



# What shapes upper secondary pathways and transitions? Insights for Wales

The experiences a young person has during upper secondary education strongly influence the next steps they take into the world beyond school. Upper secondary education is a site of significant divergence among the learner cohort, with learners at this level having more opportunities to specialise and develop agency over their own pathway than at earlier levels. A key role and purpose of upper secondary education is to prepare learners to transition to the next stage of their journey, be it further education or work. The shape of learners' pathways and the support they receive before and during transitions play a critical role in learners' readiness and ability to succeed in the unstructured world after school.

This Policy Perspective situates upper secondary pathways and transitions in Wales (United Kingdom) in an internationally comparative perspective. It identifies policy levers that the country can consider to promote smooth, purposeful transitions that enable its young people to become the ambitious, confident and creative contributors that are central to the new Curriculum for Wales.

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## Why are upper secondary pathways and transitions important?

Successfully navigating and completing upper secondary education brings many benefits to learners, as well as the economies and societies where they live (OECD, 2023<sup>[1]</sup>). Learners' pathways influence their next steps into tertiary education, training and work. The combination of subjects a learner takes can determine if they meet the requirements for tertiary courses or institutions, just as the skills and competencies they develop during upper secondary influences the ease of their transition into new education and employment contexts. When transitions, before, during or at the end of upper secondary are smooth, this supports learners to remain in education and receive support to make informed decisions. On the other hand, unsmooth transitions can disrupt the learner journey and result in learners leaving education early or finding themselves in options that prematurely restrict their future choices (Perico E Santos, 2023<sup>[2]</sup>). Young people's integration into the labour market is supported by the skills and work experiences they acquire during upper secondary. On average across OECD countries, young adults (24-35) who enter work directly after completing upper secondary vocational programmes have employment rates 10 percentage points higher than their peers who complete general upper secondary education (OECD, 2023<sup>[1]</sup>). Learners' decisions around the subjects that they take and how they are combined can also influence their experiences on the labour market. For example, individuals with the opportunities and support to recognise the value of developing strong numeracy skills can benefit in the labour market with higher paying jobs (OECD, 2016<sup>[3]</sup>). By supporting learners to understand the range of options available to them and make informed choices that best support their strengths and future ambitions, policymakers can support learners' transitions into further education and the labour market.

### **Defining pathways and transitions**

“**Pathways**” can be defined as the trajectories that learners take as they transition through upper secondary education (Stronati, 2023<sup>[4]</sup>). Pathways are shaped by the curriculum that underpins learners' experiences and by the programme (notably general or vocational), specialisation and/or subjects a learner follows. Pathways are also shaped by how programmes, specialisations and certification are designed i.e. the range of subject choices available to learners, the number of subjects learners are expected to take and the balance of learner-selected subjects versus compulsory ones.

“**Transitions**” occur when learners reach the end of an education programme (or the end of a stage of an education programme) and/or as they change education settings.

While all learners experience transitions into and out of upper secondary education, transitions look different in each system. In Wales for example, a key transition is at the end of compulsory education when learners typically transition from the 14-16 phase of upper secondary into post-16 education and enrol into school “sixth forms” (school-based post-16 education), further education colleges or apprenticeships.

### **The reform landscape in Wales creates the need to explicitly consider upper secondary transitions**

*From an internationally comparative perspective, upper secondary education in Wales is long and unique in its two phase structure*

Education in Wales is compulsory from ages 3-16. Upper secondary education in Wales begins comparatively early from an international perspective at age 14 (15 is the most frequent starting age across OECD countries) and lasts four years. It concludes once learners complete A Levels or equivalently levelled vocational qualifications. One of the unique features of upper secondary education in Wales, and across other systems the United Kingdom, is the division of upper secondary education into two distinct phases, each marked by high stakes national certifications:

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- **14-16 phase:**

At 14, most learners begin a two-year general upper secondary programme working towards national certifications, the General Certification of Secondary education (GCSEs). In this phase, learners are expected to be taught in accordance with the curriculum, with the new Curriculum for Wales currently being rolled out (Box 1). Education is compulsory until 16 and typically takes place in schools.

- **16-18 phase:**

At 16, learners who stay on in education can pursue general upper secondary education, by taking Advanced Level (A Level) qualifications, typically in three to four subjects or a range of vocational qualifications. Learners may also combine vocational and general qualifications. In this phase, learners have the choice of enrolling in a school ‘sixth form’, at a further education college, or in an apprenticeship (work-based learning programme). Others exit education at this age, for example to transition to employment. The Curriculum for Wales does not formally apply to learners in post-compulsory education and, in this phase, learning is guided by a wide range of qualifications. Learners have, in theory, a degree of subject choice that is unparalleled internationally (with the exception of other UK systems). Although, in practice, choice is constrained by the range of locally available options.

*The new Curriculum for Wales is the centrepiece of the Welsh Government’s education reform agenda*

Developed following a widespread consultation, the Curriculum for Wales sets a holistic vision for education, which is guided by four learner-centred purposes (Welsh Government, 2021<sup>[5]</sup>) (Box 1). As a national curriculum framework, the curriculum gives freedom to schools and puts trust in teachers to support learners to progress and develop their knowledge and skills. The Curriculum for Wales includes “four purposes” which should be the starting point and aspiration for schools’ curriculum design. Alongside the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales, other key reviews and reforms in Wales include a review of Vocational Qualifications, a review of the full 14-16 qualifications offer, the establishment of a new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research and the development of new evaluation and improvement arrangements (Welsh Government, 2023<sup>[6]</sup>) (Qualifications Wales, 2023<sup>[7]</sup>) (Welsh Government, 2023<sup>[8]</sup>) (Welsh Government, 2019<sup>[9]</sup>).

## Box 1. The Curriculum for Wales

The Curriculum for Wales is a high-level national framework that provides clear guidance for each school to flexibly develop their own curriculum. The Curriculum for Wales aims for learners to make strong and meaningful links in and across disciplines as they develop ever deeper knowledge and a more sophisticated understanding of the ‘big ideas’ and principles of each Area of Learning and Experience (Area). The Curriculum for Wales is intended to be delivered with innovation and creativity and practitioners have significant scope to select content, make links between Areas and disciplines and develop learners’ cross-curricular skills. The overall aim is to support learners to become:

1. ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives
2. enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work
3. ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world
4. healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.

There is an expectation of breadth included in the curriculum; schools are expected to design a broad and balanced curriculum whereby all learners engage with each of the Areas. Learners in years 10 and 11 (ages 14-16) must still access learning in each Area, although they do not necessarily need to engage with the full scope of each Area nor sit national examinations (GCSEs) in each Area. Learners must also access Relationships and Sexuality Education and Religion, Values and Ethics. The Curriculum for Wales sets an expectation that learners have experiences related to work and careers. The Curriculum for Wales applies to learners aged 3-16. Post-16 learning is guided by a wide range of qualifications rather than by a national curriculum.

Roll-out of the Curriculum for Wales commenced on a phased basis in secondary schools in September 2022, with all 3-16 year-olds due to be learning under the Curriculum for Wales by the 2026/2027 academic year (Welsh Government, 2021<sup>[5]</sup>).

Source: Welsh Government (2021<sup>[5]</sup>), Curriculum for Wales, <https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/>

### *Developing comparative insights on transitions and pathways in upper secondary education for Wales*

This Policy Perspective was developed by the [OECD’s Above and Beyond: Transitions in Upper Secondary Education](#) team at the request of Wales (United Kingdom). The Policy Perspective summarises the insights developed over the course of a project with Wales focused on how countries across the OECD support pathways and transitions for learners aged 14-19. One of the key questions for Wales in undertaking this piece of work was to explore how upper secondary education – in terms of learner pathways and transitions – can work in harmony with the new Curriculum for Wales.

The aim of the project was to identify key insights and policy considerations for Wales, based on a comparative review of international practices and by situating Wales within this comparative perspective. This project involved:

- an initial two-day workshop for sharing insights;
- virtual Peer Learning Discussions, which are moderated conversations, with British Columbia (Canada), Saskatchewan (Canada), Estonia and New Zealand;

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- an in-person Peer Learning Discussion with the Netherlands; and
- publication of a Policy Perspective summarising key insights, to be followed by an OECD Report.

The comparative analysis in this Policy Perspective and the upcoming OECD Report focuses on eight ‘comparison systems’: British Columbia (Canada), Estonia, Ireland, Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, Singapore and Sweden. These countries were chosen in collaboration with Wales to provide a balance of education systems with shared historical ties and/or cultural similarities (e.g. Ireland, Singapore), similar curricula structures (e.g. British Columbia, New Zealand and Portugal), as well as contrasting upper secondary education systems (e.g. Estonia, the Netherlands and Sweden). The analysis is based on publicly available information and, where countries participated, insights from the Peer Learning Discussions.

This Policy Perspective first introduces a framework and then analyses key levers that shape pathways across the comparison system. The Policy Perspective also identifies approaches across the comparison countries for supporting smooth transitions through and out of upper secondary education. Attention is drawn to where Wales stands out from the other comparison systems. The Policy Perspective concludes by summarising policy considerations for Wales and looking ahead to the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales in upper secondary education. This Policy Perspective aims to provide comparative insights on transitions and pathways in upper secondary education for Wales to support engagement with the Welsh Government’s consultation on a “learner profile”.

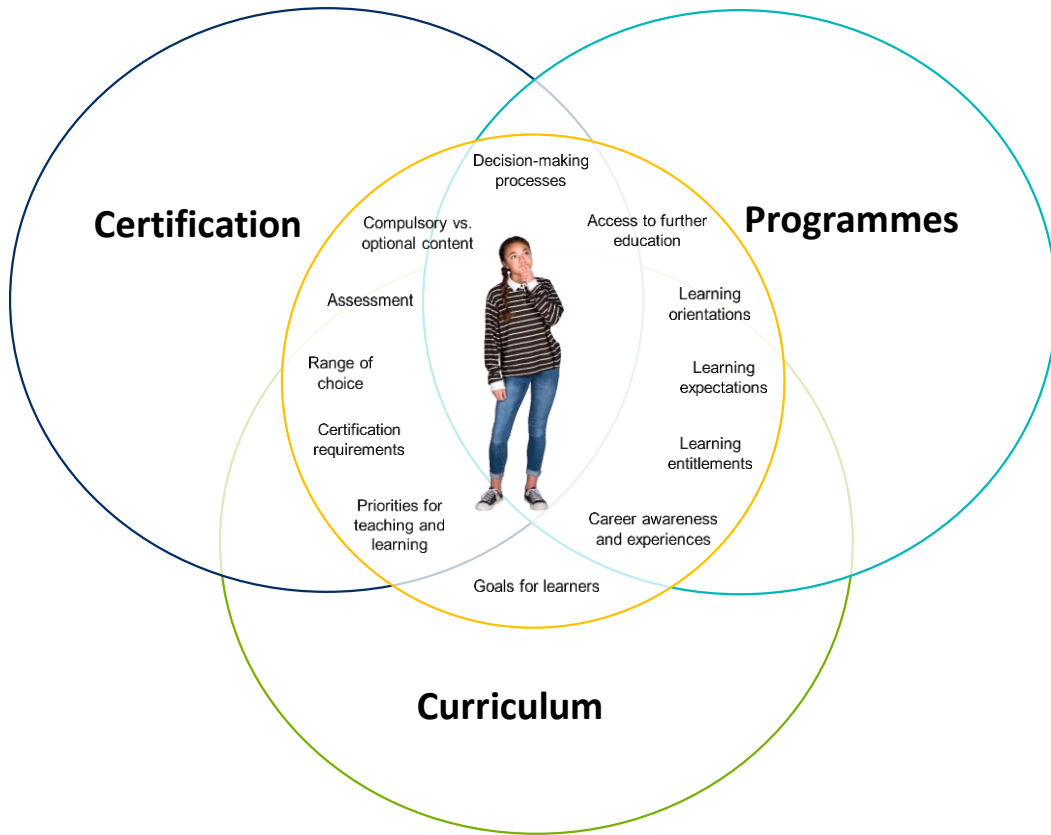
### Policy levers that shape pathways: Curriculum, Programmes, Certification and Settings

To cater to the diversity of learner strengths, future aspirations and socio-economic needs, upper secondary education internationally is characterised by choice and differentiated options for learners (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012<sub>[10]</sub>). As well as reflecting individual interests, upper secondary education has to align with the overall goals and aspirations the system has for its learners, including economic and societal needs.

Education systems use three key policy levers – curriculum, certifications and programmes – to allow learners to determine their own pathways while ensuring all learners develop the knowledge and skills most valued by the system. The three levers come together to shape what learners experience, including the options for choice and specialisation and how it is that these choices are made (Figure 1). The levers of curriculum, programmes and certification also interact with a wider ecosystem that shape learners’ pathways. For example, in Wales, learners’ achievement in national certifications informs the system’s Performance Measures for school evaluation, and so these measures influence what subjects learners are encouraged to take.

Additionally, the extent to which different settings provide upper secondary education impacts learners’ choices for what and where they will study. Settings are particularly relevant at shaping upper secondary pathways in Wales, given the wide variety of settings that learners can choose from at the end of compulsory education.

Figure 1. Curriculum, programmes, certification shape upper secondary pathways



***The curriculum lays the foundations for learning expectations and aspirations***

The term ‘curriculum’ holds diverse and multifaceted meanings across different country contexts (OECD, 2020<sub>[11]</sub>). Simply put, the curriculum may be defined as the entirety of learners’ educational experiences during their time at school (OECD, 2020<sub>[11]</sub>). In Wales, ‘curriculum’ is described as:

“... everything a learner experiences in pursuit of the four purposes. It is not simply what we teach, but how we teach and crucially, why we teach it.” (Welsh Government, 2021<sub>[5]</sub>)

Across OECD countries, the term curriculum can also refer to the expectations outlined in policy statements and legislative frameworks about what learners should learn and teachers should teach. A curriculum may be high-level, with flexibility given to schools to design their own local versions, or it may be more detailed and prescriptive.

*In some systems, the curriculum determines the key components and shape of learner pathways*

In some systems, the curriculum may set out the programmes learners follow and the subjects they may take. For example, in Singapore, the A Level curriculum specifies the three areas for learning (Life skills, Knowledge skills and Subject disciplines) and that learners must take a subject from a ‘contrasting discipline’ to ensure they engage with a range of subjects across the curriculum (Box 2). A country’s curriculum may even describe how learners are to be assessed for the purposes of upper secondary

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certification. For example, in Estonia, the regulation establishing the general upper secondary curriculum also specifies how learning is to be organised, the compulsory subjects and the requirements to graduate (Estonia Government Ministry of Education and Research, 2022<sup>[12]</sup>).

### Box 2. How can the curriculum shape learning pathways?

#### Balancing depth with breadth in Singapore – A Levels

Singapore inherited an education system similar to Wales, whereby learners taking A Levels take a small number of subjects at significant depth at ages 16-18. Since delinking from the United Kingdom's GCE A Level examination in 2002, Singapore has attempted to create greater diversity, breadth and structured coherence in learners' upper secondary choices via its A Levels.

Learners aged 16-18 in the general education programme have a programme of assessment based on the A Level curriculum which has three pillars:

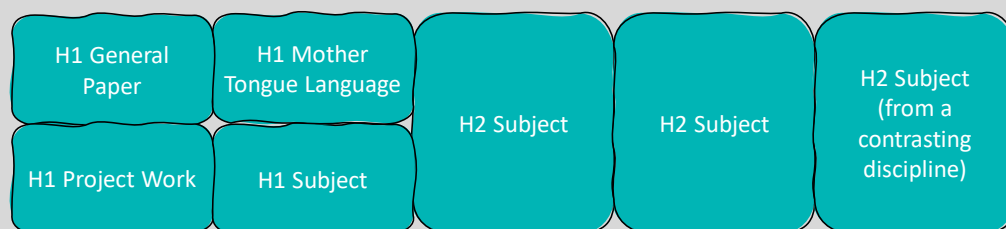
- **Life skills** which are non-examined
- **Knowledge skills** which are assessed via the General Paper, Knowledge and Inquiry, and Project Work, and
- **Subject disciplines** which are assessed via written examinations and other assessment methods, such as coursework.

Typically, learners take a combination of Higher 1 (H1) and Higher 2 (H2) subjects. H1 subjects are at the same level of breadth and depth as H2 subjects but cover approximately half the content. For example, an H2 Chemistry subject would have more topics than H1 Chemistry but the level of demand of the content would be broadly similar. A typical structure of an A Level programme might include:

- Mother Tongue Language at H1 level
- General Paper and Project Work (both the size of an H1 subject)
- One other H1 subject
- Three H2 subjects

At least one H1 or H2 subject must come from a 'contrasting discipline' i.e. if learners take mostly Humanities and Arts subjects, they must take at least one Mathematics or Science subject.

Figure 2. Typical combination of subjects for Singapore A Levels



Sources: Sin and Goh, (2017<sup>[13]</sup>), *Singapore's Journey in Preparing Learners for a Fast-Changing Global Landscape: The A Level Curriculum and Examinations*, <https://www.seab.gov.sg/docs/default-source/research-and-presentation-articles/research-and-presentation-articles/2017/1-the-A-Level-curriculum-and-examinations.pdf>.



*In other systems, the curriculum sets expectations and the direction for learning, but not the design of learning programmes*

The curriculum that learners engage with is not always specific to a particular programme: a single curriculum may apply to multiple programmes, or multiple programmes might each have their own curricula. In many systems, including Wales, British Columbia (Canada), New Zealand, and Portugal, the curriculum learners engage with at upper secondary spans multiple levels of education and may even apply to learners in both general and vocational programmes (Table 1). Given that these curricula apply to a broader range of learners, they do not always specify the detail of programme structure, such as compulsory and optional subjects. Rather, these curricula focus on the overall goals for education and high-level learning outcomes. Table 1 shows that Wales is unique in having no national curriculum beyond compulsory education. Instead, learners' experiences are shaped by their qualifications.

Table 1. Curriculum frameworks that apply to learners from early learning to upper secondary in selected countries

Review of national documents and frameworks referring to “curriculum”.



Country / Jurisdiction	Level of education			
	Early Childhood Education	Primary	Lower Secondary	Upper Secondary
Wales	Curriculum for Wales			
British Columbia	British Columbia's Curriculum			
Estonia	National Curriculum for Preschool Child Care Institutions	National Curriculum of Basic School		National Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools
		Vocational training curricula		
Ireland		Primary curriculum	Junior Cycle	Senior Cycle + Key Skills Framework
The Netherlands		Curriculum for Primary Education	HAVO / VWO Programmes	
			VMBO Programmes	MBO Programmes
New Zealand	Te Whāriki	The New Zealand Curriculum		
		Te Marautanga o Aotearoa		
Portugal	Curriculum Guidelines for Pre-School Education	Profile of Learners Leaving Compulsory Education + Curriculum of Basic and Secondary Education		
Singapore <sup>1</sup>	Nurturing Early Learners Framework	Desired Outcomes of Education + Framework for 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Competencies		
		Primary school curriculum	Secondary school curriculum	
Sweden	Curriculum for the primary school, pre-school class, and after-school centre			Curriculum for Upper Secondary Education

Note: Several of the education systems referenced in the table are currently reviewing or implementing reforms to their curricula, the curriculum as it is in the 2022/2023 or 2023 academic year is used for reference. <sup>1</sup> In Singapore, the Desired Outcomes of Education and the Framework for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Competencies also extend to post-secondary education, which learners progress to at age 16. For post-secondary general education, there are a range of options: the A level curriculum and subject syllabi provide direction for teaching and learning of learners at Junior Colleges and the Millennia Institute, and learners can also enrol in a Polytechnic or the Institute of Technical Education to access a range of pathways. Starting from the 2024, learners in Singapore will no longer be sorted into Normal (Technical), Normal (Academic) and Express streams and learners will have greater flexibility to take subjects at different subject levels as they progress through secondary school. In the Netherlands, the Curriculum for Primary Education is from 4 to 12-years-old, although it is only mandatory from the age of 5. See Annex A for Table 1 sources.

*Policy approaches for ensuring learners engage with the breadth of the curriculum while undertaking high stakes assessment*

Since assessment and certification carries high stakes for learners' future pathways, there are incentives for teachers and learners to prioritise the content to be assessed. However, this can lead to an effective narrowing of the curriculum to only what is assessed – and non-assessed parts of the curriculum may be undervalued and struggle to compete for time in learners' busy schedules. The 'washback' effect can lead to assessment specifications taking on the role of a default curriculum (Alderson and Wall, 1993<sup>[14]</sup>). This effect has been observed in both Ireland and New Zealand and is a driver of reforms in both countries (Smyth, 2019<sup>[15]</sup>) (New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2019<sup>[16]</sup>).

To avoid a scenario where the curriculum learners experience becomes excessively limited due to downward assessment pressures, countries tend to pursue two main approaches (which may be, and often are, used to complement each other):

- **Ensuring that assessment closely reflects the curriculum.** 'Constructive alignment' is when the three elements of learning, teaching and assessment are all appropriate and relevant to each other (Biggs, 1996<sup>[17]</sup>). For example, in New Zealand, the National Curriculum sets out high-level expectations for learners in each Learning Area or Wāhanga Ako and across the curriculum levels. This is used to inform the development of Achievement Standards, which determine what learners need to accomplish in order to gain credits for the upper secondary certificate, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement. Then, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority develops externally-assessed examinations and teachers develop internal assessment activities that create contexts and opportunities for learners to demonstrate they have met these standards. Wales, too, is aligning Made-for-Wales GCSEs with the six areas of learning and experience of the Curriculum for Wales. These GCSEs will also engage with the curriculum's cross-cutting themes and skills integral to the four purposes of the curriculum.
- **Separately certifying curricula goals that would not typically be covered in subject-specific courses and their assessments.** For example, in British Columbia, learners must achieve 4 credits from a Career Life Education course and 4 credits from a Career Life Connections course. These courses build on the Career Education learners experience from kindergarten through to Grade 12 and can be delivered either outside or inside the timetable. By building this in as a mandatory requirement for graduation, the B.C. government ensures that all learners access some form of career education while still at school.

Similar to the approach taken in British Columbia, in Singapore, A Level learners do a General Paper and Project Work to develop their thinking, process and communication skills, reflecting the 'knowledge skills' part of the A Level curriculum (Sin and Goh, 2017<sup>[13]</sup>). This approach, to assess a wider range of learning and experiences beyond subjects specifically and separately, can also be seen with the Skills Challenge Certificates in Wales (Welsh Government, 2019<sup>[18]</sup>). To complete the Skills Challenge Certificate, learners must complete an Individual Project, an Enterprise and Employability Challenge, a Global Citizenship Challenge, and a Community Challenge – all of which aim to foster the development of transversal competencies.

***Programmes provide a structured vision and expectations for learning***

Programmes act as a roadmap for learners to complete upper secondary education. For policymakers, they are a way to give structure to learner pathways and set clear requirements and expectations for learners and the system as a whole. According to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), which is used for comparing programmes across countries, "an education programme is defined as a coherent set or sequence of educational activities or communication designed and organised to

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achieve pre-determined learning objectives or accomplish a specific set of educational tasks over a sustained period” (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012<sub>[10]</sub>).

In most OECD countries, there are one or multiple structured programmes that learners take to complete upper secondary. The most frequent number of programmes that OECD countries provide at upper secondary level is three, most commonly one general programme and two vocational programmes (Stronati, 2023<sub>[4]</sub>). Programmes may be set out and defined in the curriculum (as in Estonia), via a programme statement (as in the Netherlands), or via the system of certification (as in British Columbia).

In upper secondary, the range of subjects that learners take, the content with which they engage and how their learning is structured tend to be shaped by their programme. Programmes provide a vehicle for policymakers to ensure learners participate in key subjects and that the overall combination of subjects is coherent. Coherence and subject combinations are important issues for programmes to address since the content learners engage with during upper secondary can either open doors to future possible pathways or limit their options (Daniell, 2018<sub>[19]</sub>).

Across OECD systems, learners have varying levels of choice and autonomy within their programmes. In some systems, like New Zealand, there are no compulsory subjects. In other systems, like the Netherlands, the subjects learners take are almost entirely pre-determined by their programme. Most OECD countries structure their upper secondary programmes so that:

- Compulsory subjects ensure that learners develop breadth in a range of key subjects
- Compulsory subjects are frequently offered at different levels
- Some degree of learner choice is combined with structured specialisation i.e. learners take a pre-set combination of subjects designed to coherently support pathways to a particular industry or study field e.g. Humanities, Building and Construction
- Learners have opportunities to go beyond subject-specific content to promote broader learning goals, like defining future career aspirations, personal development and transversal skills like self-organisation, investigation and exploration.

### *Compulsory subjects to promote breadth of learning*

Across the OECD, all systems set some requirements for mathematics and national language achievement in upper secondary education, reflecting their centrality to success at this stage of education and in life more broadly (Stronati, 2023<sub>[4]</sub>). Beyond this, most systems, with the exception of a handful of English-speaking countries (systems across the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Ireland) also set a wide range of compulsory subjects. There is significant commonality in these subjects, which typically include:

- the national language(s)
- mathematics
- a science subject
- humanities (history, geography, social studies and sometimes citizenship education)
- a foreign language (mostly English for countries where it is not one of the national languages)
- physical education (including health in some countries)
- in some cases, also an arts subject (such as art or music).

Singapore, a non-OECD system, also demonstrates commonalities with this list of subjects where learners in the Normal (Academic) programme (14-16 years) must take English Language, Mother Tongue Language, Mathematics, Science, and Humanities. For learners who progress to A Levels (16-18 years), they choose a smaller selection of subjects, but they are required to take a subject in a contrasting discipline that supports breadth of learning. For example, if a learner takes mostly Humanities and Arts subjects, they must take at least one Mathematics or Science subject (Box 2). Other post-16 programmes

in Singapore also balance breadth with depth, for example, the Polytechnic Foundation Programme, where learners might take an English subject, a Mathematics subject, three to four subjects specialised to the selected track, as well as a citizenship and a sports subject (Singapore Polytechnic, n.d.<sup>[20]</sup>).

The 14-19 phase in Wales is different from this international practice in that no subjects are technically compulsory to take as qualifications. Per the Curriculum for Wales, learners are expected to engage with each of the Areas, and with Relationships and Sexuality Education and Religion, Values and Ethics, but they do not have to take GCSEs in each of the Areas. Learners in post-16 education have no compulsory subjects. At this level, learners typically work towards achieving three A Levels or equivalent qualifications, such as Business and Technology Education Council qualifications (BTECs). Learners who plan to progress into tertiary education often choose subjects that are recommended for their desired tertiary programme.

In practice, however, at 14-16, Welsh learners take a common set of subjects: mathematics, English, Welsh and sciences. Schools also structure learners' remaining six or seven other GCSE qualifications, for example by requiring that they take a foreign language, a humanities subject, an arts subject, a technology subject, etc. Some schools may also require learners to do the Skills Challenge Certificate (Welsh Government, 2019<sup>[18]</sup>). Unlike in many systems, subjects like physical education and health are typically not mandatory subjects for national certification although they are covered in learners' timetables. In post-16 education, if learners have not yet achieved at least a Grade C in mathematics or English, they may be encouraged to take these subjects again or do other literacy and numeracy qualifications before they can progress, or alongside, higher level qualifications.

In Wales, measures of learners' performance in the GCSEs or equivalent qualifications are used to compare schools and to hold them to account (Welsh Government, 2019<sup>[9]</sup>). In particular, these measures capture learners' performance in areas of science, literacy and numeracy, along with their best results in six other qualifications. Because of this and because of how important those measures have become, schools tend to encourage learners to take a broad range of subjects including key subjects like maths, English, Welsh and sciences.

#### *Compulsory subjects are frequently offered at different levels*

Most systems provide mathematics and national language subjects at different levels. This reflects the different levels of preparation at which young people enter upper secondary education but also their future ambitions. In Sweden, for example, learners can select modules in core subjects at different levels in order to meet their requirements, such as Swedish 3, Mathematics 2. In Finland, learners can choose from Basic and Advanced Mathematics. Schools in Japan might offer up to six different options for mathematics, while in Korea they offer a choice between three options in mathematics (Stronati, 2023<sup>[4]</sup>).

In Singapore, A Level learners can opt to be assessed in either the Higher 1 or Higher 2 version of the subject – and for some subjects there is even an option to do further extension work at Higher 3 level (Sin and Goh, 2017<sup>[13]</sup>). The different levels cater to the varied interests, skill levels and future ambitions of learners: individuals wishing to pursue subjects with a high level of mathematical content in tertiary education will need to take at least Higher 2 mathematics (and they may benefit from taking an additional Higher 3 mathematics if given the option), while those intending to study subjects with less mathematics content such as the humanities may opt to take only Higher 1 mathematics.

In Wales, the GCSEs a learner takes shapes what subjects make up their timetable. While GCSEs are generally offered at the same level (across Level 1 and Level 2 of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales), some GCSEs are 'tiered': for Mathematics and Numeracy and the Sciences, learners will have the choice of sitting the exam at either 'foundation' or 'higher' level (Qualifications Wales, 2023<sup>[7]</sup>). The highest grade available from a foundation exam is capped at a C grade. Some GCSEs also exist as Double Awards, where learners are expected to spend double the amount of time on the subject. Following a 2022

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consultation on new Made-for-Wales GCSEs, Qualifications Wales has decided that there will be both double and single awards for Language and Literature (for both English and Welsh) and that Mathematics and Numeracy and the Sciences will also be developed as a double award (Qualifications Wales, 2023<sup>[7]</sup>). Alongside the Sciences double award, there will be a new single award promoted as a more accessible alternative for learners not necessarily planning to progress into AS/A Level sciences.

In contrast, A Levels are not provided at different levels. The limited breadth of learners' subjects in post-16 education (learners in Wales typically study 3-4 subjects in contrast to the 6-9 across most OECD countries), means that each subject is studied at significant depth. Comparative analysis has suggested that the depth and level of demand in key A Levels subjects such as mathematics, chemistry, history and English is high from an international comparative perspective. In some A Levels – such as chemistry – content matches the demands of a first-year bachelor's degree in tertiary education (Ofqual, 2012<sup>[21]</sup>). The comparatively high level of demand that A Levels set supports learners to recognise their talents and strengths. However, together with a lack of differentiated options, this structure likely limits accessibility for some learners, and may limit the possibility of most learners to continue engaging in key domains like maths and national language for the duration of upper secondary (OECD forthcoming, maths report).

The level that learners can progress to study at in post-16 education is often determined by their GCSE grades. Even though courses at Level 3 of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (such as A Levels or BTECs) are the level which counts for upper secondary completion per international standards, many colleges, for example Bridgend College, will only allow learners to take Level 3 courses if they have achieved the equivalent of five or more GCSEs (Bridgend College, n.d.<sup>[22]</sup>). If not, learners will be encouraged to take courses at Levels 1 or 2. In 2021/2022 in Wales, 34% of the active enrolments towards qualifications in Further Education, Work-based Learning and Adult Learning sectors were at Level 2 – representing the largest proportion of active enrolments (Welsh Government, 2023<sup>[23]</sup>).

### *Choice is supported by structured specialisation*

All upper secondary systems across the OECD provide learners with some degree of choice in their subjects. Choice enables systems to respond to learner interests and promote mixed skills for the economy. While choices at the beginning of upper secondary education typically promote breadth, encouraging learners to experience a range of subjects, the latter part of upper secondary is frequently devoted to choices that enable learners to progressively deepen skills in areas of interest and strength, for example by combining multiple science or humanities subjects at greater depth.

Most systems structure choice and specialisation to some extent to promote coherence. Coherence means that subjects are complementary so that learners can identify linkages across domains. Coherence also means that, overall, learners have sufficient coverage of foundational skills and some advanced skills to provide a platform to access more complex learning and employment in related fields after school. The Swedish example in Box 3 shows how programmes can be used to set the direction for the breadth and depth of learners' study. By having a structured, overarching programme, policymakers can ensure that a learner's overall programme is aligned to the goals the system has for upper secondary education.

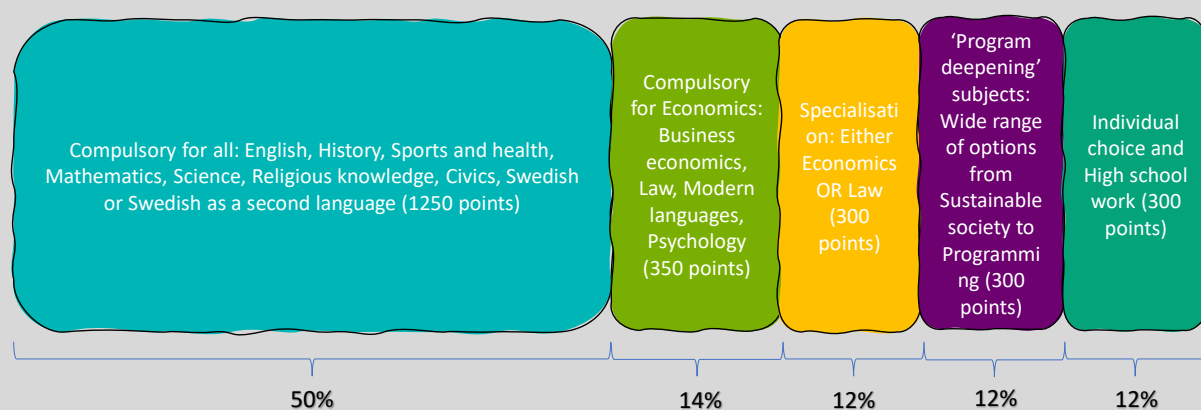
In Wales, although learners do not choose a specialisation, learners can select subjects that would support deepening in a particular area. Careers Wales also encourages learners to take 'facilitating subjects' such as English, Maths, Sciences, Geography, History and Languages because these subjects are most often needed for entry to degree courses. If a learner does not know what they plan to study or what they want to do for work after school, facilitating subjects can help them keep their options open (Careers Wales, n.d.<sup>[24]</sup>).

### Box 3. How do programmes provide a structure for learning?

#### Creating coherent learner choice in Sweden – 18 national programmes

In Sweden, when deciding to do either vocational or general upper secondary education, learners also select their course of study from a choice of 18 programmes, such as Electricity and Engineering (vocational) and Economics (general). Some subjects are compulsory across all programmes and others are compulsory to the specific programme chosen (as shown in Figure 3 with the example of the Economics programme). This creates a consistent framework across all 18 programmes, even though the extent to which learners study some compulsory subjects can vary. For example, learners in the Arts programme do 200 points of History, whereas learners in vocational programmes may do as little as 50 points of History. About one third of a vocational programme is comprised of general education subjects.

Figure 3. Subjects in the Economics programme in Sweden



Sources: Skolverket [Swedish National Agency for Education], (n.d.<sup>[25]</sup>), *Curriculum, programs and subjects in upper secondary school*, <https://www.skolverket.se/undervisning/gymnasieskolan>.

#### Content promoting broader goals

Many education systems also require learners to engage in activities that promote broader learning goals beyond subject-specific content, such as learners’ personal development or acquisition of social and emotional skills. Even though schools, as “microcosms of society”, are environments rich with opportunities to engage with complex social situations, since these skills do not always fall neatly into traditional subject areas it can be hard for schools to develop clear and practical guidance for developing these skills (OECD, 2023<sup>[26]</sup>). Despite the challenges, there is evidence to suggest that skills such as self-control, co-operation, self-efficacy, meta-cognition and problem-solving are teachable at upper secondary level (Steponavičius, Gress-Wright and Linzarini, 2023<sup>[27]</sup>). With the intent to give broader recognition to individuals’ skills, knowledge and talents, some countries are building content related to these skills and broader goals into their upper secondary certification, (OECD, 2023<sup>[28]</sup>).

For example, in both British Columbia and Sweden, learners undertake a capstone project or culminating activity. In Sweden, this is known as *Gymnasiearbetet* or High school work. Worth 100 points, the high school work is a requirement for learners to receive a high school diploma (Skolverket [Swedish National Agency for Education], n.d.<sup>[25]</sup>). In British Columbia, a capstone project is a requirement for the Career-Life

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Connections course and for graduation and the awarding of the Dogwood Diploma (British Columbia Government Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2019<sup>[29]</sup>). In Sweden, where learners take one of 18 different national programmes or specialisations, the high school work is expected to be connected to their study programme and may be completed individually or in groups. In British Columbia, as the project is undertaken as a part of a careers education course, it is an opportunity for learners to develop and showcase their strengths, passions, and learning journey. In both Sweden and British Columbia, there is a strong emphasis on learner self-reflection and self-evaluation. While learners are expected to produce or deliver a final presentation, there is as much of a focus on the process of the project and the skills learners develop along the way as on the final product.

In Estonia and Singapore, broader content such as career education, cultural identity, entrepreneurship, research skills, critical thinking and communication are incorporated into assessed courses. In Singapore, the knowledge skills pillar of the A Level curriculum is assessed via A Level papers, such as the Knowledge and Inquiry paper (Box 2) (Singapore Government Ministry of Education, 2023<sup>[30]</sup>). Knowledge skills are assessed through a range of approaches including written examinations, oral presentations and written reports and reflections based on an independent investigation or a group project (Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board, 2024<sup>[31]</sup>). Likewise, in Estonia, learners can take elective subjects of Career Education and Fundamentals of Research (Estonia Government Ministry of Education and Research, n.d.<sup>[32]</sup>). In Estonia, learners are assessed while undertaking the learning activities. Materials created by learners during the course, such as a CV or personal career plan, may be used for assessment (Estonia Government Ministry of Education and Research, n.d.<sup>[32]</sup>). While these may be elective courses, lifelong learning and career development is one of the eight overarching compulsory topics of the curriculum and is expected to be integrated into the school curriculum.

*“The learner is an active partner in the assessment, who analyses and gives feedback on both his/her own and his/her fellow learners' work.”  
– Estonia “Fundamentals of Research” subject (Estonia Government Ministry of Justice, 2023<sup>[33]</sup>)*

Under the Curriculum of Wales, learners up to 16 are expected to access content on Relationships and Sexuality Education and Religion, Values and Ethics. Learners might also undertake the Skills Challenge Certificate alongside their other upper secondary qualifications. In contrast to the examples in British Columbia, Singapore and Sweden, these activities are not mandatory, assessed activities that count for upper secondary certification.

While having broader learning determined and supported at the school level provides the space to respond to local contexts, draw on local resources and respond to learner needs in Wales, there is also the risk that learner experiences vary widely across different educational institutions. Particularly in the 16-18 phase, when learners have far less structured timetables and school time, learners and teachers might feel pressure to prioritise content due to be assessed for certifications, narrowing time for broader skills and areas.

### ***Assessment and certification provide an insight on learner experiences and support, as well as achievement***

While certifying upper secondary achievement is clearly important for individual learners, the assessments that take place during upper secondary education may also serve other functions.



*Assessment and certification during upper secondary can provide a snapshot on learners' skills and their learning progress*

High-stakes summative assessment, by definition, is assessment that measures the sum of a learner's skills, knowledge and ability – normally at the end of a learning programme (OECD, 2013<sup>[34]</sup>). Since results from assessment are used by tertiary education providers and employers to select applicants, it is important that these assessments best reflect what learners can achieve. However, in some upper secondary certifications, assessment takes place throughout upper secondary and so provides snapshots of learners' developing skillsets as they progress. In Estonia, learners' average course grades from across the upper secondary period, in addition to completing an investigation/practical work and final exams, determine whether they are eligible to complete upper secondary education. In British Columbia, certification is based on learners attaining the requisite number and combination of credits over a three-year period, with learners working towards credits for graduation from Grade 10 (age 15). In New Zealand, schoolwork that learners do in the first few terms of the year may even be used for assessment that counts towards the National Certificate of Educational Achievement. By having assessment for certification take place throughout upper secondary education, assessment is less of a summative capture of what learners can do. Rather, it reflects the developing skillsets and knowledge of learners at milestone moments throughout upper secondary. As shown with the British Columbia and Estonia examples, assessment that takes place earlier in the upper secondary pathway can still be high stakes: the outcomes of these assessments still count towards certification. Learners in these systems may be motivated to keep trying their best as they cannot just rely on doing well in final exams.

*Assessment and certification provides an opportunity for further curriculum elaboration and to shape the teaching and learning process*

When assessments take place throughout upper secondary and are integrated alongside teaching and learning, this provides another opportunity for policymakers to influence what goes on in the classroom and to drive teaching and learning. Assessment and certification may be used to provide more specific standards and a syllabus, going beyond the detail of the curriculum, and ensuring consistency across learners' experiences. The assessment activities themselves may also drive learning activities and experiences. For example, Ireland, the assessment for the Link Modules of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme is comprised of a portfolio (60%) and an exam (40%), with the portfolio including items such as a CV, an action plan, and a diary of work experience (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2022<sup>[35]</sup>). By specifying assessment activities in a course syllabus, policymakers and assessment developers can therefore use assessment as a tool to guarantee learners undertake particular activities as a part of the learning process.

GCSE qualifications in Wales are mostly achieved through completing end of year examinations but, for some subjects, work completed during the school year is assessed and counts towards the qualification. Following the consultation on new Made-for-Wales GCSEs, Qualifications Wales has determined that learners will still sit examinations at the end of the school year, although the types of examinations that learners will sit will vary across subjects (Qualifications Wales, 2023<sup>[7]</sup>). GCSEs may also include 'non-examination assessment', such as a music performance or using coding skills to develop a solution to a challenge. However, these may still feel like an examination to learners because the assessment remains high-stakes and will take place at a fixed point in time, likely towards the end of the year to maximise learning time (Qualifications Wales, 2023<sup>[7]</sup>).

*Assessment and certification can support national learning goals*

Most OECD systems use their upper secondary certifications to specify the skills, knowledge and even attributes that they expect young people to acquire by the end of upper secondary education. Frequently,

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the certifications work in harmony with the national curriculum and education programme so that the certification is assessing the competencies that the programme and curriculum sets out. For example, in Sweden, the curriculum provides high level expectations. The curriculum does not specify how learning should be organised as this is laid out via the 18 national programmes or specialisations. The 18 national programmes do, however, reflect the high-level expectations of the curriculum. For example, courses such as the high school work reflect these expectations. This twin approach of integrating broader learning goals into the national certifications as well as the curriculum helps ensure that all aspects of teaching, learning and assessment are aligned.

One of the challenges in Wales is around ensuring alignment between the Curriculum for Wales and assessment and certification requirements. There is no statutory relationship between post-16 A Level and vocational education and training qualifications and national qualifications in Wales, including GCSEs, are supplied by a mix of providers, including some non-Welsh based examination boards. As in other systems, integrating broader learning goals into the national certifications as well as the curriculum will help to ensure alignment between the goals of the Curriculum for Wales and national certifications. In Wales, new Made-for-Wales GCSEs provide an opportunity to ensure a unified set of goals across both the curriculum and assessment and certification. The Made-for-Wales GCSEs are being developed to be rolled out from 2025, aligning with when the first cohort of learners who are learning under the Curriculum for Wales will enter year 10.

*Assessment and certification carry important information about the performance of an education system*

The results of national/central examinations are used to a greater or lesser extent in the evaluation of school performance in at least a quarter of OECD countries. Across 31 countries that provided data, 11 OECD systems, including England and Scotland, report that national/central examinations have a high level of influence in the evaluation of school performance (Table 2). In Wales, learners' performance in GCSEs are used in Key Performance Measures to compare and assess the quality of schools. One of the challenges however is that the way GCSEs results are used – i.e. focusing on specific subjects - encourages schools, the education system and even society to focus on achievement in individual subjects rather than a broader measure of achievement. In the future, a broader learning indicator might better reflect the wider aspirations of the Curriculum for Wales and the goals the system has for learners at age 16 and age 18/19. Most other systems, use the share of learners who passed the national examination or certification – though they may also include subject level information – to gain a broad perspective of learner achievement.

**Table 2. Extent that national/central examinations are used in evaluation of school performance**

OECD countries and participants	Extent the national/central examinations are used in evaluation of school performance			
	None	Low	Medium	High
Australia	None			
Austria	None			
Chile	None			
Colombia				High
Costa Rica				High
Czechia		Low		
Denmark				High
Estonia			Moderate	
Finland	None			
France				High

Germany		Low		
Greece	None			
Hungary				High
Ireland		Low		
Israel				High
Italy	None			
Korea	None			
Latvia			Moderate	
Lithuania (1)		Low	Moderate	
Luxembourg	None			
Netherlands				High
New Zealand (2)		Low		
Poland		Low		
Slovak Republic			Moderate	
Slovenia	None			
Spain	None			
Republic of Türkiye				High
United States				High
French Comm. (Belgium)			Moderate	
England (UK)				High
Scotland (UK)				High
Total	10	6	5	11

Note: 1. Refer to Education at a Glance 2023 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes (<https://doi.org/10.1787/d7f76adc-en>) for differences in the extent to which of different examinations are used in various evaluation activities.

2. Year of reference 2022.

Source: OECD (2023<sup>[1]</sup>), *Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en>. For more information see Source section and Education at a Glance 2023 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes.

*Upper secondary completion certifications are a central tool for monitoring learners' experiences, support and achievement of curriculum aspirations*

Completing upper secondary is widely recognised as the minimum level of education that young people will need to successfully integrate into the labour market and social life more generally. For this reason, most OECD countries make universal completion of upper secondary education a policy goal. Completion of upper secondary is typically certified by the achievement of an upper secondary qualification (OECD, 2023<sup>[1]</sup>). Many countries use completion data to monitor the performance of their upper secondary education system, and their education systems more broadly (OECD, 2013<sup>[34]</sup>). Completion data can provide a window into how effectively all learners are being supported and are achieving the aspirations that the system sets for them.

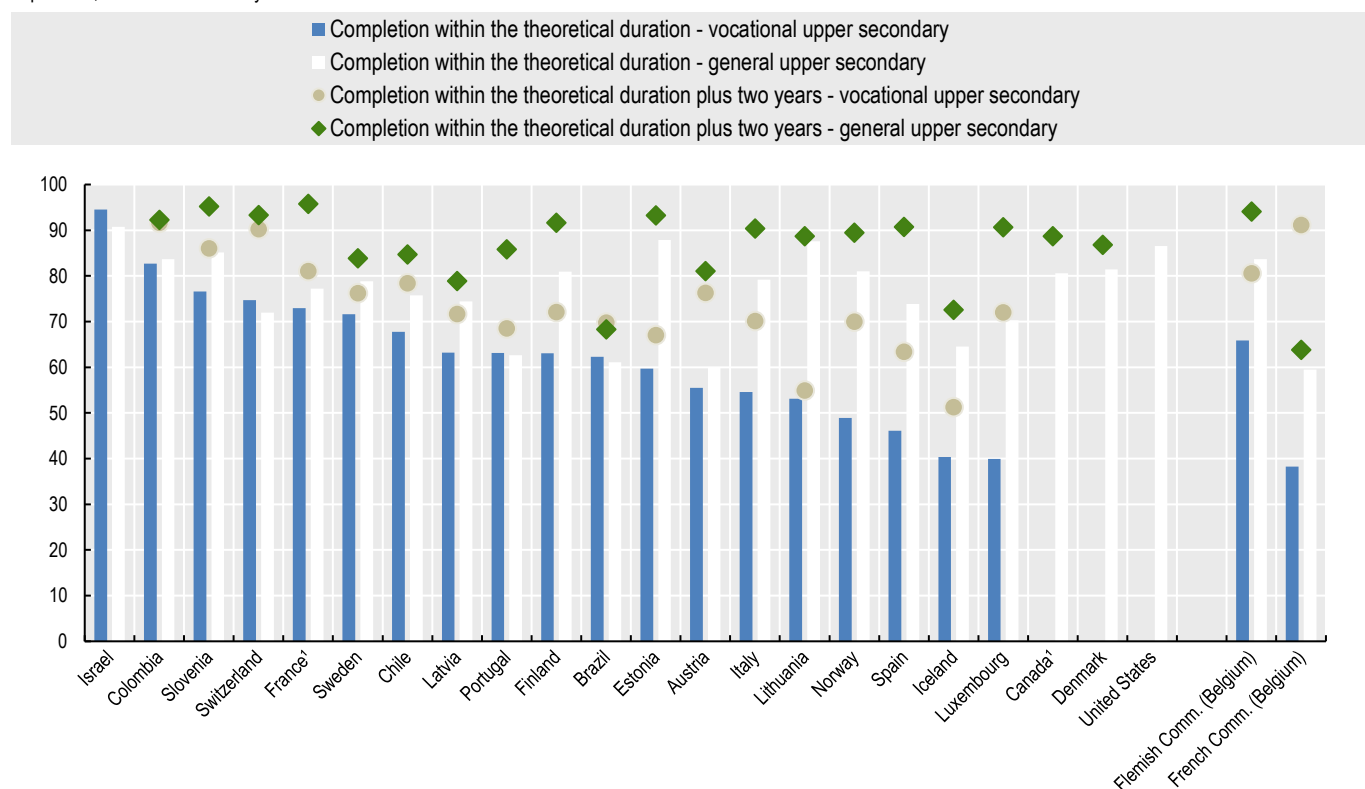
In many systems, the design of upper secondary certification means that completion data provides much more information than learner achievement in individual subjects or occupationally specific competencies alone. In cases where upper secondary programmes are designed to promote learner engagement across a range of key learning areas, structured skills deepening and broader learning goals (with certifications aligned with these goals), completion data provides a strong indication of learners' experiences and achievement across those goals. When disaggregated, completion data can help countries to understand differences in upper secondary outcomes across learners from different backgrounds, schools and other education institutions and regions of a country.

Completion data also enables countries to understand the share of a cohort that completes upper secondary education within the expected timeframe, and the share of learners that take longer to complete this level of education. In Canada for example, 81% of learners complete upper secondary education within

the expected duration of three years, with completion rising to 89% after an additional two years (Figure 4). Figure 4 presents comparative data on upper secondary for countries who collect and report these data.

**Figure 4. Upper secondary completion rates, by timeframe and programme orientation on entry (2021)**

In per cent, true cohort data only



Source: OECD (2023<sup>[11]</sup>), *Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en>.

*The absence of an upper secondary completion measure is a challenge for understanding learner experiences in upper secondary education in Wales*

One of the challenges in Wales for monitoring learner progression and experiences in upper secondary education, as is currently the case across the other United Kingdom systems, is the absence of a completion measure for upper secondary education. While there are standalone qualifications – such as A Levels or vocational qualifications – there is no national expectation for how many qualifications learners are required to complete in upper secondary education. Most learners undertaking general upper secondary education aspire to achieve three A Levels, yet this is a measure of success determined by tertiary institutions for selection. Box 4 discusses some of the datasets and challenges in Wales for constructing completion data.

## Box 4. Estimating upper secondary completion in Wales

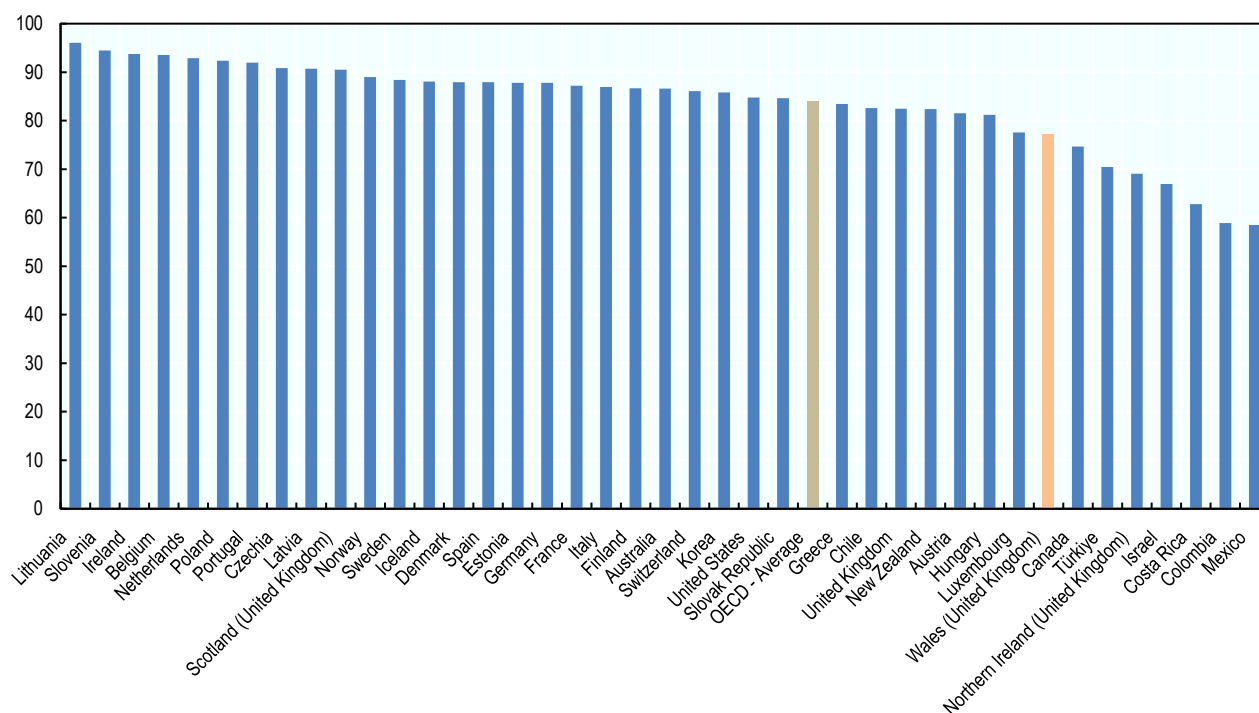
In Wales, there is no definitive data on upper secondary completion. Of 16-year-old learners who started working towards AS/A Levels in 2020/2021 – representing about half of learners who had completed Year 11 the previous year – just over three quarters went on to achieve at least three A Levels. This suggests upper secondary completion rates for general education are around 75%.

The success rate for 2021/2022 for vocational programmes taken by learners who were aged 16 at the start of their programme was similar, at 74%. However, in 2021/2022 over half of all vocational qualifications achieved were sub-Level 3: below the level that counts for upper secondary completion internationally. As national data does not indicate what proportion of these vocational completions were from learners who started their programme at age 16, it is difficult to estimate the completion rate for vocational upper secondary education in Wales.

Source: Careers Wales (n.d.<sup>[36]</sup>), Pupil Destinations, <https://careerswales.gov.wales/education-and-teaching-professionals/pupil-destinations> (accessed on 30 October 2023), Welsh Government (2023<sup>[37]</sup>), Consistent performance measures for post-16 learning (achievement): August 2021 to July 2022, <https://www.gov.wales/consistent-performance-measures-post-16-learning-achievement-august-2021-july-2022> (accessed on 30 October 2023).

Looking at the share of learners of typical upper secondary age who are enrolled in education provides a comparative measure of learners' participation in upper secondary education (Figure 5). The share of 15-19 year-olds enrolled in education in Wales (77%) is one of the lowest rates of enrolment across the OECD. While enrolment in education is influenced by many factors, many education systems have used completion data to set national targets, accompanied by national monitoring and a range of other support measures to support all young people to remain in full time education until they have completed all phases of upper secondary education.

Figure 5. Enrolment rate of 15 to 19-year-olds in all levels of education (2021)



Source: OECD (2023<sup>[11]</sup>), *Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en>.

Completion data can be a simple and yet powerful tool to monitor and communicate how far the system supports learners to complete this essential level of education. It can also be an important accountability measure for educational institutions and can help to move away from a narrower focus on achievement in individual subjects. When upper secondary programmes and their qualifications are aligned, completion data provides a measure of learner engagement across the breadth of a curriculum. In cases where learners are moving between settings, such as the post-16 transition in Wales, completion data could help to monitor the progression of learners across settings and, in particular, identify how many and which learners might leave the system as they transition to post-16 education.

### ***A diversity of settings can provide the space to cater to different learner needs and interests***

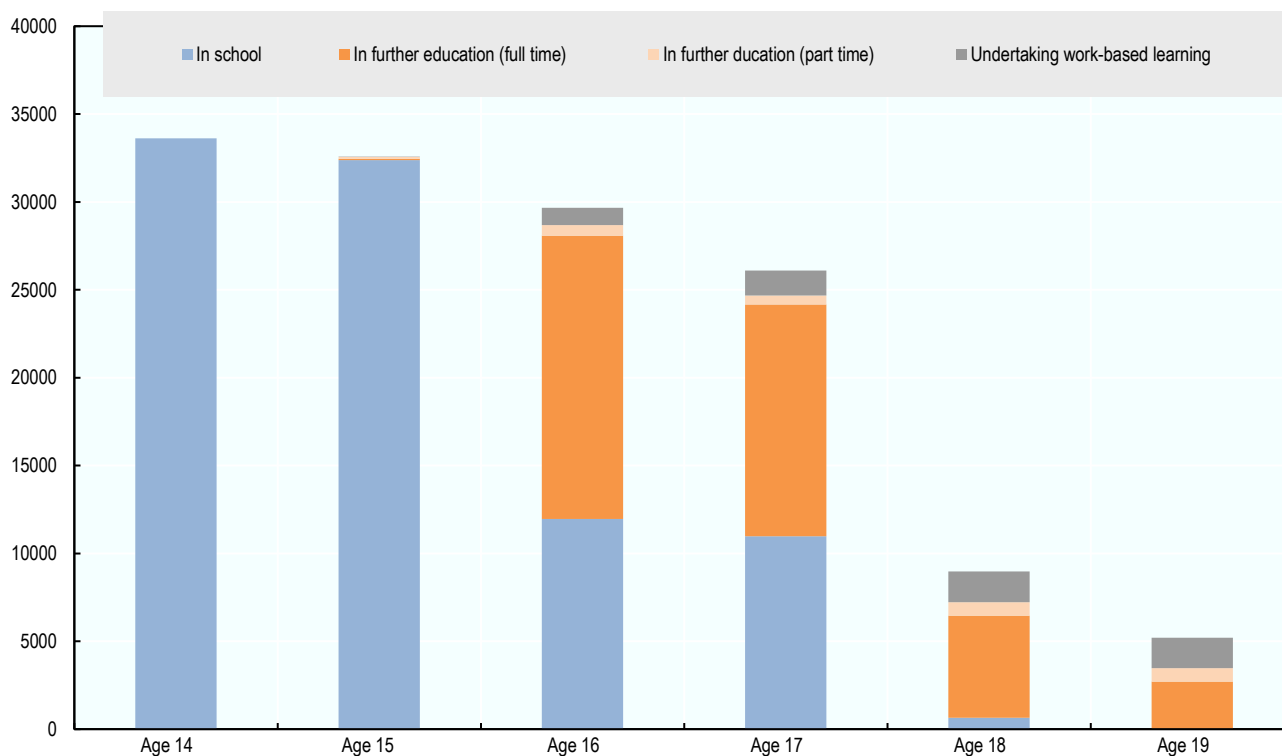
Most OECD countries offer a range of upper secondary programmes and these programmes may drive the need for different settings. For example, upper secondary vocational programmes may require specific facilities and equipment and so may be resourced and delivered separately to general programmes. In Wales, the landscape of settings is particularly complex because both the main types of settings – schools and further education colleges – can deliver both main types of education – general and vocational. A diversity of settings can provide the space to cater to different learner needs and interests. However, if there are not clear roles and responsibilities for the different settings, it can be difficult to promote coherent experiences for learners and to ensure that the different settings operate effectively as a network.

*The range of settings learners transition to at 16 in Wales stands out internationally*

In the 16-18 phase, learners have the choice of enrolling in a school sixth form, at a further education college, or in an apprenticeship (work-based learning programme), or exiting education, for example to transition to employment. Of the 178 secondary schools in Wales, 121 of them offer post-16 provision (Welsh Government StatsWales, 2022<sup>[38]</sup>). This means that after completing Year 11, around one in three learners will have no choice but to transition to a new learning setting if they wish to remain in education. Many learners may also decide that a further education college may be better suited to their study and career aspirations and desired learning environment.

Almost all post-16 learners enrolled in schools in Wales take AS/A Levels (which are general upper secondary programmes), whereas further education colleges tend to offer both AS/A Levels and vocational programmes (Welsh Government, 2023<sup>[37]</sup>). Most learners who stay enrolled in education after 16 move to further education colleges (Figure 6). For programmes finishing in 2021/2022, just under three quarters of 16-year-olds in further education colleges were enrolled in vocational programmes, and the remaining quarter were taking AS/A Levels (Welsh Government, 2023<sup>[37]</sup>).

**Figure 6. Learners enrolled in schools and further education institutions and work-based learning in Wales (2021/2022)**



Note: Data for learners aged 15 may include other learners under age 16 who are enrolled in further education or work-based learning. Data for learners aged 19 may include some other learners aged above 19. Pupil numbers have been rounded to the nearest 5. Data not included where, for a particular category, pupil numbers are greater than zero but less than five. This may result in the figure showing slight underreporting.

Source: Welsh Government StatsWales (2022<sup>[38]</sup>), Pupil level annual school census 2021/2022, <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/Schools-Census/Pupil-Level-Annual-School-Census/Pupils>, Welsh Government StatsWales (2022<sup>[39]</sup>), Unique learners enrolled at further education institutions by age group, mode of learning and level, <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Further-Education-and-Work-Based-Learning/Learners/Further-Education/uniquelearnersenrolledfurthereducationinstitutions-by-age-modeoflearning-level>.

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### *The 14-16 phase in Wales has an important role in preparing learners for post-16 transitions*

While the possibility of moving to new settings provides learners in Wales with significant choice and agency, it also raises several challenges. First, learners are faced with a range of decisions, not only about where to study but also what to study, both in terms of vocational or general qualifications and the subjects they choose. These choices carry high stakes for individuals since they will influence their trajectories into tertiary education, training and employment later on.

Second, the transition to new institutions, where learners will have to become accustomed to new adults and a new peer group is challenging at any age. Evidence suggests that the emotional and social investment associated with transitions, as well as the transfer to a new environment, is typically associated with reduced learning progress. Studies focused on the primary to secondary transition have estimated that 40% of learners fail to make expected progress immediately following the transition, with over a third of learners making no progress in English or mathematics in the first year after transition (Galton M., 1999<sup>[40]</sup>). Similar studies looking at older age cohorts in the middle to high school transition in the United States have identified similar drops in academic performance as well as social pressures associated with adapting to a new environment (Benner, 2009<sup>[41]</sup>). Given the high stakes assessment that post-16 learners have to engage with relatively soon after their transition, this can create a high-pressured context for young people in Wales. Third, a specific challenge in Wales is that the Curriculum for Wales technically ends at 16. In post-16 education, learning goals are set by the specific programmes and qualifications learners take. Once the Curriculum for Wales is fully implemented, the changes to teaching and learning practice may have some flow-on effects for post-16 education; teachers in schools with both pre- and post-16 provision may continue to teach following the principles of the Curriculum for Wales for their post-16 classes. In contrast, learners moving to further education colleges or work-based learning will be moving to settings with no statutory relationship to the Curriculum for Wales.

Finally, the absence of a national completion measure combined with the end of compulsory education at 16 means that the system might not be picking up where learners are not making a successful transition to post-16 education. In 2021/2022, there was an early dropout rate of 3% for AS/A level starters – representing the proportion of AS starters who were no longer enrolled after eight weeks (Welsh Government, 2023<sup>[37]</sup>). For learners in vocational programmes (including learners both 16-year-olds and learners aged 17+), the early dropout rate was 9% for learners starting Level 3 programmes (i.e. at ISCED 3) and 14% for learners starting Level 2 programmes (i.e. at ISCED 2) (Welsh Government, 2023<sup>[37]</sup>). This shows that if learners get to post-16 education and are not yet ready to study at upper secondary level, they are at a higher risk of having unsmooth transitions. This context creates several important questions for Wales around how teaching and learning in 14-16 can best prepare learners for the transition at 16, both in terms of their subject and qualification choices but also socially and emotionally.

### *Increased autonomy for schools can make it a challenge for governments to ensure all learners can access all options*

Across the OECD, in recent decades, many education systems have given local authorities and schools greater responsibility, most notably in the areas of resource allocation, curriculum planning and learner assessment (Burns and Köster, 2016<sup>[42]</sup>). This means that decisions about what programmes and subjects a school will offer are now frequently made by school leaders and educators, rather than by the government and local authorities. Across the OECD, of the 15-year-old learners who participated in PISA 2022, at least 45% attended schools where the principal reported that it was either teachers, including the school management team, or the principal who had the main responsibility for deciding which courses would be offered in the school (OECD, 2023<sup>[43]</sup>). While the school systems that perform well in PISA tend to be those that entrust principals and teachers with more responsibility, this devolution of responsibility can make it hard for education systems to ensure that different schools in a locality offer a complementary range of options. In Sweden, for example, municipalities participate in planning to ensure learners can access a



range of programme and specialisation options that are relevant to the local economy (Box 5). This might provide a useful example for Wales since, beyond meeting curriculum requirements for the 14-16 phase, schools and further education colleges in Wales have a large degree of autonomy over what they teach and what subject qualifications they offer to learners. Currently for post-16 education in Wales, the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 is the main lever for ensuring learners can access a range of options. Per the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009, post-16 learners should be able to choose from at least 30 courses, including vocational courses, covering a range of subjects. However, post-16 providers and local authorities do not use the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 well enough in planning and, courses with low uptake do not always run, effectively reducing the range of real options for learners (Estyn, 2022<sup>[44]</sup>). Estyn, the education and training inspectorate for Wales has recommended the Welsh Government, alongside the newly established Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, review the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 (Estyn, 2022<sup>[44]</sup>).

### Box 5. Swedish municipalities: co-ordinating the range of options available in a local area

In Sweden, municipalities decide what programmes they want to have on offer in their area, ensuring that the range of programmes reflect the local economy as well as learner interests and aspirations. Since a recent amendment to the Education Act, municipalities must co-operate and establish agreements with at least two other nearby municipalities. Municipalities use data provided by the Swedish National Agency for Education to plan, streamline the use of resources, encourage learners to take programmes that align with areas of forecasted skill demand and overall, to improve access to a comprehensive and wide range of high-quality education options.

School principals must also consider the needs of the labour market and work with municipalities to determine their offering. For example, a school may give priority to certain specialisations and programme-deepening options to create a programme that best meets local and regional labour market needs. Together, this means that – while not all programmes and not all specialisations are offered by all schools – within a local area, learners still have access to a wide range of locally-relevant options that will support their future pathways.

Source: Country input; Skolverket [Swedish National Agency for Education] (2023<sup>[45]</sup>), *Regional planering och dimensionering av gymnasial utbildning [Regional planning and dimensioning of upper secondary education]*, <https://www.skolverket.se/regler-och-ansvar/forandringar-inom-skolomradet/regional-planering-och-dimensionering-av-gymnasial-utbildning> (accessed on 12 December 2023).

*Clear roles for different parts of the education system can help to encourage collaboration over competition and clarify pathways*

Moreover, if multiple settings offer the same type of education, as is the case in Wales, this may result in the settings competing for learners. In Wales, both schools and further education colleges deliver general education, which can at times lead to schools and further education colleges competing for learner enrolments. National research has found that pre-16 learners at schools with a sixth form may be less likely to receive impartial information and advice about the full range of post-16 study options, reducing their capacity to make informed decisions about future pathways (Estyn, 2022<sup>[44]</sup>). There is mixed evidence on the benefits of competition between schools on learner achievement (OECD, 2019<sup>[46]</sup>). Having multiple schools in a local area means parents and learners may be able to choose the school that best matches their needs. School choice, as a “market-based” policy, rests on the idea that parents and learners having choice creates incentives for schools to improve their offer (OECD, 2019<sup>[46]</sup>).

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Competition between schools can also create inefficiencies. This is a particular risk for upper secondary education given this level of education needs to cater to an ever-broadening range of learner pathways, interests and aspirations and prior attainment levels. It is a tall order for each individual school to provide a truly broad and deep curriculum – for both general and vocational education and at different levels – and so expecting schools to compete in their offer may not be the best use of limited resources. For example, if schools are incentivised to offer a full range of courses, there may be unnecessary duplication between the course offerings of multiple local schools. This is particularly relevant for vocational courses, which often require specialist resources and teaching staff, as it may be a particularly inefficient use of resources for a school to develop the capacity to offer these courses when there is another school nearby with this already available. In 2023, Qualifications Wales consulted on a proposal to introduce vocational qualifications in broad occupational areas at a level equivalent to GCSEs. In January 2024 it was announced that Qualifications Wales would develop a suite of qualifications in work-related subjects, to be titled VCSE (Vocational Certificate of Secondary Education) at level 1/level 2 and titled Foundation at entry level/level 1 (Qualifications Wales, 2024<sup>[47]</sup>). Responses to the consultation highlighted risks around schools needing costly specialist resources to be able to deliver the qualifications and some colleges felt that it would not be appropriate for vocational qualifications to be solely delivered by schools (Qualifications Wales, 2024<sup>[47]</sup>). While these concerns will need to be considered, VCSEs may be an effective way to engage a broader range of learners, inspire pathways to vocational education and create an opportunity for new school-college partnerships.

Maintaining a clear division of responsibilities for different parts of the education sector can reduce undesired competition between settings and increase co-operation among education providers (OECD, 2018<sup>[47]</sup>). If different settings have a distinct educational offer, co-operation and partnership between them can be a way to expand the curriculum offer accessible to learners at either setting. While collaboration between education providers has many benefits for learners, significant administrative work may be required to make it possible and ensure learners have a coherent learning experience across settings i.e. aligning timetables and curricula. Collaboration across providers can already be seen in some parts of Wales, such as the Post-16 Education Consortium for Gwynedd and Anglesey (Estyn, 2022<sup>[44]</sup>).

While there are examples of good practice in Wales, there is no overall strategy to promote co-operation across settings in support of retaining and providing meaningful pathways for learners. The new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research will be involved in the planning and monitoring of post 16 provision across further education and training including school sixth forms (Welsh Government, 2023<sup>[8]</sup>). Box 6 provides an example of a policy in New Zealand that encourages collaboration between settings in order to offer learners access to a wider range of options.

## Box 6. New Zealand: collaboration between schools and other providers for vocational education

Under New Zealand's Secondary-Tertiary (Trades Academy) Programme, different types of education providers – including schools, vocational education and training and tertiary institutions, work-based learning providers, and employer partners – work together under the co-ordination of a 'lead provider' to ensure that learners in a specific region/locality have access to a broad vocational curriculum. This saves each individual school from having to resource a full range of vocational options and allows learners to stay attached to their school even if they attend a different setting for part of their programme.

The fact that the different institutions do not compete for the same group of learners – as is the case in Wales – helps make greater levels of collaboration possible in New Zealand. The majority of young people are still enrolled in schools until they complete NCEA Level 2 or 3, at which point they transition to tertiary education, vocational education and training institutions for vocationally-oriented ISCED 3 programmes, or into employment.

Source: New Zealand Government Ministry of Education (n.d.<sup>[48]</sup>), *Trades Academies*, <https://youthguarantee.education.govt.nz/initiatives/opportunities-at-school-and-beyond/trades-academies/>.

### ***Supporting smooth transitions in upper secondary education***

In all systems, transitions in upper secondary education tend to carry high stakes because the programmes and subjects that learners study influence their future pathways in post-secondary education and into employment. In Wales, the post-16 transition is particularly challenging for a number of reasons:

- learners decide which qualifications and subjects they will take with a level of individual choice that is unparalleled internationally (with the exception of other UK systems);
- learners transition to new physical settings;
- compulsory education ends;
- learners transition to a phase of education that is guided by qualifications more than the curriculum;
- and there is no national measure for completion of upper secondary education.

This context creates several considerations for the support and preparation for post-16 transitions that takes places in Wales, and also collaboration and co-operation across 14-16 and post-16 institutions to best support those transitions. It is important to note that there are many examples of effective transitions provision and support in Wales. The discussion here merely provides an overview of the national context in which post-16 transitions occur.

This section draws on a framework of policies and practices for supporting upper secondary transitions, created to support the peer learning discussions with Wales and for the forthcoming comparative report (Box 7).

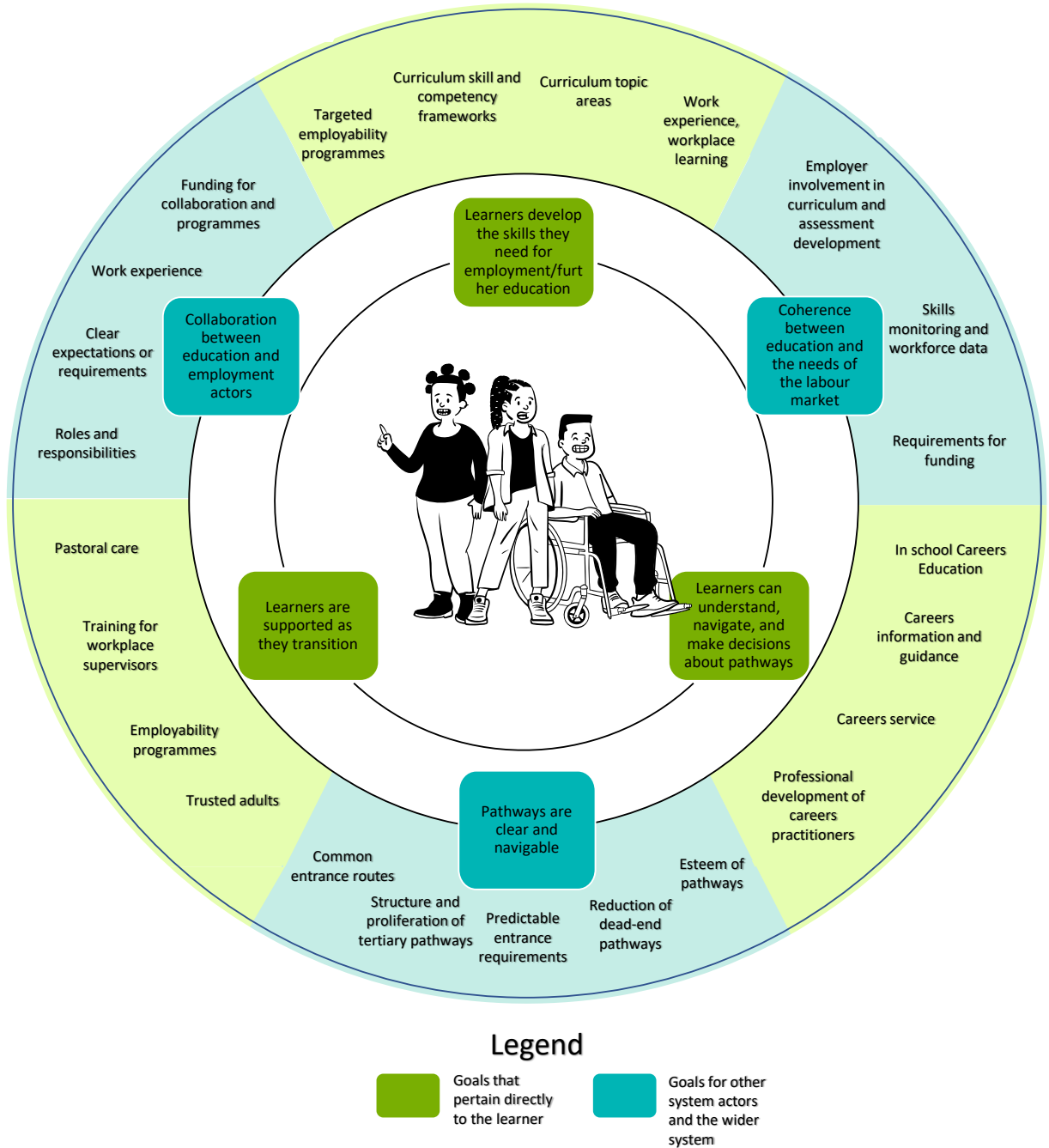
## Box 7. Framework of policies and practices for supporting upper secondary transitions

To provide insights for Wales around how education systems support learners' upper secondary transitions, a stocktake was undertaken of country policies and practices in the comparison systems related to transitions. The goal of this stocktake was not to evaluate different policies and practices, but simply to develop a framework showcasing the range of policies as well as government-run or government-funded programmes and initiatives that relate to upper secondary transitions. Relevant search terms, such as 'transitions', 'pathways', 'post-secondary', 'career' and 'world of work', were used to identify the recent, current, and in-development policies and practices in official materials and government web pages that relate to upper secondary transitions. The stocktake revealed a wide range of policies and practices related to transitions. These policies and practices have been organised into a framework, structured by six overarching goals (Figure 7).

Source: See Annex B for Figure 7 sources.

Figure 7. Framework of policies and practices for supporting upper secondary transitions

Stocktake of country practices and policies related to transitions.



Source: See Annex B for Figure 7 sources.

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#### *A focus on a learner's skills and capacity to make a smooth transition*

Across the comparison systems, countries' policies and practices aim to ensure learners have the skills, knowledge, competencies, prior experiences, and support needed to make smooth transitions. One example of such a practice is mandatory careers education. In the Netherlands, careers education is integrated into the curriculum and/or systematically across school practices. For lower secondary vocational programmes (VMBO), Career Orientation and Guidance is compulsory and is aimed at supporting learners to develop self-awareness and gain experiences and insights from the world of work so that they can make effective decisions (Expertisepunt LOB [Career Development Expertise Centre], 2021<sup>[49]</sup>). Practices like workplace visits, employment programmes, and career activities, have been identified as career readiness indicators by the OECD (Covacevich et al., 2021<sup>[50]</sup>).

#### *System-focused policies and practices to create an environment that facilitates smooth transitions*

Across the comparison systems, there are also a wide range of system-level policies and practices focused on supporting learners' transitions across settings. In Sweden, municipalities are obliged to track learners not in education, employment or training (NEET) who are under the age of 20 and to offer them activities with a view to getting them back to school (OECD, 2016<sup>[51]</sup>). Municipalities' activities to meet this obligation vary and might include offering specific activities to young migrants and young people with disabilities (OECD, 2016<sup>[51]</sup>). Sweden also supports the settings learners transition to after school, such as places of employment, to be better prepared to receive learners. Supervisors of learners who are starting workplace-based training can receive their own training via an online platform that covers topics such as mentoring and awareness of common disabilities. After completing the training, workplace supervisors receive a certificate and their workplace can receive extra government subsidies (Skolverket [Swedish National Agency for Education], 2023<sup>[52]</sup>).

Other transition-related activities focus on involving employers in the curriculum and assessment development process. While this is common practice for vocational education and training, it is less often considered for general education programmes. By having greater alignment between the curriculum and the world of work, learners will be better prepared for employment following graduation. Some education programmes may also include work experience or work-based learning, with policymakers encouraging active collaboration between education and employment actors.

#### *Transitions-related policies and practices are often the responsibility of many actors, but are rarely strategically co-ordinated*

The wide range of policies and practices that support transitions tend to fall under the jurisdiction of different parts of government and actors beyond government. Transitions-related policies and practices may involve parts of government and other actors responsible for:

- Curriculum, programme design, and assessment and certification design
- School reviews and inspections
- Careers education and digital infrastructure e.g. Careers website
- Social development, justice and crime prevention and employment and the labour market.

While some systems have high-level strategies that include transitions, it is rare to find national strategies explicitly related to the transition from upper secondary education. Some of the comparison systems do have transition strategies and guidance for other education levels, such as from early childhood education to primary, or for disabled learners. In Wales in 2022, new Transitions Regulations came into force requiring secondary schools and their feeder primary schools to develop a transition plan together for their

learners (Welsh Government, 2022<sup>[53]</sup>). Despite this focus on transitions from primary school to secondary school, there is no explicit, nationally mandated transition plan for learners leaving secondary school.

### Policy considerations for coherent upper secondary pathways and transitions in Wales

Wales requested this project with the OECD because of a national desire to explore how – in light of the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales – learners can have smooth transitions as they progress through the Curriculum for Wales, into the first phase of qualifications (ages 14-16) and then into post-16 education, training and employment. The research and peer discussions that have informed the project suggest that great care is being taken to ensure that all aspects of learning, including qualifications, align to the Curriculum for Wales. However, the policy levers that the Welsh Government has traditionally relied on – with no universal certificate of completion, no curriculum beyond compulsory education, and subject-specific qualifications driving performance measures – limit policymakers’ ability to shape how learners organise and navigate their pathways.

#### **Levers shaping learning pathways in Wales: policy observations and future considerations**

This section summarises the key policy observations about how the curriculum, programmes, certifications and settings in Wales support smooth transitions in upper secondary education (Table 3). It also provides policy considerations for Wales to consider building on its strengths and enhance support for learners’ pathways in line with the Curriculum for Wales’ aspirations.

**Table 3. Overview of levers shaping learner pathways during upper secondary education in Wales**

	Curriculum	Programmes	Certifications	Settings
Policy observations	Sets out <b>goals and aspirations</b> for learners and their schools	High level of institutional autonomy <b>to respond to learner needs</b> and scope for learner choice (esp. 16-18)	Certification reinforces the <b>skills-focused</b> and <b>purpose-oriented</b> curriculum goals	Different settings may be better suited <b>to different learner needs, giving learners more choice</b>
Future considerations	Unpacking the intent of the curriculum to more purposefully <b>signal how pathways could be shaped</b>	Balancing school flexibility to respond to local needs with greater direction of learning options to <b>promote equitable engagement</b> across curriculum	Creating space for broader goals and achieving a <b>comprehensive learning vision</b> alongside subject-specific	Promoting an explicit role for 14-16 education in <b>preparing learners for smooth transitions into post-16 settings</b>

*The Curriculum for Wales strongly sets out the system’s aspirations for learners...*

The Curriculum for Wales lays clear foundations for teaching, learning and formative assessment as learners progress through early learning, primary, lower secondary and into the first phase of upper secondary education (ages 14-16). Learner progression is expected to be demonstrated via learners’ increasing breadth and depth of knowledge, deepening understanding, growing sophistication of skills, and by learners’ growing ability to make connections and transfer learning to new contexts. While the Curriculum for Wales does not apply to learners in post-16 education, it will be important for Wales to explicitly consider how to ensure that both pre- and post-16 education and qualifications are aligned in working towards the goals of the four purposes.

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*...but the curriculum does not direct what options learners will be assessed in*

In most upper secondary education systems, programmes provides a comprehensive vision for how learners engage across multiple learning areas to build a range of competencies that are both subject and occupationally-specific, such as mathematics, science or vocational skills, as well as broader transversal learning and goals, like personal development, health and wellbeing. This vision is often driven by assessment and certification both in subject and occupational specific content and in transversal skills, for example through individual learner projects or dedicated courses.

Upper secondary programmes in Wales, across both the 14-16 and 16-18 phases, provide highly flexible expectations. The Curriculum for Wales sets high aspirations for all learners' development in many aspects of their lives, and schools have significant autonomy in its implementation. Schools are expected to ensure that young people access learning across all Areas. However, when learners do not take a GCSE in each Area, there may not be a defined way that teaching and learning should be provided. For example, all young people at 14-16 are expected to engage with content on relationships and sexuality education and religion, values and ethics, but schools are not required to provide specific courses on this subject and there is no compulsory assessment.

In Wales, no qualifications are technically compulsory and, unlike the comparison systems considered in this Policy Perspective, there is no overarching programme statement or certification which provides a framework for compulsory/elective options and how they should be organised. However, many schools, in line with expectations set out in Wales' Interim Key Performance Measures, ensure that learners take a range of subjects at 14-16. In post-16 education, there are no subjects that are compulsory.

*Finding a home for broader learning is a challenge given the subject-oriented nature of certifications*

One of the challenges for promoting broader transversal skills in upper secondary education is ensuring that there is sufficient space and priority given to these skills as teachers and learners prepare for high stakes assessments (OECD, 2023<sup>[28]</sup>). One approach is to ensure that assessment and certification in upper secondary education integrate broader learning goals so that they continue to receive sufficient space and support when learners are preparing for national examinations. From 2025, new Made-for-Wales GCSE qualifications will provide a framework for how learners in Years 10 and 11 (14-16) engage with the Curriculum for Wales. While each GCSE is focused on a subject area, all GCSEs will include opportunities for learners to engage with the Curriculum's cross-cutting themes, to develop cross-curricular skills of literacy, numeracy and digital competence and to develop the skills integral to the four purposes of the Curriculum (Qualifications Wales, 2023<sup>[7]</sup>). The new Made-for-Wales GCSEs may provide an important tool to drive broader engagement across the breadth of the Curriculum for Wales.

With the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales, schools are being asked to plan, design and implement careers and work-related experiences for learners. For learners who engage with it, the Skills Challenge Certificate provides opportunities for learners to develop key skills and have experiences linked to the world beyond school. Careers Wales is also an important part of the system, offering group and individual Career guidance sessions to learners. Careers Wales co-ordinators can also meet with schools to support the integration of careers and work-related experiences into the curriculum. However, the Skills Challenge Certificate is not compulsory, and the extent of Careers Wales' engagement in schools varies based on local school policies.

In this context, it may be challenging for schools to find sufficient time for careers and work-related experiences in the context of learners' busy timetables while working towards GCSEs. One option is providing more defined and assessed content on broader learning goals, including work-related experiences, that all learners must engage with. In British Columbia, all learners must complete courses in Career Life Education and Career Life Connections to achieve the BC Certification of Graduation that



certifies completion of upper secondary education (British Columbia Government Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2023<sup>[54]</sup>).

### *Considering explicit expectations for post-16 transitions in Wales*

Given the complexities of transitions to post-16 education and employment in Wales, explicit expectations for school leaders and teachers around support for this transition might be included in the 14-16 phase. These expectations might be included alongside the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales. In order to determine the expectations, policy makers might ask the following questions:

- What tools (e.g. explicit integration of Curriculum for Wales goals into GCSEs, programme/certification requirements for learners to engage with explicit content on personal and career development as evidenced in other systems) might be used to ensure balance between subject-specific learning with opportunities for young people to develop a clear idea of their strengths, future aspirations and future plans?
- How can learners across Years 10 and 11 be encouraged to develop individual approaches to learning which will continue to support their personal growth and development in line with the four purposes, even as they move beyond education guided by the Curriculum for Wales?
- What tools (e.g. programme/certification requirements, defining a universal measure for upper secondary completion or compulsory education completion in Wales) might be used to clearly signal what learning all learners are expected to engage with – and at what level – prior to making the transition out of compulsory education?
- What tools and measures will enable educators and the Welsh Government to see a full picture of learner transitions to, progression through and completion of post-16 education programmes at upper secondary level?

To provide further clarity for schools and teachers on how to balance subject-learning with other key parts of the curriculum across Years 10 and 11, Wales is considering developing a “learner profile”. This could help to operationalise the curriculum by providing direction to schools on how they should create a framework for learners to choose GCSE subjects and to ensure that appropriate weight and value is given to non-assessed learning experiences, such as careers and work-related experiences.

As the Welsh Government reviews its qualifications reporting arrangements, it is worth considering how to collect a broader range of information about learner experiences and the support they receive in advance of post-16 transitions. For example, in Estonia, upper secondary learners complete a satisfaction survey focused on their upper secondary experience. Questions include how informed they were about future pathways during and after formal schooling and the support that they received for decision-making (OECD, 2020<sup>[55]</sup>). Surveying learners about their awareness of future pathways could act in tandem with an upper secondary completion measure, providing a fuller picture of support for transitions at age 16 and achievement post-transitions at age 18/19.

### ***Space for a new tool to promote coherence over the 14-19 pathway***

While the Curriculum for Wales is the flagship of the country’s reform agenda, there are other changes underway. In addition to qualifications reform, evaluation is also a priority (OECD, 2020<sup>[56]</sup>). Currently, the Key Stage 4 qualifications data (i.e. GCSE and equivalent qualifications) reporting arrangements are considered to be a temporary arrangement. It is acknowledged that the current system has a disproportionate focus on summative assessments and, consequently, what is best for individual learners is not always placed at the heart of decision-making (Owen et al., 2023<sup>[57]</sup>). This is at odds with the Curriculum for Wales and the country’s reform agenda. Since the overall philosophy of Wales’ curriculum reforms is about uniting education stakeholders around a shared vision, it is fitting that Wales is moving

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towards a more holistic system for evaluation, following the same philosophy as the curriculum whereby learners, teachers and parents are at the centre and the ‘four purposes’ acts as the driving force for all.

It is in this context that the idea of a ‘learner profile’ has been proposed. This could have a number of functions, including to represent the learning a young person is entitled to access at ages 14-16, to showcase how a school could balance a range of qualifications with wider non-assessed experiences, and create a roadmap for the expectations the system has for learners against which schools and the education system should be evaluated (see Box 8).

As has been discussed in this Policy Perspective, there are a number of ways to approach implementing a shared vision for education across upper secondary education: from the alignment between the curriculum and assessment to the structure of certifications and the role of broader learning goals within these, from collaboration between different education settings to how schools collectively prepare for and support transitions. While a ‘learner profile’ might contribute a valuable middle layer between the curriculum and qualifications, all policy levers – including assessment design, careers and transitions support and evaluation and performance measures – will need to be carefully designed in tandem to best achieve Wales’ vision.

## Box 8. Developing a portfolio of a wider range of learner experiences

The idea of a ‘learner profile’ and also that of a ‘learner portfolio’ – learners recording their own achievements, experiences and reflections – were a key point of discussion in the Above and Beyond project and peer learning discussion with Wales. A ‘learner profile’ could have a function similar to programme statements in many of the comparison systems: it could provide guidance for how learner programmes should be constructed, setting out a framework for which categories of subjects learners should take and choose between. A ‘learner portfolio’ might highlight non-subject specific learning experiences that all learners should engage with while working towards qualifications. This box showcases some of the approaches from other education systems that create, in some way, a portfolio of learner experiences.

- In the **Netherlands**, all learners in the VMBO (lower secondary vocational) programme have a ‘Career File’. Schools have the freedom to, alongside the learner, decide what form the Career File will take. Templates and examples are provided, but schools can also develop their own approach. The Netherlands’ five Career Competencies are often used to frame the Career File and provide a structure.
  - For learners in the VMBO programme, participation in Career Education is compulsory. Schools determine what exactly a learner must do to meet this requirement. This introduces a cross-disciplinary, element to a learner’s programme. At a system level, there is a lot of flexibility for the Career Education requirement. Teachers, together with learners’ mentors, are trusted to decide if learners meet the participation requirement for Career Education, as specified in their Career File.
  - Learners are the owners of their own Career File, as this is a space where they share personal reflections. Separate to the Career File, schools can have a ‘Transfer File’ to share information about learners’ needs and experiences. Local authorities often give funds to support schools to implement a Transfer File system. Some schools also make their own templates. Learners can choose if their Career File gets included in their Transfer File.
- In **British Columbia**, the K-12 Student Reporting Policy requires learner self-reflection on Core Competencies and goal setting. The policy sets the standard across the province, and schools have flexibility to design how self-reflection and goal setting should be taught and documented. Learners can also choose which Core Competencies they will reflect on.
- In **New Zealand**, there are a range of locally-developed and community-led programmes aiming to strengthen connections between education and employment and support learners to develop a portfolio of skills that they can demonstrate in practice. For example, in the Youth Employability Aotearoa ‘License to Work’ programme, learners do group work, work-readiness learning, voluntary work and work experience to cultivate a portfolio of employability skills.
  - At a national level, New Zealand is also grappling with the technical challenges of developing an information-sharing platform that is designed to follow learners throughout their educational pathway.

Source: Peer Learning Discussions with Wales, facilitated by the OECD’s Above and Beyond project

## The bottom line: promoting broad learning across a curriculum must be built into programme and certification intent

Learners' **pathways** through upper secondary education and into the world beyond are shaped by the **curriculum** that sets out a vision for education, the **programmes** that learners may select into, and the systems of assessment and **certification** that are the ultimate goalposts of upper secondary education. The way education systems organise the different types of **settings** providing upper secondary education shapes the learning options available to learners. The policy levers of curriculum, programmes, and certification also influence learners' readiness to **transition** and the support they receive during transitions. Specific support for transitions might involve embedding activities such as career education and workplace learning into learners' education.

In **Wales**, learners' pathways are shaped by the cadence of certification and the transition that comes at age 16 when learners leave compulsory education and, potentially, progress into new education settings or the world of work. The Curriculum for Wales aims to focus teachers and learners on four key purposes that go beyond academic achievement to include a range of broader goals for young people to be ambitious learners, confident individuals and creatively contribute to life in Wales and the world. This Policy Perspective suggests that achieving this ambitious vision and ensuring equitable access to the breadth of the Curriculum for Wales will require explicit expectations built into policy levers like programmes, certifications and monitoring of the education system.

## Above and Beyond: Upper Secondary Transitions

This document was prepared by Rebecca Frankum as part of the work within the Above and Beyond: Transitions in Upper Secondary Education team within the Policy Advice and Implementation Division at the OECD's Directorate for Education and Skills. The OECD Above and Beyond team provides analysis and policy advice on transitions into, through and out of upper secondary education.

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### For more information

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## Annex A. Table 1 sources

**Table A A.1. Sources for Table 1: Curriculum frameworks that apply to learners from early learning to upper secondary in selected countries**

Sources for Table 1: Curriculum frameworks that apply to learners from early learning to upper secondary in selected countries	
Wales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Welsh Government, (2021<sup>[5]</sup>), Curriculum for Wales, <a href="https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/">https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/</a>.</li> </ul>
British Columbia (Canada)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>British Columbia Government, (n.d.<sup>[58]</sup>), BC's Curriculum, <a href="https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/">https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/</a>.</li> </ul>
Estonia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Estonia Government Ministry of Education and Research, (2022<sup>[12]</sup>), <i>Pre-school, basic and secondary education</i>, <a href="https://www.hm.ee/en/education-research-and-youth-affairs/general-education/general-education-estonia#curricula">https://www.hm.ee/en/education-research-and-youth-affairs/general-education/general-education-estonia#curricula</a>.</li> </ul>
Ireland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, (n.d.<sup>[59]</sup>), The Primary Curriculum Framework, <a href="https://curriculumonline.ie/Primary/">https://curriculumonline.ie/Primary/</a>;</li> <li>National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, (n.d.<sup>[60]</sup>), Junior Cycle, <a href="https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Junior-Cycle/?lang='en-ie'">https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Junior-Cycle/?lang='en-ie'</a>;</li> <li>National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, (n.d.<sup>[61]</sup>), Senior Cycle, <a href="https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Senior-Cycle/?lang='en-ie'">https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Senior-Cycle/?lang='en-ie'</a>;</li> <li>National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, (2017<sup>[62]</sup>), Senior Cycle Key Skills Framework, <a href="https://ncca.ie/en/resources/senior-cycle-key-skills-framework/">https://ncca.ie/en/resources/senior-cycle-key-skills-framework/</a>.</li> </ul>
Netherlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stichting Leerplanontwikkeling [Curriculum Development Foundation], (2023<sup>[63]</sup>), <i>Kerdoelen [Core objectives]</i>, <a href="https://www.slo.nl/sectoren/po/kerndoelen/">https://www.slo.nl/sectoren/po/kerndoelen/</a>;</li> <li>Stichting Leerplanontwikkeling [Curriculum Development Foundation] (n.d.<sup>[64]</sup>), <i>HAVO VWO [Senior general secondary education (HAVO) and pre university education (VWO)]</i>, <a href="https://www.slo.nl/sectoren/havo-vwo/">https://www.slo.nl/sectoren/havo-vwo/</a>;</li> <li>Stichting Leerplanontwikkeling [Curriculum Development Foundation] (n.d.<sup>[65]</sup>), <i>VMBO [Pre-vocational secondary education]</i>, <a href="https://www.slo.nl/sectoren/vmbo/">https://www.slo.nl/sectoren/vmbo/</a>;</li> <li>Netherlands Government Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, (n.d.<sup>[66]</sup>), <a href="https://www.kiesmbo.nl/">https://www.kiesmbo.nl/</a>.</li> </ul>
New Zealand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New Zealand Government Ministry of Education, (2017<sup>[67]</sup>), Te Whariki, <a href="https://www.education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Early-Childhood/ELS-Te-Whariki-Early-Childhood-Curriculum-ENG-Web.pdf">https://www.education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Early-Childhood/ELS-Te-Whariki-Early-Childhood-Curriculum-ENG-Web.pdf</a>;</li> <li>New Zealand Government Ministry of Education, (2007<sup>[68]</sup>), The New Zealand Curriculum, <a href="https://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/The-New-Zealand-Curriculum">https://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/The-New-Zealand-Curriculum</a>;</li> <li>New Zealand Government Ministry of Education, (2017<sup>[69]</sup>), Te Marautanga o Aotearoa, <a href="https://tmoa.tki.org.nz/Te-Marautanga-o-Aotearoa">https://tmoa.tki.org.nz/Te-Marautanga-o-Aotearoa</a>;</li> </ul>

Portugal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Portugal Government Directorate-General for Education, (n.d.<sup>[70]</sup>), <i>Orientações Curriculares para a Educação Pré-Escolar [Curriculum Guidelines for Pre-School Education]</i>, <a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/orientacoes-curriculares-para-educacao-pre-escolar">https://www.dge.mec.pt/orientacoes-curriculares-para-educacao-pre-escolar</a>;</li> <li>Portugal Government Directorate-General for Education, (2017<sup>[71]</sup>), <i>The Profile of Learners Leaving Compulsory Education</i>, <a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/curriculo-nacional-documentos-curriculares">https://www.dge.mec.pt/curriculo-nacional-documentos-curriculares</a>;</li> <li>Portugal Government Directorate-General for Education, (2021<sup>[72]</sup>), <i>Curriculo Nacional [National Curriculum]</i>, <a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/curriculo-nacional-documentos-curriculares">https://www.dge.mec.pt/curriculo-nacional-documentos-curriculares</a>.</li> </ul>
Singapore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Singapore Government Ministry of Education, (n.d.<sup>[73]</sup>), <i>Nurturing Early Learners Framework</i>, <a href="https://www.moe.gov.sg/preschool/curriculum">https://www.moe.gov.sg/preschool/curriculum</a>;</li> <li>Singapore Government Ministry of Education, (n.d.<sup>[74]</sup>), <i>Desired Outcomes of Education</i>, <a href="https://www.moe.gov.sg/education-in-sg/desired-outcomes">https://www.moe.gov.sg/education-in-sg/desired-outcomes</a>;</li> <li>Singapore Government Ministry of Education, (n.d.<sup>[75]</sup>), <i>21st Century Competencies</i>, <a href="https://www.moe.gov.sg/education-in-sg/21st-century-competencies">https://www.moe.gov.sg/education-in-sg/21st-century-competencies</a>;</li> <li>Singapore Government Ministry of Education, (n.d.<sup>[76]</sup>), <i>Primary</i>, <a href="https://www.moe.gov.sg/primary">https://www.moe.gov.sg/primary</a>;</li> <li>Singapore Government Ministry of Education, (n.d.<sup>[77]</sup>), <i>Courses and subjects for secondary schools</i>, <a href="https://www.moe.gov.sg/secondary/courses">https://www.moe.gov.sg/secondary/courses</a>.</li> </ul>
Sweden	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Skolverket [Swedish National Agency for Education] (n.d.<sup>[78]</sup>), <i>Läroplan för grundskolan samt för förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet [Curriculum for the primary school as well as for the pre-school class and the leisure center]</i>, <a href="https://www.skolverket.se/undervisning/grundskolan/laroplan-och-kursplaner-for-grundskolan/laroplan-lgr22-for-grundskolan-samt-for-forskoleklassen-och-fritidshemmet">https://www.skolverket.se/undervisning/grundskolan/laroplan-och-kursplaner-for-grundskolan/laroplan-lgr22-for-grundskolan-samt-for-forskoleklassen-och-fritidshemmet</a>;</li> <li>Skolverket [Swedish National Agency for Education], (n.d.<sup>[79]</sup>), <i>Läroplan för gymnasieskolan [High school curriculum]</i>, <a href="https://www.skolverket.se/undervisning/gymnasieskolan/laroplan-program-och-amnen-i-gymnasieskolan/laroplan-gy11-for-gymnasieskolan">https://www.skolverket.se/undervisning/gymnasieskolan/laroplan-program-och-amnen-i-gymnasieskolan/laroplan-gy11-for-gymnasieskolan</a>.</li> </ul>

## Annex B. Figure 7 sources

**Table A B.1. Sources for Figure 7: Framework of policies and practices for supporting upper secondary transitions**

Sources for Figure 7: Framework of policies and practices for supporting upper secondary transitions	
British Columbia (Canada)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>British Columbia Government Ministry of Education and Child Care, (n.d.<sup>[80]</sup>), <i>Vision for Learner Success</i>, <a href="https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/program-management/vision-for-learner-success">https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/program-management/vision-for-learner-success</a>;</li> <li>British Columbia Government Ministry of Education and Child Care, (2023<sup>[54]</sup>), <i>B.C. Graduation Program</i>, <a href="https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/kindergarten-to-grade-12/support/graduation/graduation-policy-guide.pdf">https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/kindergarten-to-grade-12/support/graduation/graduation-policy-guide.pdf</a>;</li> <li>British Columbia Government Ministry of Education and Child Care, (2005<sup>[81]</sup>), <i>Recognition of Post-Secondary Transition Programs for Funding Purposes</i>, <a href="https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/legislation-policy/public-schools/recognition-of-post-secondary-transition-programs-for-funding-purposes">https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/legislation-policy/public-schools/recognition-of-post-secondary-transition-programs-for-funding-purposes</a>.</li> </ul>
Estonia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Estonia Government Ministry of Education and Research, (2021<sup>[82]</sup>), <i>Haridusvaldkonna arengukava 2021-2035 [Education field development plan 2021-2035]</i>, <a href="https://valitsus.ee/media/4250/download">https://valitsus.ee/media/4250/download</a>;</li> <li>Estonia Government Ministry of Education and Research, (2016<sup>[83]</sup>), <i>Edu ja Tegu [Entrepreneurship and career education program]</i>, <a href="https://ettevotlusope.edu.ee/">https://ettevotlusope.edu.ee/</a>;</li> <li>Estonia Government Ministry of Education and Research, (2021<sup>[84]</sup>), <i>Noortevaldkonna arengukava 2021–2035 [Development plan for the youth sector 2021–2035]</i>, <a href="https://valitsus.ee/media/4107/download">https://valitsus.ee/media/4107/download</a>;</li> <li>Estonia Government Ministry of Education and Research, (2023<sup>[85]</sup>), <i>Haridus- ja noorteprogramm 2023-2026 [Education and youth program 2023-2026]</i>, <a href="https://www.hm.ee/ministeerium-uudised-ja-kontakt/ministeerium/strateegilised-alusdokumendid-ja-programmid?view_instance=2&amp;current_page=1#haridus-ja-noortepr">https://www.hm.ee/ministeerium-uudised-ja-kontakt/ministeerium/strateegilised-alusdokumendid-ja-programmid?view_instance=2&amp;current_page=1#haridus-ja-noortepr</a>.</li> </ul>
Ireland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ireland Government Department of Education and Skills, (2021<sup>[86]</sup>), <i>Ireland's National Skills Strategy</i>, <a href="https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/69fd2-irelands-national-skills-strategy-2025-irelands-future/">https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/69fd2-irelands-national-skills-strategy-2025-irelands-future/</a>;</li> <li>Ireland Government Department of Education and Skills, (2013<sup>[87]</sup>), <i>Supporting A Better Transition From Second Level To Higher Education: Key Directions and Next Steps</i>, <a href="https://www.gov.ie/pdf?file=https://assets.gov.ie/24687/6788d6a1490a40af8f71ad6830b0cdcc.pdf#page=null">https://www.gov.ie/pdf?file=https://assets.gov.ie/24687/6788d6a1490a40af8f71ad6830b0cdcc.pdf#page=null</a>;</li> <li>Ireland Government Department of Education and Skills, (2015<sup>[88]</sup>), <i>Supporting a Better Transition From Second Level To Higher Education: Implementation and Next Steps</i>, <a href="https://www.gov.ie/pdf?file=https://assets.gov.ie/25070/33ceed247c03445abbc3ec2e9d0b1ac7.pdf#page=null">https://www.gov.ie/pdf?file=https://assets.gov.ie/25070/33ceed247c03445abbc3ec2e9d0b1ac7.pdf#page=null</a>;</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ireland Government Department of Education and Skills, (2014<sup>[89]</sup>), <i>Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019</i>, <a href="https://www.solas.ie/ff/70398/x/920e2fa0b6/fetstrategy2014-2019.pdf">https://www.solas.ie/ff/70398/x/920e2fa0b6/fetstrategy2014-2019.pdf</a>.</li> </ul>
Netherlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Netherlands Government, (n.d.<sup>[90]</sup>), <i>Pilot pro/vmbo-onderbouwklassen [Pilot pro/pre-vocational secondary education classes]</i>, <a href="https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/voortgezet-onderwijs/pilot-pro-vmbo">https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/voortgezet-onderwijs/pilot-pro-vmbo</a>;</li> <li>• Netherlands Government Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, (n.d.<sup>[66]</sup>), KiesMBO.nl, <a href="https://www.kiesmbo.nl/">https://www.kiesmbo.nl/</a>.</li> </ul>
New Zealand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New Zealand Government Ministry of Education, (2020<sup>[91]</sup>), <i>The Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities (NELP) &amp; Tertiary Education Strategy (TES)</i>, <a href="https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/overall-strategies-and-policies/the-statement-of-national-education-and-learning-priorities-nelp-and-the-tertiary-education-strategy-tes/">https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/overall-strategies-and-policies/the-statement-of-national-education-and-learning-priorities-nelp-and-the-tertiary-education-strategy-tes/</a>;</li> <li>• New Zealand Government Ministry of Education, (2023<sup>[92]</sup>) <i>Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020-2030 2023 Refresh</i>, <a href="https://assets.education.govt.nz/public/Documents/our-work/strategies-and-policies/action-plan-for-pacific-education/Action-Plan-for-Pacific-Education-2023_070723.pdf">https://assets.education.govt.nz/public/Documents/our-work/strategies-and-policies/action-plan-for-pacific-education/Action-Plan-for-Pacific-Education-2023_070723.pdf</a>;</li> <li>• New Zealand Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, (2019<sup>[93]</sup>), <i>Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy</i>, <a href="https://www.childyouthwellbeing.govt.nz/resources/child-and-youth-wellbeing-strategy#foreword-minister-for-child-poverty-reduction">https://www.childyouthwellbeing.govt.nz/resources/child-and-youth-wellbeing-strategy#foreword-minister-for-child-poverty-reduction</a>;</li> <li>• New Zealand Government Te Puni Kōkiri [Ministry of Māori Development], (n.d.<sup>[94]</sup>) <i>Pae Aronui [Skills and employment scheme]</i>, <a href="https://www.tpk.govt.nz/en/nga-putea-me-nga-ratonga/education-and-employment/pae-aronui">https://www.tpk.govt.nz/en/nga-putea-me-nga-ratonga/education-and-employment/pae-aronui</a>;</li> <li>• New Zealand Government Ministry of Social Development, (n.d.<sup>[95]</sup>) <i>He Poutama Rangatahi - Youth Employment Pathways</i>, <a href="https://workandincome.govt.nz/providers/programmes-and-projects/he-poutama-rangatahi-youth-employment-pathways.html">https://workandincome.govt.nz/providers/programmes-and-projects/he-poutama-rangatahi-youth-employment-pathways.html</a>.</li> </ul>
Portugal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Portugal Government Directorate-General for Education, (n.d.<sup>[96]</sup>), <i>Educação para a cidadania [Education for citizenship]</i>, <a href="https://cidadania.dge.mec.pt/">https://cidadania.dge.mec.pt/</a>;</li> </ul>
Singapore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government of Singapore, (2023<sup>[97]</sup>), <i>myskillsfuture.gov.sg</i>, <a href="https://www.myskillsfuture.gov.sg/content/portal/en/index.html">https://www.myskillsfuture.gov.sg/content/portal/en/index.html</a>;</li> <li>• Singapore Government Ministry of Education, (2023<sup>[30]</sup>), <i>A Level Curriculum and Subject Syllabuses</i>, <a href="https://www.moe.gov.sg/post-secondary/A_Level-curriculum-and-subject-syllabuses">https://www.moe.gov.sg/post-secondary/A_Level-curriculum-and-subject-syllabuses</a>; ;</li> <li>• Singapore Government Ministry of Education, (n.d.<sup>[98]</sup>), <i>Overview of Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs)</i>, <a href="https://www.moe.gov.sg/education-in-sg/our-programmes/cca/overview">https://www.moe.gov.sg/education-in-sg/our-programmes/cca/overview</a>;</li> <li>• Singapore Government Ministry of Education, (n.d.<sup>[75]</sup>), <i>21st Century Competencies</i>, <a href="https://www.moe.gov.sg/education-in-sg/21st-century-competencies">https://www.moe.gov.sg/education-in-sg/21st-century-competencies</a>.</li> </ul>
Sweden	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skolverket [Swedish National Agency for Education], (2023<sup>[99]</sup>), <i>Du kan få bidrag för att ta emot en lärling [You can get a grant to take on an apprentice]</i>, <a href="https://www.skolverket.se/for-dig-som-.../arbetsgivare/for-dig-som-ar-arbetsgivare/du-kan-fa-bidrag-for-att-ta-emot-en-larling">https://www.skolverket.se/for-dig-som-.../arbetsgivare/for-dig-som-ar-arbetsgivare/du-kan-fa-bidrag-for-att-ta-emot-en-larling</a>;</li> </ul>

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This Education Policy Perspective has been authorised by Andreas Schleicher, Director of the Directorate for Education and Skills, OECD.

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