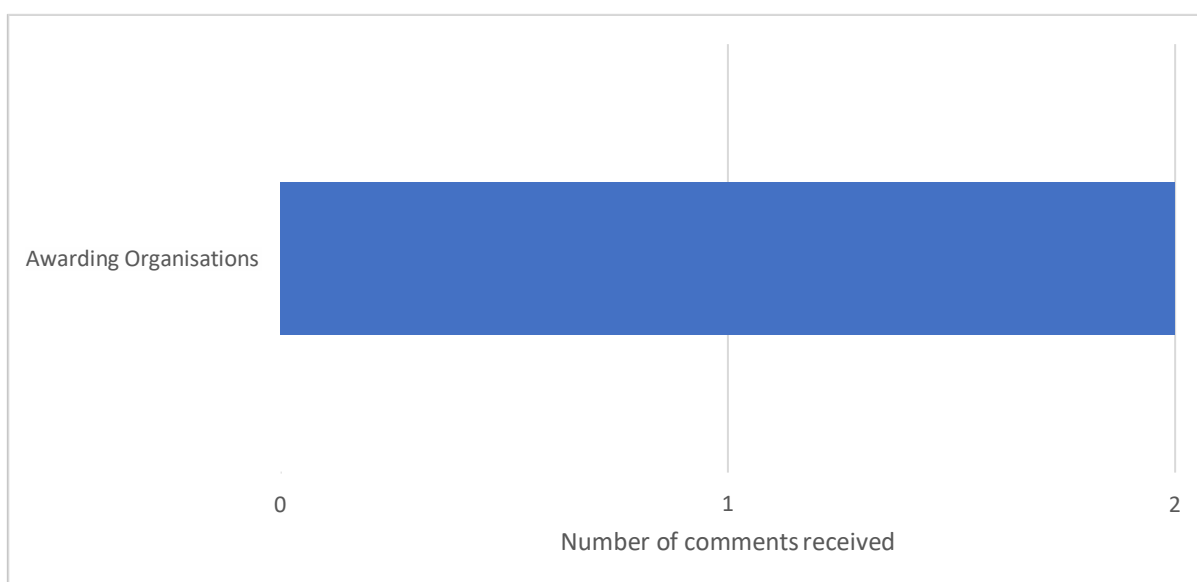
	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	2	18%
Agree	5	45%
Neither agree nor disagree	4	36%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly disagree	0	0%
Total	11	100.00%

This question was relevant for AOs. 11 respondents answered this question.

63% of respondents (n=7) agreed that the alternative arrangements were manageable, allowing adequate time to meet the issue of results timelines. No respondents disagreed with this statement.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment on the results timelines. 2 respondents (18%) provided feedback.

Figure 26: Breakdown of comments received from respondents on whether the alternative arrangements were manageable, allowing adequate time to meet issue of results timelines



One AO indicated that the results process would have benefited from the discussion of contingency plans ahead of January 2021, instead of planning for a scenario where all examinations were to proceed. With the directive on the cancellation of examinations being announced in January 2021, AOs had until March 2021 to determine guidance, processes, and systems to support centres in NI in implementing the alternative arrangements before they closed for summer on 30 June. This required significant resource planning to enable it to happen within the timeline. Another AO indicated that to facilitate the issuing of results for this revised date, they had to redeploy existing resources to ensure compliance.

2.2.7 General

2.2.7.1 Table 26. Overall, how satisfied were you with the alternative assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications in 2020-2021?

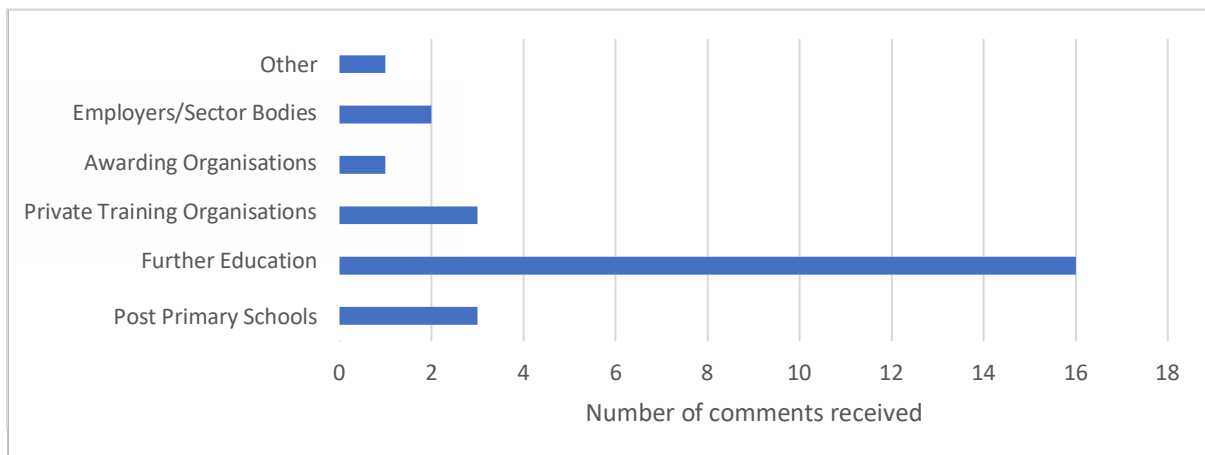
	Frequency	Percentage %
5. Very satisfied	9	10
4. Satisfied	38	41
3. Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	27	29
2. Dissatisfied	7	8
1. Very dissatisfied	12	13
	93	100

This question was relevant for all groups. All respondents answered this question.

51% of respondents (n=47) agreed that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the alternative assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications in 2020-2021. 19 respondents (21%) from PPS and FE were dissatisfied.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comments. 26 respondents (28%) provided feedback. Comments were from PPS, FE, PTOs, AOs, Employers/Sector Bodies and 'Other' category.

Figure 27. Breakdown of comments received from respondents on their satisfaction with the alternative assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications in 2020-2021



Comments were received from PPS, FE, PTO, AOs and Employers/Sector Bodies. PPS commented that the processes implemented were robust; however, there was a significant volume of administration required, which was repetitive in some cases.

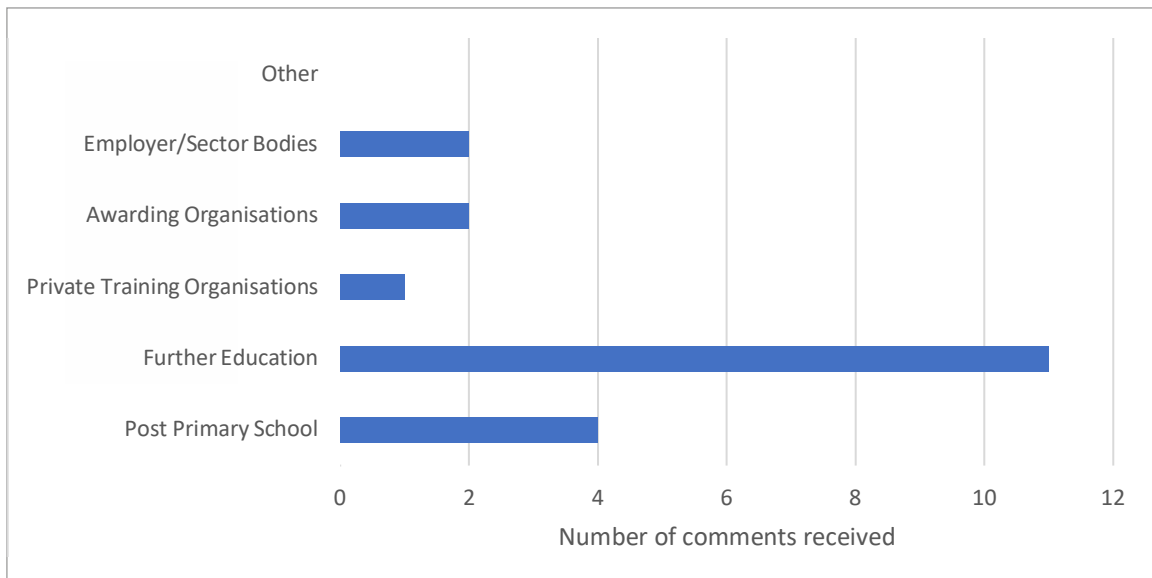
Comments received from FE were mixed. One FE respondent indicated that arrangements were much more manageable than in 2019-2020 and felt that centres were more in control. They also stated that lessons learned had been implemented effectively and there was better communication. Other FE respondents were very dissatisfied due to the delays in receiving information and continuous, confusing updates from AOs which caused stress to both staff and students.

One PTO stated that the alternative assessment arrangements were essential in ensuring that learners were able to make effective progress and achieve their qualifications and that arrangements were appropriate to the restrictions and realistic given the circumstances.

One AO advised that, overall, it was satisfied that valid results were issued on time and enabled learners to progress. The EQA process did increase the burden on AOs and centres, compared to the CAG process, but it also provided confidence that all learners received reliable results. This is essential for maintaining public confidence in the qualifications system.

The Employers/Sector bodies commented that the alternative arrangements for assessment of competency in practice were very restrictive initially but improved when reviewed.

Figure 28. Breakdown of additional feedback received from respondents



All respondents were asked if they would like to provide further feedback. 20 respondents (21%) provided feedback. Comments were from PPS, FE, PTO, AO and Employers/Sector Body groups.

Three FE respondents raised the absence of a question on the role of the regulator in the survey. One respondent stated that the role of the regulator was much better this time around and had a more joined up approach than before. Another respondent stated that meetings with the regulator were useful as issues were escalated at pace and many resolved. Other FE respondents thought that the regulator performing its regulatory role in approving AO processes caused delays. FE also raised concerns about AOs putting staff on furlough and felt that English AOs did not understand the timelines and restrictions in NI.

One AO’s comments indicated that there is a need to manage the expectations of providers better so that they have a realistic view of timelines in which AOs can produce guidance based on policy direction and workforce regulators. Another AO commented favourably on CCEA Regulation’s collaborative approach for Essential Skills and the opportunities it provided in bringing all stakeholders together.

One Employer/Sector Body advised that for vocational competency assessments, a more unified approach between all AOs would have been preferred. They also advised that a more uniform communication from all AOs would have been helpful as some AOs seemed to provide less guidance/communicate less than others.

Section 3: Awarding Data

3.1 Data Source

Information on VTQs – such as type, AO, sector subject area etc. – comes from the [Register of Regulated Qualifications](#). The Register contains a record of qualifications regulated by CCEA Regulation in NI, and Ofqual in England.

For each calendar quarter, data on the numbers of certificates awarded to learners in NI in VTQs is collected from AOs and published by [CCEA Regulation](#). The number of certificates awarded for each quarter during 2020-2021 is the closest measure of certification activity during the VTQ Contingency Regulatory Framework (VCRF). Similar data is collected and published for Wales and England, which can be used to make direct comparisons between regulated qualifications across jurisdictions. However, due to the data owners masking values fewer than 4 for confidentiality reasons, estimates for these qualifications have to be made.

3.2 Comparative Representation of Certification Data

Figure 1 shows the number of certifications in Technical & Professional qualifications in NI for the 2020/21 academic year compared with previous years.¹ There were 4.2% more certificates awarded in 2020/21 than in 2019/20, though there were 20.1% fewer than the pre-COVID-19 figure from 2018/19.

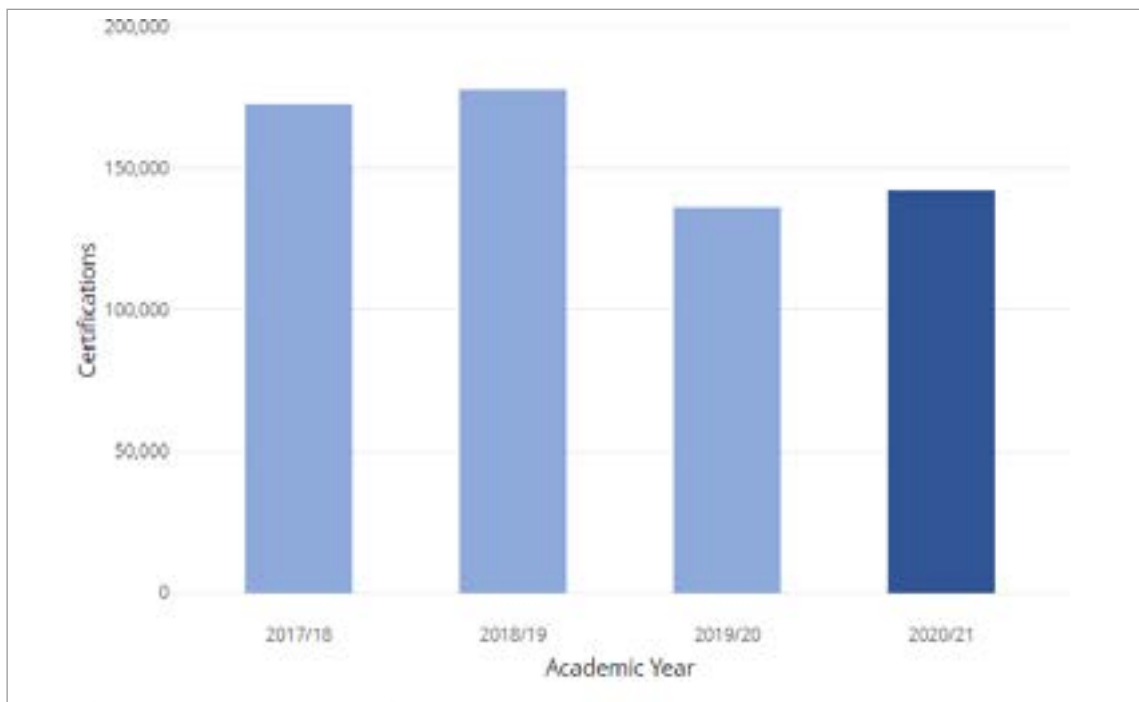


Figure 1: Certifications by academic year

¹certification data is collected quarterly and it is not possible to align cut-off dates with the Department for the Economy's definition of academic year 1st August to 31st July. We define the academic year for certifications as starting on 1st October and ending on 30th November.

Academic Year	Certifications
2020/21	142,164
2019/20	136,380
2018/19	177,928
2017/18	172,709

The number of certifications by calendar quarter are shown in figure 2. Quarter 2 of 2021 had almost twice as many certifications as quarter 2 of 2020. Quarter 3 of 2021 had 3.9% more certifications than quarter 3 of 2019, which is expected due to the delay to certifications caused by disruption to learning and assessment.

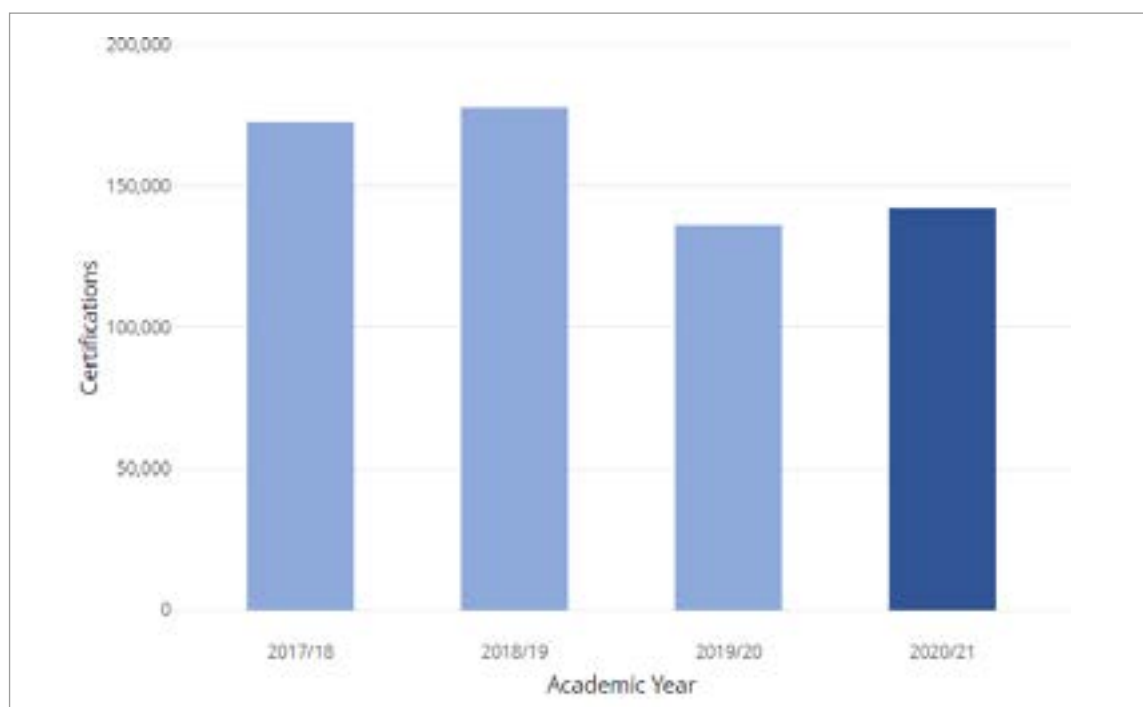


Figure 2: Certifications by calendar year

Academic Year	Quarter	Certifications
2017/18	Q4	25,624
2017/18	Q1	25,127
2017/18	Q2	59,683
2017/18	Q3	62,275
2018/19	Q4	24,329
2018/19	Q1	25,136
2018/19	Q2	65,157
2018/19	Q3	63,306
2019/20	Q4	24,014

2019/20	Q1	21,812
2019/20	Q2	17,230
2019/20	Q3	73,314
2020/21	Q4	18,178
2020/21	Q1	13,680
2020/21	Q2	34,157
2020/21	Q3	76,149

Sector subject area (tier 1)

The number of certifications by sector subject area is shown in figure 3. The largest increases in certifications in 2020/21 on 2019/20 were in Arts, Media and Publishing (30.7%) and Health, Public Services and Care (22.8%). Certifications in some subject areas decreased on 2019/20, with the largest being Preparation for Life and Work (-8.8%) and Information and Communication Technology (-16.1%).

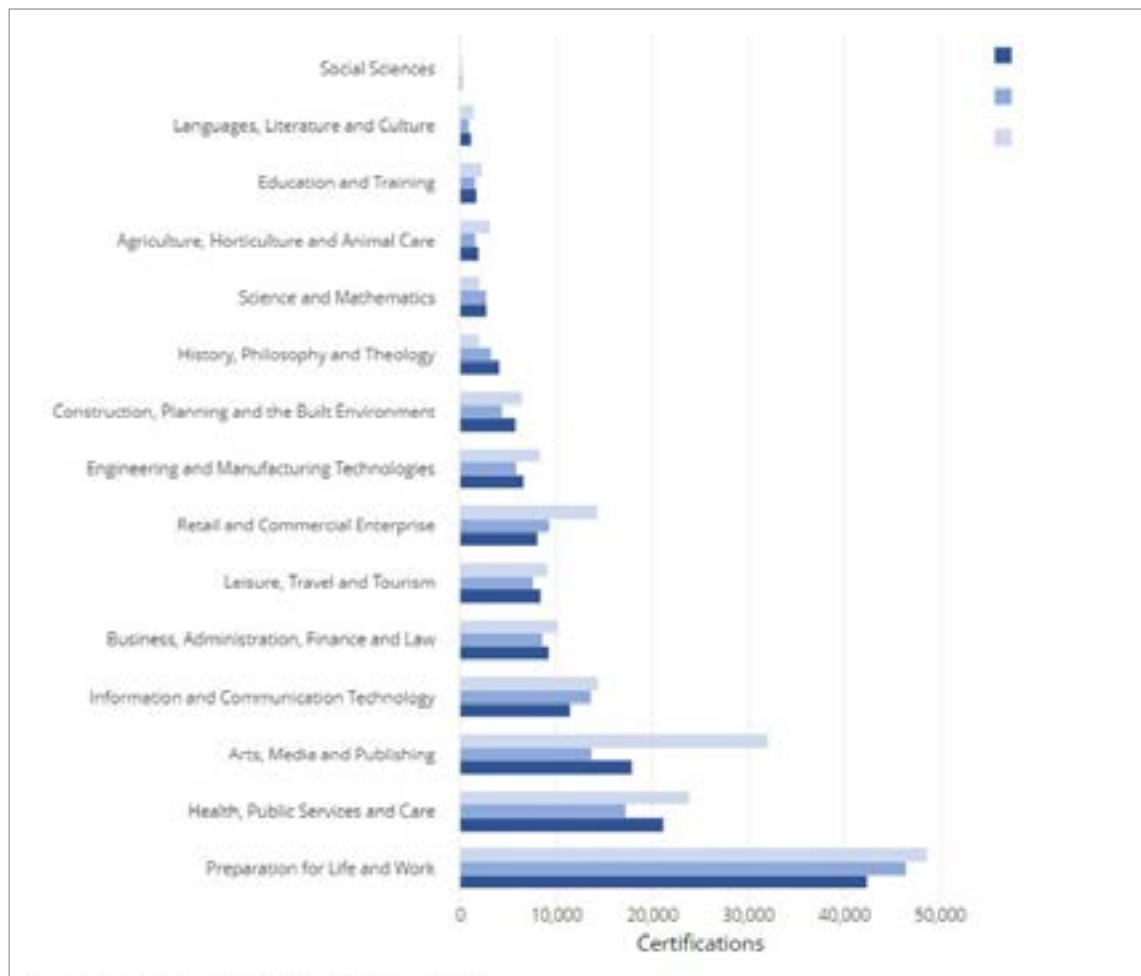


Figure 3: Certifications by Sector Subject Area (tier 1)

Sector Subject Area	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
Preparation for Life and Work	42,371	46,435	48,653
Health, Public Services and Care	21,144	17,218	23,850
Arts, Media and Publishing	17,870	13,599	32,068
Information and Communications Technology	11,417	13,599	14,341
Business Administration, Finance and Law	9,198	8,543	10,169
Leisure, Travel and Tourism	8,350	7,558	9,088
Retail and Commercial Enterprise	8,016	9,254	14,279
Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	6,569	5,801	8,291
Construction, Planning and the Built Environment	5,728	4,332	6,464
History, Philosophy and Theology	4,051	3,206	1,962
Science and Mathematics	2,688	2,679	1,970
Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care	1,878	1,563	3,089
Education and Training	1,668	1,541	2,242
Languages, Literature and Culture	1,110	879	1,384
Social Sciences	106	94	78
Total	142,164	136,380	177,928

Qualification level

The number of certifications by qualification level is shown in figure 4. The largest increases in certifications in 2020/21 on 2019/20 were for Level 3 (17.7%) and Level 2 (4.9%). Certifications in some subject areas decreased on 2019/20, with the largest decrease being Entry Level (-20.8%). The number of certificates for Level 1/2, Level 4 and Level 5 has been quite stable over the past three academic years; Level 4 certifications were slightly higher in 2021 than in 2019.

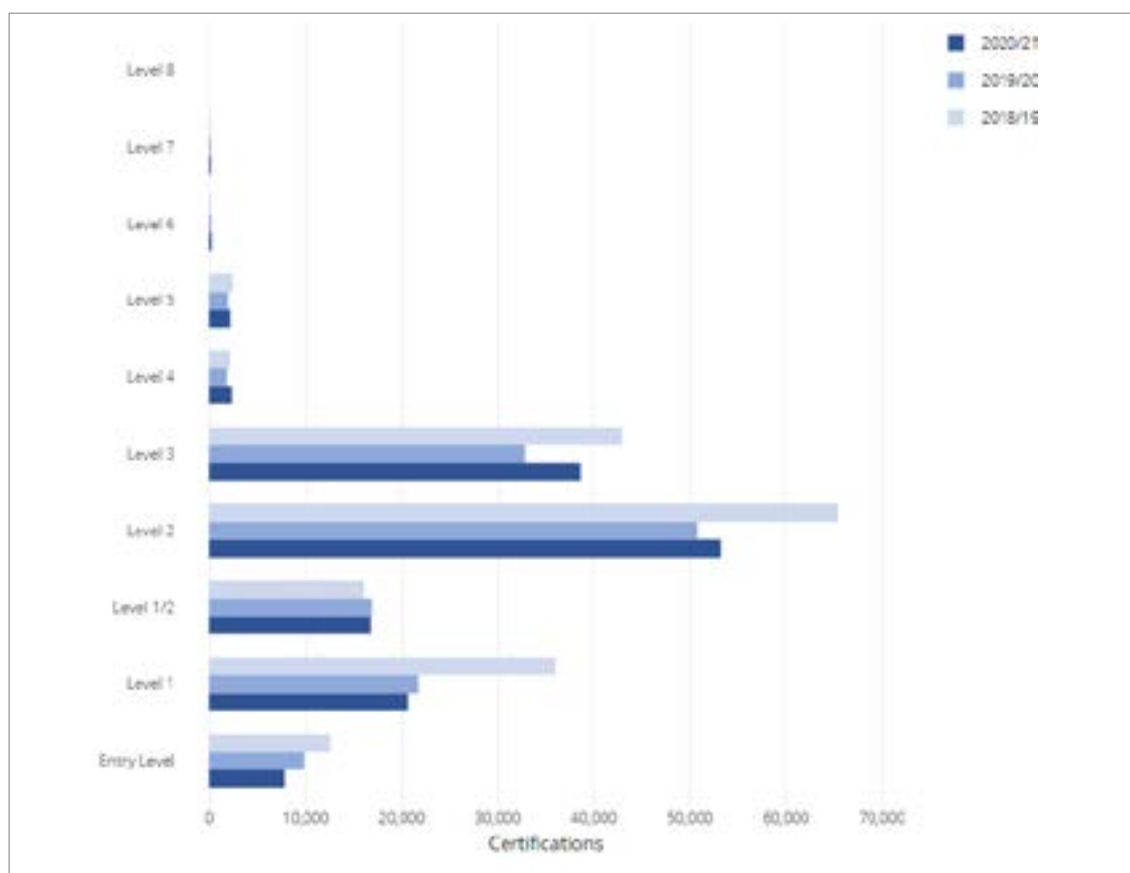


Figure 4: Certifications by qualifications level

Qualifications Level	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
Entry Level	7,843	9,896	12,570
Level 1	20,718	21,749	36,008
Level 1/2	16,828	16,982	16,042
Level 2	53,236	50,767	65,509
Level 3	38,660	32,852	42,947
Level 4	2,292	1,791	2,096
Level 5	2,135	1,909	2,371
Level 6	260	243	213
Level 7	191	191	1721
Level 8	1	0	0
Total	142,164	136,380	177,928

Qualification type

The number of certifications by qualification type is shown in figure 5. The largest increases in certifications in 2020/21 on 2019/20 were for types *Performing Arts Graded Examination* (47.4%) and *Vocationally-Related Qualification* (5%). Certifications in some subject areas decreased on 2019/20, with the largest decrease being *Essential Skills (NI)* (-14.9%). *Other General Qualifications* were up on both

2019/20 and 2018/19, mostly driven by CCEA’s Occupational Studies suite and the OCN NI Level 2 Certificate in Religious Studies.

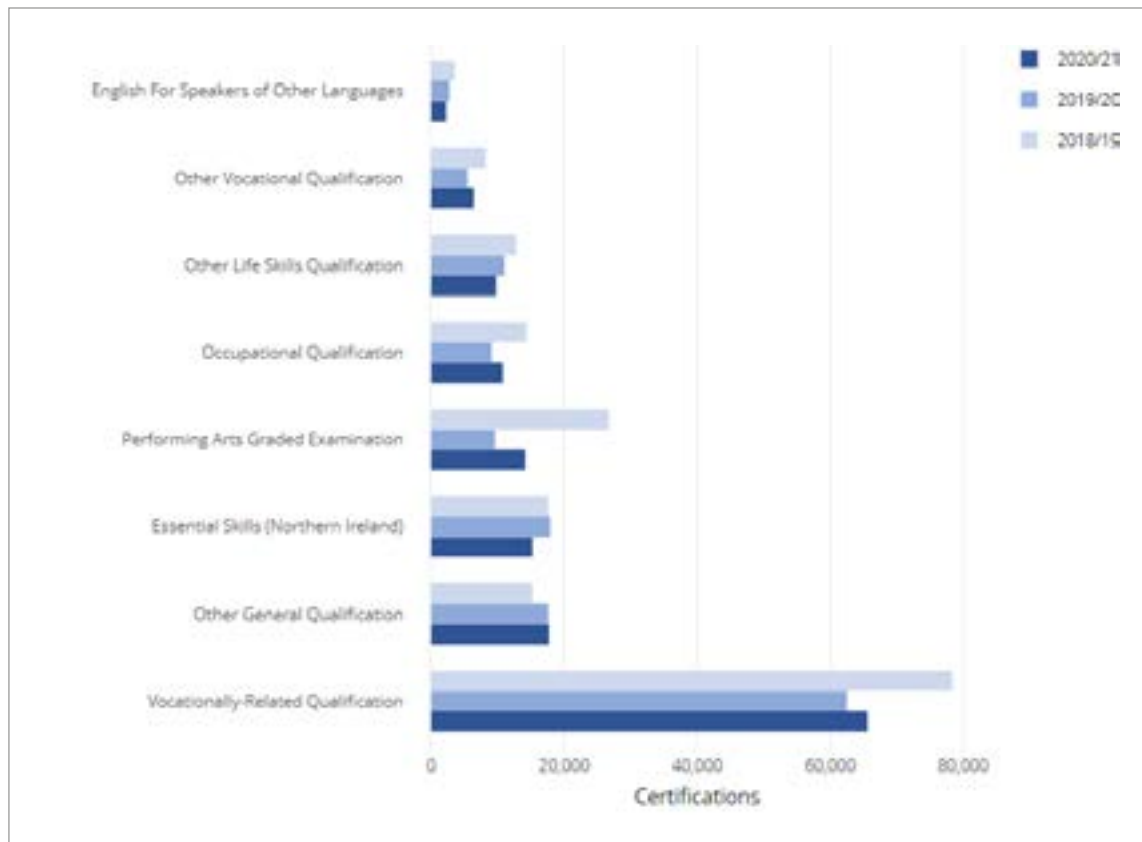


Figure 5: Certifications by qualification type

Qualifications Type	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
Vocationally-Related Qualification	65,639	62,539	78,398
Other General Qualification	17,722	17,617	15,238
Essential Skills (Northern Ireland)	15,238	17,907	17,623
Performing Arts Graded Examination	14,149	9,598	26,700
Occupational Qualification	10,769	9,087	14,312
Other Life Skills Qualification	9,760	11,019	12,789
Other Vocational Qualification	6,411	5,465	8,216
English for Speakers of Other Languages	2,252	2,751	3,535
Key Skills	215	396	529
QCF	1	0	529
National Vocational Qualification	2	0	0
Entry Level	0	0	8
Functional Skills	0	1	11
Total	142,164	136,380	177,928

Top 10 awarding organisations

Figure 6 shows the top 10 awarding organisations by number of certifications in 2020/21, along with the number of certifications they had in previous years.

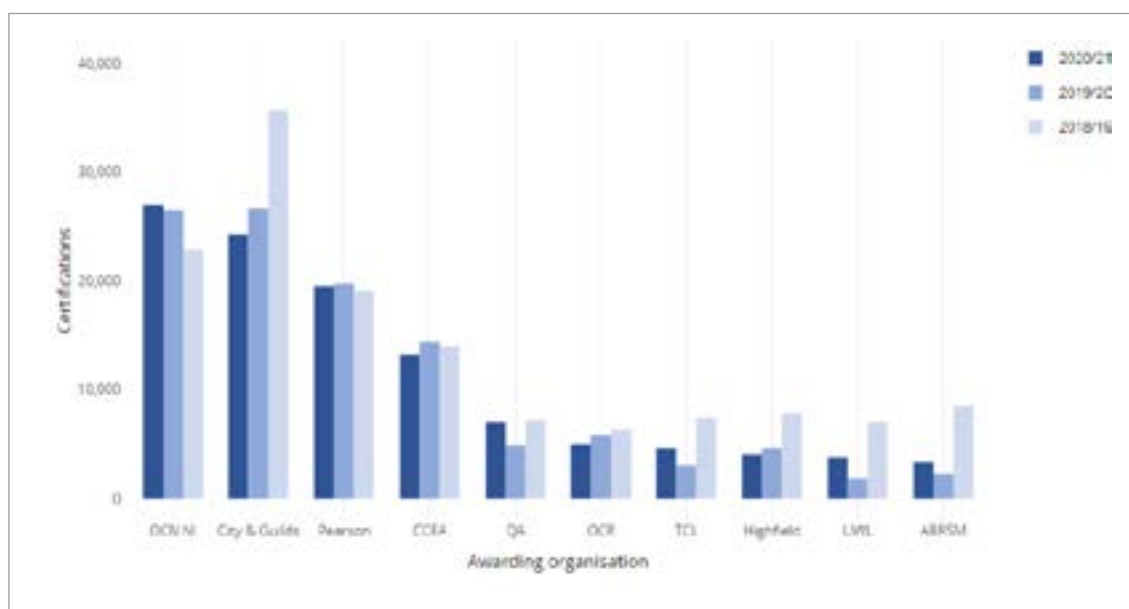


Figure 6: Top 10 awarding organisations in 2020-21

Qualifications Type	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
OCN NI	26,990	26,480	22,845
City & Guilds	24,289	26,635	35,689
Pearson	19,546	19,757	19,071
CCEA	13,223	14,377	14,007
QA	6,987	4,879	7,239
OCR	4,959	5,819	6,368
TCL	4,645	3,047	7,444
Highfield	4,023	4,657	7,805
UWL	3,787	1,858	7,001
ABRSM	3,396	2,234	8,515
Prince's Trust	2,736	2,509	2,534
VTCT	2,536	1,600	1,685
IQL	2,460	1,430	2,200
RSPH	1,637	2,028	2,851
NEA	1,216	351	2,059
ASDAN	1,200	1,568	1,886
NCFE	1,142	1,039	1,590
NOCN	1,093	981	2,542
IMI	1,040	749	1,084
Active IQ	938	930	1,164

Note on data revisions

The data used for this report is revised due to AO reporting error. Certification figures provided to CCEA Regulation in the summary report (27th October 2021) did not contain these revisions. The figures in this report are accurate as of 11th November 2021 but will not necessarily be the same as certification statistics produced previously.

Section 4: Stakeholder Engagement

Following the survey, stakeholder interviews were conducted online with a range of key stakeholder groups, including FE colleges, schools, PTOs and AOs. CAFRE was included in the stakeholder interviews due to its significance as a vocational qualifications provider in NI. ETI and CCEA Regulation officers were also invited to reflect on their experiences of the alternative arrangements in place for 2020-2021. There were 37 participants; a full list of those interviewed can be found at Appendix iii.

4.1 Approach

Prior to interview, stakeholders were furnished with a copy of the Discussion Paper, summarising the findings from the online survey, to inform Stakeholder Engagement (Appendix ii).

In the group interviews, the views of participants were sought regarding VTQ assessment and awarding in 2020-2021. The interviews discussed the themes of Communication, Teacher Assessed Grades (TAGs), Adaptations, Centre Determined Grades (CDGs) for Essential Skills, and Results, mirroring the questions in the survey. All interviewees were asked their opinions on what went well or had improved from the arrangements in place for summer 2020; what they thought did not go well and the challenges they faced; and any lessons learnt or recommendations for improvement. Any other relevant points were recorded.

On completion of the interviews, comments and opinions were summarised and findings recorded.

4.2 Findings from Stakeholder Interviews

As with the 2020 evaluation, there was a willingness from all involved in the interviews to share their views and the different stakeholders were able to identify how lessons learnt from 2020 had contributed to improvements for 2021, while acknowledging the continuing challenges for assessment and awarding of VTQ qualifications in the context of ongoing uncertainty.

4.2.1 Further Education Colleges

There were two online group interviews conducted with FE – one with Curriculum Directors and one with Quality Managers. A total of 5 Curriculum Directors and 4 Quality Managers participated and all 6 colleges were represented in one or both of the interviews.

Curriculum Directors

Curriculum Directors commented that FE delivers 66% of vocational qualifications (12,500 learners) in NI, yet the discussion paper did not distinguish between

respondents (e.g. AOs and delivery partners) in the statistics presented and the responses had equal weighting. It should be recognised that the impact varied according to sector and organisation. They also noted that there were no questions on the performance of the regulators.

Participants noted that in 2019-20 many learners' assessments were delayed. It was a better picture in 2021 because staff were cognisant of what was required and had clear contingency plans in place to ensure that learners received their results.

In 2020-2021 the main issue was the timeliness of strategic decisions and the communications around these. The group felt that decisions are not useful if they come at the wrong time; providers needed clarity early on to alleviate anxiety. Guidance was not received until after the Minister's decision in January 2021. The quality and timeliness of decision-making and the changing picture in relation to communications from AOs caused an amount of stress for staff. There were some very stressful meetings during the year and some AOs were unresponsive until May 2021; others had positive meetings but saw little resulting action in meeting the needs of staff and learners. They also felt that regulators did not issue communications in a timely manner to allow providers to put arrangements in place and keep learners and staff engaged. Communications also did not take the NI context into account at times, for example in the mitigations put in place around travel and placements. They felt it should be recognised that NI was in lockdown for longer and that summer term ended earlier than in the rest of the UK.

Moving forward, timely communications are required on what can be done to help learners 'close out' their qualifications.

In terms of Teacher Assessed Grades (TAGs), participants felt staff were diligent and thorough, so that in the end their judgements were positive. However, the different options that were considered at the start had not been thought through thoroughly, for example in taking cognisance of HEI requests for unit-level information. This led to 'chopping and changing' of processes. They felt that the Ofqual consultation delayed decision-making by two to three months.

Participants felt that any adaptations and mitigations in areas such as Health and Social Care and Childcare were hard-won, eventually agreeing on 70% of placement hours. No mitigations were permitted on completion of practicals in classrooms rather than placements. They felt that AOs should have been more flexible in considering the NI context (with lockdown not easing until mid-May) and noted that CCEA Regulation had to step in to address the issue for centres.

They were concerned by ongoing issues, such as the requirement for learners to be vaccinated before going on placement, and that there had been no consultation to date on potential mitigations for 2022. They stated that staff are becoming anxious and that CCEA Regulation should as a matter of urgency seek formal assurances from AOs that contingency plans are in place to address any potential worsening of the COVID-19 situation. The mitigations used last year should be rolled over for

2022. There was an opportunity for communications between AOs and the FE sector to focus on concerns and outline mitigations and contingency plans, but that these should be communicated well in advance, i.e. as early as possible in 2022.

Participants commented that there had been a reduction in the amount of content being assessed in general qualifications (for summer 2022) and that it should be noted that this was not the case for vocational qualifications.

In relation to Essential Skills, participants noted that CCEA Regulation had provided clear advice on how to award, but that this was not being consistently applied by AOs, which could potentially disadvantage learners. They felt that CCEA Regulation should check the consistency of how AOs were applying the advice.

Participants reported that the issue of Level 2 and Level 3 results in the same week was straightforward, but that FE needed to have the results data in a timely way to support converting applications to enrolments. This could be facilitated if GCSE learners could receive their results online, as is the case with GCE. All colleges have observed a reduction in enrolments as they perceived that learners were being retained by schools.

Participants outlined the challenges of maintaining 'business as usual' under current circumstances, for example when tutors are teaching in college while also trying to meet the needs of learners in placements or self-isolating. They expressed concerns about the impact on learners whose learning was interrupted due to illness or self-isolation and how this could be addressed to help them catch up.

Quality Managers

Participants reported that they felt communications had improved on 2019-20. However, in some cases there was a gap in communication from AOs between October 2020 and February 2021, and final communications with an appropriate level of detail were not received until April 2021.

As Quality Managers, they found the volume of email communications difficult to manage, particularly given the number of AOs with which they were dealing. It was sometimes not clear who else had received the communication and it was challenging to sift out pertinent and applicable information, particularly if this was buried deeper in the email. It was not always easy to determine the status of the communication, for example if it was an update or reminder or if it contained changes and new information. This led to quality managers taking a significant amount of time to compare with previous communications and identify anything new that required action. They recommended that AOs could indicate the status of communications and flag/highlight new instructions so that important changes are not missed.

They were able to raise concerns through the NI Communications Working Group and also found CCEA Regulation's weekly AO updates useful to double check that nothing was missed. However, some of the weekly meetings put in place by AOs were not helpful as there was nothing new to say.

They felt that AOs and regulators should be cognisant of the pressures put on staff 'on the ground' by last-minute changes. They would appreciate open and honest communications if changes have to be made, so that centres know at an early stage and can then plan accordingly.

Participants observed that the previous year's CAG process helped prepare them for TAGs and that centre assessment policies were useful. However, timelines were challenging for NI centres due to different term times, and they felt that there could have been greater clarity on mid-flight learners and the requirements for evidence, particularly given the degree of evidence requested by AOs this year.

They also felt that some schools did not always understand the TAG process, the quality function within FE and the amount of evidence required to support judgements and be able to stand over them. They observed that it would be useful to have service level agreements in place with schools, as consortium arrangements can help to clarify expectations.

In terms of adaptations, they noted that any impact of PHA guidance on a sector had an equivalent impact on learners doing related qualifications. Hair, beauty, and hospitality were most impacted, and some of these learners have deferred to 2022. There were challenges to managing placements for 'licence to practise' areas such as Health and Social Care and Childcare; while placement hours were reduced, there was constant disruption for learners due to illness and self-isolation, which meant it was difficult to build up their hours.

There was also an impact on sports qualifications; while colleges were able to arrange summer camps, etc., this was at significant cost. Retention has also been impacted, with learners leaving as they were unable to study.

Participants would have liked more flexibility from AOs, for example in accepting project-based assessments instead of placements.

There were particular issues with Essential Skills and ESOL qualifications. The amount of administration and form-filling required throughout the process (eligibility forms, rationale for IQA forms, upload of submissions etc.) was very time-consuming and their purpose was not clear. The sampling process was completed before the IQA requirements were outlined and it was difficult to manage the timescales associated with the opening and closing of different assessment windows. Centres went through the CDG process before being told in June that ESOL was not eligible for this process; this issue required intervention by CCEA Regulation to resolve the issue.

Quality managers felt that the issue of Level 2 and Level 3 results in the same week was very difficult, as often the Quality Manager was having to follow up on two sets of queries and appeals at the same time. They reflected on whether the earlier release of Level 2 results had had a detrimental effect on FE registration and enrolment figures, with perhaps schools taking the opportunity of the additional time to encourage students to stay on. They noted that for this academic year, FE registrations and enrolments were sitting at 46% of targets and there had been a

significant decrease in apprenticeships and traineeships.

Generally, they felt that they had a very collaborative process in place with CCEA Regulation which was positive and had worked extremely well. They also noted improved communications with individual AOs due to having single points of contact, and that the relationships between colleges and AOs had been strengthened.

4.2.3 Schools

Twelve schools participated in the online group interview.

Schools had a variety of experiences in terms of communication from and with AOs. One AO, it was reported, provided timely communications and weekly bulletins which were very useful, as schools knew from the start what was required of them. Schools found that liaising with CCEA subject officers on general qualifications was also very useful, as even experienced staff needed direction and advice at times. However, sometimes guidance came very late and it was challenging for schools to collate evidence within the deadlines.

One school experienced challenges with Essential Skills. They found it difficult to get an immediate response to queries from the AO and that there were inconsistencies in approach, for example, having to justify why students were entered (eligibility criteria). There were subsequent delays in results and certificates being issued and variations in the timing of issue of results for some components such as speaking and listening. This led to parental concerns and some uncertainty for students trying to secure places on FE courses.

More generally, the timing and co-ordination of communications were a concern, as schools were concerned about missing important information due to the volume of communications being received. Sometimes parents received information at the same time as schools; the schools requested some advance notice to process the implications and manage communications with parents more effectively.

They expressed no major concerns with the issue of Level 2 and Level 3 results in the same week; it was a very busy period but allowed schools to get a full picture very quickly.

They commented that communications are key and schools need channels to raise concerns and discuss issues with AOs, for example via forums or fortnightly meetings. They cited CCEA GQ meetings with school principals as an excellent example and requested that something similar be put in place for VTQs.

4.2.4 CAFRE

There were two participants in this group interview.

CAFRE is a member of Landex, a consortium of land-based colleges. CAFRE delivers both FE and HE provision. Apprenticeships focus mainly on work-based diplomas.

There are about 800 learners per year.

CAFRE uses a small number of AOs, so works directly with them. They cited the relationship with the City and Guilds technical adviser working with colleges as a particularly useful example.

CAFRE felt that the main difficulty was the delay in strategic decision-making in late 2020 as the COVID-19 situation developed. However, they were content with the timing and nature of the information received on technical qualifications following the January 2021 ministerial decision, being able to raise any concerns and resolve issues directly with AOs. The technical adviser in one of the AOs held webinars to work through amendments and mitigations, acceptable evidence etc. CAFRE uses Pearson's customised framework and noted that this may have meant that it took slightly longer to have queries resolved.

The TAG process worked well. Curriculum leads worked together and agreed a common approach, within the timelines for review; this helped to make the process reasonably straightforward. Students were back on site in March 2021 for practical activities. It helped that they were able to use the AO synoptic and alternative assessments; these were very worthwhile and meant that results were a fair reflection of students' performance. The evidence for technical qualifications was reviewed by moderators and it helped to have the meeting in advance to explain the processes involved. The biggest challenge was collating and reviewing the evidence and marks for larger cohorts.

In terms of adaptations, they noted that a lot of CAFRE students take occupational competence qualifications which left little or no scope for adaptation. However, they felt that the documentation for all qualifications was very clear (an improvement from the previous year) and they appreciated that City and Guilds took their concerns into account when approving adapted assessments. They noted the benefit of having an agreed national approach rather than regional variations. They were concerned that arrangements would be different in NI following the ministerial announcement in January 2021 and were reassured when GB followed suit.

CAFRE commented that the CDG process in place for Essential Skills went reasonably well. They use an external provider for apprenticeships, which was very proactive in moving learning online. Learners engaged well and performance was on a par with previous years.

CAFRE experienced no major problems with the issue of results. Dates were known in advance, which meant CAFRE was able to plan accordingly. It was useful to have results a day in advance and also to receive their HE results a week earlier than previously as this gave them additional time. However, as they only have a small administration team, it put some pressure on the system to receive results for their own students and for new applicants in the same week.

In general, CAFRE felt that the process had worked as well as it could under the circumstances. They received clear and prompt guidance and queries were resolved

quickly. The visits in January and June from the EQA were very helpful. It was also useful that all national AOs were basing their processes on the same information and principles provided by the regulator.

Moving forward, CAFRE felt that it was most important to have the earliest possible communication of any changes, and that good relationships between the centre and AOs were key.

4.2.5 Private Training Organisations

There was one participant from one PTO in this interview.

The participant felt that communications were generally good and everyone did the best they could under the circumstances, but sometimes felt 'bombarded' due to the number of AOs they were working with, as they received similar information from all of them. They were able to forward the information to the relevant co-ordinators.

All the qualifications the PTO delivers, other than Essential Skills, are vocational and heavily practical in nature. An effective strategy to maintain momentum during lockdown was to use remote learning to deliver theoretical elements of the course and then 'end load' the practical elements. Remote learning was very positively received by learners and employers. There were savings in time and cost and learners found it motivational, so many apprenticeship classes have remained remote.

There were issues with practical qualifications due to lockdown. At first, assessors were not on site to carry out observations, so initially these were carried out remotely using mobile phone technology, moving to outdoor observations when restrictions eased. There were particular challenges with Health and Social Care and Childcare placements due to restrictions on numbers in a room.

The PTO had no complaints about the Centre Determined Grade (CDG) process as they felt they had a rigorous assessment process in place; tutors had sufficient evidence to support their decisions and provided signed statements on assurance of performance.

There was a delay between the ministerial announcement in January 2021 and receipt of the alternative assessment booklets from one AO, so some learners had to get programme extensions until papers were available. There was considerable additional administration involved (about 2-3 times longer than usual) in collating and providing information to moderators. They felt that the additional administration replicated information and records that already existed.

The training organisation delivers qualifications on a rolling basis so there were no significantly pressured times in relation to issue of results. There was some additional administration to check e-certs against paper records and at times results had to be chased up with the AO.

On the whole, they welcome the return to external assessment and feel that if the 2020-21 processes were reintroduced this would be onerous for tutors due to the heavy administration requirements.

4.2.6 Awarding Organisations

Ten participants from seven AOs took part in the online group interview.

AOs found that the timing of communications was challenging, for example when one regulator or jurisdiction made announcements in advance of others and where arrangements were slightly different. They also found the move from the ERF to the VCRF framework in-year presented challenges. They felt that, going forward, it was important to avoid messaging that could cause confusion. They also noted the need to manage centres' expectations. They understood that centres were very concerned to know what arrangements would be in place during lockdown but that it took time for AOs to process the implications of ministerial and regulatory decisions and subsequently issue detailed guidance. They also noted that GQ guidance was issued before VTQ guidance; this may have led to perceptions that the arrangements also covered VTQs or that VTQs did not have parity with GQs.

They found the Teacher Assessed Grades (TAG) process reasonably straightforward. One AO 'frontloaded' the information and guidance for NI centres which seemed to work well. There was some confusion about 'mid-flight' learners that might have been avoided if guidance was available earlier.

They commented that the adaptations for practical assessments facilitated delivery and supported the learning process as they also facilitated flexibility. They were 'pleasantly surprised' by what centres were able to carry out, given the constraints. They noted particular challenges with Childcare. It took time to agree decisions due to the complexity of the situation, which meant that guidance was very late, and centres were anxious due to the uncertainty. Industry requirements were quite stringent. They noted that it can take time to make decisions 'by committee' and recommended in future that the terms of reference should include nominating alternative decision-makers in an organisation if someone is unavailable.

The Centre Determined Grade (CDG) process worked very well and it was easier to have one agreed process and approach. One AO stated that the process was much more robust this year as it was based on evidence and not only estimations. They felt that NI centres were well prepared, but that it must have been challenging for centres to introduce new, unfamiliar processes such as internal assessment and validation in-year and that external assessment is easier to manage.

They noted that the regulatory decision that grades could be submitted up to the end of June presented difficulties for both AOs and centres, as teachers in NI were often not available after the end of term to resolve queries and provide information. It also created a tight timeframe for issue of results.

They felt that the issue of Level 2 and Level 3 results in the same week was fairly

manageable but would prefer that this not become the status quo.

Generally, AOs acknowledged the improvements made in 2021 in comparison with the previous year. They felt that the TAG process was more robust than CAGs in the previous year; the external verification process was difficult within the timeframes but provided AOs with more confidence in the accuracy of the outcomes. Centres adjusted well to adaptations and the TAG process was positively received. They were encouraged by the flexibility within the VCRF to reintroduce TAGs if required.

However, they recognised the difficulties of different jurisdictions making different decisions at different times and the impact this had on the clarity of communications to centres. They would like a degree of policy coherence across jurisdictions and, where possible, to have direct dialogue with the regulators on potential direction of travel in terms of policy decisions to allow for two-way communication and feedback on the implications.

4.2.7 ETI

There were three participants in the group interview.

ETI noted their role in providing advice to DfE to inform policy decisions and therefore the tension in commenting on a process in which they had played an integral part. They welcomed the extension to the depth of the questions in the survey.

They stated that there had been good organisational learning overall, having now been through two years of disruption; this meant that communications could now build on existing information and be tailored to the current situation rather than starting from scratch. They welcomed CCEA Regulation's proactive, personal messaging this year and felt that this was an improvement on last year. They also felt that the effectiveness of communications reaching the appropriate person at the right time depended in part on the structures in place within centres.

They noted the current tension because of the developing situation regarding COVID-19 and the uncertainties if arrangements change and alternative awarding is put in place for 2022. They also identified issues such as: the perceptions of inequity of esteem between general and vocational qualifications; the different term times in different jurisdictions and the pressures put on NI providers to collate and submit huge amounts of information before the end of term; and the need to consider portability and comparability of qualifications when making policy decisions across the three jurisdictions.

In relation to TAGs, they noted that the 2021 process was different from 2020; this means that it is not a like-for-like situation when comparing experiences and that centres have now had two years of alternative awarding processes using different processes. They also noted that some subject areas received information earlier than others, which meant that there had been a wide range of experiences across FE in terms of the timeliness of communications and guidance.

They were cautious in commenting on the guidance for adaptations, recognising that centres were best placed to evaluate this as they were using it 'on the ground'. They commented on the importance of the guidance received for safety-critical competencies (occupational and 'licence to practise' competencies). They felt that centres were in a better position in 2021 because more reliable evidence was available. It will be important to monitor the pathways of learners over time.

They reported that there had been some concerns with Essential Skills outcomes in 2020 but that feedback from centres was more positive in 2021 as there was more evidence available and commented that it will be important to carry out a comparison of achievement across Essential Skills levels over time.

They commented that the important immediate question was whether the alternative arrangements had allowed learners to obtain results and progress to the next stage in their learning under the circumstances; thereafter it will be a case of longitudinal monitoring of impact. Emotional health and wellbeing were also vital aspects, not only results and outcomes.

They recommended comparing satisfaction rates and volume of appeals between 2020 and 2021 to investigate if stakeholders were more content with their results by 2021. Certifications rose in 2021 but they asked if this was reflected in the number of registrations.

They observed that lessons had been learned between lockdowns. Processes became more established, enabling the system to be responsive in a more efficient and timely manner. However, they recognised the huge amount of pressure existing within the system, affecting everyone working within it, as they had lived with uncertainty for so long. They stated that, whatever the arrangements, consultation with stakeholders was vital to 'capture the voice and hear the journey'. Communications were key as uncertainty caused anxiety, and the tone of any communication should be cognisant of this.

4.2.8 CCEA Regulation

Interviews were held with the CCEA Chief Executive, CCEA Regulation Business Manager and the Regulation Vocational Qualifications team (seven people in total).

Participants noted that they were mindful of the difficulties of commenting when they had been an integral part of the process, but recognised that in playing an integral part, they too, like the other stakeholders, had a role in the evaluation process.

They felt that CCEA Regulation had done everything possible, in its role as a regulator, to ensure that the process went smoothly and that arrangements were implemented effectively. The pandemic had meant that in some cases, CCEA Regulation had taken a more proactive role in the relationship between AOs and centres than would be normal practice for a regulator, in order to agree local and regional solutions to disruption caused by the pandemic. Lessons had been

learnt from 2020 regarding communication and there was more adhoc and bespoke communication with centres and AOs, as well as the within the more formal communication forums. CCEA Regulation worked collaboratively with the other regulators across the jurisdictions in the development of approaches and communications, ensuring that these were aligned for NI. They maintained regular contact with providers through various forums and groups and so were able to identify issues as they arose and seek solutions. The weekly AO communication updates issued by CCEA Regulation and hosted on the website, they felt, were also useful.

However, they recognised the challenges of dealing with cross-jurisdictional issues, for example the dependency on timelines of decision-making elsewhere in the interests of alignment and consistency. Alignment with Ofqual was critical in ensuring portability of qualifications taken by NI learners, but this alignment carried with it a level of dependency. Ofqual is required to hold consultations before any change to current processes or policies. Whilst this is important and essential to its legislative remit, it can lead to delays in decision making and consequently frustration for centres.

CCEA Regulation also felt that sometimes those outside the process did not appreciate fully the complexity of vocational qualifications in comparison with general qualifications, in terms of the nature of the qualifications and their differing assessment methods. This complexity in turn requires different decision-making processes and approaches.

Regarding TAGs, they noted the benefits of vocational qualifications being competence and criterion- based, but that this also meant fewer adaptations were possible, due to the increased risk to competence-based and 'licence to practise' sectors. They raised the need for research type work on the possible longer-term effects of any gaps in learners' knowledge and experience and if this year's process had resulted in advantaging or disadvantaging certain cohorts.

They noted that three-country monitoring (which they conduct as part of regulation) and feedback on the adaptations process had been positive. Adaptations had improved and now had greater stability. For example, AOs had to justify the appropriateness of adaptations to Ofqual, and adaptations were put in place following consultation and with regulatory monitoring in place. They discussed the potential future benefits of a greater focus on assessment methods and of the potential for remote moderation and invigilation.

Regarding Essential Skills (ES), they reflected that as it was an NI only qualification, the instructions to AOs offering this qualification was delivered comparatively quickly and effectively. They were in effect able to issue instruction, and work with the AOs, independently as the only regulator for this qualification. They also acknowledged the amount of additional work that CDGs brought for ES tutors and commented that it was on balance possibly less burdensome administratively for those delivering ES to have external assessment in place.

They reflected on the Ofqual decision to have level 2 and 3 results in the same week and for the date to be moved forward by around a week earlier to allow for processing appeals and facilitate learner progression. They observed that the issuing Level 2 and Level 3 results in the same week was potentially demanding for centres, particularly in terms of administration and careers/pastoral advice and there were concerns about this. However, they pointed out that if NI had not followed suit in aligning the results dates with England and Wales (and Scotland), its learners would have been disadvantaged in terms of higher education opportunities and admissions.

Overall, they felt that 2020-21 had been a success given the context of the pandemic, the timescales involved and challenges for adaptations and access to placements. They noted the value of close collaboration between the regulators and of close working between AOs and the regulators. They confirmed that CCEA Regulation has a voice equal to that of other regulators and seeks to ensure the NI context is considered in any directive given to AOs. However, due to the need for confidentiality and the sensitivity of discussions with other regulators and AOs, this is not always immediately apparent to centres.

CCEA Regulation advised that the role of regulators is to ensure the integrity (including reliability and validity) of qualifications and maintain standards, and by doing so protect the interests of all stakeholders who use the qualifications and rely of these being a robust reflection of the learners' achievements. It is therefore necessary for the regulator to approve any adaptations or other alternative arrangements that the AOs made to their qualifications. CCEA Regulation felt that within the parameters of its role in upholding standards that it sought acceptable solutions with AOs and providers where issues arose. They cited Childcare as an example of industry bodies, AOs, regulators, and centres working together to ensure that adaptations would provide valid, reliable outcomes that were acceptable to employers.

Moving forward, they felt that the main challenge is in relation to managing the decision-making process, both in the decisions themselves and the timing of such decisions across different jurisdictions. They also felt of critical importance is the need for strategies to identify and re-engage learners who have become disengaged with working towards qualifications because of the ongoing effects of the pandemic.

Section 5: Summary of Stakeholder Responses

The online survey of AOs, providers, employers/sector bodies and 'other'² stakeholder groups returned responses from all stakeholder groups. Further Education (34%) and post primary schools (24%) accounted for 58% of the responses received, which represented a balanced representation of the larger providers of VTQ qualifications in NI.

Overall, there was a general satisfaction rate of 51% in relation to the alternative arrangements in place for assessment and awarding in 2020-2021.

Satisfaction rates from all respondents of the survey showed that 56% agreed that communications relating to 2020-21 assessment and awarding arrangements for VTQs were clear, helpful and easily understood. However, dissatisfaction with communications related largely to communications not being timely; and receiving continuous updates imposed pressure on managing the overall processes.

There were high satisfaction ratings with the approach for assessment and awarding, using the TAG and CDG processes, with 78% and 82% respectively citing that the processes were fair to learners in providing an accurate assessment of performance; with 75% in agreement that the results issued to learners demonstrated a valid representation of performance.

Over 60% of respondents agreed that adaptations were appropriate; however, there were challenges in working with some industry bodies to finalise arrangements within timelines required for NI.

Stakeholder interviews were conducted online with participants from the stakeholder groups which participated in the initial online survey. There was a recognition that lessons learnt from 2020 had contributed to improvements in 2021. There was an acknowledgement of the continuing challenges for assessment and awarding in the context of the ongoing pandemic and PHA restriction that it imposed.

There was recognition of improved communication channels, for example the establishment of the NI Communications Working Group and CCEA Regulation's weekly AO updates. ETI noted CCEA Regulation's proactive, personal messaging this year and felt that this was an improvement on last year.

However, some problems regarding timeliness of communications and of strategic decisions were highlighted by providers as the main issue in 2020-21, resulting in a significant amount of stress on staff. Differences in the NI context (relating to travel and placements) and the academic calendar in England and NI continued to present difficulties during 2020-2021.

² Responses within the 'Other' stakeholder category included charities, one community group, one European Social Fund funded project, CCEA Regulation, one Social Enterprise/Charity, one training organisation funded by DfE/ESF programme.

AOs found the timing and clarity of communications challenging, particularly in relation to the variations across jurisdictions and across industry sectors. However, they recognised the need to avoid confusing messaging and their role in managing centre expectations.

The necessity for concise communications with the appropriate detail, cognisance of NI context (differences in PHA restrictions), timely strategic decisions, and parity with general qualifications were the main themes that most providers emphasised should be addressed in 2021-22 whilst maintaining 'business as usual' challenges under current circumstances.

Section 6: A Comparative Study of Practices and Experiences Elsewhere in UK and Internationally

6.1 Introduction

This section is intended to review some of the practices in place and experiences gained during 2020- 2021 by the different jurisdictions within the UK and a selected number of countries within Europe.

6.2 Northern Ireland, England, Wales

The regulators for NI (CCEA Regulation), England (Ofqual) and Wales (Qualification Wales) worked closely together to regulate VTQs available in the UK. Regulatory direction for 2020-2021 was the same for qualifications taken across the three jurisdictions and aligned as closely as possible for NI-only qualifications and NI only qualification suppliers. This enabled a consistency in approach to maintain standards in qualifications across the three countries and ensure portability, fairness and consistency for all learners taking these qualifications.

Throughout 2020-2021, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to disrupt education and training for many students and have a significant impact on VTQs. In the UK, public health restrictions continued to be in place during 2020 and 2021 and further disruption occurred on a localised basis, which affected teaching and learning and the delivery of assessments. Initially in autumn 2020, the expectation was that assessments should proceed as usual in 2020-2021. Awarding organisations therefore began to consider and put in place adaptations to qualifications to enable assessments to take place in 2021.

On 10 November 2020, the Welsh Education Minister announced that GCSE, AS and A Level examinations were cancelled for 2021. On 4 January 2021, the English government also announced that GCSE, AS and A level examinations would not go ahead in the summer because of the disruption to students' education caused by the pandemic. This was closely followed by a similar announcement in NI.

It was also recognised that it would not be viable for timetabled examinations and assessments for many vocational, technical and 'other general' qualifications to take place.

On 22 January 2021, NI Economy Minister Diane Dodds announced the cancellation of all external vocational examinations for the remainder of the year, including Essential Skills and BTECs and all other vocational examinations scheduled for February/March 2021 and the scheduled summer 2021 examination series.

In England, Ofqual worked with the Department for Education (DfE England) to launch a joint consultation on the alternative awarding arrangements. The three-

country announcement on the approach to awarding vocational qualifications in summer 2021 was confirmed on 25 February 2021. This approach outlined that vocational qualifications similar to A levels or GCSEs, such as BTECs, would be awarded using a Teacher Assessed Grade (TAG). Qualifications that were used to demonstrate practical skills, such as plumbing, construction, performing arts or hairdressing, would still need to be assessed before they could be awarded. Assessments for these qualifications should continue as normal where possible, although they might be held in a different way. In some cases, assessments would need to be delayed until they could be carried out safely in line with public health guidance.

Following further consultation, on 23 March 2021 Ofqual published the Vocational Contingency Regulatory Framework (the VCRF), which replaced the 'Extraordinary Regulatory Framework for VTQs'. The VCRF applied to all qualifications from Entry Level to Level 6, except for Project qualifications and apprenticeship end-point assessments. It permitted AOs to adapt qualifications and assessments or to issue results using alternative arrangements, for example based on Teacher Assessed Grades (TAGs).

The VCRF set out broad categories of qualifications to enable AOs to award results to students who needed to progress to the next stage of their lives, without undermining the validity and reliability of their qualifications.

- Category A included qualifications which assess occupational or professional competency, proficiency, or act as a licence to practise, as well as performing arts graded examinations which assess proficiency. Examinations and assessments needed to continue either in normal or adapted form to allow students to be awarded these qualifications.
- Category B included qualifications used for progression to further or higher study or into employment where the issuing of results to students should be prioritised.

Within Category B they distinguished between:

- qualifications most similar to GCSEs, AS and A levels used for progression to further or higher education – these qualifications were awarded using alternative arrangements, such as TAGs; and
- qualifications used to support progression to further or higher study, but which do not have the same characteristics as GCSEs, AS and A levels and are not delivered in the same way – the examinations and assessments were expected to continue either in normal or adapted form, but where students were ready to take an assessment but could not do so safely, results could be issued using alternative arrangements including TAGs.

From October 2020 to September 2021, AOs in England issued a total of 4.6 million certificates, which was a 9% percent increase on the 4.2 million certificates

issued in October 2019 to September 2020. In spring and summer 2021 alone, AOs worked closely with centres to issue over 1 million qualification results to students taking Functional Skills qualifications, other general qualifications such as Core Maths, IB Diplomas and Cambridge Pre-Us, and VTQs approved for inclusion in the Department for Education's performance tables such as Applied Generals and Tech Levels.³

6.3 Scotland

Scotland operates a vocational qualifications system using Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) based upon national standards for a wide range of occupational areas, and a range of other technical qualifications offered by mostly England-based AOs.

On 7 October 2020, the Deputy First Minister confirmed that there would be no external assessment, or examinations for National 5 courses. This was followed by an announcement on 8 December 2020 that there would be no external assessments of Higher or Advanced Higher courses. On this basis, the 2021 National Qualifications examination programme was cancelled. An Alternative Certification Model (ACM) was put in place for 2020-21, taking into account the disruption to learning and providing a flexible framework for schools and colleges to draw upon a range of assessment tools in arriving at provisional results for learners based on professional judgement of demonstrated attainment.

Following discussions between SQA, Colleges Scotland and other stakeholders, a Higher National and Vocational Qualifications (HNVQ) 2021 Group was formed to develop advice and guidance to support assessment for vocational qualifications in 2020-21. The group met for the first time on 14 January 2021. The HNVQ 2021 group agreed that the ongoing and increasing restrictions associated with COVID-19 required further changes to the assessment of some group awards, and the provision of an additional alternative approach to assessment to provide further flexibility for centres and learners whilst maintaining the integrity of certification and public confidence.

On 3 April 2021, SQA published guidance around the approach for college delivery and quality assurance for Higher National Certificates (HNC), Higher National Diplomas (HND), National Certificates (NCs) and National Progression Awards (NPAs) qualifications, as well as National Qualification (NQ) units, which may be part of college certificated courses.

The guidance aligned the approach for all these courses and units in line with previous decisions on Higher National (HN) qualifications. This meant that college colleagues could take a holistic approach, where necessary, in determining grades and use their professional judgement to assess other learner evidence, including knowledge of their learners' progress and achievements to date.

³ [Delivery and award of vocational and technical qualifications in 2021 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/delivery-and-award-of-vocational-and-technical-qualifications-in-2021)

Once holistic assessment decisions had been finalised, learner results for the planned units contained within a group award would be submitted to SQA through normal channels. Certification would be undertaken by SQA in line with normal arrangements. SQA would operate a reduced external verification model for HNs, NCs and NPAs, enabling a reasonable level of quality assurance to be undertaken remotely.

At this time, SQA also indicated that it was reviewing subject areas where alternative approaches to assessment might not be suitable and therefore a holistic approach could not be taken, for example, where there were matters of health and safety to be considered. It was also reviewing the position for other vocational qualifications, including Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs), Professional Development Awards (PDAs) and licence to practise qualifications.

6.4 Ireland

QQI carried out an evaluation of *The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education in 2020*.⁴ The following is summarised from their findings.

In response to COVID-19-related social restrictions, further education and training (FET) institutions including community education providers, and higher education (HE) institutions established modified arrangements for teaching, learning and assessment starting in mid-March 2020. Institutions implemented these modifications rapidly on an emergency basis to enable learners where feasible to complete the academic year under the COVID-19 social distancing regime. QQI operates across all these sub systems and engages frequently with other state agencies and representative bodies involved with the tertiary education system. During the crisis QQI worked closely with all FET and HE provider groups, including the education and training boards, designated awarding bodies and private or independent providers. IUA, THEA, and QQI collaborated closely to address issues with professional statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) and other HE contingencies and requirements.

QQI worked with as many PSRBs as possible directly on modified arrangements made and flexibility agreed with the HE providers.

In the development of alternative assessment arrangements all education and training providers and student representative organisations contributed to the agreement of national principles. Student engagement was also an important part of the process.

As the national qualifications and quality assurance authority for FET and HE, QQI published two documents on addressing the COVID-19 challenge: *Building Confidence: Supports and Arrangements for the Tertiary Education System*. National

⁴ [The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

level guidance was developed on alternative assessment arrangements, including additional guiding principles at a national level with systemwide contributions.⁵

- *QQI Principles for Alternative Assessments*. The guidance is based on the five key principles of:
 - Learning outcomes-based approaches
 - Integrity of assessment
 - Proportionality
 - Support for staff and students
 - Confidence and transparency
- *Sources to provide information and support to Tertiary Education Providers and Students in the COVID-19 crisis*.

The renewed emphasis on the statutory QA guidelines on blended learning requirements was also timely. The guidance outlined above continued to be available in 2021.

As providers moved from full lockdown to a return to in-person teaching, learning and assessment, there was a shift from emergency measures to a new longer-term planning phase that required a strategic approach to delivering education and training in a blended learning environment.

QQI played a key role in supporting partners and maintaining confidence in the tertiary education and training system. Adjustments included: adding extra certification periods to facilitate CAO learners; creating virtual site visits as part of quality assurance reviews; and extending deadlines for programme review and revalidation processes.

6.5 International Surveys and Evaluations

There have been a number of international studies considering the impact of COVID-19 on vocational education since the start of the pandemic. These include:

- British Council: How are vocational institutions innovating, evolving and changing as a result of COVID-19? A study of practice and perspectives in five countries (June 2021)⁶
- OECD: VET in a time of crisis: Building foundations for resilient vocational education and training systems (May 2020)⁷
- OECD: Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Vocational Education and Training (June 2021)⁸
- International Labour Office (ILO): Skills development in the time of COVID-19: Taking stock of the initial responses in technical and vocational education and training (February 2021)⁹

⁵ [COVID guidance for education and training providers | Quality and Qualifications Ireland \(qqi.ie\)](#)

⁶ [how_are_vocational_institutions_innovating_evolving_and_changing_as_a_result_of_covid-19_report.pdf \(britishcouncil.org\)](#)

⁷ [VET in a time of crisis: Building foundations for resilient vocational education and training systems \(oecd.org\)](#)

⁸ [Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Vocational Education and Training | en | OECD](#)

⁹ [wcms_766557.pdf \(ilo.org\)](#)

6.5.1 OECD

The OECD 2021 Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Vocational Education and Training found that Vocational Education and Training (VET) assessments or examinations in upper secondary education needed to be adjusted in many countries. Practical skills demonstrations were particularly difficult to organise during the pandemic, so some countries made changes to how examinations were organised. In addition, many countries changed graduation criteria to take into account the fact that students did not have access to work-based learning and other forms of practice-oriented learning (two-thirds of respondent countries in 2019-20 and almost 60% in 2020-21).

In all countries that have national examinations for VET, changes were made to these examinations due to the pandemic in school year 2019/2020. This was more common than for general qualifications, reflecting the particular challenges faced by the vocational sector.

Additional health and safety measures were introduced in almost 90% of countries, national VET examinations were postponed or rescheduled in three quarters of countries, and alternative forms of assessment were introduced in just over 40% of countries.

Some countries prioritised vocational assessments over those in general education, for example in Norway where most examinations were cancelled in 2019-20 and 2020-21 but some vocational examinations were still held. Norway also prioritised examinations for apprentices and reduced the number of examiners required for examination committees (from two to one).

Some countries provided alternatives for assessments that normally take place in the workplace but could not do so due to business closures or restrictive health and safety measures. For example, in Finland, students demonstrated their professional skills and competence by performing other practical tasks as similar as possible to authentic work situations and processes. More flexibility was introduced in the other types of competence assessment that could supplement the demonstration of skills and competence.

In contrast, in Switzerland work-based assessment was less of a problem than the school-based components. Therefore, only the practice-oriented examinations related to work-based learning took place.

Various countries made changes to graduation or progression requirements. For example, in Slovenia, for VET students who could not carry out work-based learning in the school years 2019/2020 and 2020/2021, the work-based component is considered as having been completed if the student attained positive grades in all vocational subjects in a given year. VET teachers were still encouraged to assess practical skills of students using alternative approaches, such as problem-based learning. In Poland, some requirements to take the vocational examination as a condition for progression or graduation were waived in the 2020/2021 school year.

6.5.2 International Labour Office

The joint ILO-UNESCO-World Bank survey, which was administered online from 5 April until 15 May 2020, targeted providers of initial and continuing technical and vocational education and training, policymakers, and social partners from around the world. The survey collected data from 1,353 respondents, representing 126 countries from all over the world. The following therefore relates to the 2019-20 school year but has implications for 2020-2021.

The resulting report, *Skills development in the time of COVID-19: Taking stock of the initial responses in technical and vocational education and training*, found that the health crisis and the resulting lockdown led to the disruption of assessments and certifying examinations, with approximately 78% of respondents indicating that certifying examinations and assessments were postponed for TVET trainees and students and in some cases even cancelled.

In the majority of countries, respondents reported that providers were not assessing learning outcomes related to practical skills developed in workshops or laboratories, or through work-based learning and apprenticeships, due to the difficulties posed by closures and physical distancing requirements.

While in most cases the focus was on continuity of theoretical coursework during lockdown periods, some introduced alternative approaches to provide practical skills training and conduct assessments.

For example, in countries where face-to-face training and assessment was still possible, precautionary measures were used such as physical distancing, face masks and limiting the number of students. Other countries used both online and offline platforms and tools to conduct the practical aspects of training where possible; for example, massive online open courses (MOOCs), the Modular-Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (MOODLE), video tutorials, live video conferences and simulators.

In relation to practical knowledge and skills assessment, alternative methods were also reportedly implemented, often through virtual platforms. Methods included:

- carrying out practical tasks at home and uploading them on to platforms or sending videos and photos of completed work for evaluation by teachers;
- use of digital simulators;
- portfolios of past work compiled by learners and submitted online;
- remote assessment through videos, photographs, portfolios and simulations; and
- additional professional discussions between learners and assessors.

6.5.3 British Council

The British Council research brought together 15 technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions from the five countries in the British Council's I-WORK Programme and included TVET practitioners and leaders from Ghana, India, Malaysia, South Africa, and the UK. The research took place as institutions approached almost a year of adapting their teaching, learning and support to localised lockdowns and the restrictions of the pandemic.

In terms of assessment to measure achievement, the questionnaire asked respondents about the extent to which their institution had changed its assessment methods since the onset of COVID-19. 26% of respondents reported that there had been little or no change to their assessment methods, while 12% stated that they had not been fully able to carry out their assessments as usual. 47% of respondents stated that they had made some temporary changes but would revert to previous assessment methods in the near future, while the same percentage indicated that they had made some changes that they would continue to use in the future. Only 9% said that they had made major changes to assessment methods which they would continue to use.

Participants made a range of comments around disruption to assessments and course completion during the pandemic. They recorded:

- delayed or cancelled assessments, especially practicals, due to lockdown;
- insufficient flexibility around formal assessments and tensions between national assessment arrangements versus local restrictions;
- virus fears preventing student attendance at assessments and difficulties in ensuring students were studying and learning during lockdown;
- students needing extensions or to repeat a trimester or a year of their course due to examination cancellations, sometimes without the sponsorship they might otherwise have accessed;
- additional regulations and the need for PPE; and
- issues with awarding bodies and vocational practitioners to secure consent on student progression.

Technology was not always a substitute for face-to-face teaching, learning and assessment, but it was critical to minimising lost learning and the impact on students during COVID-19. Benefits included the move to flexible and blended curriculum delivery and assessment models and the generation of new, online quality assessment and verification tools permitting a greater number of staff to observe classes and review training quality centrally. However, they faced challenges in replicating practical and vocational assessments online.

Section 7: Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusions

- 7.1.1 The number of VTQ certifications during the 2020-2021 academic year was 142,164 in total, equating to 80% of pre-pandemic levels (2018-2019) and representing an increase of 4.2% on the same period during 2019-2020. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the related unprecedented challenges, this is a clear indicator of the success of the alternative arrangements put in place for the assessment and awarding of VTQs in 2020-2021, and in ensuring that as many learners as possible received qualifications to assist their progression.
- 7.1.2 Building on experiences and lessons learned coming out of the alternative arrangements in place for assessment and awarding in 2019-2020, it is clear that improvements were introduced in the implementation of the 2020-21 alternative arrangements.
- 7.1.3 Communications were better managed and more robust. The establishment of a range of communications' channels, including the establishment of the NI Communications Working Group and CCEA Regulation's weekly stakeholder updates, were well received.
- 7.1.4 There was better collaboration across the sector as a whole, with the establishment of various communication forums between CCEA Regulation, AOs and centres. There were also improved communications between centres and AOs, with many AOs providing single-point-of-contact arrangements to deal with queries.
- Policy and regulatory alignment with other jurisdictions protected standards and portability of qualifications, while continuing to pose challenges for CCEA Regulation and in turn, AOs and centres, in terms of timing of decisions.
- 7.1.5 While there was a noticeable improvement around some aspects of communications it is recognised that there were issues with the timeliness of some communications which put pressure on internal processes and systems. The volume of communications from some AOs meant it was very difficult to work through the information and there were concerns about missing essential information. Challenges around the timing of regulatory communications and term times across jurisdictions posed problems for AOs in general.
- 7.1.6 Overall, the different processes in place were manageable, with clear guidance in place to support the processes; robust quality assurance arrangements provided an assurance of standards being met and the reliability of learner results.

7.2 Recommendations

- 7.2.1 The ongoing pandemic continues to put pressure on the examinations and assessment system, impacting across all sectors. While improvements since the academic year 2019–2020 have been recognised above, the experience gained by stakeholders over the course of the pandemic must engender further improvements and support the overall VTQ qualifications arena.
- 7.2.2 At the time of writing this evaluation, towards the end of January 2022, it seems clear that we are entering a different phase of the pandemic and examinations and assessments continue to be planned. However, it is incumbent on DfE and CCEA Regulation to ensure that detailed preparations and contingency plans continue to be developed so that the system has agility to respond to any need to revisit the policy in the coming months should the public health situation warrant this.
- 7.2.3 Each organisation involved in VTQ assessment and awarding must ensure that all communications in every format are clear, concise, consistent and timely. The NI Communications Working Group and other recent initiatives have brought about significant improvements in this area and should continue to support the VTQ delivery oversight process for as long as is necessary.
- 7.2.4 The decision-making process across the three jurisdictions must continue to be managed effectively. For example, English AOs offering VTQs in NI should continue to pay cognisance to the NI context, for example different term times.
- 7.2.5 The Evaluation of Summer 2020 Awarding for Vocational Qualifications in NI recommended that DfE consider streamlining the NI VTQ qualifications market and that NI's reliance on qualifications supplied by non-NI sources should be addressed. Significant work has been undertaken around these recommendations and it is important that this work continues.
- 7.2.6 The perception among some of those in the VTQ system that there is no 'parity of esteem' with their general qualifications (GQ) colleagues in NI could be addressed further. Some work has been done in this regard, for example by CCEA Regulation instigating regular meetings with Heads of Centre offering VTQs, as is the case with GQs (CCEA AO conducts the corresponding GQ meetings).
- 7.2.7 There are likely to be residual issues in the VTQ area in the aftermath of the pandemic that will require further research and analysis. For example in the longer-term impact of the pandemic on teaching and learning, the potential skills deficits and the need to reintegrate public examinations as the standard norm. The effects of the pandemic are increasingly accepted to be wide and far reaching in education and development and research to support policy initiatives to address this will be critical.



Appendix i

Evaluation Survey of Assessment and Awarding Arrangements for Vocational Qualifications in NI for 2020-2021

The continuation of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic resulted in disruption to teaching and learning during the 2020-2021 academic year.

During this period, alternative regulatory frameworks ensured that Awarding Organisations could adapt qualifications to address the continued impact of the pandemic on teaching and learning.

In January 2021, the Minister for the Economy announced the cancellation of examinations and assessments in vocational qualifications for the remainder of the academic year. Measures were introduced such as teacher assessed grades (TAGs), adaptations and centre determined grades (CDGs) to ensure that as many learners as possible would be issued with a result in order that they could progress to the next stage of their education and/or employment journey.

This survey seeks to record the views of stakeholders and their experience during the 2020-2021 academic year. The survey will be supplemented by further quantitative and qualitative analysis, including stakeholder engagement, through interviews and focus groups.

It is important to reflect on this period and understand what lessons can be learned. Your views and comments expressed through this survey will be invaluable to inform the evaluation and provide an opportunity for further discussion over the coming months.

In order to assist you, prompts have been provided against the questions. These however are not exhaustive, and you may wish to reflect on other issues of relevance not cited. Comment boxes are provided for you to expand further on your responses, and to record any views or illustrative examples you might wish to highlight.

Guidance for survey completion

*** Required** - at the top of each page refers to those questions that need to be completed before moving to the next question.

Survey Structure

Respondents were required to choose a rating for each question based on a five-point Likert scale.

For each question, the scale covered Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree.

For the general satisfaction rating the scale covered Very satisfied, Satisfied, Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, Very dissatisfied.

Provision was made within each question for respondents to provide comment.

Providers (Schools/Further Education Colleges/Private Training Organisations)

Communications

Communication between the regulator, Awarding Organisations and providers was of critical importance to ensure the smooth implementation of the alternative arrangements.

Please reflect on your experience of the communications in this period and answer the questions that follow.

- The communications relating to the 2020-2021 assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications were clear and easily understood*
Consider ministerial direction, Awarding Organisations' guidance for providers, regulatory communications
- The timing of communications relating to the 2020-2021 assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications was appropriate*
Consider ministerial direction, Awarding Organisations' guidance for providers, regulatory communications
- The communications relating to the 2020-2021 assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications were helpful*
Consider ministerial direction, Awarding Organisations' guidance for providers, regulatory communications

Teacher Assessed Grading (TAG) Process

When examinations and assessments for vocational qualifications were cancelled a Teacher Assessed Grading (TAG) approach was introduced so that learners could be issued with a result for their qualification.

Please reflect on your experience of the TAG approach and how effective you think it was and answer the following questions.

- The TAG process was fair to learners in providing an accurate assessment of their performance*
- The TAG process was manageable*
Consider the consistency and manageability of approach across Awarding Organisations
- The timelines for the submission of TAG information to the Awarding Organisations were manageable*
Consider the consistency and manageability of approach across Awarding Organisations
- Instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the TAG process were helpful*
Consider the consistency and manageability of approach across Awarding Organisations

- Instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the TAG process were timely*
Consider the consistency and manageability of approach across Awarding Organisations

Suitability of adaptations to facilitate assessment and awarding for vocational qualifications

In order to ensure as many learners as possible gained their qualification, adaptations were made to assessments depending on the type of qualification.

Please consider the adaptations made to qualifications and answer the following questions.

- The adaptations introduced for those qualifications which assess occupational or professional competency, or those for mixed purpose, were appropriate to facilitate assessment and awarding in 2020-2021*
Consider the suitability of adaptations in facilitating learner progression and how these affected reliability and validity
- Instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on adaptations were helpful*
Consider the consistency and manageability of approach across Awarding Organisations
- Instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on adaptations were timely*
Consider the consistency and manageability of approach across Awarding Organisations

Centre Determined Grading (CDG) Process for Essential Skills

When examinations and assessments for Essential Skills were cancelled a Centre Determined Grading (CDG) approach was introduced for Essential Skills so that learners could be issued with a result for their qualification.

Please reflect on your experience of the CDG process and how effective you think it was and answer the following questions.

- The CDG process was fair to learners in providing an accurate assessment of their performance*
- The CDG process was manageable*
Consider the consistency and manageability of approach across Awarding Organisations
- The timelines for the submission of CDGs to the Awarding Organisations were manageable*
- Instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the CDG process were helpful*
- Instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the CDG process were timely*

Results

Issue of Results dates were changed in 2021, with level 3 and level 2 results issued earlier than usual, and in the same week.

Please consider your experience of the timing of the results and the level of information provided.

- The results issued to learners under the alternative arrangements were a valid representation of their performance*
- The issue of results for level 3 and level 2 vocational qualifications in the same week was manageable*
- Instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the issue of results were clear and helpful*
- Instructions and guidance/support from Awarding Organisations on arrangements for the issue of results were timely*

General

Overall, how satisfied were you with the alternative assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications in 2020-2021?*

Do you have any other feedback?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey which will form part of the evaluation. The key purpose of the evaluation is to identify lessons learned and what improvements can be made going forward. Your views and comments are of critical importance for this. We would welcome the opportunity for further discussion with you over the coming months.

If you would be willing to participate in a follow-up stakeholder interview or focus group, please email ccearegulation@ccea.org.uk

Awarding Organisations

Communications

Communication between the regulator, Awarding Organisations and providers was of critical importance to ensure the smooth implementation of the alternative arrangements.

Please reflect on your experience of the communications in this period and answer the questions that follow.

- The communications relating to the 2020-2021 assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications were clear and easily understood*
Consider ministerial direction, regulatory guidance for Awarding Organisations
- The timing of communications relating to the 2020-2021 assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications was appropriate*
Consider ministerial direction, regulatory guidance for Awarding Organisations
- The communications relating to the 2020-2021 assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications were helpful*
Consider ministerial direction, regulatory guidance for Awarding Organisations

Teacher Assessed Grading (TAG) Process

When examinations and assessments for vocational qualifications were cancelled a Teacher Assessed Grading (TAG) approach was introduced so that learners could be issued with a result for their qualification.

Please reflect on your experience of the TAG approach and how effective you think it was and answer the following questions.

- The TAG process was fair to learners in providing an accurate assessment of their performance*
- The TAG process was manageable*
Consider the manageability of the TAG process from a systems and process perspective
- Providers understood the arrangements and instructions for the TAG process*
- Providers complied with the arrangements and timelines for gathering sources of evidence and submission of TAGs*

Suitability of adaptations to facilitate assessment and awarding for vocational qualifications

In order to ensure as many learners as possible gained their qualification, adaptations were made to assessments depending on the type of qualification.

Please consider the adaptations made to qualifications and answer the following questions.

- The adaptations introduced for those qualifications which assess occupational or professional competency, or those for mixed purpose, were appropriate to facilitate assessment and awarding in 2020-2021*
Consider how you adapted assessments in response to ministerial direction, provider needs, your organisational context and regulatory frameworks

Centre Determined Grading (CDG) Process for Essential Skills

When examinations and assessments for Essential Skills were cancelled a Centre Determined Grading (CDG) approach was introduced for Essential Skills so that learners could be issued with a result for their qualification.

Please reflect on your experience of the CDG process and how effective you think it was and answer the following questions.

- The CDG process was fair to learners in providing an accurate assessment of their performance*
- The CDG process was manageable*
Consider the manageability of the CDG process from a systems and process perspective
- Providers understood the arrangements and instructions for the CDG process*
- Providers complied with the arrangements and timelines for gathering sources of evidence and submission of CDGs*

Results

Issue of Results dates were changed in 2021, with level 3 and level 2 results issued earlier than usual, and in the same week.

Please consider your experience of the timing of the results and the level of information provided.

- The results issued to learners under the alternative arrangements were a valid representation of their performance*
- Alternative arrangements were manageable, allowing adequate time to meet issue of results timelines*

General

Overall, how satisfied were you with the alternative assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications in 2020-2021?*

Do you have any other feedback?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey which will form part of the evaluation. The key purpose of the evaluation is to identify lessons learned and what improvements can be made going forward. Your views and comments are of critical importance for this. We would welcome the opportunity for further discussion with you over the coming months.

If you would be willing to participate in a follow-up stakeholder interview or focus group, please email ccearegulation@ccea.org.uk

Employers/Sector Bodies/Other

Communications

Communication between the regulator, Awarding Organisations and providers was of critical importance to ensure the smooth implementation of the alternative arrangements.

Please reflect on your experience of the communications in this period and answer the questions that follow.

- The communications relating to the 2020-2021 assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications were clear and easily understood*
Consider ministerial direction, Awarding Organisations' guidance, regulatory communications
- The timing of communications relating to the 2020-2021 assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications was appropriate*
Consider ministerial direction, Awarding Organisations' guidance, regulatory communications
- The communications relating to the 2020-2021 assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications were helpful*
Consider ministerial direction, Awarding Organisations' guidance, regulatory communications

Teacher Assessed Grading (TAG) Process

When examinations and assessments for vocational qualifications were cancelled a Teacher Assessed Grading (TAG) approach was introduced so that learners could be issued with a result for their qualification.

Please reflect on your experience of the TAG approach and how effective you think

it was and answer the following questions.

- The TAG process was fair to learners in providing an accurate assessment of their performance*

Suitability of adaptations to facilitate assessment and awarding for vocational qualifications

In order to ensure as many learners as possible gained their qualification, adaptations were made to assessments depending on the type of qualification.

Please consider the adaptations made to qualifications and answer the following questions.

- The adaptations introduced for those qualifications which assess occupational or professional competency, or those for mixed purpose, were appropriate to facilitate assessment and awarding in 2020-2021*
Consider adaptations to assessment and how these affected reliability and validity

Centre Determined Grading (CDG) Process for Essential Skills

When examinations and assessments for Essential Skills were cancelled a Centre Determined Grading (CDG) approach was introduced for Essential Skills so that learners could be issued with a result for their qualification.

Please reflect on your experience of the CDG process and how effective you think it was and answer the following questions.

- The CDG process was fair to learners in providing an accurate assessment of their performance*

General

Overall, how satisfied were you with the alternative assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications in 2020-2021?*

Do you have any other feedback?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey which will form part of the evaluation. The key purpose of the evaluation is to identify lessons learned and what improvements can be made going forward. Your views and comments are of critical importance for this. We would welcome the opportunity for further discussion with you over the coming months.

If you would be willing to participate in a follow-up stakeholder interview or focus group, please email ccearegulation@ccea.org.uk

Appendix ii



Evaluation of the Assessment and Awarding Arrangements for Vocational Qualifications in NI for 2020-21

Discussion Paper for Stakeholder Engagement

Following the summer 2021 series, DfE instructed CCEA Regulation to conduct an evaluation of assessment and awarding arrangements of vocational qualifications (VTQs) in Northern Ireland for the academic year 2020-21. This paper presents the initial findings of this evaluation to inform stakeholder interviews.

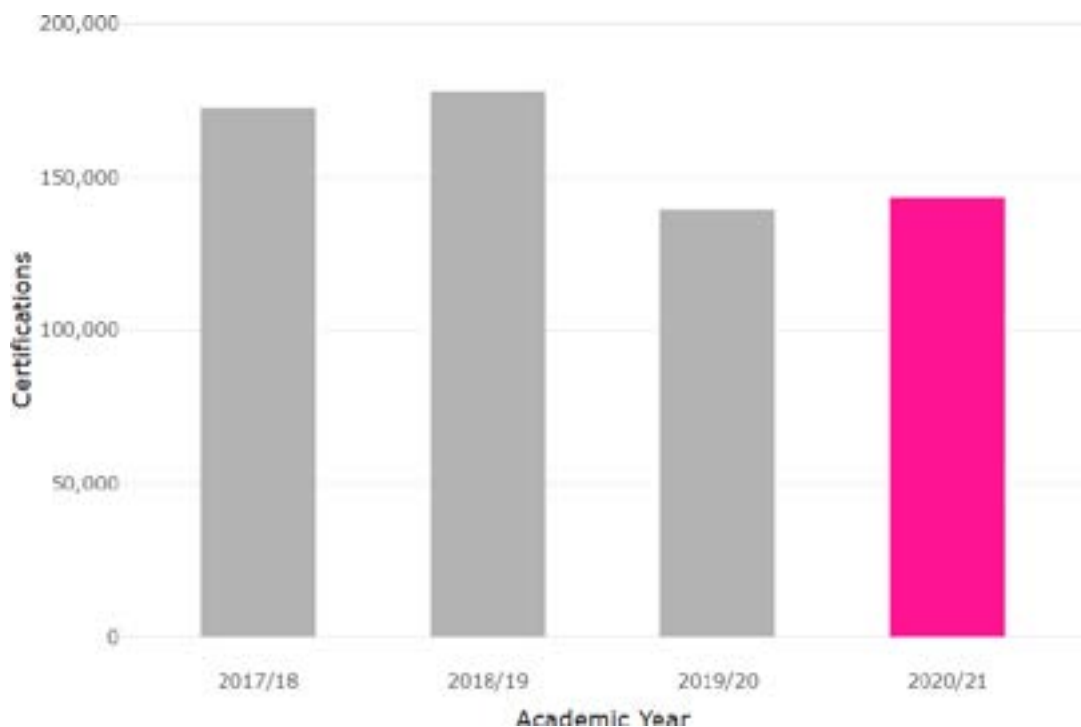
Background

In January 2021, the Minister for the Economy in Northern Ireland (DfE NI) announced the cancellation of vocational and technical examinations and assessment for the remainder of the academic year 2020-21. Ministerial direction stated that learners taking these qualifications, used for progression, should receive results where possible in summer 2021, to allow them to progress to further education, training, or employment.

Following the ministerial direction, CCEA Regulation put in place arrangements for the implementation and monitoring of awarding organisations' assessment and awarding arrangements. The approach used, because of the January 2021 cancellation of examinations, fell within the scope of the Vocational Contingency Regulatory Framework (VCRF). Measures such as teacher assessed grades (TAGs), adaptations, and centre determined grades (CDGs) were introduced to ensure that as many learners as possible would be issued with a result, in order that they could progress to the next stage of their education and/or employment journey.

2020-2021 Comparative Awarding Statistics

The overall numbers of certifications in VTQs in Northern Ireland for the 2020-2021 academic year are shown below. The overall figure shows an 80-83% level of awarding, and a 4.2% rise for 2020-2021 compared to the academic year 2019-2020.



Evaluation Survey

As part of the overall evaluation, an online survey was conducted. The purpose of the survey was to evaluate:

- the impact of arrangements on the number of VTQ awards made (including Essential Skills);
- the effectiveness of VTQ awarding arrangements in 2020-21 in ensuring the validity of the qualifications, including the suitability of qualification adaptations and the implementation of the VCRF; and
- to identify lessons learnt and recommendations to be considered.

The survey was distributed to stakeholders through the Department for the Economy (DfE), by CCEA Marcomms on behalf of DE, and the Federation of Awarding Bodies, (FAB) - Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ).

The survey was open between the 3-12 November 2021. 93 survey responses were received.

Initial Survey Findings

Responses were received from stakeholder groups and individuals. These included: Post Primary Schools (PPS); Colleges of Further Education (FE); Private Training Organisations (PTO); Awarding Organisations (AO); Employers/Sector Bodies and Others.

Most responses to the survey were provided by FE (32, 34%) and PPS (22, 24%). The remainder was made up of responses from 'Other' (14, 15%) AOs (11, 12%), PTOs (9, 10%) and Employers/Sector Bodies (5, 5%).

The survey focused on six principal areas of assessment and awarding for the academic year 2020-2021.

1. Communications (Survey Questions 2a-2c)

56% of respondents agreed that communications were clear and easily understood; 30% did not agree¹. Questions focused on the clarity, timing, and helpfulness of the communications relating to 2020-2021 assessment and awarding arrangements.

Concerns were expressed in relation to the volume and complexity of communications and several respondents identified variances in the clarity of communications issued regarding the awarding and assessment of VTQs compared to those of General Qualifications (GQs). Concerns raised about the unhelpfulness of communications were due to timing rather than content.

2. Teacher Assessed Grading (TAG) Process (Survey Questions 3a-3g)

78% of respondents agreed that the TAG process was fair to learners; 10% did not agree. Questions focused on the TAG process in relation to fairness to learners, manageability, helpfulness and timeliness of instructions and support.

Comments received identified three main issues which impacted across the TAG process. These were the time required by teachers to complete the TAG process, some inconsistencies of approach taken by AOs in terms of sampling learners' work and timelines not being planned or clearly communicated by AOs.

AOs acknowledged that centres endeavoured to comply with instructions and timelines; however, due to the restrictions of term time, there were challenges.

3. Suitability of Adaptations to facilitate assessment and awarding for Vocational Qualifications (Survey Questions 4a-4c)

60% of respondents agreed that the adaptations put in place were appropriate; 18% did not agree. Questions focused on the adaptations to qualifications that assess occupational or professional competency in relation to appropriateness, helpfulness and timeliness of instruction, guidance, and support.

¹ Where percentages do not total 100%, the remaining percentage is made up of those respondents that replied "neither agree nor disagree"

Attention was drawn to timeliness of guidance and, whilst it was helpful, there were several versions communicated over a 2-to-3-month period which caused confusion. Detailed guidance was not fully communicated until May 2021.

Comments received indicated that not all AOs provided clear guidance at unit level. Some comments stated that consideration could have been given to introducing reasonable adaptations for competence-based qualifications. There were challenges working with some industry bodies to finalise alternative arrangements for assessments within the timelines needed for centres in Northern Ireland.

4. Centre Determined Grading (CDG) Process for Essential Skills (Survey Questions 5a-5g)

82% of respondents agreed with the CDG process and believed learners received outcomes that were reflective of the standard at which they were working while 8% did not agree.

Questions focused on the CDG process, its fairness to learners, its manageability and the helpfulness and timeliness of instructions and support provided by AOs.

Several issues were raised, with respondents indicating that the CDG process was only manageable with significantly increased centre resources. They advised there was a lack of contingency planning, timelines, and clear communication. Respondents indicated that the guidance was helpful but expressed concern about the timing of detailed guidance being issued.

5. Results (Survey Questions 6a-6e)

74% of respondents agreed that they believed results were a valid representation of learners' performance; 4% did not agree. Questions focused on the results process to ascertain whether they were a valid representation of learners' performance, the manageability of the issue of results for level 2 and level 3 qualifications in the same week, whether the instructions/guidance and support were helpful and timely and whether the alternative arrangements were manageable to meet the results timelines.

Comments received indicated that respondents considered the issue of results for level 2 and 3 in one week was manageable and allowed more time for providers to deal with post results queries and appeals.

FE respondents stated there was a significant amount of instructions and guidance from AOs from June to August and, whilst instructions and guidance/support documents were helpful, the volume and timing of communications from different AOs was overwhelming.

6. General Satisfaction (Survey Question 7a)

51% of respondents agreed that they were satisfied with the alternative assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications in 2020-2021. 21% disagreed with this statement.

Comments were received from all groups. PPS stated that they believed the processes implemented were robust; however, there was a lot of administration required which was repetitive in some cases. Comments received from FE were mixed. One FE respondent indicated arrangements were much more manageable than 2019/2020 and felt centres were more in control. They also stated that lessons learned had been implemented effectively and communication had improved. Other FE respondents were very dissatisfied due to the delays in gaining information and continuous, confusing AO updates which caused stress to both staff and students.

One AO commented that overall, it was satisfied valid results were issued on time and enabled learners to progress. The EQA process did increase the burden on AOs and centres compared to CAG, but it also improved the confidence that all users can have reliable results.

Other points raised included:

- The need for managing the expectations of centres so that they have a realistic view of timelines in which AOs can produce guidance based on policy direction given by regulator and workforce regulators.
- A more unified approach between all AOs would have been preferred for vocational competency assessments.
- Concerns that the survey questions did not make provision for feedback on the role of CCEA Regulation.

Appendix iii



Stakeholder Interviews

Organisation	Interviewee name/s and role/s
Post Primary Schools	
Lisneal College	Rita Mullan – Vice Principal
Wallace High	David Cleland – Vice Principal
Brownlow College	Nicola Stevenson – Principal
St Mary’s Limavady	Fergal McGilligan – Curriculum Co-Ordinator and Timetabler
St Patrick’s High School	Neill McCaffrey – HOD Computing/Digital Technology/Vocational Qualifications
Castleberg High School	Caroline Kelly – Curriculum Co-Ordinator
Dunclug College	James McClintock – Director of Evaluation and Development
St Ciaran’s Ballygawley	Mairead Owens – Senior teacher for Vocational Curriculum
St Benedict’s Randalstown	Olive Coulter – Head of Pastoral Care
St Joesph’s Crossmaglen	Maria Hamill – Vice Principal Curriculum
Lagan College	Deborah Carlisle – Acting Vice Principal
Methodist College	Scott Naismith – Principal
Further Education and Training	
Northern Regional College (NRC)	Christine Brown - Vice Principal, Teaching & Learning
College of Agriculture, Food & Rural Enterprise (CAFRE)	George Moffett - Head of Agriculture Education Sharon McLaren - Quality Manager
South Eastern Regional College (SERC)	Michael Malone - Director of Curriculum and Information Services
South West College (SWC)	Carol Viney - Principal Lecturer
Belfast Metropolitan college	Damian Duffy – Interim Director of Curriculum Michelle Devlin – Assistant Director of Curriculum
Further Education Quality Managers	Elizabeth Shackles - Head of Quality and Performance, SWC Emma Connolly - Organisational Quality Manager, BMC Patricia Morrison - Quality Manager, NWRC Hilary Hagan - Quality Manager, NRC
People 1st	Heather McBride - Quality Assurance Manager
ETI	Sinead McKenna Alistair Gilmour Gareth Rooney

Awarding Organisations	
OCN NI	Lisa Robinson - Director of Compliance & Audit Karen Reynolds - Head of Essential Skills
ETCAL	Peta J Hairsine - Head of Solutions and Compliance
City & Guilds	Paloma Passos Tattershall-Dodd - Integral Manager, Product Strategy & Implementation & Delivery for UK and International Markets Angharad Lloyd-Beynon - Partnership Manager
ASDAN	Judith Ingle - Compliance Manager
Prince's Trust	Rosie Marsh - Head of Qualifications
FDQ	Helen King - Quality & Compliance Manager
Pearson	Fiona Callaghan - Territory Manager Northern Ireland, Scotland, Somerset, Devon, Cornwall and the Isle of Man BTEC and Apprenticeships Jonathan Couper - Head of Assessment Skills Team

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