

**FUNDAMENTAL REVIEW OF
GCSES AND A LEVELS**

**CONSULTATION ON PROPOSED
RECOMMENDATIONS**

Consultation Document

Ministerial Foreword

I announced on 1 October 2012, that CCEA would undertake a fundamental review of GCSEs and A levels. That review is now complete and via this document, I intend to consult upon CCEA's findings and recommendations.

CCEA's review confirms that GCSEs and A levels have strong support from teachers, students and FE and HE sectors. It suggests that some revisions in the short term would help to reflect the needs of our education policy and the economy. This would allow the strengths of the qualifications to be developed and changes to be made which support the focus of our curriculum and reflect the needs of employers and higher education.

The Review makes recommendations about how GCSEs and A levels might be taken forward, and how the focus on improvements to literacy, numeracy and ICT skills could be supported. It also challenges us to begin the process of setting the long term (10-year) vision for learning, assessment and qualifications now and to draw from qualifications, systems, experiences and research from across the world.

My goal is to have a highly valued system of assessment which recognises appropriately, the efforts of our children; which is respected both nationally and internationally and which reflects international best practice.

I believe CCEA's report and its recommendations will provide a route to that goal. It sets out a range of issues, both short and long term which I believe we should take forward. This is your opportunity to let the Department know your views. I will finalise my decisions on the way forward, following this consultation.

**JOHN O'DOWD
MINISTER FOR EDUCATION**

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Contacting Us

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Mura bhfuil formáid na cáipéise seo ag riar ar na riachtanais atá agat féin, déan teagmháil, le do thoil, leis an fhoireann Measúnú agus Cáilíochtaí. Beimid sásta aon iarratas le haghaidh cóipeanna den cháipéis seo i bhformáidí malartacha amhail cló mór, Braille, closchóip nó i dteangacha eile a chur san áireamh.

This document is also available on the Department of Education's [consultation page](#) or on NI Direct.

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Introduction

1. Following a number of developments in relation to GCSE and A Level qualifications in England, Minister O'Dowd announced a fundamental review of GCSE and A level qualifications in the north of Ireland on 1 October 2012. The aim of the review was to establish the appropriateness of these qualifications, consider how best the examination system meets the needs of our children as well as our economy, and to ensuring that qualifications taken here are of an equivalent standard to elsewhere. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) was commissioned to undertake this review. In taking forward the review, CCEA established a sub-team within its Regulatory Team and put in place an expert group comprised of representatives from the education and business sectors, as well as representation from the qualifications sectors in other jurisdictions.
2. Interim reports were provided at the end of January 2013 and March 2013, and the final report was received at the end of June 2013.
3. The final report emphasises the importance of qualifications taken here being comparable to those taken in other jurisdictions. It also highlights that the GCSE and A level brands are highly valued by stakeholders and that there is not widespread support for following recent developments in England.

Summary of the Recommendations

4. Some of the key recommendations in the report include:
 - a) **GCSEs / A Levels**
 - Tiering (the use of differentiated examinations for Foundation Tier and Higher tier learners) should be retained where there is a need. (This differs from the policy position in England, where Michael Gove has indicated that tiering should cease in most subjects.)
 - The progression of the skills embedded in the revised curriculum at Key Stage 1 to 3 should be incorporated alongside the required subject

knowledge – this would address what many see as a clear disconnection between KS3 and GCSEs.

- A programme of work should be undertaken to promote GCSE (and A level) qualifications here. This would help to win the argument for flexibility in terms of GCSE (and A level) design with FE, HE, employers and so on.

b) Non-general and Vocational Qualifications

- High quality non-general and vocational qualifications should be made available to all 14–18 year old learners in the north including those for whom GCSEs and A levels do not meet their needs.
- In addition, a programme should be undertaken to promote the value of non-general qualifications. In taking forward these recommendations we would intend to work closely with DEL colleagues, as that Department leads on policy relating to vocational qualifications.

c) Literacy, Numeracy and ICT

- GCSEs in English, mathematics and ICT should support progression from the corresponding Levels of Progression at Key Stage 3;
- New competency-model skills qualifications should be developed at Levels 1 and 2;
- GCSE English and GCSE English Language should be streamlined to offer only one GCSE in this subject area;
- A second GCSE mathematics qualification should be developed focussing on the use of mathematics in daily life.
- A specialised systems based GCSE IT qualification should be developed.
- The current GCSE ICT qualification should remain, as it prepares young people for the world of work
- A level qualifications should support the development of literacy, numeracy and ICT skills where appropriate to the subject.

d) Accountability / Regulation

- Accountability measures should be broader in range and in design, to illustrate a variety of factors across the system. Achievements by some

should not be referred to as “good” (e.g. 5+ A*-C GCSEs), to prevent the inference that other achievement is not. The report advises that care should be taken to ensure frameworks for accountability are not incompatible with recognising the achievements of all learners. This could mean consideration of a range of other measures for accountability purposes.

- A review of the regulation and quality assurance of qualifications available here should be undertaken to support north of Ireland GCSEs and A levels.

e) Policy / Strategy

- A strategy for 14-19 education should be developed as a matter of urgency. It should consider all aspects of education including qualifications, ensuring provision is seamless and provides maximum choice and flexibility. The report recommends that we should begin work on the longer-term vision for learning, assessment and qualifications here at ages 14-18.
- Consideration should be given to a credit-based qualification approach to engage learners working below GCSE level. Currently this could consist of accredited, credit-based qualifications which facilitate learners meeting the requirements of the statutory curriculum. In the design of this approach, consideration should be given to the Nationals Levels 1–4 model being introduced in Scotland. This would help to address perceived short-comings in the existing qualifications offer.

5. A list of the 49 recommendations contained within CCEA’s report are set out in Annex A of this document.

Executive Summary

6. The Department of Education is consulting on the recommendations made by CCEA and we wish to seek your views on these before the Minister finalises his decisions on the way forward.

Principles

7. The Department's principles are that our qualifications:
 - i. should reflect the aims and objectives of the revised curriculum;
 - ii. should test skill as well as knowledge;
 - iii. in core subjects (English / Gaeilge, Maths and ICT), should reflect and represent progression from the Levels of Progression;
 - iv. should be robust and credible;
 - v. should meet our economic and societal needs;
 - vi. should be designed to test pupils fairly and robustly and reward them appropriately;
 - vii. should be seen as the pinnacle of the statutory assessment scheme;
 - viii. should reflect international best practice and the importance of teaching and learning;
 - ix. should provide portability, comparability and equality of access across these islands and internationally.

Section 75 Considerations

8. 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.

9. 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.

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

Responses

11. DE is consulting on these policy proposals from 30 September 2013 to 20 December 2013. The Department welcomes the views of any organisation, group or individual on this document. We would welcome your thoughts on these recommendations.

12. 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. Alternatively, free text responses are also welcome.

13. 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.

14. The deadline for responses is 20 December 2013.

Annex A - Recommendations from Fundamental Review

a) GCSEs / A Levels

Rec #	Description
2.	GCSE and A levels should be retained with amendments to reflect the needs of the north of Ireland education policy and our economy.
3.	Changes in England and Wales should be kept under review and discussions about the use of GCSE and A Level 'brand' names should take place.
12.	GCSEs and A levels should have modular or linear assessment that is appropriate for the subject and needs of the learner.
13.	GCSEs, where modular, should have only one re-sit opportunity per unit and require 40% of assessment to be taken at the end of the course.
14.	A levels, where modular, should have examinations available in June only, with only one re-sit opportunity per unit.
15.	GCSEs and A levels should have internal assessment where this is the most valid method of assessing skills integral to specific subject requirements.
16.	The internal assessment process should be reviewed to improve quality assurance procedures where needed.
17.	GCSEs should have tiered examination papers, or a similar assessment model, where there is a need for this due to the nature of the subject.
27.	The current 60% weighting for controlled assessment in GCSE English/English Language should be reduced to no more than 40% in the revised qualification.
32.	GCSE qualifications should be retained at Level 1 and Level 2.
33.	The qualifications should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) have subject content which reflects the needs of the north of Ireland; b) be aligned to the principles of the Entitlement Framework (EF); c) support progression, in their delivery, of the Cross-Curricular Skills of Communication (Literacy), Using Mathematics (Numeracy) and Using ICT (ICT); and d) support progression, in their delivery, of the other skills of Problem-Solving, Self-Management and Working with Others.
34.	GCSE qualifications should identify opportunities for links between subjects to connect learning and support the development of transferability of skills.
35.	A programme of work should be undertaken to promote GCSE qualifications in the north of Ireland
37.	GCSEs and A levels should allow learners to develop the skills valued by further and higher education to support continuing learning. In revising the qualifications the opportunity should be taken: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) at GCSE – to incorporate, alongside the required subject knowledge, the progression of the skills embedded in the revised curriculum at Key Stages 1 to 3; and b) at A level – to incorporate independent learning, creative thinking and problem-solving skills.
38.	GCSEs and A levels should have the support of local employers in their development.
39.	GCSEs and A levels should facilitate young people in developing the wider knowledge and skills for working life.
41.	GCE A level qualifications should be retained as the main qualification taken at Level 3. They should be similar in demand to A levels offered in England and Wales with variation where necessary to meet the needs of learners in the north of Ireland
42.	AS should be retained as part of the A level qualification.

b) Non-General / Vocational Qualifications

Rec #	Description
20.	High quality non-general and vocational qualifications should be made available to all 14–18 year old learners in the north of Ireland including those whose needs are not met by GCSEs and A levels.
21.	A programme should be undertaken to promote the value of non-general qualifications.
22.	The current qualifications provision should be strengthened with options for those who do not wish to take A levels.

c) Literacy, Numeracy and ICT

Rec #	Description
24.	GCSEs in English, mathematics and ICT should support progression from the Levels of Progression in Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT at Key Stage 3.
25.	Rigorous, competency-model skills qualifications at Levels 1 and 2, to recognise achievement in Literacy, Numeracy and ICT, should be developed.
26.	Consideration should be given to the streamlining of the GCSE English and GCSE English Language subject offer to one GCSE in the subject area. This should support progression from Communication in Key Stage 3 and develop the literacy skills of learners.
28.	Further consideration should be given to the development of a second GCSE Mathematics qualification. This should include a core qualification focusing on mathematical capability that reflects the needs to be able to use mathematics at a high level in daily life; complemented by a qualification relating to mathematical concepts for those intending further study in subjects which will require this level of knowledge.
29.	A more specialised, systems-based, GCSE IT qualification should be developed.
30.	The current GCSE ICT qualification should remain to prepare young people for the world of work. It should focus on practical elements of ICT and develop problem-solving skills and an appreciation of real-life applications.
31.	A level qualifications should support the development of literacy, numeracy and ICT skills where appropriate to the subject.

d) Accountability / Regulation

Rec #	Description
5.	Work should be undertaken by the Regulators in England, Wales and the north of Ireland to identify flexibility in the three-country qualifications criteria to allow jurisdictional differences to be accommodated in qualification revision.
6.	Where qualifications are being shared by two jurisdictions or offered in the north of Ireland only, the Regulators should work to review the current qualifications criteria and subject criteria to facilitate the future development and accreditation of qualifications.
7.	The Department of Education and CCEA, in its Regulation capacity, should work with partners to ensure the comparability of qualifications taken by learners in the north of Ireland with similar qualifications taken elsewhere.
8.	Work on benchmarking GCSE and A level qualifications should be carried out to ensure rigour and comparability with qualifications taken in other jurisdictions.
9.	A review of the regulation and quality assurance of qualifications available in the

	north of Ireland should be undertaken to support our GCSE and A level qualifications.
11.	Accountability measures should be broader and considered holistically across the system. Achievement by some should not be referred to as 'good' as it infers that other achievement is not.

e) Policy / Strategy

Rec #	Description
1.	Qualifications taken by learners in the north of Ireland should reflect the education policy and context in this jurisdiction.
4.	Qualifications' revision should be undertaken on the basis of short- and longer-term considerations.
10.	The qualifications system in the north of Ireland should facilitate and encourage the engagement and motivation of all learners. It should recognise and reward a range of achievement and provide valid information about attainment.
18.	A strategy for 14–19 education should be developed as a matter of urgency. This should consider all aspects of education, including qualifications; ensuring provision is seamless and provides maximum choice and flexibility.
19.	All students should have the opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills required for further study and working life and, in line with the Entitlement Framework, should have access to qualifications that offer appropriate routes of progression.
23.	Consideration should be given to a credit-based qualification approach to engage learners working below GCSE level. Currently this could consist of accredited, credit-based qualifications which facilitate learners meeting the requirements of the statutory curriculum. In the design of this approach, consideration should be given to the Nationals Levels 1–4 model being introduced in Scotland.
36.	Qualifications should have the support of local further and higher education institutions in their development.
40.	Consideration should be given to developing a mechanism to complement the A level subject offer and to support the value that employers and FHE put on skills development and enrichment programmes post-16.
43.	Work should begin on the longer-term vision for learning, assessment and qualifications in the north of Ireland at ages 14 to 18. In considering what the system should look like ten years from now, qualifications, systems and experiences from the UK, Ireland and internationally should be explored, as well as lessons from academic research into qualifications and assessment.
44.	Proposals for a longer-term qualifications system for the north of Ireland should be developed over a period of at least three-years. Opportunities for working with other jurisdictions should be considered.
45.	Any system should be aligned with internationally recognised best practice.
46.	Proposals should be trialled, tested and evaluated with a view to subsequent implementation in a longer timeframe which is appropriate for all users.
47.	At GCSE level this should incorporate consideration of both developing/aligning with an alternative 14–16 qualification system and the removal of high-stakes external assessment at age 16.
48.	At post-16 the rigour, portability and currency of qualifications must be ensured.
49.	Changes proposed for the longer-term future of qualifications in the north of Ireland should be allowed to be fully embedded before periodic evaluation and review begin.