

Potential short-term changes to A levels

Consultation Document

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Contacting Us

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Introduction

1. There has been considerable debate over the past year, calling for improvements in the standards of qualifications offered in England from age 16 to 19. Specifically, Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education in England, wrote to John O'Dowd on 30 March 2012, informing him of his plans to reform GCE A levels in England. He feels that universities should have greater input into their design and development. He wants to see that Awarding Organisations can provide proof that they have engaged with universities, such as those in the Russell Group, before their qualifications are accredited. He also has concerns over the current modular structure and the opportunities to re-sit modules.
2. His changes will mean that the Department for Education in England will no longer have a role in the development of qualifications. He believes that it is much more important that universities are satisfied that A levels equip people with the appropriate skills to begin their university courses.
3. Mr Gove commissioned Ofqual (the qualifications regulator in England) to take forward this work and is proposing that the teaching of at least some of the new A levels could start from September 2014.
4. Minister O'Dowd has stated that the GCE A level (and GCSE) brand is owned by 3 jurisdictions and that any plans to change A levels in England could have an impact here. For that reason, Minister O'Dowd has taken some time to consider what we might do in the best interests of learners here.
5. Minister O'Dowd announced a fundamental review of GCSEs and A levels on 1 October 2012. The review will report in June 2013. Once the findings and recommendations have been reported and the Minister has decided on the way forward, we expect it would be some time before these longer term changes are implemented.

6. It is vital therefore that we consider what changes might have to be considered in the interim to ensure comparability of these qualifications and portability across these islands.

7. The following paper sets out potential areas for change. They are based on Ofqual's proposals for A levels and we are keen to hear your thoughts on these.

Initial Soundings from School Principals

8. Following the Secretary of State's announcement in March to make changes to A levels in England, officials met with a small number of school principals who expressed the following views:

- i. Agreement that negative messages about examination standards have a detrimental impact on teachers and students;
- ii. Comparability with England and Wales is critical – whatever system we have must not limit opportunities for our young people to progress to study at university;
- iii. Timelines proposed for the introduction of changes is very concerning;
- iv. Development of literacy and numeracy skills needs to start much earlier than 16 / 18;
- v. It is the Regulator's job to ensure that standards of qualifications are maintained – a complete overhaul of the system is unnecessary;
- vi. A belief that assessment across 14-19 has meant a loss of the love of learning. Current culture is to teach to the test – limiting appetite for broader learning;
- vii. Some support for Ofqual proposals to change weighting between AS and A2; for getting rid of January assessments (although this was not unanimous) and ending re-sits;
- viii. Suggestion to consider subject specific approach to modular / linear choice;

Executive Summary

9. The Department of Education is consulting on potential changes to A levels that could apply here before any findings from the fundamental review of GCSEs and A levels are implemented. We wish to seek your views on potential changes to A levels and whether the changes as set out below for England should apply here.

10. 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

Proposed Changes in England

11. The following has been taken from Ofqual's consultation document: *In taking forward its proposed changes, Ofqual hopes to achieve the following:*

- i. *Equality of access for students to the full range of universities – It is important that all A level specifications in a subject allow students equal access to courses at all universities. Undoubtedly, for many courses in many universities, some A level subjects will be considered essential and others will be considered inappropriate, and universities must continue to be solely responsible for their admissions decisions. However, we (Ofqual) have an obligation to secure public confidence in regulated qualifications and assessments, and it benefits no one if universities feel that they have to distinguish between different versions of the same A levels from different exam boards: it will be more work for universities, and will mean that some students end up with what some may regard as second-class qualifications. We (Ofqual) must ensure comparability of demand and content in different specifications in a subject.*

- ii. *Support for selection to universities – It is important to have a common grading system for A levels so that they can be used in university selection procedures. This facilitates comparisons between candidates studying with different exam boards or following different subjects, thus simplifying selection decisions.*

12. Ofqual's General Conditions of Recognition already demand some overarching requirements of all qualifications. For instance, they must be fit for purpose and manageable, and ensure comparability across optional routes in a specification and between exam boards where more than one exam board is offering the same qualification.

13. However, in order to meet these principles, Ofqual is proposing that it will need some additional design rules for A levels. It has therefore consulted on some new General Conditions of Recognition for GCE qualifications.

These are as follows:

Ofqual Proposals

Condition 1 – Objective

14. An awarding organisation must ensure that each GCE qualification which it makes available or proposes to make available:

- i. defines and assesses achievement of the knowledge, skills and understanding which will be needed for Learners planning to progress to undergraduate study at a UK higher education institution, particularly (although not only) to study the subject concerned;
- ii. sets out a robust and internationally comparable post-16 academic course of study to support that knowledge, skills and understanding;
- iii. permits UK universities to identify accurately the level of attainment of Learners.

15. It should also:

- i. Provide a basis for school and college accountability measures at age 18;
- ii. Provide a benchmark of academic ability for employers.

Condition 2 – Size and grading

16. An awarding organisation must ensure that each GCE qualification which it makes available or proposes to make available:

- i. assigns 360 hours of guided learning;
- ii. has specified levels of attainment on a scale of A*, A, B, C, D, E (U – unclassified – identifies Learner performance below the minimum specified level of attainment for the qualification);
- iii. publishes clear, minimum expectations of the performance of Learners to achieve Grade A and Grade E.

17. In considering whether or not to retain the current AS/A2 structure Ofqual proposed three options for consultation:

- i. Option 1. Removing the AS qualification – which would mean a return to a linear two year course of study with all the assessment at the end of the course;
- ii. Option 2. Making the AS a standalone qualification but where the results do not contribute to the A level. This would mean the AS could be completed in one year but the A level would be a two year course of study and assessment as in option 1.
- iii. Option 3. Retaining the AS qualification and its relationship to the A level as at present but making changes to January assessments and re-sitting opportunities.

18. For Option 1 and Option 2, where the A level is a linear two year course of study (whether or not Ofqual retained the AS as a standalone qualification), Ofqual propose the following condition setting out the minimum structures that should apply to all A levels:

Condition 3 – Qualification structure and availability of assessments

19. An awarding organisation must ensure that each GCE qualification which it makes available or proposes to make available:

- i. will only be assessed once a year, during the summer term;
- ii. will have no more than three assessment components.

20. **For Option 3** - if Ofqual retain the current AS/A2 structure, Ofqual propose the following condition:

21. An awarding organisation must ensure that each GCE qualification which it makes available or proposes to make available:

will only be assessed once a year, during the summer term;

- i. will require Learners to be assessed by means of two assessment elements, each of which will have a total weight of 50 per cent of the GCE:
- ii. one at AS (the expected level of attainment to be demonstrated by Learners completing the first year of a two-year course of study);
- iii. one at A2 (the expected level of attainment to be demonstrated by Learners completing the second year of a two-year course of study);
- iv. will have no more than three assessment components;
- v. will offer the AS assessment element as a qualification in its own right;
- vi. will permit Learners to resit the AS and/or A2 once only, and, in doing so:
- vii. will require they resit all the externally assessed components of the AS and/or A2;
- viii. will allow that they carry forward a mark for any internally assessed component from a previous examination series;
- ix. will count the highest mark of any assessment component towards that Learner's qualification.

Condition 4 – Variety of question types

22. An awarding organisation must ensure that each GCE qualification which it makes available or proposes to make available:

- i. uses a variety of appropriate question types, including questions that require responses to be produced through extended writing (including essay questions);
- ii. uses multiple choice, single and/or low mark tariff questions only where they are a valid form of assessment and do not outweigh the proportion of marks derived from other forms of assessment.

Condition 5 – Synoptic assessment

23. An awarding organisation must ensure that the assessment for each element of each GCE qualification which it makes available or proposes to make available:

- i. requires Learners to demonstrate their ability to draw together different areas of knowledge, skills and/or understanding learned from various parts of the course of study.

Condition 6 – Purpose of assessment

24. An awarding organisation must ensure that each GCE qualification which it makes available or proposes to make available:

- ii. makes clear the purpose of the assessment and sets out the balance between knowledge of the subject and application of skills, identifying the requirements for research, analysis, interpretation and evaluation to be achieved within each element and across the qualification as a whole.

Condition 7 – Assessment requirements

25. An awarding organisation must ensure that each GCE qualification which it makes available or proposes to make available:

- i. includes at least 60 per cent external assessment for each assessment element;

- ii. has comparable assessment requirements to similar GCE qualifications made available by other awarding organisations.

Condition 8 – Evidence of support

26. An awarding organisation must be able to demonstrate, through the publication of formal evidence, that for each GCE qualification which it makes available or proposes to make available it:

- i. has had significant and relevant subject engagement in the content and design from Higher Education and learned societies;
- ii. has the support* of universities, respected in the specific field of study and/or from those deemed to be leading research institutions; and
- iii. has been developed in consultation with schools and/or colleges to ensure that the qualification is manageable for successful delivery and, where appropriate, in consultation with employers.

* This support must indicate that those universities:

- iv. endorse the qualification, in particular its content, as suitable for progression to UK Higher Education courses in that subject or related subjects; and
- v. are satisfied that the qualification should present no barriers to equal access for students to the full range of universities; and
- vi. there will be an expectation that in any GCE development work, the local Regulator will want to be assured of engagement with universities and learned bodies and will ensure at the point of accreditation that GCEs taken are comparable in standard and demand to GCEs taken elsewhere..

27. An awarding organisation must ensure that the specification for the qualification sets out those higher education institutions who have been involved in its development and those who have formally supported it.

Condition 9 – Exceptions

28. An awarding organisation seeking any exception to these General Conditions of Recognition for GCE qualifications must agree these with the Regulator prior to submission and provide:

- i. a rationale for each instance of exception, accompanied by evidence of support from relevant universities; and
- ii. details of how comparability and consistency in assessment will be achieved within a subject.

29. An awarding organisation seeking any exception to the Condition of support for GCE qualifications must demonstrate:

- i. that the qualification is specialised and there is limited expertise at university department level or limited requirement for university entry;
- ii. that those universities that have departments with sufficient expertise do support it; and
- iii. that other universities support it in principle even if they do not specifically require it for entry.

Implementation

30. So that Ofqual can be confident that this reform is effective, it thinks that the reform of a limited range of priority subjects should be introduced first. It has invited views on what these priority subjects should be. There is a case for focusing first on subjects where there is most concern about the current A levels. There is also a case for focusing on subjects where there are well established stakeholders to coordinate the work.

31. Ofqual thinks a good option would be to start with a selection from the following: chemistry, physics, biology, mathematics, English literature, geography, history, French, German and Spanish.

32. If Ofqual took a distinct suite of qualifications such as chemistry, physics and biology, or French, German and Spanish, it would provide a sound basis from which a development model could be devised and then adapted for other subjects. A levels in these subjects would be introduced in September 2014 only if high-quality A levels had been developed and accredited in good time to allow teachers to prepare. Ofqual would review progress regularly, and if necessary delay implementation.

33. Following a review of the reform's initial success in these subjects, Ofqual will then remove subject criteria and introduce new A levels in a systematic way. Ofqual proposes to set a deadline of September 2018 – when most current A levels will be ten years old – for current qualifications to be reviewed or developed.

Section 75 Considerations

34. 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 –

- i. persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
- ii. men and women generally;
- iii. persons with a disability and persons without; and
- iv. persons with dependants and persons without.

35. 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.

36. We have completed an Equality Screening Document of the changes proposed by Ofqual and this will be available at www.deni.gov.uk. You can make your views known on these issues within the Response Booklet.

Responses

37. DE is consulting on these policy proposals from 3 December 2012 to 8 March 2013. The Department welcomes the views of any organisation, group or individual on this document. We would welcome your thoughts on these proposals.

38. 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

39. 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 3. Consultation responses will be placed on our web-site. 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.

40. The deadline for responses is 8 March 2013.