



ORAL STATEMENT ON GCSE QUALIFICATION MARKET AND GRADING

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Mr Speaker, I wish to make an announcement on the GCSE qualification market and associated grades awarded in Northern Ireland.

GCSEs form a core aspect of post-primary education in Northern Ireland. They are not the only qualifications to be taken, but they constitute a standard to which the great majority of our learners aspire at the end of compulsory education, with a higher percentage of pupils in Northern Ireland consistently achieving 5 or more GCSEs (including English and Maths), than their counterparts in England and Wales.

It is essential that our young people, schools, parents and employers have confidence in the GCSEs available here. GCSEs must be understood and recognised wherever they are taken. And they must support the attainment and progression of our learners.

For these reasons, I have reviewed the existing policies in respect of GCSEs in line with my desire for a child centred education system.

Schools need to have access to qualifications designed here in Northern Ireland, meeting the needs of our own learners and our own economy. That being the case, CCEA will continue to offer GCSEs with distinctive characteristics that are valued by schools here. We have a statutory curriculum of which we can be proud, and it is important that there is a GCSE offer that reflects the qualities of that curriculum, with its recognition of skills development and employability in the twenty-first century.

It is equally important that teachers and school leaders are free to exercise their professional discretion in choosing examination specifications that can help their pupils enjoy learning and achieve, and that are relevant to the needs of our economy and society.

Our qualifications system has worked well for the pupils of Northern Ireland down the years, but in light of the changes in England, there are some concerns that have arisen, namely around the comparability and portability of our local GCSE qualifications, and the continuance of the open market in qualifications for schools in Northern Ireland.

The overriding concern in the former is that no pupil in Northern Ireland runs the risk of being disadvantaged. In particular this relates to the top end of qualifications and the issue of places on high demand, high qualification degree courses and to mid range qualifications which could impact on future employment in other parts of the United Kingdom. While the numbers potentially impacted are likely to be low, nevertheless these are real concerns that need addressed.

Similarly, on probably the bigger issue of the impact of the qualifications market in Northern Ireland, with the announcement of the withdrawal from the Northern Ireland GCSE market of exam boards AQA, OCR and Pearson, this restricts choice for schools and pupils, and leaves gaps in provision of some subjects which would have to be filled very quickly by local development of new courses at a cost to the public purse.

While others have been distracted by side issues, it is these issues of comparability, portability and the open market that I have concentrated on and sought outcomes to resolve.

On the issues of comparability and portability, it is necessary to give some clarity around grading.

The new grading system in England is to be anchored to the alphabetical grades at two points – the bottom of the grade 4 will be anchored to the bottom of the grade C, and the bottom of the grade 7 will be anchored to the bottom of the grade A. These shall provide the necessary points of reference.

I am proposing that the alphabetical grading of CCEA's GCSEs will remain consistent with the alphabetical grading in the past with two exceptions.

Firstly, in order to ensure that our highest achievers are able to demonstrate comparable excellence with their contemporaries in England, CCEA will realign the A* to reflect the level of attainment at grade 9 in the 9-1 GCSEs. Not only will this restore the distinction of the A* as a mark of outstanding achievement, but also restore the value of the grade A as a high-level achievement within the reach of our most able learners.

Secondly, in England, it has been decided that the grade 5 shall be the benchmark performance measure for attainment at Key Stage 4. This grade is higher than the grade C, which marks the boundary of the level-2 qualification within all GCSEs, achievement at which is a core element of our new PfG framework. In order not to disadvantage our young people, CCEA will additionally be asked to identify a new reference point on the grading scale to equate to the grade 5. This new grade C* will provide additional information on the level of attainment.

On the issue of the examination market, this includes choosing alternative specifications to those offered by CCEA in certain subjects, as well as having access to a range of specifications that CCEA does not offer. Rather than restrict schools in their choice, they should have a wider range of GCSEs to choose from, including those being introduced in England under the recent reforms, which are graded 9-1.

I have therefore decided to lift the current restriction upon the accreditation of 9-1 GCSEs.

A small number of exceptions need to be made to this re-opening of the market. These exceptions reflect continuity with the statutory curriculum in Northern Ireland, and the views of key stakeholders including educationalists and the business community. Specifically, it shall remain the case that the assessment of speaking and listening must be included and contribute towards the overall grade in the award of GCSE English Language. Also, consistent with the policy at A level, the assessment of practical skills must be included and contribute towards the overall grade in the award of GCSE sciences.

By re-opening the market in this way, our learners will be able to access GCSE courses leading to both alphabetical grades and numerical grades. Depending upon the decisions of schools, some young people will leave school with a record of attainment that consists of a mixture of letters and numbers. This in practice is little different from what happens now with the mixture of qualifications at level 2 with GCSEs, BTEC, Level 2 Certificates and Diplomas.

I am pleased to inform members that in light of my decision AQA, OCR and Pearson exam bodies have confirmed that they will make their GCSE specifications available here again with immediate effect.

In conclusion Mr Speaker, I am satisfied that this revision of policy preserves the best of our existing qualifications provision, whilst opening up the opportunity for our young people to access a wider range of subject specifications. It addresses the challenges of comparability and portability, to the overall benefit of our learners and the economy.