COVID-19 Response: Longitudinal Evaluation of the Assessment and Awarding Arrangements for Vocational Qualifications in Northern Ireland (2020–2022)

June 2023

Contents

Executive Summary

In March 2020 the normal examinations and assessments were cancelled due to the Covid 19 pandemic. This was unprecedented and presented major challenges for all stakeholders involved in the qualifications system. Alternative arrangements had to be put in place at short notice for the Summer 2020 awarding series and this continued into the 2020–21 and 2021–22 academic years.

The alternative assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) across the whole COVID-19 impacted period (Summer 2020–Summer 2022) were put in place to facilitate as many learners as possible to receive an award, whilst ensuring that qualifications standards and validity of awards were maintained.

The key focus of previous stand-alone evaluations of the arrangements in Summer 2020 and the academic year 2020–2021 was to capture evidence-based stakeholder experiences, assess successes and challenges and identify lessons learned that would inform subsequent arrangements throughout the COVID-19 period.

In October 2022, CCEA Regulation was commissioned by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to conduct a longitudinal evaluation of the alternative assessment and awarding arrangements for VTQs across the whole COVID-19 impacted period: Summer 2020–Summer 2022. The purpose was to examine and compare trends and patterns over time to retrospectively determine if lessons learned were appropriately and effectively applied.

Phase one of the longitudinal evaluation involved a quantitative survey of stakeholder views for the 2021–2022 academic year. Phase two involved stakeholder interviews via focus groups to provide the opportunity for stakeholders to further articulate their views and provide qualitative evidence on their experiences across the whole COVID-19 impacted period. Analysis on awarding data across the whole period was also conducted.

The report presents comparative awarding data analysis, and views from discussions with stakeholders, in the context of disruption to assessment of vocational qualifications across the whole COVID-19 impacted period. The report concludes that collaborative working and effective communication were crucial in securing the successful implementation of the alternative arrangements, and in turn successful outcomes for learners, with as many learners as possible gaining qualifications during this time. Longitudinal monitoring of the impact of the pandemic on VTQ learners had been one of the key actions coming out of the first two stand-alone evaluations of 2020–21 and 2021–22. The focus of monitoring was not only to measure results but also to assess the effects of the disruption on learners' emotional health and well-being.

Section 1: Background and Methodology

1.1   Background

The Northern Ireland Context

There are currently 88 awarding organisations (AOs) operating in Northern Ireland (NI), which offer VTQs to NI centres and their learners. The VTQ landscape is extensive and diverse. There are over 2000 VTQs registered for use in NI. The complex nature and purpose of VTQs creates difficulties in the approach to alternative assessment and awarding when normal arrangements are suspended, as arrangements have to suit the different types of qualifications. An added challenge is that, apart from a few exceptions, the AOs offering VTQs in NI are based in England and regulated by Ofqual. This makes alignment with Ofqual in assessment and awarding approaches important, as it reduces risk both for the AOs in terms of systems and processes, and for the learner, in that the portability of the qualifications they take is protected.

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

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

Alternative Arrangements across the COVID-19 impacted period

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

communications to providers. In addition, work was conducted on management of risks around learners being unable to complete qualifications due to the impact of COVID-19. The extent of the pandemic between 2020 and 2022 required monitoring of both its effects on teaching and learning and of the assessment arrangements for VTQs delivered in NI.

In the first phase of the pandemic, centres offering VTQs faced enormous pressures in delivering these qualifications in the midst of public health advice and learner absenteeism due to COVID-19 illness and self-isolation. The disruption caused by the pandemic meant that, for example, learners were often unable to access work placements, which created difficulties for centres seeking to ensure their learners had opportunities to complete courses. The pandemic, therefore, continued to pose significant challenges for staff and learners in centres throughout the 2020–21 academic year.

From September 2020, CCEA Regulation took a targeted and risk-based approach to the monitoring of NI and English AOs' compliance with the Vocational and Technical Qualifications Contingency Regulatory Framework (VCRF), which was in place for the academic year 2020–21.

The DfE NI Communications Working Group and Task and Finish Group were established at the start of the academic year 2020–21. These forums were used by DfE and CCEA Regulation to ascertain the difficulties faced by centres in delivering the VTQs during public health advice and the ongoing effects of the pandemic. CCEA Regulation's meetings with FE colleges' Quality Managers allowed for monitoring the situation at an operational level and developing solutions with AOs where centres faced difficulties in delivery because of the ongoing pandemic.

DfE commissioned CCEA Regulation to conduct an evaluation of the alternative assessment and awarding arrangements for VTQs in Northern Ireland in summer 2020 and at the end of the academic years 2020–21 and 2021–22. The evaluation in each year was conducted in two phases to ensure an appropriate balance of qualitative and quantitative data. In each evaluation, phase one included an online survey and phase two included stakeholder interviews.

The online surveys of stakeholders involved in the assessment and awarding of VTQs in summer 2020, and the academic years 2020–21 and 2021–22, were carried out at the close of each academic year. The online survey for 2021–22 can be found in Appendix (i).

Each of the surveys focused on the experiences, challenges faced, and lessons learned by stakeholders, to enable these lessons to be identified and inform future arrangements. There were common areas of focus in each survey, as well as more targeted areas relevant to the assessment and awarding arrangements in specific years. This allowed information to be gathered on the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequential impact on teaching and learning, as well as adaptations and alternative arrangements put in place to enable learners to obtain awards and progress to the next stage of their learning journey.

Stakeholder engagement has been a key aspect of evaluating the alternative assessment and awarding approaches throughout the COVID-19 impacted period. This engagement included discussions with further education, training organisations, and school practitioners and managers, awarding organisations, and wider stakeholders, including the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and higher education. Each of the survey phases in the evaluations informed a discussion paper that was used in online focus groups.

Evaluation reports for summer 2020 and for 2020–21 can be found here:
Home | Department for the Economy (economy-ni.gov.uk)
Evaluation of summer 2020 assessment and awarding of VTQs in NI
Evaluation of 2020–2021 assessment and awarding of VTQs in NI

The survey analysis of the online survey for 2021–22 can be found in Appendix (iii). These evaluations, taken in the light of ongoing three-country and NI qualifications assessment and awarding, provide the basis for this longitudinal study.

1.1   Methodology

Following each of the COVID-19 impacted periods, DfE commissioned CCEA Regulation to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the awarding of VTQs to determine the effectiveness of the assessment and awarding arrangements and to identify the lessons learned for the future.

Each evaluation was conducted in two phases to ensure an appropriate balance of qualitative and quantitative data.

For each evaluation, phase one comprised an online survey of stakeholders involved in the arrangements for assessment and awarding in the particular COVID-19 impacted period. The survey focused on stakeholder experiences, challenges faced and lessons learned.

Phase one also included a presentation of VTQ awarding data across NI-only AOs and NI-only qualifications, and for qualifications offered across England and NI.

The outcomes of the survey and the awarding data results were used to inform stakeholder engagement in phase two of each evaluation. Stakeholder engagement involved interviews with stakeholder focus groups to explore further the key issues and themes emerging from the phase one survey. Stakeholder groups comprised post-primary schools, further education colleges, private training providers and employers. In 2020–21, focus groups with providers, such as FE colleges, a major provider of vocational qualifications, were arranged subsequent to the survey.

Phase two in each evaluation included an analysis of the awarding data to identify patterns of awarding during the affected period, including a comparative and impact analysis over time.

The evaluations for summer 2020 and in 2020−21 included a comparative analysis with UK and international country experiences of awarding to further develop the lessons learned.

This report is longitudinal in focus, in the context of the awarding of VTQs, delivered under the conditions of the regulatory frameworks during the affected period of the pandemic. The alternative arrangements for VTQ awarding in each of the COVID-19 impacted periods were closely aligned across NI, Wales and England, with all jurisdictions having similar regulatory conditions and requirements for awarding. The NI Communications Working Group was engaged in each stage of the development process, in preparation of the final report submission to the DfE Task & Finish Group and DfE.

In phase one of the evaluation, the online survey developed by CCEA Regulation was circulated to stakeholder groups affected by the alternative awarding arrangements. The key stakeholders identified for the evaluation were provider groups delivering VTQs in schools, FE colleges, private training providers and employers and AOs offering VTQs in NI.

The survey section of this report presents a longitudinal focus on the findings of the three online surveys carried out in 2020, 2021 and 2022. The common areas of focus in each of the three years were communications, delivery of results and general satisfaction. Other areas varied in each survey, centring on approaches, development, and suitability of adaptations for alternative assessment and awarding arrangements in summer 2020, 2020−21 and 2021−22. This enabled an exploration of the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions on teaching and learning for individual years.

The analysis of awarding data is presented for the purpose of identifying patterns of awarding during the whole COVID-19 impacted period.

Stakeholder engagement was conducted across all stakeholder groups, with a longitudinal focus. The objective of this engagement was to seek stakeholder feedback on how assessment and awarding arrangements met the needs of the sectors over the whole COVID-19 impacted period. There was also a strong emphasis on general satisfaction and lessons learned over the whole period.

Conclusions and recommendations are provided for DfE's consideration.

Section 2: Survey Analysis

2.1   Approach

In each year, the surveys were open for a two-week period. The respective surveys were issued in October in 2020, November 2021 and September 2022.

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

2.2   Findings

This section provides a longitudinal focus on the findings of the three online surveys carried out over the COVID-19 period 2020–22. It sets out the principal areas examined in each survey, the levels of stakeholder satisfaction within each area examined, the issues identified through stakeholder experience, and the actions implemented as a result of feedback received and lessons learned.

2.2.1   Principal areas of focus in surveys undertaken in 2020, 2020–21, and 2021–22

Table 1: Comparison of the principal areas of focus in each of the surveys carried out at the end of each of the three academic years

Academic Year	Number of Principal Areas of Focus	Main Topics of Focus	Number of Questions
2019–20	6	1 Communication. 2 Processes and approaches for assessment. 3 User experience of development/delivery of alternative arrangements. 4 Implementation challenges. 5 Delivery of results. 6 Overall satisfaction with awarding in context of alternative arrangements.	10
2020–21	6	1 Communication. 2 Teacher Assessed Grade (TAG) process. 3 Suitability of Adaptations to facilitate awarding. 4 Centre Determined Grade (CDG) process. 5 Results. 6 General satisfaction with alternative arrangements.	26
2021–22	6	1 Communication. 2 The learner experience. 3 Suitability of adaptations to facilitate awarding. 4 Results. 5 Regulation. 6 General satisfaction.	14

Areas of focus were identified and explored in each of the three years.

Communications, delivery of results, and general satisfaction were included in each survey. Other areas included, varied in each survey, focusing on approaches, development and suitability of adaptations for alternative assessment and awarding arrangements in summer 2020, 2020–21 and 2021–22. This enabled an exploration of the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on teaching and learning across individual years.

2.2.2 Number of responses received to surveys undertaken in 2020, 2020–21 and 2021–22

Table 2: Number of responses obtained from the individual and group respondents to each of the evaluation surveys for each of the academic years

Academic Year	Number of Responses
2019–20	51
2020–21	93
2021–22	73

The number of responses received may in some cases reflect the views of more than one individual.

2.2.3 Demographics of respondents to surveys undertaken in 2020, 2020–21 and 2021–22

Table 3: Percentage respondents in each category over 3 years

	Post Primary School	FE College	Private Training Organisation	Awarding Organisation	Employer/ Sector Body	Other
2019–20	45%	4%	29%	18%	2%	2%
2020–21	24%	34%	10%	12%	5%	15%
2021–22	49%	10%	14%	10%	10%	7%

Responses were received from Post Primary Schools (PPS), Further Education Colleges (FE), Private Training Organisations (PTO), Awarding Organisations (AO), Employer/Sector Bodies and responses from a group categorised as 'Other.'

The group 'other' included responses from charities, work-based learning, social enterprises, and community groups.

The percentage of respondents in each of the stakeholder groups varied from year to year. For summer 2020 the largest response was from PPS (45%) followed by PTO (29%) and AO (18%). The smallest responses were from FE (4%), Employer/Sector Body (2%) and Other (2%).

In 2020–21 the largest response was from FE (34%) followed by PPS (24%), 'Other (15%) and AO (12%). The smallest response was from PT0 (10%) and Employer/Sector Body (5%).
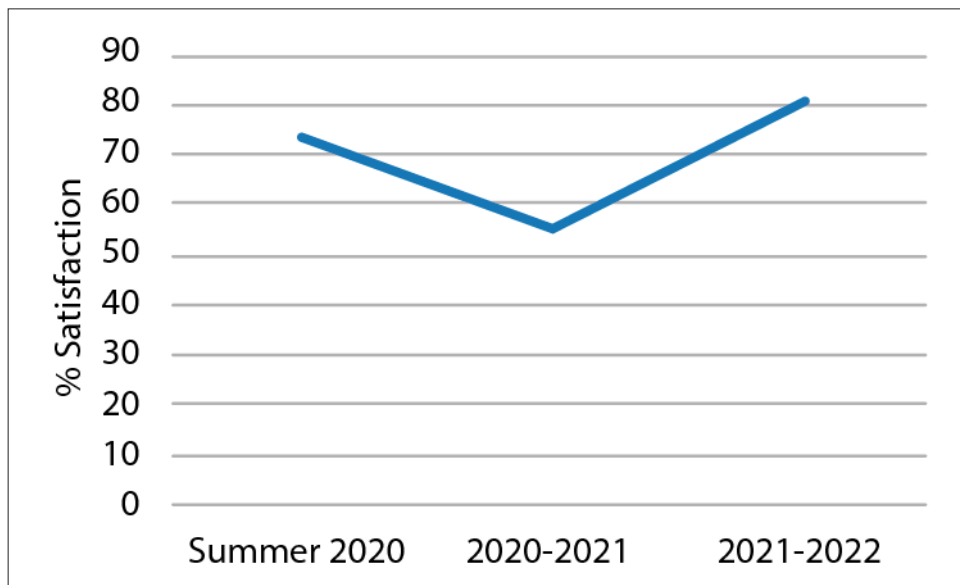
In 2021–2022 the largest response was from PPS (49%) followed by PTO (14%), FE, AO, and Employer/Sector Body (10%). The smallest response was from 'Other' (7%).

2.2.4   Survey Areas of Focus

2.2.4.1 Communication

Communication was a principal area of focus in each of the surveys. Satisfaction levels varied across the three years.

Figure 1: Satisfaction with Communications

74% and 56% of respondents in summer 2020 and 2020–21 respectively agreed that communications were readily understood. Across both these periods feedback indicated common areas of concern around the timeliness, clarity, volume and complexity of communications issued. Concerns were identified about the inconsistency of approach and contradictory information provided by AOs. Concerns were also identified with the level of changes to information following its issue by AOs.

Feedback in both periods indicated there were perceived differences between the timelines and clarity of communications for VTQs and General Qualifications (GQs).

As a result of feedback received, a number of actions were implemented during 2020, 2021 and 2022. These included the development of a communication strategy with providers and AOs. DfE introduced a NI communications group for stakeholders and CCEA Regulation set up regular meetings with FE colleges' Quality Managers. This allowed ongoing monitoring to develop solutions with AOs, where centres faced difficulties in delivery during the different stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. CCEA Regulation also led several communication forums to ensure that the implementation of the regulatory frameworks by AOs met the needs of learners and that standards were maintained.

In 2021−22 the online survey identified that 81% of respondents agreed that communications were clear and easily understood.

2.2.4.2 Approaches, development, and suitability of adaptations for alternative assessment and awarding arrangements in summer 2020, 2020−21 and 2021−22

In each of the three surveys the questions posed varied to reflect the specific processes and approaches in operation within a particular year.

Figure 2: Satisfaction with Assessment and Awarding
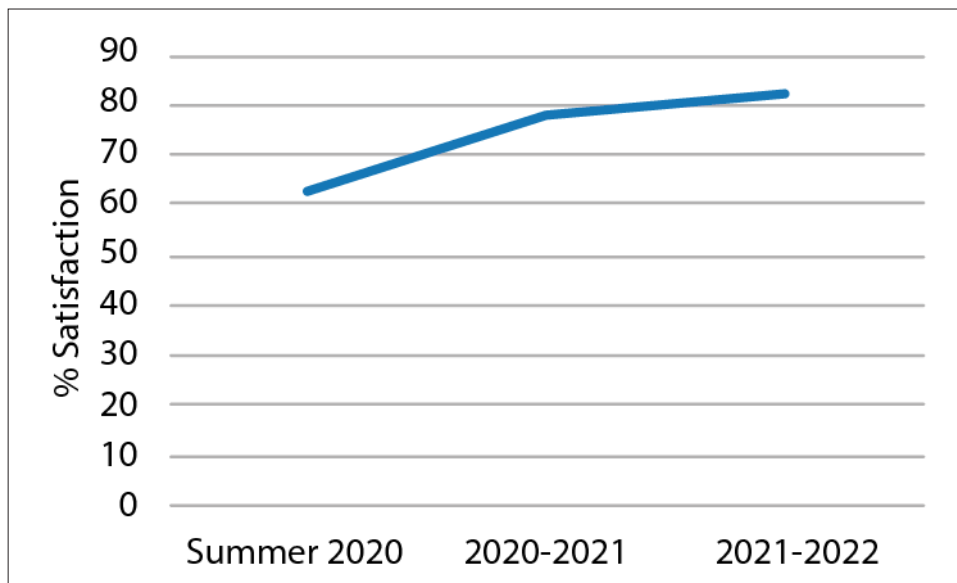
The summer 2020 survey focused on new processes and approaches that were implemented to manage the alternative assessment and awarding arrangements.

78% of respondents across all stakeholder groups stated that they were required to develop new processes or approaches for summer 2020 awarding. These processes included: online assessment; remote assessment; adapted assessment; delayed assessment; or Centre Assessed Grades (CAGs). 62% of respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the development and delivery of assessment and awarding arrangements in summer 2020. There were some concerns raised about the different approaches taken by different AOs. The importance of learners being able to display practical skills and the restrictions that impacted on this was raised as a concern. In some cases, gathering supporting evidence to support learner outcomes was challenging, especially in respect of learners completing a full qualification in one year. Providers wanted clear guidance from AOs to allow evidence to be gathered throughout the year and transparency to enable comparability of approach between VTQs and GQs. The timescale required to implement new systems for centres to be able to manage the CAG process was raised as a concern, as was the need for a more formal steer from regulators on AOs working together for similar qualifications.

The summer 2020 survey highlighted challenges faced in the implementation of awarding in the context of the alternative arrangements, with 78% citing that this was a challenging task. The challenges identified included: difficulties due to remote working conditions for staff and e-Learning engagement with learners, especially those learners that found difficulties with internet access or did not have access to a personal laptop; inaccessibility of student work; providing information in the right format for AOs; inadequate resources and inadequate time to prepare for lockdown. The 2020–21 survey focused on the TAGs process and the CDG process for Essential Skills introduced for 2020–21.

78% of respondents stated that the TAG process was fair to learners in providing an accurate grade. They indicated that the process allowed assessment mitigations for cohorts and individual learners to be fully considered and reviewed by entire tutor and lecturing teams. Concerns that were raised indicated that the process could disadvantage learners as a learner develops over the course of their study programme; that the timing of the assessment may lead to an unfair assessment; and that the process could enable lower-ability learners to achieve higher grades.

50% and 52% of respondents respectively agreed that the TAG process and the submission of information for the process was manageable. There were concerns about the timeliness of decision making, the lack of resources in centres and the inconsistency of approach taken by AOs.

In relation to instructions and guidance for TAGs, 49% of respondents thought it was helpful and 38% thought it was timely. There were concerns about the number of iterations of documents, poor communications, and the timeliness of the receipt of guidance/instructions provided.

In relation to the CDGs process for Essential Skills, 82% of respondents stated that it provided learners with outcomes that were reflective of the standard at which they were working; however, the approach made it difficult to differentiate between learners of different abilities.

61% of respondents agreed that the CDG process was manageable and 52% agreed that the instructions and guidance from AOs was helpful. Feedback indicated that processes were burdensome on centres, that timelines and some contingencies were not planned or clearly communicated, and that quality assurance processes did not provide assurance that standards were being met.

In general, there were concerns about late decision-making on policy and the differences between academic terms in NI and those in England and Wales, with the end of term in NI being the end of June and England and Wales, mid-July. This caused operational challenges for centres in closing out actions within AO timescales.

In respect of qualifications which assessed occupational or professional competency, or those for mixed purpose, 60% of respondents agreed that adaptations introduced were appropriate to facilitate assessment and awarding. Concerns raised indicated that not all AOs provided clear guidance at unit level and that there were challenges in finalising adaptations with industry bodies within the timescales needed. Feedback indicated that adaptations were not permitted

for qualifications deemed 'license to practice'; however, it was felt that reasonable adjustments could have been made.

The learner experience was explored through stakeholders' feedback in 2021–22, to get an understanding if the move towards normal assessment arrangements had a positive effect on learners. 77% of responses were positive. There was some concern about gaps in learners' knowledge and the potential for a void in skills' acquisition for some learners, depending on their individual experience over the past two years. This in turn, it was felt, could impact on learners during a move back to normal assessment.

The balanced approach, to allow a reduction in overall assessment while continuing to develop skills, was welcomed for learners completing the final year of a course.

Action taken following feedback given in 2020 resulted in CCEA Regulation continuing to work collaboratively with fellow regulators, Ofqual and QW, with AOs and with sector bodies on alternative arrangements to address challenges arising from regional variations in lockdowns and the level of disruption. This allowed regional and local solutions to be found without compromising the integrity of the examinations. CCEA Regulation was represented at the cross-country VTQ technical working group. This group's remit was to ensure consistency of approach across all jurisdictions and AOs and to monitor developments. CCEA Regulation also met with the NI AOs group to develop solutions for NI-only qualifications, and the Essential Skills Working Group was established to ensure comparability across skills qualifications.

In 2021–22, 82% of respondents agreed that the adaptations introduced for VTQs were appropriate to facilitate awarding. 71% agreed that adaptations were fair to learners in providing an accurate assessment of their performance. Some stated that for some qualifications, delayed assessment was appropriate.

2.2.4.3 Delivery of Results to meet expectation

Delivery of results was a key focus in each survey.

Figure 3: Satisfaction with the delivery of results as a valid representation of learner performance
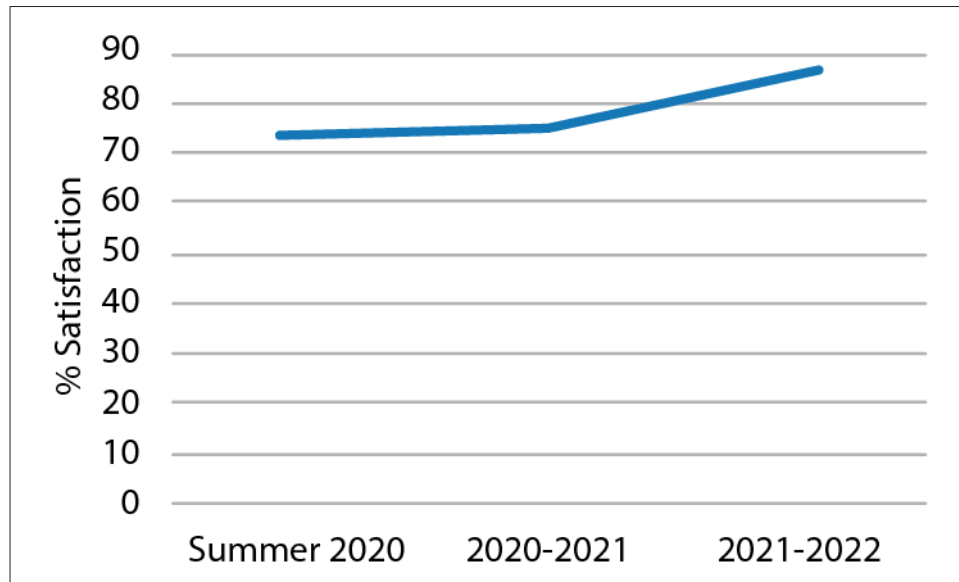
In 2020, 74% of respondents stated that they felt results had been delivered as expected in the context of alternative arrangements in place and they welcomed the decision to implement CAGs. AOs indicated that they thought the arrangements for CAG quality assurance, awarding and results turnaround were too tight, putting pressure on centres and internal teams.

In 2020−21 and 2021−22 the evaluation focused on whether the results issued to learners were a valid representation of their performance. In 2020−21, 75% of respondents agreed that they were. Feedback indicated that providers welcomed the decision to implement CDGs for Essential Skills in 2020−21. Some results and certificates were slow to be issued, which providers indicated impacted on student progression. In 2020−21 feedback indicated that information in relation to results was only received in June and continued to be received until just before the issue of results, which put pressure on examinations staff in centres.

55% of respondents agreed that instructions and guidance for the issue of results were clear and helpful with 44% agreeing they were timely. However, there were concerns about the volume and timeliness of some AO communications, which made it difficult to keep up with different processes required by different AOs and put pressure on examinations staff.

In 2020−21, AOs were specifically asked if they found the alternative arrangements manageable, allowing adequate time to meet the issue of results timelines in 2020−21.

63% of respondents agreed they were; however, they indicated that the results process would have benefitted from a discussion of contingency arrangements ahead of January 2021.

Following feedback in 2020 and 2020–21 a number of actions were implemented to address the concerns raised. These included the setting up of stakeholder groups, including the NI Awarding Organisation Group, Sector Groups, and the Essential Skills Working Group. These groups enabled solutions to be found without compromising the integrity of the qualification. CCEA Regulation monitored AO activity around the timing and quality of communications.

AOs published guidance on their websites rather than issuing high volumes of communications to centres. Websites thus served as central hubs for centres and removed the burden on centres receiving high volumes of communications directly.

In 2021–22 87% of respondents agreed that the results received were as expected and 92% of respondents agreed that results issued were a valid representation of learner performance.

2.2.4.4 Regulation

In the 2021–22 survey, questions on the role of CCEA Regulation were included for the first time because of feedback received from respondents in 2020–21.

In response, 82% of respondents agreed that CCEA Regulation had appropriate arrangements in place to facilitate assessment in 2021–22, which protected the interests of NI learners. 97% agreed that CCEA Regulation had ensured that appropriate engagement and support were in place to enable providers to conduct assessments, and 86% agreed that CCEA Regulation had provided clear direction concerning the implementation of assessment and awarding arrangements for 2021–22.

2.2.4.5 General satisfaction

General satisfaction was a principal area of focus in each of the three surveys. Levels of satisfaction varied across the three years.

Figure 4. General Satisfaction with Assessment and Awarding Arrangements
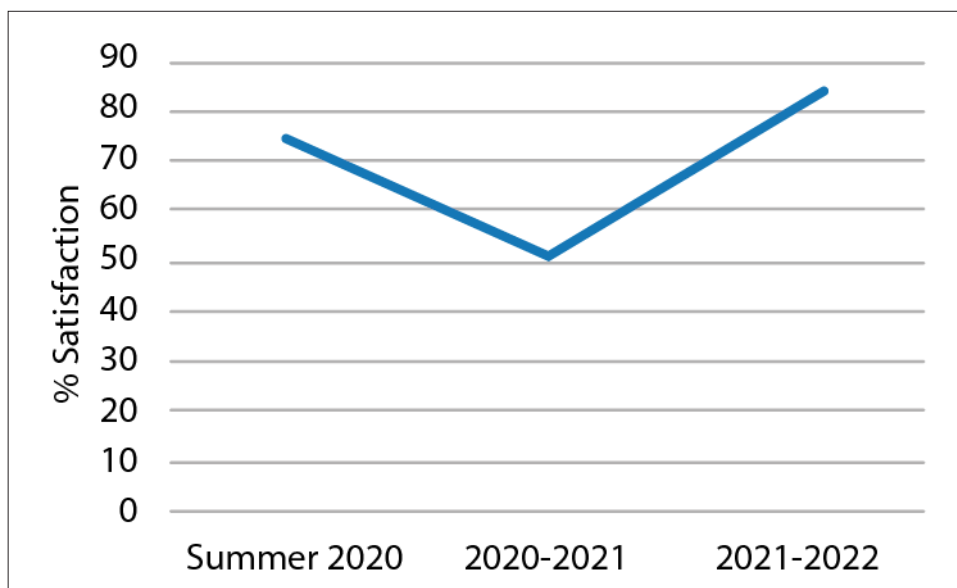
In summer 2020, 74% of respondents were satisfied with assessment and awarding arrangements. Feedback received was positive and indicated that CAGs were the best gauge of learner ability for summer 2020, but that better continuous assessment arrangements were required going forward. AOs stated that the alternative assessment put in place for CAGs was internally effective and worked well in delivering results. The key issues identified were the timescales and delays with some centres, consistency in communication, and technology and platforms used by AOs struggling to cope with the demand placed on them. It was also indicated that UK AOs did not seem familiar with the structure of VTQ provision in NI.

In 2020–21 general satisfaction levels dropped to 51%. PPS indicated that the processes implemented were robust; however, there was a significant volume of administration required, which was repetitive in some cases. It was considered that arrangements were more manageable in 2020–21 than in 2020 and that lessons learned had been implemented effectively, while overall communications had improved. However, there was dissatisfaction because of delays in receiving information and because of what was regarded as continuous, confusing updates from AOs, which caused stress to staff and students.

Action taken as a result of 2020 and 2020–21 feedback included CCEA Regulation working with Ofqual and QW to align announcements on VTQs and GQs on three-country qualifications. CCEA Regulation represented the interests of NI in strategic and operational groups at national level. This enabled CCEA Regulation to provide the NI perspective at the three-country Standards and Technical Board, the VTQ Oversight Board, the Policy Implementation Advisory Group and the Cross Sector Communications Group, which included AO and provider representatives.

In 2021–22, 84% of respondents stated that they were satisfied with the assessment and awarding arrangements.

Section 3: Data Analysis

3.1 Introduction

This section presents information on the number of certificates issued for regulated VTQs in Northern Ireland.

The analysis is set in the context of the number of certificates awarded since 1 October 2017, with a focus on the number of VTQ certifications made across the whole COVID-19 impacted period: summer 2020 (April to September 2020); 2020–21 (full academic year); and 2021–22 (full academic year). Data for the 2017–18 and 2018–19 academic years is presented for pre-pandemic comparison.

Comparative analysis outlines the number of certificates awarded by Qualification Type, Qualification Level and Qualification Sector Subject Area. In focus 'Sector Subject Areas (SSAs)' 'Entry Level to Level 3' and 'Essential Skills (Northern Ireland)' qualification overviews are also included.

The certification data provides insights into the impact the pandemic had on the certification cycle, including on the number of certificates issued and where there is a strong association with qualification uptake and completion. When compared against pre-pandemic norms, the anomalous nature of the academic years 2019–20, 2020–21 and 2021–22 means that caution needs to be exercised in interpreting differences and in any attempt to identify trends from these years, for example, any perceived changes to qualification uptake and completion. Overall, on exit from the pandemic, while certification data is signalling that there is a recovery (normalisation) in progress, it is not yet complete. It may be that some of the recent changes to the VTQ certification landscape will in effect be transient. One important note of caution: whilst an increase in the number of certificates issued might be interpreted as a return to pre-pandemic norms, this apparent normalisation might not be the case, as these increases include changes in sector subject area uptake which will result in a different profile of skill sets emerging.

3.2 Data Source

The data underlying this section has been sourced from CCEA Regulation Technical and Professional Qualification Bulletins | CCEA

For each calendar quarter, data on the number of certificates issued to learners in NI in VTQs is collected from AOs and published by CCEA Regulation. Quarter 2 2020 – the quarter that covers April, May and June 2020 in the 2019–20 academic year – can be used as an indicator of certification activity at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Quarter 3 2020 – the quarter that covers July, August and September 2020 in the 2019–20 academic year – can be used as an indicator of certification activity when mitigations to facilitate awarding and progression were first put in place during the COVID-19 impacted period. The number of certificates issued in the quarters that cover October 2019 to September 2020[1] is used as the closest measure of certification activity during the 2019–20 academic year. Similarly, the number of

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[1] The four quarters are: 2019 quarter 4 (October – December 2019); 2020 quarter 1 (January – March 2020); 2020 quarter 2 (April - June 2020); and 2020 quarter 3 (July – September 2020).

certificates issued in the quarters that cover October 2020 to September 2021[2] is used as the closest measure of certification activity during the 2020–21 academic year and the number of certificates issued in the quarters that cover October 2021 to September 2022[3] is used as the closest measure of certification activity during the 2021–22 academic year.

Information on VTQs, such as qualification type, awarding organisation, and Sector Subject Area (SSA), can be accessed from the Register of Regulated Qualifications.

The Register contains a record of qualifications regulated by CCEA Regulation in Northern Ireland and by Ofqual in England.

CCEA Regulation publishes quarterly certification data for VTQs. Similar certification data is collected and published for England and Wales, which can be used to make direct comparisons between regulated qualifications across jurisdictions. However, due to the data owners masking values lower than 4 for confidentiality reasons, estimates for these qualifications have to be made.

3.3 Data analysis findings

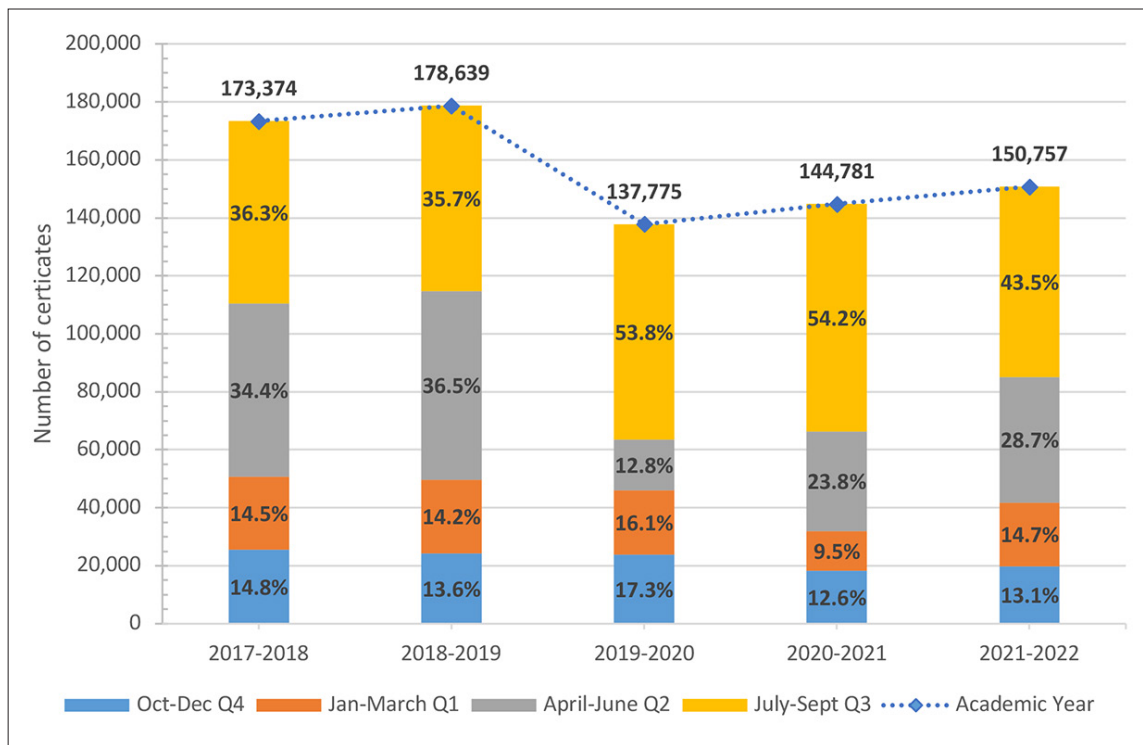**Number of Certificates awarded for all vocational qualifications from 2017–18 to 2021–2022**

Figure 1 Certificates awarded in Northern Ireland for VTQs from October 2017 to September 2022

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[2] The four quarters are: 2020 quarter 4 (October – December 2020); 2021 quarter 1 (January – March 2021); 2021 quarter 2 (April - June 2021); and 2021 quarter 3 (July – September 2021).
[3] The four quarters are: 2021 quarter 4 (October – December 2021); 2022 quarter 1 (January – March 2022); 2022 quarter 2 (April - June 2022); and 2022 quarter 3 (July – September 2022).

The table below presents the overall total certificates awarded for each year and the breakdown percentages for each quarter, as represented in the bar chart above (Figure 1).

Period	2017–2018	2018–2019	2019–2020	2020–2021	2021–2022
Percentage certificates awarded in Q4 (October–December)	14.8%	13.6%	17.3%	12.6%	13.1%
Percentage certificates awarded in Q1 (January–March)	14.5%	14.2%	16.1%	9.5%	14.7%
Percentage certificates awarded in Q2 (April–June)	34.4%	36.5%	12.8%	23.8%	28.7%
Percentage certificates awarded in Q3 (July–September)	36.3%	35.7%	53.8%	54.2%	43.5%
Total Certificates Awarded in each year	173,374	178,639	137,775	144,781	150,757

Figure 1 shows that after a notable drop in the overall number of certificates issued in the 2019–20 academic year (from 178,639 certificates in 2018–2019 to 137,775 in 2019–20 a decrease of 40,864, 22.9% in certificates), increases occurred in the 2020–21 (7,006, 5.1%) and 2021–22 (5,976, 4.1%) academic years. In spite of these increases the number of certificates issued in the 2021–22 academic year is below pre-pandemic levels, with 27,882 fewer certificates issued between October 2021 and September 2022 than between October 2018 and September 2019 (178,639).

Although the certification cycle altered during the COVID-19 pandemic, quarter 3 certifications remained high. There was a notable increase in quarter 3 2020 and quarter 3 2021. Measures put in place to ensure that learners could progress saw some certifications that normally occurred in quarter 2 occurring in quarter 3 instead – as evidenced by the associated decreases in quarter 2, 2020 and quarter 2, 2021.

Although the number of VTQ certificates has declined since the start of the pandemic the proportion of certificates issued in quarters 4 and 1 and quarters 2 and 3 appear to be returning to pre-pandemic levels. This is further illustrated in the number of certifications in Figure 2 below. A figure to show number of qualifications over time is also included in Figure 2 below.

The number of qualifications with certificates has seen a modest recovery to pre-pandemic levels, particularly in the initial COVID-19 impacted period, quarter 2. The number of certifications now sits at 88% of its pre-pandemic position.
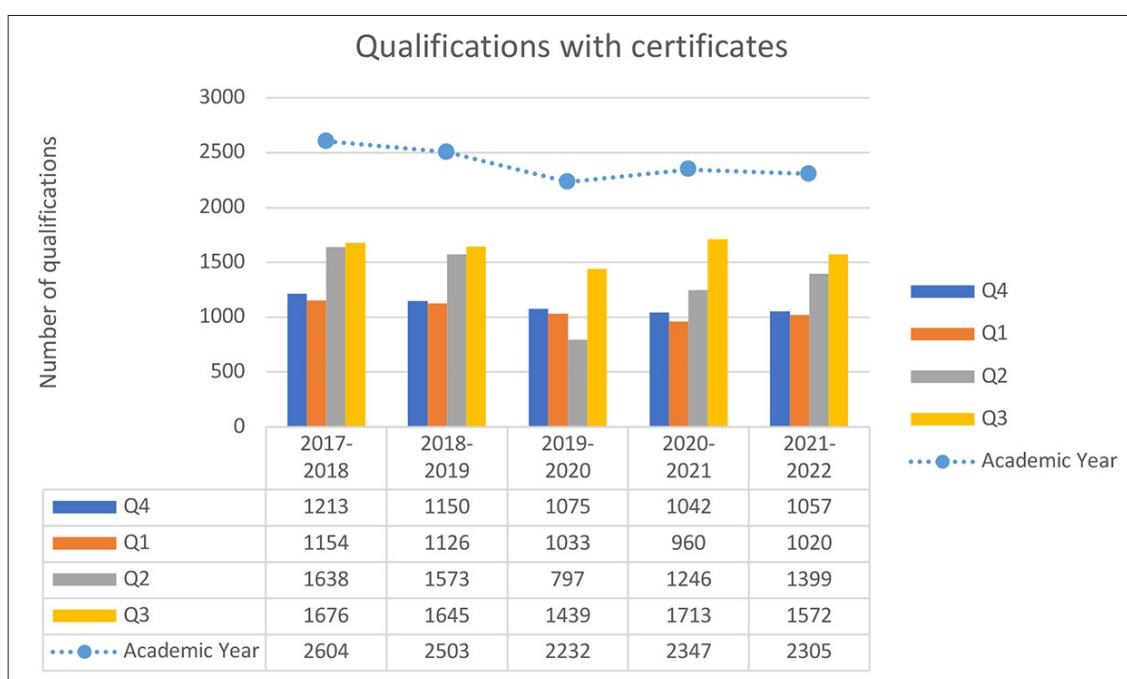
Figure 2 Qualifications with Certificates from October 2017 to September 2022

The table below presents the breakdown number of qualifications with certificates per quarter within each year, as represented in the bar chart above (Figure 2).

Period	2017–2018	2018–2019	2019–2020	2020–2021	2021–2022
Number of qualifications with certificates in Q4 (October–December)	1213	1150	1075	1042	1057
Number of qualifications with certificates in Q1 (January–March)	1154	1126	1033	960	1020
Number of qualifications with certificates in Q2 (April–June)	1638	1573	797	1246	1399
Number of qualifications with certificates in Q3 (July–September)	1676	1645	1439	1713	1572
Academic Year	2604	2503	2232	2347	2305

Summer 2020

Variations in the number of VTQ certificates awarded by type, level and sector subject area were present before the COVID-19 pandemic. Factors such as provision, prior attainment profiles and personal circumstances will naturally influence year on year changes in course enrolments and completions that result in certifications. However, the unprecedented disruption to the assessment and awarding of VTQs due to the pandemic and subsequent mitigations put in place to

deal with restrictions have undoubtedly had a significant impact on the certificates issued. Significant decreases in the number of certificates awarded were seen across nearly all qualification types, levels and sector subject areas in summer 2020 (April–September 2020) with the overall number of certificates issued dropping by 37, 156 (28.8%) (Tables 1-3 below).

Table 1: Change in Certifications by qualification type from Summer 2019 to Summer 2020

Certifications by qualification type	Summer 2019 (N)	Summer 2020 (N)	Change (N)	Change (%)
Performing Arts Graded Examination	19,403	2,105	-17,298	-89.2
Vocationally-Related Qualification	56,511	42,988	-13,523	-23.9
Occupational Qualification	9,091	4,801	-4,290	-47.2
Other Vocational Qualification	4,413	1,512	-2,901	-65.7
Other Life Skills Qualification	8,625	7,995	-630	-7.3
English For Speakers of Other Languages	2,062	1,500	-562	-27.3
Essential Skills (Northern Ireland)	13,378	13,167	-211	-1.6
Key Skills	569	396	-173	-30.4
QCF	62	0	-62	-100.0
Project	19	4	-15	-78.9
Functional Skills	10	1	-9	-90.0
Entry Level	8	0	-8	-100.0
Other General Qualification	14,862	17,388	2,526	17.0
Grand Total	**129,013**	**91,857**	**-37,156**	**-28.8**

Table 2: Change in Certifications by qualification level from Summer 2019 to Summer 2020

Certifications by qualification level	Summer 2019 (N)	Summer 2020 (N)	Change (N)	Change (%)
Level 1	24,783	11,322	-13,461	-54.3
Level 2	44,325	32,661	-11,664	-26.3
Level 3	30,825	20,863	-9,962	-32.3
Entry Level	9,511	7,310	-2,201	-23.1
Level 5	1,812	1,356	-456	-25.2
Level 4	1,550	1,243	-307	-19.8
Level 6	123	128	5	4.1
Level 7	56	65	9	16.1
Level 1/Level 2	16,028	16,909	881	5.5
Grand Total	**129,013**	**91,857**	**-37,156**	**-28.8**

Table 3: Change in Certifications by qualification SSA from Summer 2019 to Summer 2020

Certifications by qualification SSA	Summer 2019 (N)	Summer 2020 (N)	Change (N)	Change (%)
09 Arts, Media and Publishing	24,757	5,913	-18,844	-76
01 Health, Public Services and Care	14,804	7,820	-6,984	-47
07 Retail and Commercial Enterprise	8,413	3,471	-4,942	-59
04 Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	5,634	3,472	-2,162	-38
05 Construction, Planning and the Built Environment	3,558	2,067	-1,491	-42
08 Leisure, Travel and Tourism	7,316	6,073	-1,243	-16
03 Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care	2,189	1,342	-847	-38
13 Education and Training	1,544	798	-746	-48
06 Information and Communication Technology	12,212	11,482	-730	-6
15 Business, Administration, Finance and Law	6,933	6,295	-638	-9
12 Languages, Literature and Culture	1,093	556	-537	-49
11 Social Sciences	78	94	16	N/A
14 Preparation for Life and Work	36,670	36,699	29	-1
02 Science and Mathematics	1,903	2,604	701	-37
10 History, Philosophy and Theology	1,909	3,171	1,262	-70
Total	**129,013**	**91,857**	**-37,156**	

Exceptions to the overall decreases are seen in the certifications for the Other General Qualification type (increase of 2,526 certifications), qualification certifications at Level 1/Level 2 (increase of 881), Level 6 (5) and Level 7 (9) and certifications for the Sector Subjects Areas: '11 Social Sciences' (16); '14 Preparation for Life and Work' (29); '02 Science and Mathematics' (increase of 701); and '10 History, Philosophy and Theology' (increase of 1, 262).

The certification data shows that a major impact occurred in the awarding of Performing Arts Graded Examinations with certification levels dropping by 89.2%. In alignment with this development, the greatest decrease seen in SSA certifications was for '09 Arts, Media and Publishing'. Many other SSAs including '01 Health, Public Services and Care' and '07 Retail and Commercial Enterprise', were adversely impacted. Some 1,243 fewer certificates were issued for '08 Leisure, Travel and Tourism'.

Level 1 and Level 3 qualifications experienced the most notable decreases in certification volume. The percentage decrease in awards at these levels was lower than the overall decrease of 28.8%.

The changes in the number of certificates awarded by qualification type, level and SSA at the very start of the COVID-19 impacted period highlight the extraordinary nature of this initial period in the pandemic.

Over the course of the COVID-19 impacted period, as restrictions decreased and mitigation frameworks widened in scope, increased amounts of assessment and awarding activity were facilitated. Comparisons drawn from certification data from the 2019–20, 2020–21 and 2021–22 academic years provide a measure of this activity.

2019–20, 2020–21 and 2021–22 academic years

Table 4: Number of VTQ certifications by academic year and the year-on-year change (%)

Academic Year	2017–2018	2018–2019	2019–2020	2020–2021	2021–2022
Total	173,374	178,639	137,775	144,781	150,757
Year-on-Year change (%)	-	3.0	-22.9	5.1	4.1

After a 22.9% overall drop in the number of certificates in the 2019–20 academic year as shown in Table 6, the 5.1% and 4.1% increases in the 2020–21 and 2021–22 academic years (respectively) might be interpreted as a recovery. However, this recovery has not been the same across all qualification levels and sector subject areas.

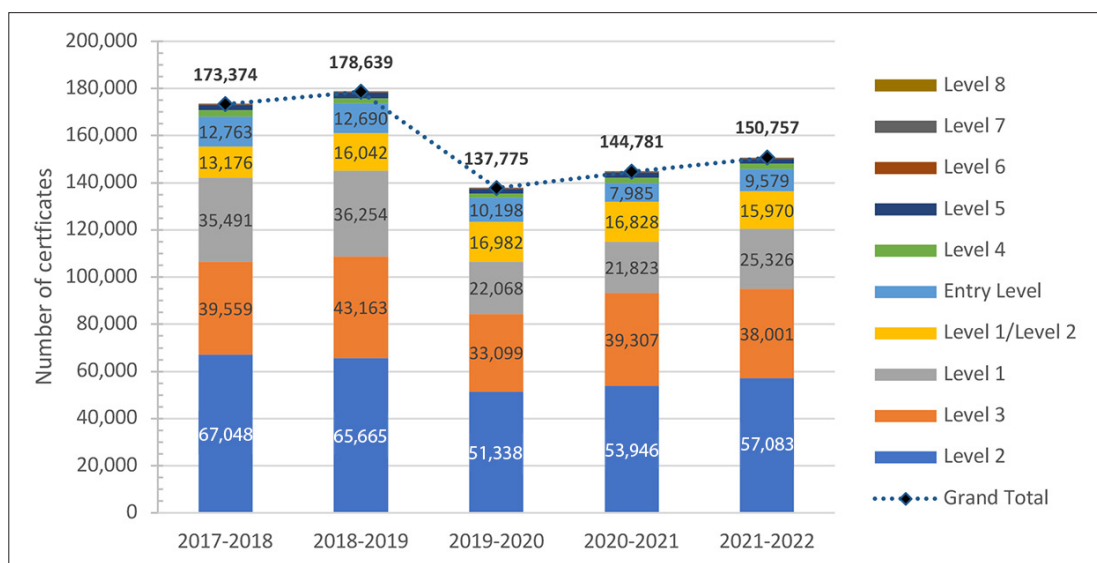### Number of certificates by qualifications level

Figure 3: NI Certifications by Qualification Level over time

The table below presents the breakdown number of certifications by qualification level within each year, as represented in the bar chart above (Figure 3).

Qualification Level	2017–2018	2018–2019	2019–2020	2020–2021	2021–2022
Level 8	0	0	0	1	0
Level 7	123	172	191	191	256
Level 6	212	213	243	261	352
Level 5	2308	2371	1909	2143	2037
Level 4	2694	2069	1747	2296	2153
Entry Level	12763	12690	10198	7985	9579
Level 1/Level 2	13176	16042	16982	16828	15970
Level 1	35491	36254	22068	21823	25326
Level 3	39559	43163	33099	39307	38001
Level 2	67048	65665	51338	53946	57083
Grand Total	173374	178639	137775	144781	150757

Entry Level to Level 8 qualifications are offered in Northern Ireland. In 2021–22, Entry Level, Level 1, Level 2, Level 6 and Level 7 qualifications showed an increase in the number of certificates issued compared to 2020–21. The largest increase in numbers was seen in Level 1 qualifications, with an increase of 3, 503 certifications when compared to 2020–21. The largest decreases in numbers were seen in Level 1/Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications, with decreases of 858 and 1,306 certifications respectively.

57,083 certificates issued in the 2021–22 academic year were Level 2 certifications. This was 37.9% of the total number of certificates awarded in this academic year and represents the level category with the greatest proportion of certifications. 25.2% of certificates were Level 3 certifications, 16.8% Level 1, 10.6% Level 1/2 and 6.4% Entry Level. This compares to 37.3%, 27.1%, 15.1%, 11.6% and 5.5% for Level 2, Level 3, Level 1, Level 1/2 and Entry Level certifications (respectively) in the 2020–21 academic year. The 2019–20 academic year presents the same qualification level ranking with 51,338 Level 2 certificates being issued (37.3% of certifications). Level 3 certifications show the greatest year on year decrease in the proportion of certificates issued (1.9%). This suggests that learners eligible for Level 3 pathways may be making different pathway choices.

Number of certificates by qualifications SSA

Qualifications offered in Northern Ireland span 15 SSAs.

Figure 4 below shows that Preparation for Life and Work is the sector subject area with the highest certifications across all academic years. In 2021/22 Health, Public Services and Care ranked second; Arts, Media and Publishing third; Information and Communication Technology fourth; and Retail and Commercial Enterprise fifth. The relative positions of the SSAs Health, Public Services and Care, and Arts Media and Publishing, have reversed over the COVID-19 impacted period. History, Philosophy and Theology certifications have increased.
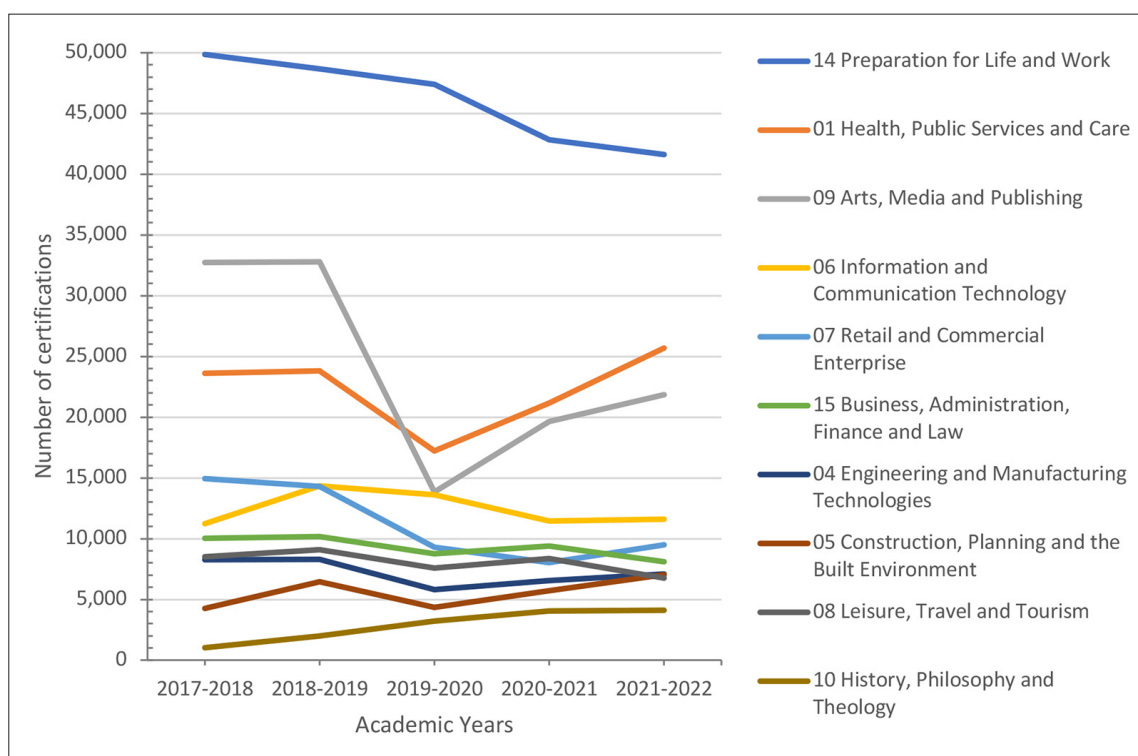
Figure 4: Number of NI VTQ certifications issued over time, by subject sector area (top ten).

The table below presents the breakdown number of qualifications by sector subject area (top ten) within each year, as represented in the line graph above (Figure 4).

Subject sector area	2017–2018	2018–2019	2019–2020	2020–2021	2021–2022
14 Preparation for Life and Work	49,859	48,672	47,380	42,853	41,620
01 Health, Public Services and Care	23,606	23,823	17,219	21,143	25,688
09 Arts, Media and Publishing	32,749	32,787	13,839	19,640	21,844
06 Information and Communication Technology	11,230	14,341	13,619	11,438	11,617
07 Retail and Commercial Enterprise	14,940	14,279	9,295	8,025	9,481
15 Business, Administration, Finance and Law	10,034	10,169	8,742	9,387	8,100
04 Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	8,252	8,291	5,801	6,569	7,110
05 Construction, Planning and the Built Environment	4,255	6,464	4,345	5,727	7,027
08 Leisure, Travel and Tourism	8,510	9,088	7,558	8,350	6,752
10 History, Philosophy and Theology	1,019	1,962	3,206	4,051	4,103

Five qualification SSAs showed a decrease in the number of certifications when compared to the previous year. Seven showed a decrease in the proportion of certifications when compared to the previous year. These SSAs include '06 Information and Communication Technology', '08 Leisure, Travel and Tourism', '14 Preparation for Life and Work' and '15 Business, Administration, Finance and Law'. The changes in sector subject area certifications suggest that the pathways learners are choosing, have altered over the course of the COVID-19 impacted period. This will result in a different profile of skill sets emerging. 'Preparation for Life and Work', 'Health, Public Services and Care' and 'Arts, Media and Publishing' certifications account for more than half of the certificates issued each year.
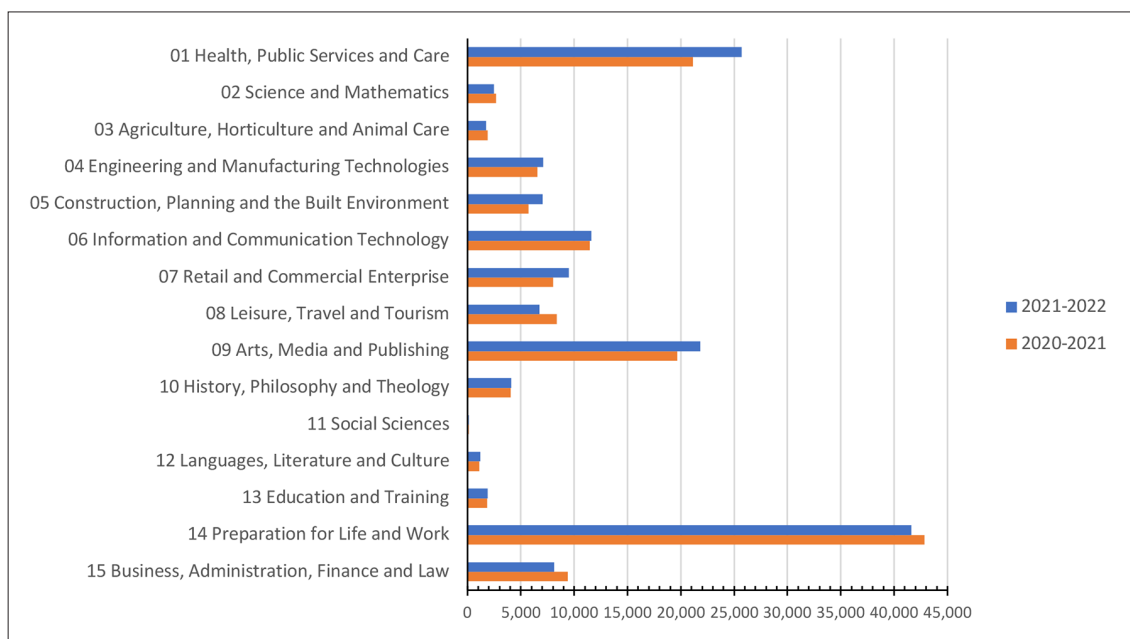
In Focus: SSAs

Figure 5: NI VTQ certifications by sector subject area (tier 1) and academic year

The table below presents the number of certifications for each sector subject area for 2020−2021 and 2021−2022, as represented in the bar chart above (Figure 5).

Sector Subject Area	2020–2021	2021–2022
01 Health, Public Services and Care	21,143	25,688
02 Science and Mathematics	2,688	2,456
03 Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care	1,882	1,735
04 Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	6,569	7,110
05 Construction, Planning and the Built Environment	5,727	7,027
06 Information and Communication Technology	11,438	11,617
07 Retail and Commercial Enterprise	8,025	9,481
08 Leisure, Travel and Tourism	8,350	6,752
09 Arts, Media and Publishing	19,640	21,844
10 History, Philosophy and Theology	4,051	4,103
11 Social Sciences	106	113
12 Languages, Literature and Culture	1,110	1,211
13 Education and Training	1,812	1,900
14 Preparation for Life and Work	42,853	41,620
15 Business, Administration, Finance and Law	9,387	8,100

Figure 5 shows that within tier 1 the most popular sector subject area in the 2021−22 academic year was '14 Preparation for Life and Work'. 41,620 certificates were issued in this sector subject area during this academic year. This was 27.6% of the total number of certifications in this year. '01 Health, Public Services and Care', '09 Arts, Media and Publishing' and '06 Information and Communication Technology' were also popular sector subject areas accounting for 17.0%, 14.5% and 7.7% of the total number of certificates issued in 2021−22 (respectively).

2021−22 saw decreases on 2020−21 in the number of certificates awarded for several sector subject areas which include 08 Leisure, Travel and Tourism; 15 Business, Administration, Finance and Law; 02 Science and Mathematics; 03 Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care and; 14 Preparation for Life and Work. The percentage change in certifications presented in Figure 6 for these SSAs alongside 10 History, Philosophy and Theology and 06 Information and Communication Technology were all less than the overall percentage change (increase) in certifications seen between 2021−22 and 2020−21. 01 Health, Public Services and Care and 05 Construction, Planning and the Built Environment saw increases of 21.5% and 22.7% in the number of certificates issued.
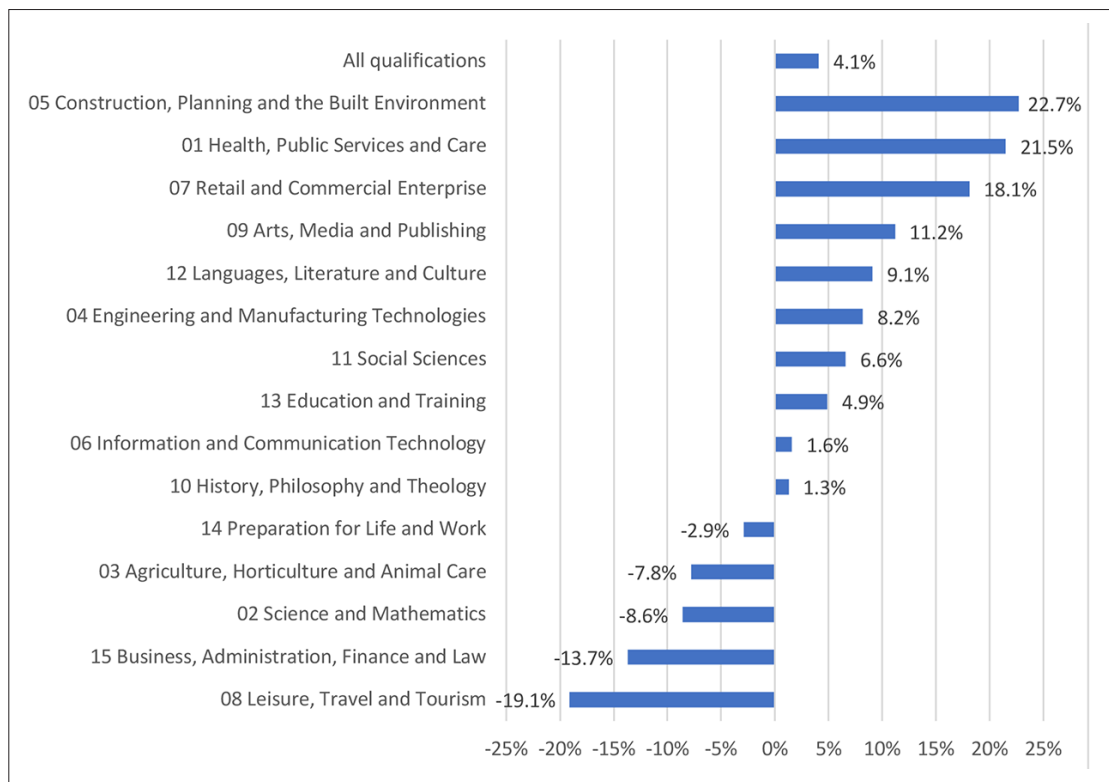

Figure 6: Percentage change in certification numbers 2020−21 to 2021−22 (%)

The table below presents the percentage change in certification numbers for each sector subject area for 2020–2021 and 2021–2022, as represented in the bar chart above (Figure 6).

Sector Subject Area	Change %
All qualifications	4.1
05 Construction, Planning and the Built Environment	22.7
01 Health, Public Services and Care	21.5
07 Retail and Commercial Enterprise	18.1
09 Arts, Media and Publishing	11.2
12 Languages, Literature and Culture	9.1
04 Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	8.2
11 Social Sciences	6.6
13 Education and Training	4.9
06 Information and Communication Technology	1.6
10 History, Philosophy and Theology	1.3
14 Preparation for Life and Work	-2.9
03 Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care	-7.8
02 Science and Mathematics	-8.6
15 Business, Administration, Finance and Law	-13.7
08 Leisure, Travel and Tourism	-19.1

Section 4: Stakeholder Engagement

From the online survey, some respondents indicated their willingness to participate in further discussion. Each of these respondents was invited to an online focus group meeting. Stakeholders included post-primary schools, further education colleges, the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) and awarding organisations.

Focus groups were conducted with each of the stakeholder groups – post-primary schools, further education colleges, CAFRE, and awarding organisations. A full list of those interviewed can be found in Appendix (iv).

4.1   Approach

In advance of the focus groups, stakeholders were furnished with a copy of the Discussion Paper [Appendix (ii)], to inform the stakeholder engagement. The discussion paper set out the headline certification data across the whole COVID-19 impacted period, and the main outcomes of each of the online surveys.

In the focus group interviews, the views of the participants were sought regarding assessment and awarding from summer 2020 through to summer 2022. The interviews discussed some themes covered in the survey, but the main emphasis was on how assessment and awarding met the needs of their sector over this extended period. Previous evaluations have recorded how stakeholders evaluated assessment and awarding for the individual periods summer 2020 and 2020–21 but this set of interviews constitute a longitudinal evaluation, so there is a strong emphasis on general satisfaction over the period and on the lessons learned. The participants were keen to reinforce the long-term implications of the lost learning and changed assessment and awarding arrangements from this period.

Themes such as communication, what worked well, how challenges were overcome and lessons learned afforded the opportunity for the groups to discuss the associated issues of the degree of success in adaptation to new processes, the long-term implications of the operations over the two-year period and any emerging concerns. Any other relevant points were recorded.

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

4.2   Findings from Stakeholder Focus Groups

As with previous evaluation discussions, there was a willingness on the part of all involved in the focus groups to share their views, and each different sector was able to identify positive experiences in the awarding and the support provided at this challenging period.

4.2.1   Post-Primary Schools

Three post-primary schools participated in the online focus group.

The schools stated that the timing of AO communications in the initial phase of the pandemic was challenging, with the numerous iterations causing difficulty to coordinate internally. Different approaches across AOs were also difficult to manage. In the second phase of the pandemic, 2020–21, AO communications were timelier, as procedures and arrangements became better established.

Senior managers in schools ensured that there were clear communications with staff and parents. However, concern was raised that media communications from AOs and government departments did not differentiate sufficiently the procedures for GQs and VTQs. There needed to be clarification that announcements regarding GQs did not relate to VTQs, as many audiences, especially parents, were unaware that there are separate departments dealing with GQs and VTQs in NI. A joint communication from DE and DfE clarifying policy approaches would have been welcomed.

Schools were generally satisfied with the assessment and awarding arrangements; the quality of the support from AOs improved over the COVID-19 impacted period in terms of the volume of information and clarity of messages, as did the procedures in schools. Staff quickly adapted to become skilled in IT and virtual learning platforms, and the importance of rigorous departmental standardisation was recognised.

Regarding the delivery of results, there was a certain degree of apprehension in schools in the first phase of the pandemic, but rigorous standardisation ensured that there were no significant issues. In the second year, as the guidance policies became more comprehensive, there was greater confidence in the process.

The security of an external examination system is no longer seen as a given and schools felt that the support provided in assessment and delivering results during the years 2020 to 2022 has enabled them to feel well equipped to deal with any future uncertainties.

4.2.2   Further Education Colleges

Three FE colleges participated in the online focus group.

Colleges deal with multiple AOs, mainly City and Guilds, OCNNI, Pearson and VTCT. Initially, many AO staff were put on furlough, which created difficulties for the colleges, but this improved with time. Some AOs did not have representatives in NI and this was problematic for the colleges, as it was challenging to sift through and align to the COVID-19 guidelines for NI, which differed with guidelines for the rest of the UK. Some participants from the FE colleges felt that communications from AOs tended to be reactive and lacking in detail at first, with some key messages delayed. However, it was acknowledged that some AOs were proactive and realistic in getting learners through assessments and awards in each academic year. A lot of additional effort and time had to be put into assessment arrangements and, while some were adapted, none were reduced.

The main challenges were with the practical aspects of courses, especially close contact ones such as hairdressing and hospitality and those with work-based learning. In the period March–June 2020 colleges stated that they did not receive any communications from AOs regarding close contact learners and FE took the initiative to continue with learning, moving learners from one year to a two-year programme, as they needed the practical experience that could not be simulated.

In 2021–22, colleges endeavoured to cover most of the practical aspects of the courses when there were relaxations in COVID-19 restrictions. Transporting learners off site for educational visits represented a challenge. During this period DfE had prohibited educational visits but for some courses they were necessary for assessment.

The colleges considered that lessons learned included the importance of banking learner evidence, tracking, and keeping up to date with assessment schedules. Long term implications are considered to be the loss of oracy and communication skills from close contact service courses.

4.2.3   College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE)

Two CAFRE representatives participated in the online focus group.

CAFRE is a member of Landex, a consortium of land-based colleges. CAFRE delivers both FE and HE provision. CAFRE identified City & Guilds as a lead partner. CAFRE also delivery qualifications offered by a range of other AOs, including Pearson.

Communications with the several AOs involved with CAFRE were generally timely and focused and the level of support very helpful, especially from the relevant technical advisers.

There was not much need to adapt procedures, apart from some examinations being conducted online, and the thorough COVID-19 precautions in the colleges meant that practical sessions could be managed in small groups. CAFRE adopted an innovative approach to delivering programmes. The delivery of work-based diplomas was moved online and practicals postponed until restrictions were eased, meaning that learners were able to continue with their studies and complete their courses.

Challenges for CAFRE included the differences in end-of-term times between NI and the rest of the UK and the timing and changes in COVID-19 policy across jurisdictions. CAFRE kept in touch with the Minister for Agriculture and also kept abreast of developments through DfE.

In relation to the TAG and CAG processes, CAFRE's internal examination boards, quality managers and programme managers ensured consistency in the delivery of results. There were no issues in this respect and certificates were issued on time.

Overall, CAFRE was very satisfied with arrangements. In the second year, all parties were better prepared to deal with restrictions and different ways of working.

4.2.4   Awarding Organisations

Three AOs participated in the online focus group.

At the onset of the pandemic, AOs acknowledged that the timing of communications was challenging, in particular when COVID-19 restriction announcements across jurisdictions were not aligned. Decisions were made for GQs before those of VTQs, and the AOs acknowledged the frustrations felt by centres. In 2020, additional challenges were presented by the closure of schools and colleges in NI, three weeks earlier than in England and Wales. By 2020–21, everything was more coherent, and contingencies were in place for TAGs. Overall, communications sessions with regulators and other AOs have been positive.

AOs recognise that centres can find that working with so many different AOs challenging. Confusion can be caused by different terminology; for example, 'Centre Assessed Grades' are known as 'Centre Determined Grades' in Northern Ireland. Improvements could be made by the alignment of language/terminology and arrangements with the regions in UK.

Adaptations were offered to centres in NI which, in many cases, would have greatly lessened the centres' workloads; however, these were only availed of when there was a complete barrier to awarding. Examples of suggested adaptations were the use of cross-referencing and reduced numbers of case studies, which the AOs speculated may not have been embraced because colleges and training organisations do their mapping and planning a year in advance.

Regarding work-based assessment, it was challenging for AOs to support centres with some qualifications, such as Health and Social Care, as professional regulatory bodies were unable to sign off on what was acceptable.

Remote assessment as an adaptation was offered to centres but not availed of to any great degree in NI, as learners did not have equitable access to the digital software. Many learners only had access to WIFI on personal phones.

The main issue in awarding results was in cases where centres were unclear about what evidence that had to be submitted. Once arrangements were clarified, awarding went smoothly, and for AOs using e-certification, meant that there were no delays in results.

As AOs and an assessment community, it was felt that everyone worked together, but for the future it was suggested that the sector needs a single set of standards with the minimum of divergence.

4.3 Summary of what worked well

1. The schools were generally satisfied with the assessment and awarding arrangements. The quality of the support from AOs improved over the two years in terms of the volume of information and the clarity of the message, as did the procedures in the schools.

2. Rigorous systems in centres for CAGs and TAGs ensured consistency in the delivery of results.

3. Adaptations that would lessen the workload for centres were readily available.

4. Staff in centres have been upskilled in IT.

5. Communications between regulators and AOs improved over time and were generally positive.

4.4   Summary of lessons learned

1. Importance of banking learner evidence, tracking and keeping up to date with assessment schedules.

2. If alternative arrangements are needed in the future and a centre presents queries to an AO and proposes a reasonable solution, then the AO should work collaboratively using that solution.

3. Prompt communication from the regulator to AOs and from AOs to centres is essential.

4. Robust internal standardisation in centres is essential.

5. Ensure trained personnel are on hand and accessible to deal with queries. Key contact staff should not be furloughed.

4.5   Main issues during 2020–2022

1. Different jurisdictions having different COVID-19 policies in place, meaning AOs having to realign specifically for NI, for example, term-time differences between NI and England.

2. Lack of common language/terminology for AOs.

3. Confusion for learners over GQ and VTQ arrangements.

4. Work-based assessments difficult to manage.

5. Equity of access to online facilities for learners.

4.6   Implications for the future

1. Serious concerns regarding the implications of the loss of learning over the period, as without the practical skills gained at KS3 and KS4, pupils' performance in their future VTQs will be affected.

2. Loss of oracy and communication skills from the close contact service courses.

3. Mental health issues with learners coming out of COVID-19 affecting patterns of attendance, retention and achievement.

4. OCNNI Essential Skills. Grade D GCSE is a feeder into L2 Application of Number Essential Skills, and providers are seeing a dip in L2 candidates' results.

5. A fall in retention rates in some programmes is due to the financial consequences of the lockdowns. For example, in L5 Hairdressing (Hair Salon Management), having to go without wages for so long meant that students needed to return to paid employment.

Section 5: Conclusions

5.1   The key objective of the alternative assessment and awarding arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic was to ensure that as many learners as possible achieved qualifications to support their progression to further education or employment. The number of (in-scope) certifications made in summer 2020, the first stage of the pandemic, totalled 86,701, representing 83% of the number of certifications made in the previous year. In 2020–21 the number of certifications made was 142,164, equating to 80% of pre-pandemic levels, and an increase of 4.2% on summer 2020 certification levels. The number of certifications made in 2021–22 has seen a healthy recovery, sitting at 88% of pre-pandemic levels; in comparison to 2019–20, the first impacted year of the pandemic, there is a 9.4% increase in 2021–22. Notwithstanding the demographic changes and patterns of VQ enrolments, these high percentage levels of certification during the whole COVID-19 impacted period is a clear measure of the success of the alternative assessment and awarding arrangements in place for VTQs in NI, to ensure that as many learners as possible achieved qualifications during this time.

5.2   Coming out of the initial stages of the pandemic in 2020, it was evident that there were issues around communications. Timing and clarity of communications posed challenges for stakeholders in the early stages of the pandemic and there was a perceived lack of cohesion across communication channels. Lessons learned coming out of summer 2020 saw the establishment of a range of communications forums across various stakeholder groups, both locally and at national level. For example, the NI Communications Working Group and Task and Finish Group were established by DfE at the start of the 2020–21 academic year, with CCEA Regulation taking a pivotal role in these forums to monitor the ongoing effects of the pandemic on providers. CCEA Regulation worked collaboratively with fellow regulators, Ofqual and QW throughout the whole COVID-19 impacted period, representing the interests of NI in strategic and operational groups at national level. By the end of 2020–21 it was acknowledged across stakeholder groups that communications had significantly improved and there was clear direction provided across the sector.

The 2021–22 stakeholder survey identified that general satisfaction levels with communications had increased from 74% and 56% in 2020 and 2020–21 respectively, to 81% in 2021–22.

5.3   Logistically, the alternative arrangements posed challenges in the early stages of the pandemic, for example, the transition from classroom-based learning to online learning; and the requirement for providers to upskill teachers and lecturers for online delivery. Another challenge was the development and administration of new processes around the submission of learner evidence to allow AOs to award qualifications. The unprecedented circumstances at the beginning of the pandemic meant that there was no prior model on which to reference good practice. Over time there has been sound organisational learning, with improvements around processes such as standardisation and evidence-banking to support the transition back to business-as-usual arrangements.

5.4   One aspect of feedback received in the 2020−21 evaluation concerned
the longitudinal monitoring of the impact of the alternative arrangements
on learners. Across the COVID-19 impacted period, CCEA Regulation has
conducted analyses in this respect of teacher and centre assessed grades and
furthermore on alternative ways to gather assessment evidence. The 2021−22
evaluation focused on the learner experience, to capture an understanding of
the impact on learners of moving towards normal assessment arrangements.
Results from the online survey identified that 80% of stakeholders stated that the
learner experience was positive. However, some concern remained about gaps
in learners' knowledge and the potential for a void in skills' acquisition across
some learner cohorts.

5.5   The successes achieved through the alternative arrangements for assessment
and awarding of VTQs throughout the COVID-19 impacted period would not
have been possible without the determined efforts across all stakeholder groups
in the education sector. Building on the outcomes and experiences of the
summer 2020 arrangements, it is recognised that strong working relationships
have been developed across the sector, with CCEA Regulation in regular contact
with AOs and providers through various channels. Greater understanding has
been developed of the role of CCEA Regulation in a three-country regulatory
context in VTQs and the strength this brings for portability of qualifications, but
also the restrictions it brings in that cognisance had to be given to the direction
in other jurisdictions, so that there was coherence and consistency in regulatory
approach. Strong working relationships have been built with DfE, fellow
regulators, awarding organisations, schools and colleges, training organisations
and wider stakeholder groups.

Section 6: Recommendations

6.1 While the number of certifications made over the whole impacted period was strong and continued to remain steady, with over 80% certification rate on those of pre-pandemic rates, consideration should be given to the continued analysis of non-certifications across levels, to monitor recovery as assessment and awarding return to business-as-usual activity.

6.2 The improvements actioned to strengthen communications strategies throughout the COVID-19 impacted period ensured clear direction and clarity of communications. This in turn enhanced sound working relationship. Cognisance should be paid to this going forward to enable all stakeholders to be responsive and proactive in any future exceptional crisis situations.

6.3 As circumstances developed throughout the period, it was clear that positive steps had been taken to implement lessons learned across all stakeholder groups. The development of new practices and processes has stabilised arrangements and enabled stakeholders to be more responsive to exceptional circumstances. In this respect, going forward, consideration should be given to how lessons learned can be developed into a tangible reference tool.

6.4 The longer-term impact of the pandemic on teaching and learning is acknowledged across the whole education sector. Residual work has been conducted, with some work in this area ongoing. Consideration should be given to ensuring that these research and analysis projects are adequately developed to support future policy considerations.

Appendix (i)

Stakeholder Survey

Evaluation Survey of Assessment and Awarding Arrangements for Vocational Qualifications in Northern Ireland for 2021–2022

The continuation of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic resulted in disruption to teaching and learning during the 2021–2022 academic year. While the lifting of PHA restrictions allowed internal and external assessment to move towards normal pre-pandemic approaches, these arrangements were augmented by appropriate adaptations such as reduced assessment and alternative work placement arrangements. Some innovative practices such as e-assessment remained in place also.

The Vocational Contingency Regulatory Framework (VCRF) ensured that Awarding Organisations could retain suitable adaptations and re-introduce normal internal and external assessment approaches.

In September 2021, the Minister for the Economy in Northern Ireland announced that vocational examinations and assessments would go ahead due to this being the fairest way of assessing and supporting learners' progress to the next stage of their education and/or employment journey.

This survey seeks to record the views of stakeholders and their experience during the 2021–2022 academic year.

It is important to reflect on this period and understand what lessons can be learned. Your comments and views expressed through this survey will be invaluable to inform the evaluation.

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

Guidance for online survey completion

You are not required to sign into google as offered at each question unless you choose to do so from a personal account to save progress.

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

Your Organisation

Which of these best describes your organisation?

☐ Post Primary School

☐ Further Education College

☐ Private Training Organisation

☐ Awarding Organisation

☐ Employer/Sector Body

Other (please specify type of organisation)

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Communications

During 2021–2022, the assessment of vocational qualifications moved towards normal practices with appropriate adaptations. Communication between the regulator, awarding organisations and providers was of critical importance to ensure the smooth implementation of assessment and awarding arrangements.

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

The communications relating to the 2021–2022 assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications were clear and easily understood

Consider the NI VQ policy approach, regulatory guidance for awarding organisations

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

Please use the space below if you would like to provide further comment to the question.

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The timing of communications relating to the 2021−2022 assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications was appropriate

Consider the NI VQ policy approach, regulatory guidance for awarding organisations

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

Please use the space below if you would like to provide further comment to the question.

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The communications relating to the 2021−2022 assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications were helpful

Consider NI VQ policy approach, regulatory guidance for awarding organisations

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

Please use the space below if you would like to provide further comment to the question.

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The learner experience

During 2021–2022, learners moved towards normal learning and assessment contexts, including classroom and employer-based assessment.

Please reflect on your experience of the impact on learners during this period and answer the questions that follow.

The move towards normal assessment arrangements and contexts in 2021–2022 had a positive effect on learners (this question is for providers and employers/ sector bodies only)

Consider NI VQ policy approach, regulatory guidance, awarding organisations' guidance

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

Please use the space below if you would like to provide further comment to the question.

[   ]

The move towards normal assessment arrangements in 2021–2022 facilitated the learner to access all assessment opportunities (this question for AOs only)

Consider NI VQ policy approach, regulatory guidance for awarding organisations

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

Please use the space below if you would like to provide further comment to the question.

[   ]

Suitability of adaptations to facilitate assessment and awarding for vocational qualifications

In order to ensure as many learners as possible gained their qualification, adaptations including reduced assessment, unit omissions, alternative work placement arrangements and online assessment were made available depending on the type of qualification.

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

The adaptations introduced for vocational qualifications were appropriate to facilitate assessment and awarding in 2021−2022

Consider how assessments were adapted in response to NI VQ policy approach, provider needs, your organisational context and regulatory frameworks

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Not Applicable

Please use the space below if you would like to provide further comment to the question.

[ ]

The adaptations in place during 2021−2022 were fair to learners in providing an accurate assessment of their performance

Consider how assessments were adapted in response to the NI VQ policy approach, provider needs, your organisational context and regulatory frameworks

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Not Applicable

Please use the space below if you would like to provide further comment to the question.

Results

Results for vocational qualifications during 2021–2022 were based on a relevant combination of Teacher Assessed Grades (TAGs), external and internal assessments, and other adaptations.

Please consider these arrangements and answer the following questions.

Results for vocational qualifications were received as expected
(this question is for Providers only)

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

Please use the space below if you would like to provide further comment to the question.

The results issued to learners were a valid representation of their performance
(this question is for AOs and Providers only)

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

Please use the space below if you would like to provide further comment to the question.

Arrangements for the issue of results were manageable, allowing adequate time to meet issue of results timelines (this question is for AOs only)

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

Please use the space below if you would like to provide further comment to the question.

The role of CCEA Regulation

CCEA Regulation had appropriate arrangements in place to facilitate assessment and awarding in 2021–2022 which protected the interests of NI learners

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

Please use the space below if you would like to provide further comment to the question.

CCEA Regulation ensured appropriate engagement and support to enable providers to conduct assessments (this question is for providers only)

Consider challenges such as invigilation and accommodation issues around examinations and assessments

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

Please use the space below if you would like to provide further comment to the question.

☐

CCEA Regulation provided clear direction around the implementation of assessment and awarding arrangements for 2021–2022 (this question is for AOs only)

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

Please use the space below if you would like to provide further comment to the question.

☐

General

Overall, how satisfied were you with assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications in 2021−2022?

You may wish to consider both the positive and the more challenging aspects of your experiences during 2021−2022.

☐ Very satisfied

☐ Satisfied

☐ Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied

☐ Dissatisfied

☐ Very dissatisfied

Please use the space below if you would like to provide further comment to the question.

Do you have any other feedback?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your views and comments are of critical importance to the evaluation process.

Appendix (ii)

Discussion Paper

Evaluation of Vocational Qualifications Assessment and Awarding Arrangements in Northern Ireland during the COVID-19 Response Period Longitudinal Evaluation 2020–2022

Discussion Paper for Stakeholder Engagement

Background and Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 led to the cancellation of examinations and assessments for vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) in summer 2020. Due to the continuation of COVID-19 and the ongoing public health restrictions the Minister for the Economy in Northern Ireland announced alternative assessment arrangements for VTQs for summer 2020; and subsequently the academic years 2020–2021 and 2021–2022. Regulatory frameworks for qualifications were put in place throughout this period in response to the often rapidly changing situation. The Department of the Economy's (DfE) policy position throughout stated that learners taking VTQs used for progression, should receive results where possible, to allow them to progress to further education, training or employment.

DfE commissioned CCEA Regulation to conduct an evaluation of the alternative assessment and awarding arrangements for VTQs in Northern Ireland following the close of summer 2020 examinations. Two further evaluations were conducted for the academic years 2020–2021 and 2021–2022. The evaluation in each year was conducted in two phases to ensure an appropriate balance of qualitative and quantitative data. Phase one included presentation of VTQ certification data and an online stakeholder survey. Phase two included stakeholder focus groups and interviews. The key focus of each evaluation was to capture stakeholder experiences, identify successes and challenges, and identify lessons learned that would inform subsequent arrangements throughout the COVID-19 period.

Phase 2 of the evaluation in 2021–2022 is longitudinal in focus, covering the whole COVID-19 period 2020–2022. It will examine and compare trends and patterns over time and retrospectively determine if lessons learned were appropriately and effectively applied.

This paper sets out headline certification data across the whole COVID-19 impacted period and identifies the main outcomes of each of the online surveys, and sets out actions implemented following feedback from stakeholders.
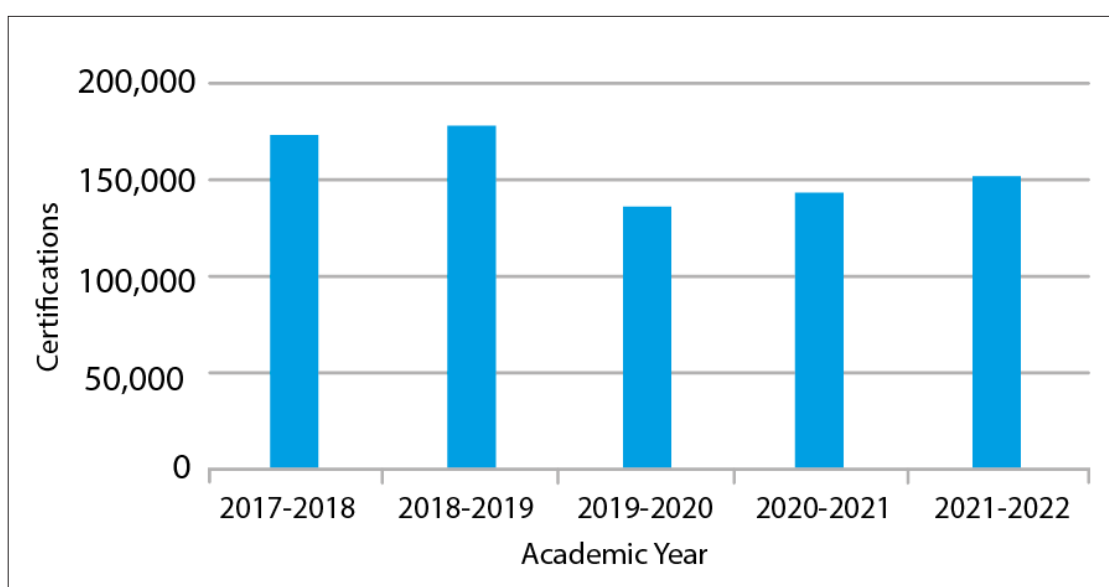
VTQ Certification Data

Awarding Statistics

The overall numbers of certifications in VTQs in Northern Ireland for the 2021–2022 academic year are shown in Figure 1below. The overall figure shows a 4% rise for 2021–2022 compared to the academic year 2020–2021. In comparison to 2019–2020 figures, in the first impacted year of the pandemic, there is a 9.4% increase in 2021–2022, which shows some recovery to pre-pandemic levels of awarding alongside demographic changes and patterns of VQ enrolments.

Figure 1: Overall Number of VTQ Certifications – 2021–2022

Academic Year	2017–2018	2018–2019	2019–2020	2020–2021	2021–2022
Total	173,374	178,639	137,775	144,781	150,757

Table 1: Overall Number of VTQ Certifications – 2021–2022

There has been a steady increase in numbers of VTQ certifications awarded each academic year following the initial impact of COVID-19, which now sits at 83% of the comparative certifications from pre-pandemic years.

Certifications Over Time by Qualification Level
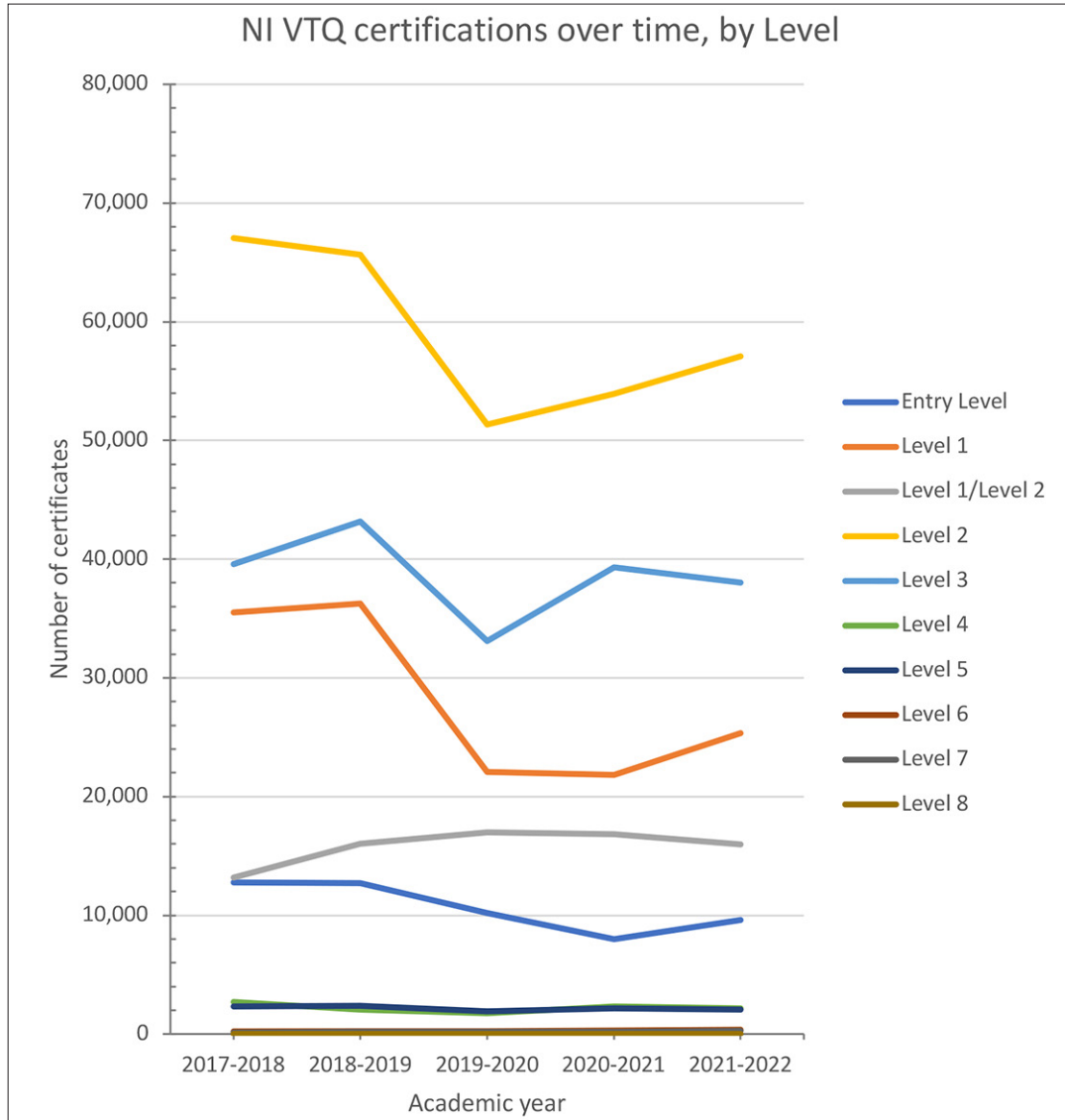
Figure 2: Number of NI VTQ certifications over time, by Qualification Level

Level	2017–2018	2018–2019	2019–2020	2020–2021	2021–2022
Entry Level	12,763	12,690	10,198	7,985	9,579
Level 1	35,491	36,254	22,068	21,823	25,326
Level 1/ Level 2	13,176	16,042	16,982	16,828	15,970
Level 2	67,048	65,665	51,338	53,946	57,083
Level 3	39,559	43,163	33,099	39,307	38,001
Level 4	2,694	2,069	1,747	2,296	2,153
Level 5	2,308	2,371	1,909	2,143	2,037
Level 6	212	213	243	261	352
Level 7	123	172	191	191	256
Level 8	0	0	0	1	0
Total	173,374	178,639	137,775	144,781	150,757

Table 2: Number of NI VTQ certifications over time, by Qualification Level

These figures show a part recovery or stability in the awarding at all levels, except for level 3.

Certification by Main Sector Subject Area (SSA)
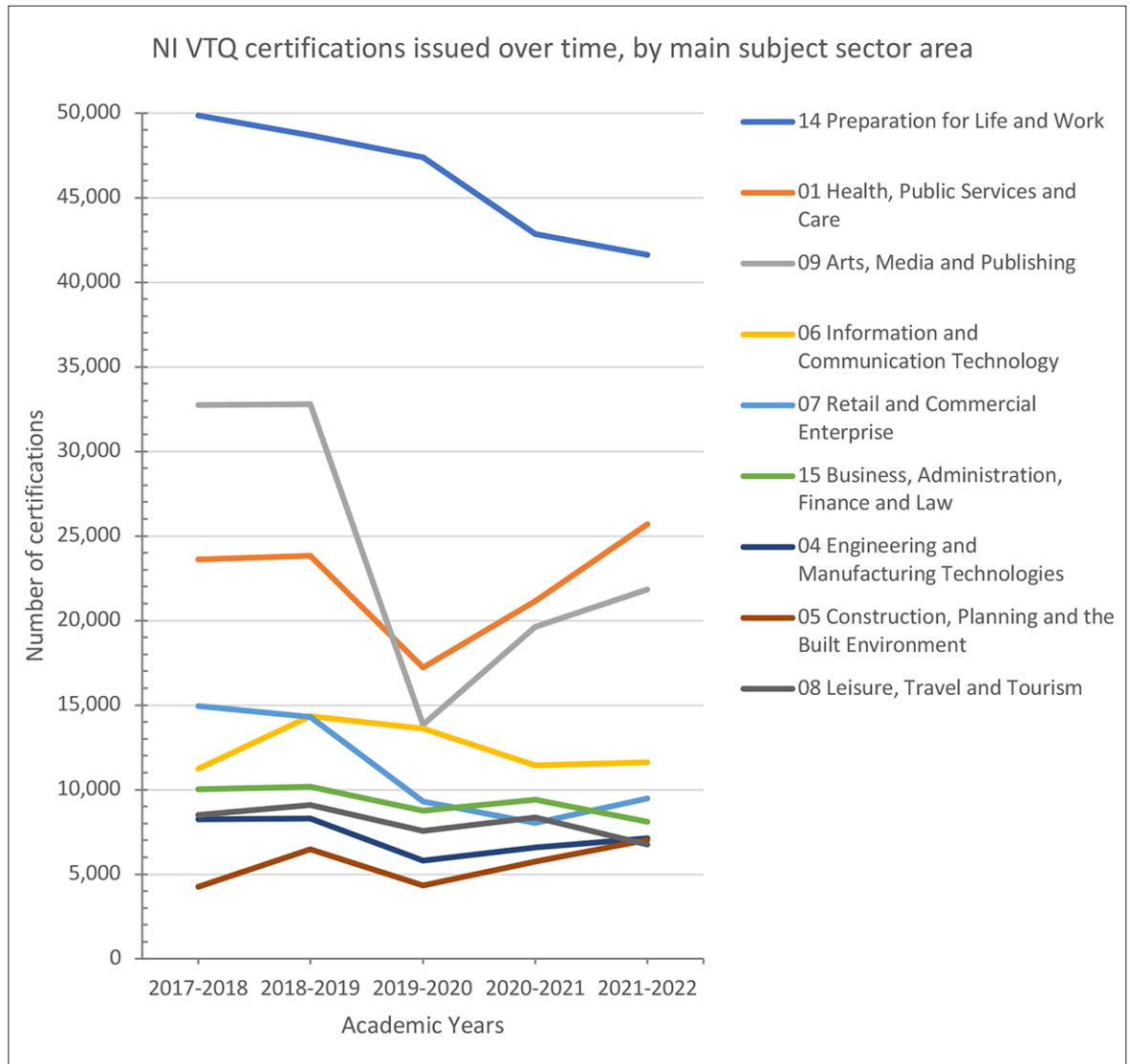
Figure 3: Number of NI VTQ certifications issued over time, by main SSA

Subject sector area (tier 1)	2017–2018	2018–2019	2019–2020	2020–2021	2021–2022
14 Preparation for Life and Work	49859	48672	47380	42853	41620
01 Health, Public Services and Care	23606	23823	17219	21143	25688
09 Arts, Media and Publishing	32749	32787	13839	19640	21844
06 Information and Communication Technology	11230	14341	13619	11438	11617
07 Retail and Commercial Enterprise	14940	14279	9295	8025	9481
15 Business, Administration, Finance and Law	10034	10169	8742	9387	8100
04 Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	8252	8291	5801	6569	7110
05 Construction, Planning and the Built Environment	4255	6464	4345	5727	7027
08 Leisure, Travel and Tourism	8510	9088	7558	8350	6752

Table 3: Number of NI VTQ Certifications issued over time, by main SSA (2021–2022 rank)

Notable impact on Health, Public Services & Care, and Arts, Media & Publishing have seen good recovery, with qualifications for Preparation for Life and Work remaining substantially impacted.

Surveys of stakeholder experiences and views through the COVID-19 Impacted Period (2020–2022)

Approach

An online survey of stakeholders involved in the assessment and awarding of VTQs in summer 2020, and the academic years 2021–2022 and 2021–2022 was carried out at the close of each of the three academic years. Each of the surveys focused on the experiences and challenges faced by stakeholders and identified lessons learned to inform future arrangements. There were common areas of focus in each survey, with questions targeted at specific stakeholder groups. This allowed information to be gathered on the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on teaching and learning; adaptations and alternative arrangements put in place to enable learners to obtain awards and progress to the next stage of their learning journey; and to assess the impact of actions implemented as a result of lessons learned.

In each year, the online survey was open to stakeholders for a 2-week period. Timing for the publication of the survey was October 2020, November 2021 and September 2022.

The stakeholder groups included: Post Primary Schools (PPS); Further Education Colleges (FE); Private Training Organisations (PTO); Awarding Organisations (AO); Employer/Sector Bodies and other stakeholders identified as 'Other.'

The group 'Other' included responses from charities, work-based learning, social enterprises, and community groups.

Themes

1.   Communication
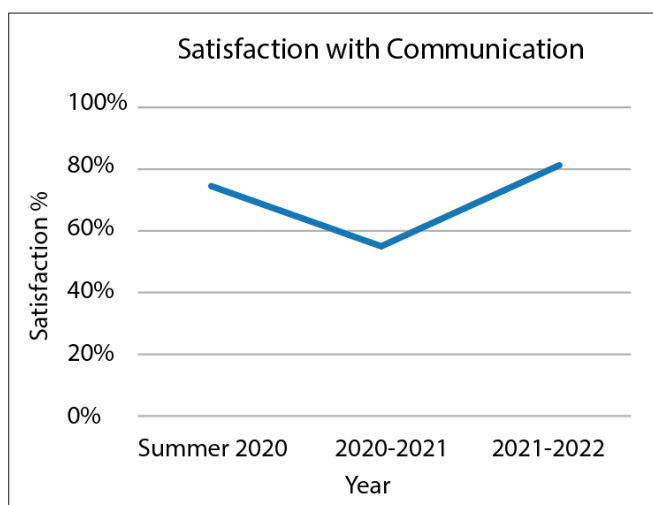
Communication was a principal area of focus in each evaluation period. Satisfaction levels varied across the three years. 74% of respondents in summer 2020 agreed that communications were understandable, however this decreased to 56% in 2020–2021. Feedback indicated that there were concerns around the timeliness, clarity, helpfulness, volume and complexity of communications issued. Concerns were also raised around the inconsistency of approach and in cases contradictory information provided by AOs. Feedback also indicated there were perceived differences between timelines of communications for VTQs and General Qualifications (GQs).

As a result of feedback received, a number of improvement actions were implemented during 2020, 2021 and 2022. These included the development of a communication strategy with providers and AOs. DfE introduced a NI communications group for stakeholders, and CCEA Regulation set up regular meetings with FE Quality Managers. This allowed ongoing monitoring to develop solutions with AOs, where centres faced challenges in managing alternative arrangements because of the ongoing pandemic. CCEA Regulation also led several communication forums to ensure that AOs' implementation of the regulatory frameworks met the needs of learners and that standards were maintained.

The 2021–2022 online survey identified a positive increase in satisfaction levels on the previous year. 81% of respondents agreed communications were clear and easily understood. Some concern remained around the timing and number of changes to communications following initial circulation.

2.   Approaches, development, and suitability of adaptations for alternative
        assessment and awarding arrangements
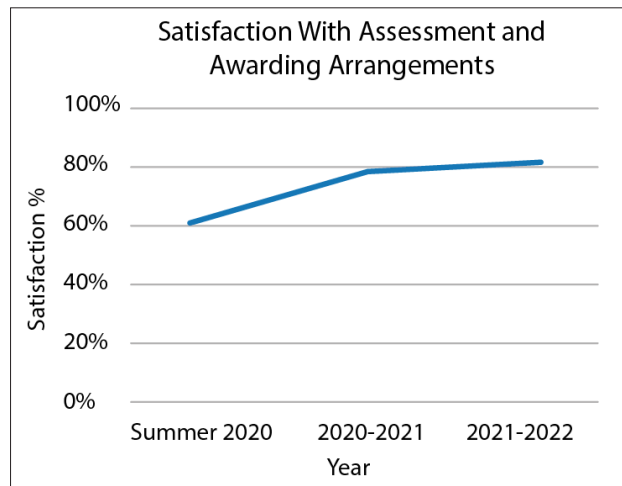
Survey questions posed to evaluate the success of specific adaptations varied in each of the three surveys to reflect the processes and approaches in operation within each year.

In 2020, 78% of respondents stated they were required to develop new processes or approaches for summer 2020 awarding. These processes included: online assessment; remote assessment; adapted assessment; delayed assessment; or Centre Assessed Grades (CAGs). 62% of respondents were satisfied with the development and delivery of assessment and awarding arrangements in summer 2020. Concerns raised were in relation to different approaches taken by different AOs and the importance of learners being able to display practical skills. Providers indicated they wanted clear guidance on AOs' requirements to allow gathering of evidence throughout the year and the need for transparency to allow the comparability of approach required between VTQs and GQs. Respondents also raised concerns about the timescale to implement new systems for centres to be able to manage the CAG process in a timely manner. Respondents indicated that a more formal steer/lead from regulators on AOs working together would have been helpful for similar qualifications.

In 2020/21, 78% of respondents stated that the TAG process was fair to learners in providing an accurate grade.

82% of respondents stated that the Centre Determined Grades (CDGs) process for Essential Skills provided learners with outcomes that were reflective of the standard at which they were working.

In relation to the TAG process there were concerns about the manageability, the timelines, the helpfulness, and the timeliness of guidance/instructions provided. There were also concerns about the timeliness of decision making and lack of resources in centres.

In relation to the CDG process concerns were raised that the process was only manageable with increased centre resources. Respondents also felt that there was a lack of contingency planning, timelines and clear communications.

In general, a perception was noted about late decision making on policy and the challenges caused by different term dates in NI if AOs had queries.

Action taken following feedback given in 2020 and 2020/21 resulted in CCEA Regulation working collaboratively with fellow regulators, Ofqual and Qualification Wales (QW), AOs and sector bodies on additional arrangements to address challenges arising from regional variations in lockdowns and level of disruptions. This allowed solutions to be found without compromising the integrity of the assessments. CCEA Regulation was represented at the cross-country VTQ technical working group. This group's remit was to ensure consistency of approach and to monitor developments. CCEA Regulation also met with the NI AOs group to develop solutions for NI-only qualifications, and the Essential Skills Working Group was established to ensure comparability across skills qualifications.

In 2021/22, 82% of respondents agreed that the adaptations introduced for VTQs were appropriate to facilitate awarding in 2021−2022. 71% of respondents felt that adaptations were fair to learners in providing an accurate assessment of their performance. Some respondents stated that for some qualifications, delayed assessment was appropriate.

3.   Results
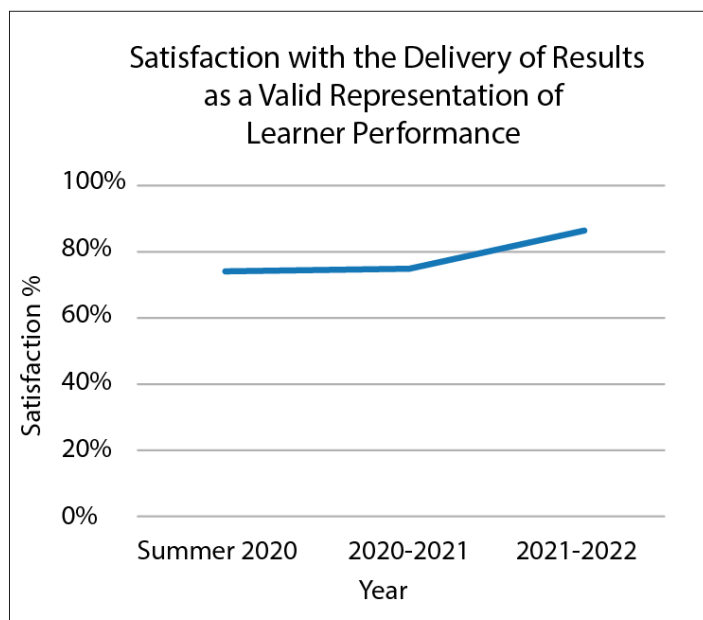
Delivery of results was a key focus in the evaluation of VTQ assessment and awarding in 2020. 74% of respondents stated that they felt results had been delivered as expected in the context of alternative arrangements in place.

In 2020/21 and 2021/22 the evaluation focused on whether results issued to learners were a valid representation of their performance. 75% of respondents agreed that results issued to learners were a valid representation of their performance.

Feedback received indicated that providers welcomed the decision to implement CDG for Essential Skills in 2020/21. Some results and certificates were slow to issue which providers indicated impacted on student progression. AOs thought the arrangements for CDG quality assurance, awarding and results turnaround were too tight and this put pressure on centres and internal teams. Concerns were raised around the volume of results related communications, which made it difficult to keep up with the different processes from different AOs. In 2020/21 feedback indicated that information in relation to results was only received in June 2021 and continued to be received until just before issue of results putting pressure on Examinations staff.

Following feedback in 2020 and 2020/21 a number of improvement actions were implemented. This included the setting up of stakeholder groups including the NI Awarding Organisation Group, Sector Groups, and the Essential Skills Working Group. These groups enabled solutions to be found without compromising the integrity of the qualification.

CCEA Regulation monitored AO activity around the timing and quality of communications. AOs published guidance on their websites rather than issuing high volumes of communications to centres. This served as a central hub for centres and removed the burden on centres receiving high volumes of communications directly.

In 2021/2022, 87% of respondents agreed that results for VTQs were a valid representation of learners' performance.

4.   General Satisfaction
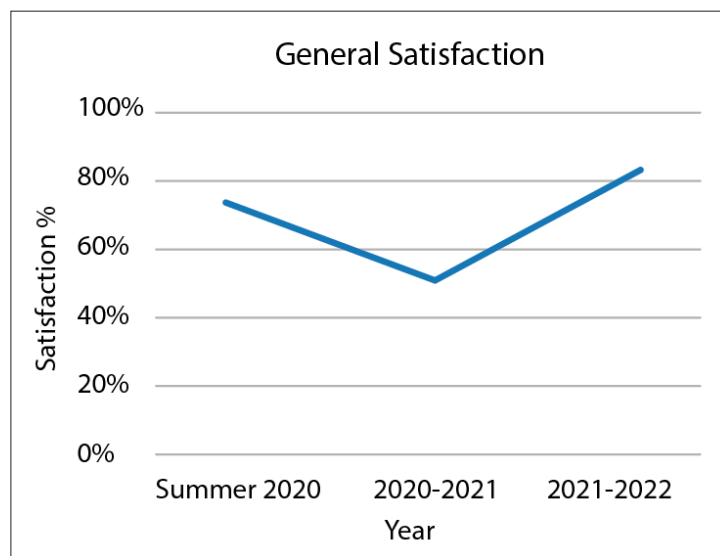
74% of respondents in summer 2020 were satisfied with assessment and awarding arrangements. This decreased in 2020/21 to 51%. In 2021/2022, general satisfaction levels increased to a healthy 84%.

Action taken as a result of 2020 and 2020–2021 feedback included CCEA Regulation working with Ofqual and QW to align announcements on VTQs and GQs on 3 country qualifications. CCEA Regulation also represented the interests of NI in strategic and operational groups at national level. This enabled CCEA Regulation to provide the NI perspective at the three-country Standards and Technical Board, the VTQ Oversight Board, the Policy Implementation Advisory Group and the Cross Sector Communications Group which included AO and provider representatives.

Some issues identified related to timescales and delays in issue of results for some centres. Respondents indicated the consistency of communications was poor and technology platforms used by some AOs could not cope with the demand. Respondents stated a more uniform approach by AOs would have been preferred along with more uniform communications.

There was some recognition that lessons learned from summer 2020 had been implemented and communications had improved.

In 2021/22, 84% of respondents stated they were satisfied with the assessment and awarding arrangements.

Additional Points:

Questions on the role of CCEA Regulation were included in the online survey for the first time in 2021/2022, in response to feedback received from stakeholders in 2020/2021.

82% of respondents agreed that CCEA Regulation had appropriate arrangements in place to facilitate assessment and awarding in 2021/2022 which protected the interests of NI learners. 86% of respondents also agreed that CCEA Regulation provided clear direction around the implementation of assessment and awarding in 2021/2022.

Appendix (iii)

Survey Analysis

Stakeholder Survey on Assessment and Awarding Arrangements for Vocational Qualifications in 2021–2022: Survey Analysis

1. Approach

The online survey comprised six principal areas of focus. It was launched in the context of the assessment of vocational qualifications moving towards more normal arrangements from those of the alternative arrangements in place for 2020–2021.

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

The survey was open from 20 September to 3 October 2022.

The survey comprised 14 questions. The questions focused on six principal areas of assessment and awarding for vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) in the 2021–2022 academic year.

The principal areas of focus included were:

- Communications, 3 questions;

- The learner experience, 2 questions;

- Suitability of adaptations, 2 questions;

- Results, 3 questions;

- The role of CCEA Regulation, 3 questions;

- General overall satisfaction, 1 question.

Provision was made within each of the 14 questions for respondents to provide further feedback. The number of questions completed by each stakeholder group depended on the relevance of the question for that group. Respondents were required to choose a rating for each question based on a five-point Likert scale. In total 73 questionnaire responses were received. This provided limited scope for analysis, particularly of the qualitative feedback received. Further exploration of qualitative feedback will be facilitated through stakeholder focus groups.

2.   Findings

This section details the feedback obtained from individual and group respondents to the *Evaluation Survey of Assessment and Awarding Arrangements for Vocational Qualifications in Northern Ireland for 2021−2022.* The stakeholder groups included: Post Primary Schools (PPS), Colleges of Further Education (FE), Private Training Organisations (PTO), Awarding Organisations (AOs), Employer/Sector Bodies and responses from a group categorised as 'Other'.

To note:

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

- *Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number for reporting purposes.*

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

2.1   Demographics
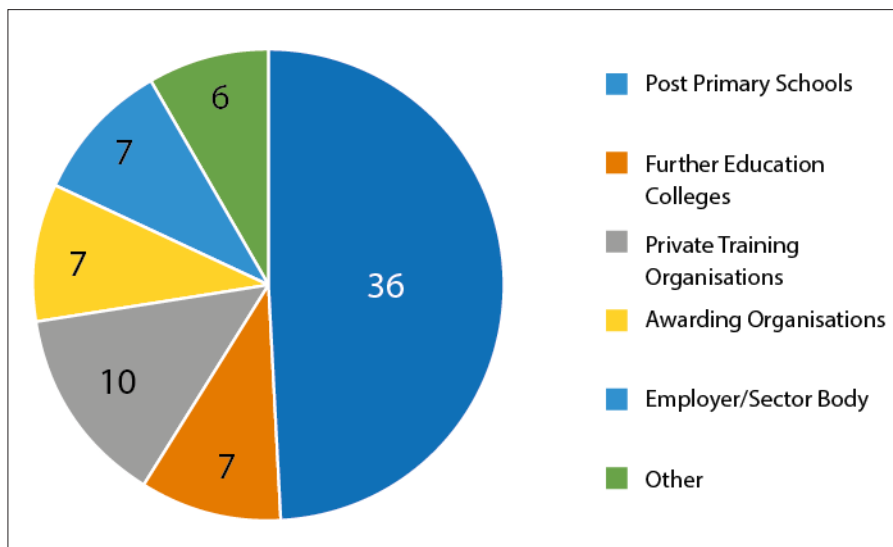
Figure 1: Breakdown of stakeholders that responded to the online survey

Most responses to the survey were provided by PPS (n=36, 49%). The remainder was made up of responses from PTOs (n=10, 14%), FE (n=7, 10%), AOs (n=7, 10%), Employer/Sector Bodies (n=7,10%) and 'Other' (n=6, 8%).

The group 'Other' included responses from 2 charities, 1 work based learning, 1 special school, 1 third sector and 1 project group.

2.2   Communications

Table 1: The communications relating to the 2021–2022 assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications were clear and easily understood

	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	15	20.55
Agree	44	60.27
Neither Agree nor Disagree	12	16.44
Disagree	1	1.37
Strongly Disagree	1	1.37
Total	73	100

This question was relevant to all groups. Respondents were asked to consider the NI Vocational Qualifications (NIVQ) policy approach, regulatory guidance for awarding organisations and regulatory communications and awarding organisation guidance issued. All respondents answered this question.

81% of respondents (n=59) agreed that communications relating to the 2021–22 assessment and awarding arrangements for VQs were clear and easily understood. 3% of respondents (n=2) from the FE and PTO disagreed with this statement.

Figure 2: Breakdown of comments received on the clarity and ease of understanding of communications
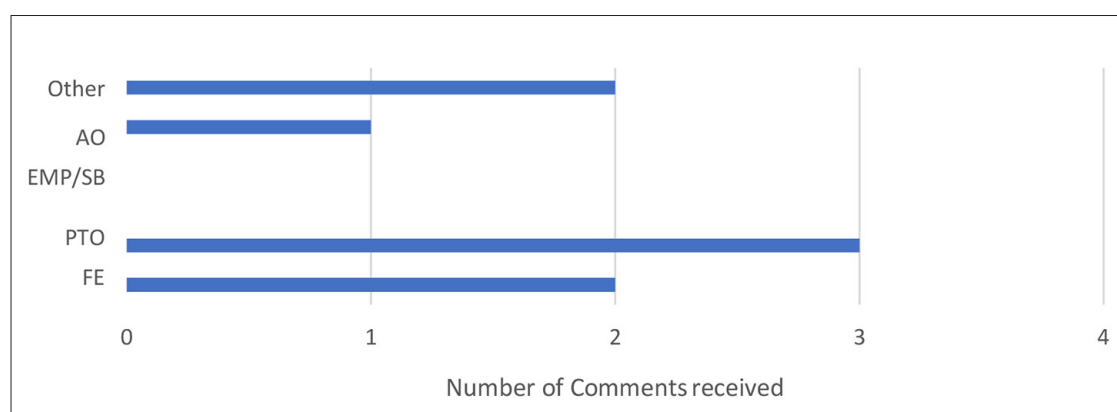
Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment. Eight respondents (11%) provided feedback. Comments were from PPS, FE, AOs, and 'Other'.

Comments indicated that respondents were largely positive about awarding organisations' communications being clear and easily understood with a few exceptions. One respondent indicated that some awarding organisations made significant effort to communicate expectations and clarify queries around incomplete learner information, while others did not. This led to some delays to results on issue of results day.

Concerns were raised about the number of changes made following the issue of a communication and that these changes were conflicting on occasions. Concern was also raised about decisions not being confirmed until after the start of the academic year.
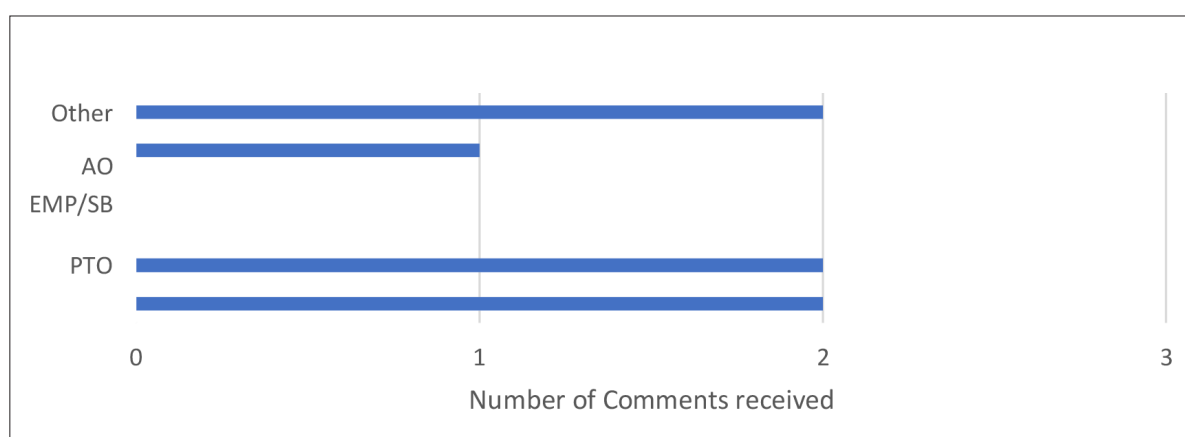
Table 2: The timing of communications relating to the 2021−2022 assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications was appropriate

	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	10	13.70
Agree	48	65.75
Neither Agree nor Disagree	12	16.44
Disagree	1	1.37
Strongly Disagree	2	2.74
Total	73	100

This question was relevant to all groups. Respondents were asked to consider the NIVQ policy approach, regulatory guidance for awarding organisations, regulatory communications, and awarding organisation guidance issued. All respondents answered this question.

80% of respondents (n=58) agreed that the timing of communications relating to 2021−2022 assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications was appropriate. 4% of respondents (n=3) from FE and PTO disagreed with this statement.

Figure 3: Breakdown of comments received concerning the appropriateness of the timing of communications

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment. Seven respondents (10%) provided feedback. Comments were from PPS, FE, AO and 'Other' category.

Comments received indicated a mixed response to the timing of communications. Respondents stated that some AOs communicated clear timelines for each level being delivered while others made changes up to and after results day impacting on work already completed by the centre.

Table 3: The communications relating to the 2021−2022 assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications were helpful

	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	11	15.07
Agree	45	61.64
Neither Agree nor Disagree	15	20.55
Disagree	1	1.37
Strongly Disagree	1	1.37
Total	73	100

This question was relevant to all groups. Respondents were asked to consider the NIVQ policy approach, regulatory guidance for awarding organisations, regulatory communications, and awarding organisation guidance issued. All respondents answered this question.

77% of respondents (n=56) agreed that the communications relating to the 2021−2022 assessment and awarding arrangements for VTQs were helpful. Two respondents from FE and PTO disagreed with this statement.

Figure 4: Breakdown of comments received from respondents concerning the helpfulness of the communications
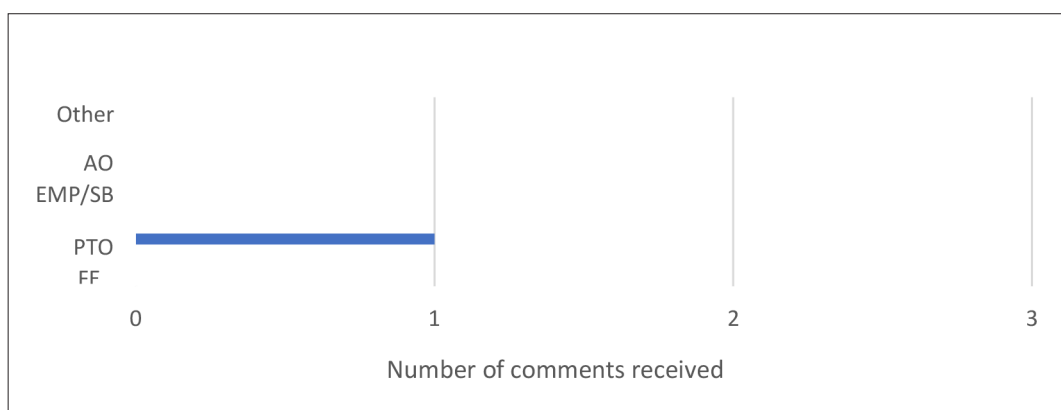
Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment. One respondent (1%) provided feedback. The comment was received from FE.

The respondent indicated dissatisfaction with the guidance issued by AOs due to the number of changes made after issue.

2.3   The Learner Experience

Table 4: The move towards normal assessment arrangements and contexts in 2021–2022 had a positive effect on learners

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	22	33.33
Agree	29	43.94
Neither Agree nor Disagree	9	13.64
Disagree	6	9.09
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00
Total	66	100

This question was for PPS, FE, PTO, Employer/Sector Body and 'Other' category. Respondents were asked to consider NI VQ policy as well as regulatory guidance and awarding organisation guidance. All respondents in relevant categories answered this question. 77% of respondents (n=51) agreed that the move to normal assessment arrangements and contexts in 2021–2022 had a positive effect on learners. Six respondents (9%) from the PPS, FE, PTO and 'Other' category disagreed with this statement.

Figure 5: Breakdown of comments received on the positive effect on learners of normal assessment arrangements
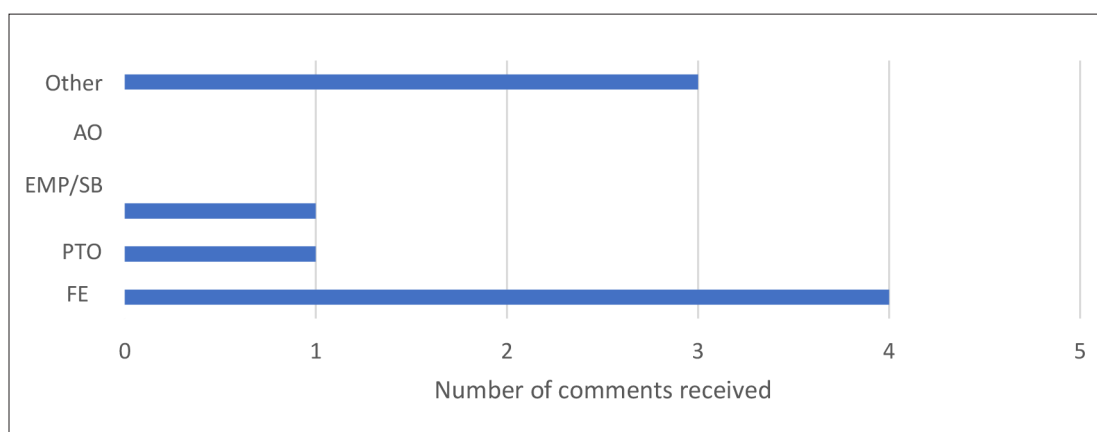
Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment. Nine respondents (12%) provided feedback. Comments were received from PPS, FE, PTO, and 'Other'.

Comments received indicated respondents thought there were still gaps in learners' knowledge due to the interruptions caused by COVID 19 pandemic. This made it difficult for learners as they were required to complete more examinations in a shorter space of time than usual. One respondent indicated that the balanced approach to allow a reduction in overall assessment while continuing to develop necessary skills was helpful for pupils completing the final year of a course. Another respondent stated they had some concerns there would be a void in skills acquisition of learners depending on their individual experience during the covid impacted

years. This may impact on a learner's capacity to work at the same level as some of their peers during a move back to normal assessment. Concern was also raised that while students experienced disruption to their vocational training, they were expected to complete assessments as if they did not experience any disruption.

One respondent from the 'other' category agreed moving towards normal assessment arrangements was a positive step, stating that students were becoming disillusioned with online courses and assessments and there was a greater willingness to return to face-to-face courses. Another respondent from the 'other' category stated that face-to-face classes were imperative for learners who do not have English as a first language and also those learners who struggle with home study requirements due to lack of facilities such as devices, internet, personal space and materials.

Table 5: The move towards normal assessment arrangements in 2021–2022 facilitated the learner to access all assessment opportunities

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	1	14.29
Agree	4	57.14
Neither Agree nor Disagree	2	28.57
Disagree	0	0.00
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00
Total	7	100

This question was for Awarding Organisations only. Respondents were asked to consider NI VQ policy as well as regulatory guidance for AOs. All AO respondents answered this question. 71% of respondents (n=5) agreed that the move to normal assessment arrangements in 2021–22 facilitated the learner to access all assessment opportunities. 2 respondents (29%) neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement.

Figure 6: Breakdown of comments received from respondents on whether normal assessment arrangements facilitated the learner to access all assessment opportunities
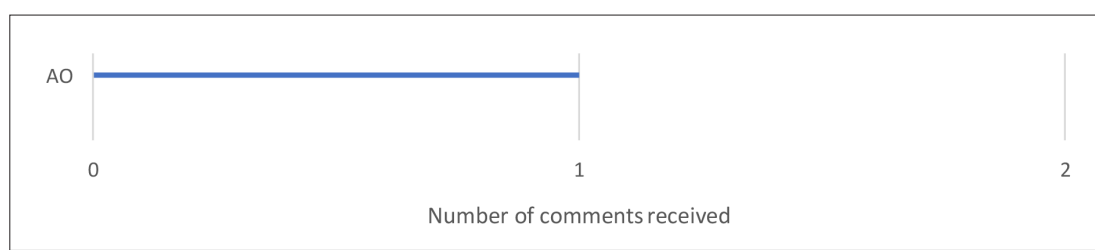
Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment.
1 respondent (1%) provided feedback.

The comment received indicated the awarding arrangements in place did not limit assessment opportunities and all criteria were expected to be met, maintaining

the rigour of competency-based qualifications. Returning to direct observation, however, was welcome.

2.4 Suitability of Adaptations

Table 6: The adaptations introduced for vocational qualifications were appropriate to facilitate assessment and awarding in 2021–2022

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	13	17.81
Agree	47	64.38
Neither Agree nor Disagree	5	6.85
Disagree	5	6.85
Strongly Disagree	1	1.37
Not Applicable	2	2.74
Total	73	100

This question was relevant to all groups. Respondents were asked to consider as appropriate: NIVQ policy approach; provider needs along with organisational context and regulatory frameworks; the suitability of adaptations in facilitating learner progression and how these affected reliability and validity. All respondents answered this question. 82% of respondents (n=60) agreed that the adaptations introduced for vocational qualifications were appropriate to facilitate assessment and awarding in 2021–22. Six respondents (8%) from FE and Employer/Sector Body disagreed with this statement.

Figure 7: Breakdown of comments received in relation to the appropriateness of adaptations introduced to facilitate assessment and awarding in 2021–22.
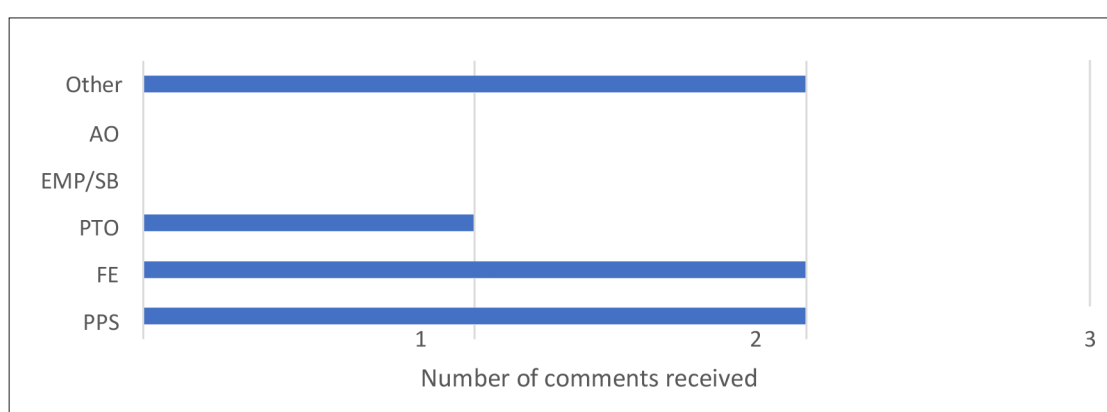
Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment. 7 respondents (10%) provided feedback. Comments were received from PPS, FE, PTO and 'Other'.
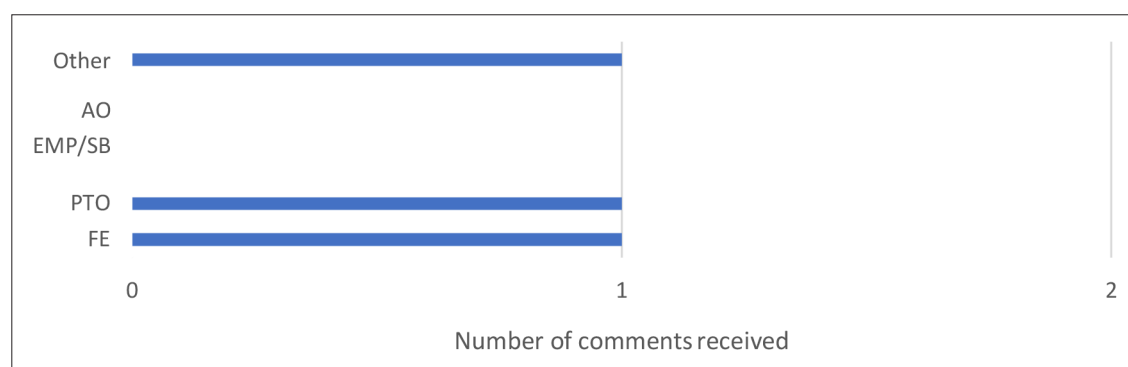
Comments received from respondents were mixed. PPS indicated that overall, the adaptations ensured pupils were able to achieve the qualifications even with the reduction of teaching/learning time and increased disruption with ongoing infection rates. As pupils still needed to complete an external examination alongside coursework in many cases, it was felt that the demands of the course were still comparable to other years. Concern was raised that placements could not take place for some subjects. One FE respondent, though, advised their centre's programmes proceeded normally without adaptations. One PTO advised that triangulation of evidence did not always work.

Table 7: The adaptations in place during 2021−2022 were fair to learners in providing an accurate assessment of their performance

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	15	20.55
Agree	44	60.27
Neither Agree nor Disagree	8	10.96
Disagree	2	2.74
Strongly Disagree	1	1.37
Not applicable	3	4.11
Total	73	100

This question was relevant to all groups. Respondents were asked to consider as appropriate: NIVQ policy approach; provider needs along with organisational context and regulatory frameworks; the suitability of adaptations in facilitating learner progression and how these affected reliability and validity. 70 respondents (96%) answered this question. 81% of respondents (n=59) agreed that the adaptations introduced for vocational qualifications were fair to learners in providing an accurate assessment of their performance. 3 respondents (4%) from PPS and FE disagreed with this statement. 3 respondents, from FE and Employer/Sector Bodies (4%) felt this question was not applicable to them.

Figure 8: Breakdown of comments received from respondents on whether adaptations were fair to learners in providing an accurate assessment of their performance.

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment. 3 respondents (4%) provided feedback. Comments were received from PPS, FE and 'Other'.

Comments received indicated that some providers found it easier to delay assessments as the adaptations were inconvenient and difficult to achieve. One respondent stated it was particularly helpful that one awarding body reviewed its grading to consider the implication of its policies when comparing those completing all units and those completing just mandatory units. This ensured pupils were awarded a fair grade despite the difficulties they faced in the 2021−22 year. One respondent from 'other' commented that working from home had impacted on learning progress, but learners, having returned to class, were making positive progress.
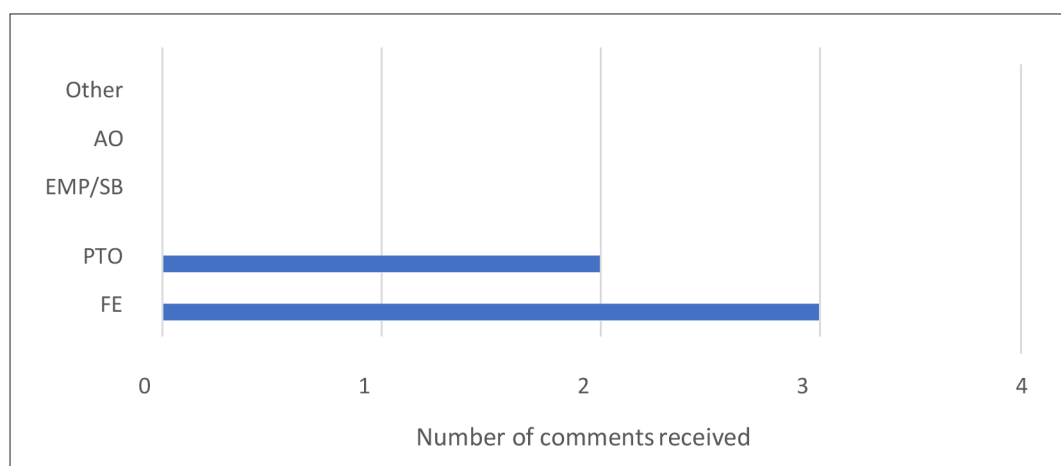
2.5   Results

Table 8: Results for vocational qualifications were received as expected

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	16	30.19
Agree	30	56.60
Neither Agree nor Disagree	3	5.66
Disagree	2	3.77
Strongly Disagree	2	3.77
Total	53	100

This question was for PPS, FE and PTOs only. Respondents were asked to consider results for VQs during 2021−22 based on a relevant combination of Teacher Assessed Grades (TAGs), external and internal assessments and other adaptations. All respondents in the relevant categories answered this question. 87% of respondents (n=46) agreed the results for vocational qualifications were received as expected. 4 respondents (8%) in PPS, FE and PTO disagreed with this statement.

Figure 9: Breakdown of comments received from respondents on whether results for vocational qualifications were received as expected
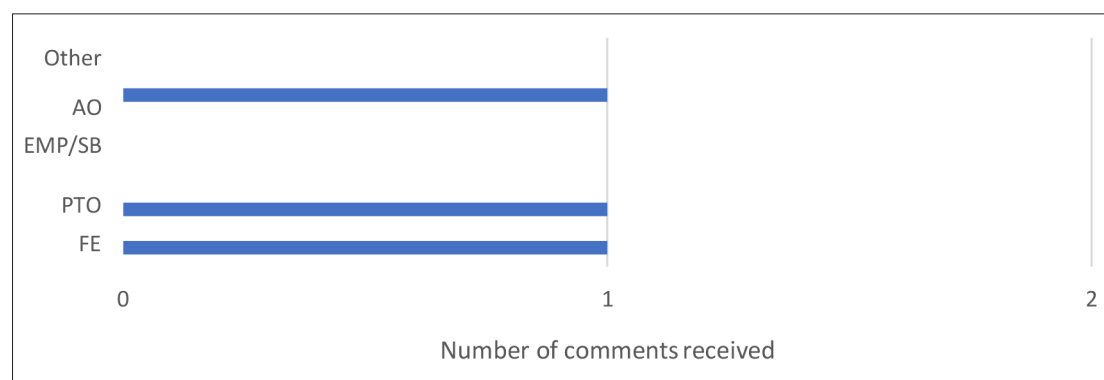
Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment.
5 respondents (7%) provided feedback. Comments were received from PPS and FE.
Comments received from PPS indicated 1 AO had technical issues with their system
and results were issued late and inaccurate in places. One respondent from FE
advised that they delayed applying for results until all assessments were completed.
Another FE respondent stated no adaptations were used therefore results were
based on actual assessment and exams as applicable.

Table 9: The results issued to learners were a valid representation of their
performance

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	22	36.67
Agree	33	55.00
Neither Agree nor Disagree	3	5.00
Disagree	1	1.67
Strongly Disagree	1	1.67
Total	60	100

This question was for PPS, FE, PTOs and AOs only. Respondents were asked to
consider results for VQs during 2021–22 based on a relevant combination of TAGs,
external and internal assessments and other adaptations. All respondents in the
relevant categories answered this question. 92% of respondents (n=55) agreed the
results issued to learners were a valid representation of their performance.
2 respondents (3%) from PPS and PTO disagreed with this statement.

Figure 10: Breakdown of comments received from respondents on whether results
issued to learners were a valid representation of their performance

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment.
3 respondents (4%) provided feedback. Comments were received from PPS, FE and
AO.

Comments received indicated that one respondent from PPS thought results
seemed to be lower than expected. Another respondent from FE stated they could
not use the proposed adaptations as they were unachievable.

Table 10: Arrangements for the issue of results were manageable, allowing adequate time to meet issue of results timelines

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	0	0.00
Agree	4	57.14
Neither Agree nor Disagree	3	42.86
Disagree	0	0.00
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00
Total	7	100

This question was for AOs only. Respondents were asked to consider results for VQs during 2021–22 based on a relevant combination of TAGs, external and internal assessments and other adaptations. All respondents within this category answered the question. 57% (n=4) respondents agreed that the issue of results was manageable allowing adequate time to meet the issue of results timelines.
3 respondents (43%) neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement.

No additional comments were received.

2.6   General

Table 11: CCEA Regulation had appropriate arrangements in place to facilitate assessment and awarding in 2021–2022 which protected the interests of NI learners

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	13	17.81
Agree	47	64.38
Neither Agree nor Disagree	12	16.44
Disagree	1	1.37
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00
Total	73	100

This question was relevant to all groups. 73 respondents answered this question. 82% of respondents (n=60) agreed that CCEA Regulation had appropriate arrangements in place to facilitate assessment and awarding in 2021–22 which protected the interests of NI learners. 1 respondent (1%) from FE disagreed with this statement.

Figure 11: Breakdown of responses from respondents on whether CCEA Regulation had appropriate arrangements in place to facilitate assessment and awarding in 2021–22 which protected the interests of NI Learners
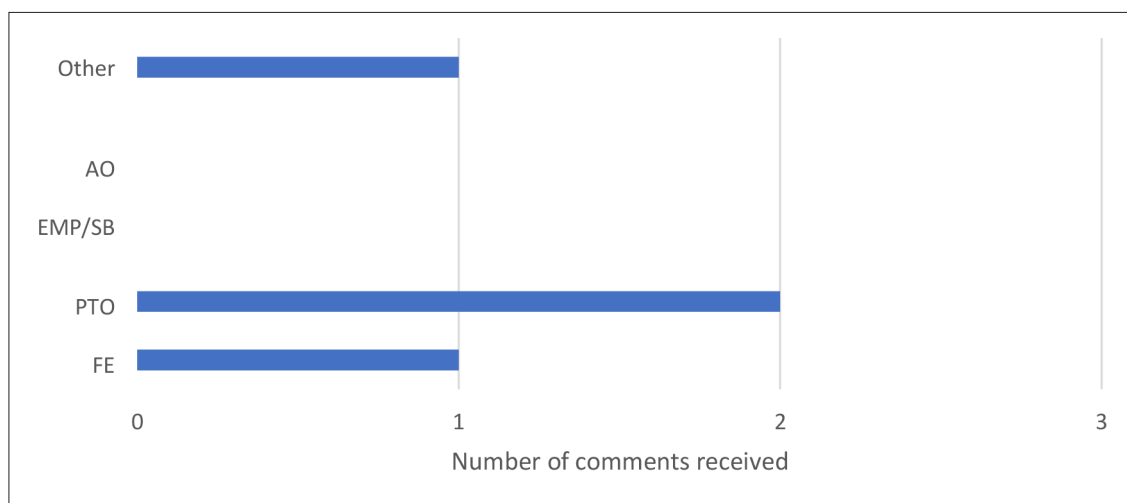
Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment.
4 respondents (5%) provided feedback. Comments were received from PPS, FE and 'Other'.

Comments received acknowledged that most of the programmes being operated by the respondents were awarded by UK AOs and were therefore subject to Ofqual arrangements, which had been adopted by CCEA Regulation as per agreed policy.

One PPS stated that many decisions were taken by the awarding bodies and while CCEA consulted with stakeholders on these, there was an awareness that the arrangements agreed were subject to wider consensual approach by the other regulators.

Table 12: CCEA Regulation ensured appropriate engagement and support to enable providers to conduct assessments

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	11	20.75
Agree	35	66.04
Neither Agree nor Disagree	6	11.32
Disagree	1	1.89
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00
Total	53	100

This question was for PPS, FE and PTO only. All respondents in these categories answered the question. 87% of respondents (n=46) agreed that CCEA Regulation ensured appropriate engagement and support to enable providers to conduct assessments. 1 respondent from FE disagreed with this statement.

Figure 12: Breakdown of responses from respondents on whether CCEA Regulation ensured appropriate engagement and support to enable providers to conduct assessments
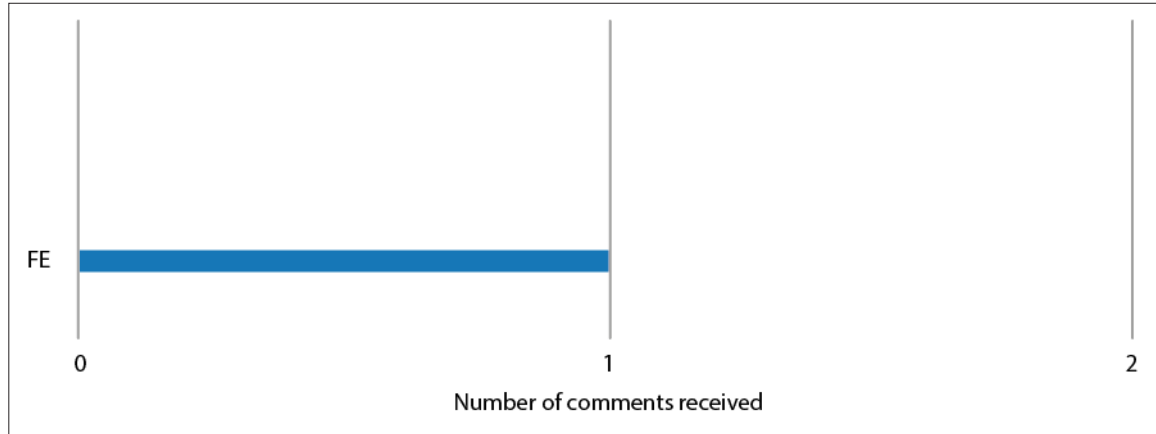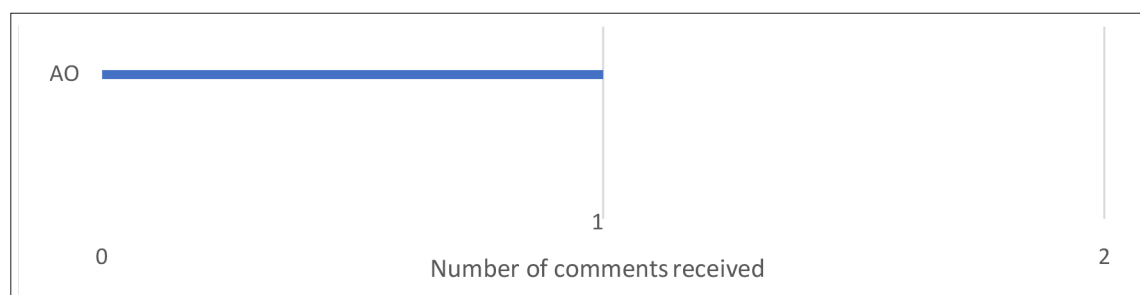

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment.
1 respondent (1%) from FE provided feedback. The comment received expressed dissatisfaction with the engagement and support in place by one AO due to its furlough arrangements. This led to queries, usually sought from the AO, being directed to the regulator from which it was difficult to get a response.

Table 13: CCEA Regulation provided clear direction around the implementation of assessment and awarding arrangements for 2021–2022

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	0	0.00
Agree	6	85.71
Neither Agree nor Disagree	1	14.29
Disagree	0	0.00
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00
Total	7	100

This question was for AOs only. All respondents in the AO category answered this question. 86% of respondents (n=6) agreed that CCEA Regulation provided clear direction around the implementation of assessment and awarding arrangements for 2021–22. 14% of respondents (n=1) neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement.

Figure 13: Breakdown of responses received into whether CCEA Regulation provided clear direction around the implementation of assessment and awarding arrangements for 2021–22
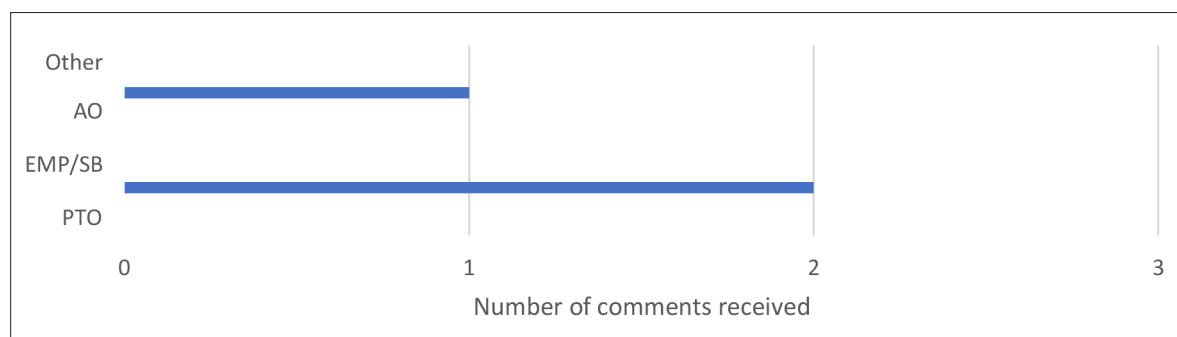
Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment. 1 AO indicated that confirmed arrangements by CCEA Regulation were clear.

Table 14: Overall, how satisfied were you with assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications in 2021−2022?

	Frequency	Percentage
Very Satisfied	15	20.55
Satisfied	46	63.01
Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	12	16.44
Dissatisfied	0	0.00
Very dissatisfied	0	0.00
Total	73	100

This question was relevant to all groups. Respondents were asked to consider both the positive and the more challenging aspects of their experience in 2021−22. All respondents answered this question. 84% of respondents (n=61) agreed that they were satisfied with the assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications in 2021−22. 12 respondents (16%) were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

Figure 14: Breakdown of comments received from respondents on satisfaction levels

Respondents were asked if they would like to provide further comment.
3 respondents (4%) provided feedback. Comments received were from FE and AO.

One FE respondent stated that they delayed assessments until students could complete them fully and another FE respondent advised no adaptations were used and qualification delivery and assessment operated normally. One AO advised it was pleased to see the extension of the Vocational Contingency Regulatory Framework (VCRF) as this helped reduce the burden on AOs for the 2021/22 academic year.

2.7   Other Feedback

Figure 15: Breakdown of additional comments received from respondents
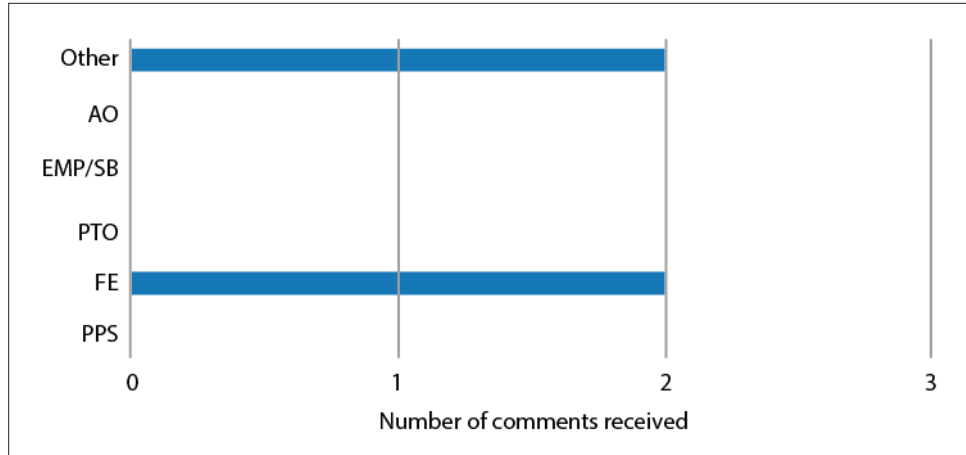
Respondents were asked if they wanted to provide any further feedback. Four respondents provided feedback. Comments were from FE and 'other'.

One respondent from FE commented that changes were constant and sometimes contradictory which was very frustrating for both learners and staff. Another FE respondent advised that a close working relationship with the Awarding Organisations was vital so that any issues are resolved promptly.

One 'Other' highlighted the benefits of a learning platform provide by OCNNI for use by all, especially organisations working in the communities with a variety of learners with different educational backgrounds/history.

Appendix (iv)

List of Focus Group Participants

Further Education Colleges

Name	Job Title	College
Tanya Heslip	Curriculum Area Manager	Belfast Metropolitan College
Fiona Forrest	Curriculum Area Manager Essential Skills/GCSE	Northern Regional College
Chris Evans	Head of Quality and Pedagogy	Southern Regional College

Post Primary Schools

Name	Job Title	College
Neil Owen	Principal	Parkhall Integrated College
Mary Gavin (Ms)	Vice Principal	Loreto Grammar School
Clare McElduff (Miss)	Senior Teacher for Assessment, Reporting and Data	Loreto Grammar School
Steven Hughes (Mr)	Senior Teacher for Links to the Community	Loreto Grammar School
Dawn Farquhar (Miss)	Vice Principal	Belfast Boys' Model School

CAFRE

Name	Job Title	College
Sharon McLaren	Quality Manager	CAFRE
Manus McHenry	Head of Agriculture Education	CAFRE

Awarding Organisations

Name	Job Title	College
Jo Sterritt	Quality and Operational Assurance Director	FDQ
Lisa Robinson	Director of Compliance and Audit	OCNNI
Paloma Tattershall-Dodd	Senior Product Manager	City & Guilds

Regulation