

Consultation on Proposed Changes to GCSEs

Comhairliúchán maidir le hAthruithe
molta ar TGMOanna



Department of
Education

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Introduction

1. The English White Paper (2010) “The Importance of Teaching”, sets out proposals for changes to GCSEs in England, namely a return to assessment being taken at the end of the two year course (moving from the current unitised assessments to linear assessment arrangements) and an increased emphasis in mark schemes on Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPaG). Ofqual was asked to advise on how best these proposals could be implemented and, on 27 June 2011, the Secretary of State for Education in England, Michael Gove responded positively to the Ofqual advice. In summary with GCSEs taken in England:
 - Candidates taking examinations from Summer 2014 (first teaching from September 2012) will be assessed at the end of the course, with revised rules not allowing for re-sits of any part (module) of the course;
 - assessments taken from 2013 will have mark schemes that strengthen the emphasis on Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPaG) in subjects where there is a requirement for extended writing, firstly with English Literature, Geography, History and Religious studies.
2. The Department of Education (DE) will consider the implications of such decisions in England.

Background

3. GCSE specifications developed for first teaching from September 2009 across England, Wales and the north of Ireland are in the main unitised. Prior to this, most GCSEs were linear with all the assessment taking place at the end of the course. There were a few unitised GCSE specifications pre-2009, mostly in mathematics and the sciences, as well as in applied subjects. The Schools White Paper in England identified a number of concerns with unitised GCSEs, including the impact on teaching and learning, and that there were too many opportunities to re-sit examinations. In addition, the view has been expressed that qualifications of the size of GCSEs are too small to be unitised effectively. Unlike A levels, the number of units is not prescribed and, therefore, it is not the case that every specification in a particular subject has the same number of units, or the same sized units.

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4. The current unitised specifications (revised from 2009) are based on criteria that allow specifications to have up to four units, each with an assessment weighting of no less than 20% of the total assessment for the qualification. Candidates are permitted one re-sit opportunity per unit. In addition, the 'Terminal Rule' must be adhered to whereby at least 40% of the assessment is taken at the end of the course. Typically Awarding Organisations in England offer four assessment opportunities (normally January and June of each year) over the two years of the GCSE course. CCEA, the local awarding organisation here, while offering unitised GCSEs, offers only two assessment slots, ie one in June of each year of the course.

 5. The revised (unitised) GCSE specifications have been developed and phased in along the following timelines:
 - all subjects except English/Gaeilge and Welsh (first language), mathematics, ICT and the sciences suite for first teaching from September 2009 (first awarding 2011);

 - English/Gaeilge/Welsh (first language), mathematics, and ICT for first teaching from September 2010 (first awarding 2012);

 - Sciences - biology, chemistry, physics, science/additional science (CCEA Double Award science) for first teaching from September 2011 (first awarding 2013).

 6. With the first awarding of revised unitised GCSEs in Summer 2011, detailed information on entry patterns and the impact on pupil achievement will only become available this autumn and will not cover English/Gaeilge or mathematics. However, early indications suggest that entry 'activity' varies across subjects, with some subjects having very small entries for units in the first year of study (Year 11). Data from England would indicate that around 50% of candidates who are claiming subject awards this summer have already received results for one or more units. This figure is much lower here where CCEA data would indicate that around 10% of the overall candidature has taken units prior to end of course awards.

Proposed reasons for the change to unitised specifications

7. The Awarding Organisations developed unitised specifications following their own market research with centres. The move to a modular approach was based on teachers' views on the opportunities for formative feedback and re-sitting opportunities, and the motivation that this can engender. They were able to do so because the criteria for the current GCSEs permitted unitisation. However, some centres are now raising concerns about: the burden/bureaucracy of unitised assessment (linked partly to re-sitting); reduction that unitisation brings to teaching time; and the possibility of fragmented learning. There are also issues around maturation, where younger students, 14/15 year olds, are entering exams that they may not be fully ready for. GCSEs do not have the GCE AS/A2 approach to unitisation, where the AS level acts a bridge from GCSE to the full A-level.
8. Research suggests that the impact of choosing a linear or modular route is complex and the results mixed. We will look at GCSE results for 2011 compared with previous years to see what evidence there is for and against both routes. This will inform our thinking in terms of Section 75 and overall policy direction.

Changes proposed by Ofqual for GCSEs in England

9. In making its proposals, Ofqual wanted to ensure that a move to linear specifications:
 - would not unfairly disadvantage any candidate;
 - would not damage the ability of the qualifications to meet the reasonable requirements of higher education and employers; and
 - had a clear educational justification.
10. After assuring itself on these issues, Ofqual recommended that for GCSE courses for all examinations, aside from any agreed exceptions, could be taken at the end of the course. Ofqual indicated that changes could wait to the next review of GCSE specifications. However Ofqual acknowledged that the

Secretary of State (SoS) may want to move faster. The response from the SoS indicated that the issues raised about the current unitised nature of GCSEs required action to be taken as soon as possible.

11. This will mean changes to GCSE entry and aggregation rules for England. Re-sitting of units will no longer be possible and there will no longer be a need for winter unit examinations. Although the option has been left open in England for candidates to take (or retake) full GCSE English and Mathematics in November. Some pupils who do not achieve a C or above in GCSE often re-take the GCSE in Year 13. Any changes made here could allow for this additional opportunity with English and Mathematics.
12. The impact of this proposal on candidates in England already on two-year courses and those who will start them in 2011 and 2012 is detailed below.
 - For those who have started two-year courses in September 2010 (and who will receive subject level results in summer 2012) there should be no change to availability of units. This means that students will be able to enter units in winter and summer 2012.
 - For those who start two-year courses in September 2011 (and who will receive subject level results in summer 2013) there should be no change to availability of units. This means that students will be able to enter units in winter and summer 2012 and 2013.
 - For those who will start two-year courses in 2012, and who will receive subject level results in 2014, specifications will be linear. This means students would enter for all units in summer 2014. They would not be permitted to enter any units early and no re-sitting of units would be possible.
13. To enable this to happen Ofqual is suggesting that Awarding Organisations in England make adjustments to their GCSE assessment structures. Ofqual has further recommended that consideration should be given, and where necessary consultation held, on possible exceptions, so that some subjects could remain unitised. Previously, even when most GCSEs were linear, there were some specifications which were modular, reflecting the nature of the assessment and the structure of the course, eg mathematics, the sciences, and applied subjects.

Issues for Department of Education

14. The drive in England for a move away from unitised GCSEs is Government policy, set out by the Department for Education in the Schools White Paper. England, Wales and the north of Ireland operate a 3-country qualifications system - we have the same qualifications and the regulators work together to ensure there are common standards across all 3 jurisdictions. This means pupils taking exams here can have their qualifications easily recognised and understood by universities and employers if they wish to go to study or work in England, Wales or the south of Ireland, and vice-versa. DE is therefore considering if the north of Ireland should also move away from unitised assessment to linear assessment. In doing so, it is taking into account advice from CCEA in its capacity as qualifications regulator, and the views of key stakeholders, especially teachers and pupils. The Department will also continue to liaise with the Department of Education and Science in Dublin in regards mutual recognition of qualifications across the island of Ireland. Our over-riding concern is the interests of young people and ensuring they are enabled to achieve to their full potential.

15. It is unlikely that the Minister's decision on this issue would stop the current position whereby English (and Welsh) awarding organisations offer GCSEs here. The main implications will be for the local awarding body and, depending on the direction taken by the DE Minister, CCEA will have to review the nature of the GCSEs it offers.

Section 75 Considerations

16. Section 75 of the NI Act 1998 requires all public authorities in carrying out their functions relating to the north of Ireland, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between -
 - persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
 - men and women generally;
 - persons with a disability and persons without; and
 - persons with dependants and persons without.

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17. In addition, without prejudice to the above obligation, public authorities must also, in carrying out their functions, relating to the north of Ireland, have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.
 18. We are considering the Section 75 implications of applying these proposed changes here and we must await results from 2011 GCSE examinations to inform our equality screening process. Unitised GCSEs were first awarded in 2011 and we will be able to compare the results to GCSEs awarded in 2010. In the meantime, we will consider research findings comparing unitised and linear assessment, including the impact on boys and girls. We are very interested in your views on the impact of these issues. Please see below for details of how you can respond to this consultation.

Consultation

19. DE is consulting on these policy proposals from 10 October 2011 to 30 December 2011. The Department welcomes the views of any organisation, group or individual on this document. We would welcome your thoughts on these proposals.
20. **A response booklet to help respondents provide a structured response can be viewed and downloaded from the Department's website at www.deni.gov.uk**
21. Comments on this document and/or requests for hard copies of this document or alternative formats can be made by mail, fax or email to the address on page 2. Consultation responses will be placed on our website. In the interests of safeguarding the environment, respondents will not receive an acknowledgement letter. However, a list of respondents will be placed on our website. In addition, we intend to publish responses (in full or in part). If you do not wish your response or name to be published on the website please make this clear in your response.
22. The deadline for responses is **30 December 2011**.

Research Papers

23. See associated research papers for information.

[Research Matters - Cambridge Assessment - Issue 11 - January 2011](#)

[Effects of Modularisation - Cambridge Assessment - Carmen L Vidal Rodeiro and Rita Nádas](#)

