



Department of
Education
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Transform**ED**

CONSULTATION REPORT

The Future of CCEA GCSE, AS and A Level Qualifications

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Part 1: Context

Introduction

In March 2025, the Minister of Education, Paul Givan MLA, launched the TransformED NI Strategy, to achieve excellence in education in Northern Ireland by transforming teaching and learning through a wide-ranging reform programme.

By drawing on robust evidence and international practice, the TransformED Strategy is designed to address current educational challenges as highlighted by the Independent Review of Education (published 2023). By working in partnership with school leaders, it aims to prepare Northern Ireland for the future, ensuring its young people have optimum opportunities in a local and global economy.

As part of the reform journey, qualifications taken by pupils in Northern Ireland are being reviewed to ensure these are of high quality and are fit for purpose, support teaching and learning, continue to provide pathways and progression, and do not compromise portability.

To inform this review, the Department launched a public consultation that ran from September to November 2025 to seek stakeholder views on aspects of GCSE and AS/A level qualifications. A separate, bespoke survey was sent to young people. In addition, there was wide-ranging engagement with school leaders, teachers and young people which enabled deeper discussion of the proposals.

This report sets out the findings from the public consultation, the young people's survey and wider engagement with key stakeholders on CCEA's GCSE and AS/A level qualifications.

Background

Northern Ireland has an open qualifications market which means that pupils can opt to take GCSE and AS/A level qualifications, and vocational qualifications, with a

variety of awarding bodies. Having both general and vocational / applied qualifications is important in providing pupils with a range of choices and pathways at Key Stage 4 and post-16. However, the focus of the current proposals for qualifications reform, and the subject of the recent consultation, survey and engagement, is CCEA's GCSE, AS and A level qualifications. This report, therefore, focuses on these qualifications only.

Despite a level of policy divergence in education across England, Wales and Northern Ireland in recent years, the GCSE and AS/A level qualifications taken in the three jurisdictions continue to share similar characteristics. Furthermore, a shared approach to awarding and setting standards in these qualifications is adopted by the regulators and awarding bodies.

In Northern Ireland, the local awarding body offering GCSE and AS/A level qualifications is CCEA. Most CCEA qualifications have a modular structure, which means that modules can be taken at stages throughout the two-year course of study. Of CCEA's 41 GCSEs, 9 are linear in structure and for the remainder, schools can choose to deliver in either linear or modular format. GCSE Single and Double Award Science modules can be taken in three examination series in an academic year, with GCSE English Language and Mathematics modules available in two series in an academic year.

Policy differences across the jurisdictions

A level

At A level, having introduced the modular AS/A2 structure in 2000, England announced a return to a linear A level structure in 2013, removing AS as part of an overall A level qualification. AS can still be taken as a standalone qualification, although entries have declined since the policy change.

Northern Ireland and Wales, however, continued to retain AS modules as part of the A level and so AS outcomes can contribute to an overall A level grade.

The AS and A level grading scales are the same across all 3 jurisdictions.

GCSE

England's GCSE qualifications have a linear structure while the majority of Wales and Northern Ireland's are modular. There are currently three grading scales operating at GCSE. Wales has an eight-point alphabetical scale; England operates a nine-point numerical scale and CCEA operates a nine-point alphabetical scale.

The policy in England is that non-examined assessment (NEA) (e.g. coursework, practical assessment) in qualifications should be limited to those subjects where it is deemed essential for testing a subject specific skill because an external examination is not a suitable or reliable method of assessment. This differs from Wales and Northern Ireland where NEA is not subject to the same policy restrictions. This has led to a greater number of NEAs in qualifications provided by CCEA and the Welsh awarding body (WJEC) than those provided by English awarding bodies.

Rationale for reform

The TransformED strategy provides an opportunity to review the CCEA qualifications and evaluate their current structures and approaches, in particular the effect on teaching and learning, and on teacher and pupil workload.

It has been over 10 years since CCEA GCSE AS/A level qualifications were last revised. Given such a passage of time, content and assessment design can become outdated, particularly in subjects where content relates to the contemporary world.

There is a need to ensure that CCEA qualifications taken by Northern Ireland pupils are fit for the modern world and that the content studied keeps pace with developments in the economy and a rapidly changing technological environment.

The *Independent Review of Education* (2023) has raised the issue of assessment burden, and the subsequent *Independent Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum* (Lucy Crehan, 2025) further highlighted the imbalance between skills and knowledge and how this can adversely impact deeper understanding. The reform of the curriculum as part of the TransformED strategy is seeking to redress this, and qualifications in

turn need to align with the curriculum so that the education experience of young people is seamless throughout their school journey.

It is clear there is a need to look at the manageability of workload for both pupils and teachers. The content and assessment demands of the current specifications, therefore, need to be reviewed to create space for pupils to facilitate personal development and encourage greater depth of understanding.

Furthermore, there is concern that the current model of qualifications' structure and assessment leads to an approach known as 'teaching to the test,' and a culture of re-sitting which, it could be argued, exacerbates further the assessment burden and anxiety for pupils.

Any review of qualifications also needs to take account of changing technology. Advances in technology, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), while having positive benefits, can also be utilised in a way that adversely impacts the accuracy and reliability of outcomes from assessments, which can compromise fairness for all pupils. NEA carries risks regarding authentication of pupil work. While these risks can be mitigated through rules and other deterrents such as penalties, it is recognised by regulators and awarding bodies that advances in technology have made the authentication process more challenging.

Vision

Taking account of the findings of the Independent Review of Education (2023) and the Independent Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum (2025) and drawing on educational research and international best practice, DE is seeking to introduce changes to CCEA GCSE and AS/A level qualifications.

It is envisaged that these changes will bring a reduced workload for teachers and pupils, with more streamlined content, fewer examinations/assessments and less bureaucracy, and as a result create more time for teaching and learning and enrichment opportunities for pupils.

The Proposals

The core proposals for qualifications, which have been the subject of consultation and engagement since September 2025 are as follows:

- Retain GCSE and A levels as qualifications.
- Reduce the content in GCSE and A level specifications to support deeper learning.
- Limit GCSEs and A levels wherever possible to a maximum of two assessments per subject.
- Reduce or remove controlled assessments where possible. (internal assessments will remain in practical subjects where they are essential for assessing subject specific skills).
- Move most GCSE qualifications to a linear structure; whilst retaining modularity for GCSE English Language and GCSE Mathematics.
- Remove AS levels and move to a two-year linear A level structure.

Evidence and Research

The Department's proposals drew on a number of sources of expertise and academic research. Annex B provides further details.

Part 2: Analysis of Feedback from Consultation and Engagement

Consultation questionnaire responses

As part of the consultation process, an online questionnaire was used to enable as many people as possible to make their views known on the Department's proposals. A total of 3,532 responses were received via the online consultation survey hosted by Citizen Space.

In addition, a further 38 people/organisations provided more substantial submissions (further details are in Annex C) and 4,496 young people responded to the survey which was specially designed for them and facilitated through the Education Authority.

Respondent profile (Citizen Space survey)

Table 1 provides a full breakdown of the respondent profile to the online questionnaire. As the table shows, the top three respondent groups were teachers / tutors/ lecturers (46.1%), followed by parents/guardians (29.7%) and pupils / young people (13.5%). A breakdown of the separate young people's survey is provided at Annex A.

Table 1 Respondent Profile

Respondent profile	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Member of a Board of Governors of an education or training establishment	22	0.6
Member of the public	63	1.8
Parent / guardian	1049	29.7
Political representative	0	0
Pupil / young person	478	13.5
School Leader	175	5.0
Leader of an education and training establishment	8	0.2
Teacher / tutor / lecturer	1629	46.1

Non-teaching staff in a school or education and training establishment	42	1.2
Trade Union representative	5	0.1
Member of the voluntary and community sector	6	0.2
Other	55	1.6
TOTAL	3532	100

1,629 responses were received from teachers / tutors / lecturers. There are currently around **22,000** teachers employed in grant-aided schools, with a further **8,000** registered as supply teachers. Responses, therefore, represent approximately **5.4%** of the teaching workforce in Northern Ireland.

478 responses were received from pupils, with a further **4,496** responses to the young person's survey. For context, there are approximately **157,000** pupils currently attending grant-aided post primary schools in Northern Ireland.

An analysis of the responses received through this consultation process is outlined below and includes a summary of the commentary provided by stakeholders alongside further reflection on the responses by the Department.

Proposal 1: To retain the GCSE and A level ‘brands’

GCSE

In the consultation, the following question was asked: “To what extent do you agree with the proposal to retain GCSEs as the main qualifications offered by schools in Northern Ireland for learners at Key Stage 4?”

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Strongly Agree	2311	65.43
Agree	1022	28.94
Neither Agree nor Disagree	103	2.92
Disagree	54	1.53
Strongly Disagree	42	1.19
Total	3532	100 ¹

94% of respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed with this proposal.

Of these:

96.44% of teachers Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

88.91% of pupils Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

92.95% of parents Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

98.29% of school leaders Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

Commentary from stakeholders

Stakeholders felt that GCSEs are well-established, widely recognised and already serve pupils effectively. There was support for retaining GCSEs as the main qualifications at Key Stage 4, largely due to their strong recognition, portability, and established credibility within Northern Ireland and across the UK.

¹ The total for each table is rounded to 100% for presentational purposes.

Some respondents noted that vocational and applied pathways should also continue to be available alongside GCSEs to ensure a system that meets the needs of all young people.

A level

In the consultation, the following question was asked: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to keep A levels in Northern Ireland as the main qualifications for learners in schools at post-16”

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Strongly Agree	2184	61.83
Agree	997	28.23
Neither Agree nor Disagree	183	5.18
Disagree	109	3.09
Strongly Disagree	59	1.67
Total	3532	100

90% of respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed with this proposal.

Of these:

92.94% of teachers Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

83.68% of pupils Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

88.27% of parents Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

91.43% of school leaders Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

Commentary from stakeholders

Stakeholders showed support for retaining CCEA A levels as the main post-16 qualification in Northern Ireland, with recognition given to their long-established credibility, strong portability, and widespread acceptance by universities and employers across the UK and beyond.

A number of responses asked for a broader offer of vocational qualifications alongside A levels. They called for stronger, better-resourced vocational and applied pathways so that the system serves the full range of pupils.

DE Reflection on Proposal

Qualifications need to be understood by schools, employers and further and higher education providers. The GCSE and (GCE) A level brands are well known throughout the UK and are also commonly recognised by many international jurisdictions. Through the consultation, the Department proposed that CCEA qualifications should continue to use the GCSE and A level brands.

The consultation responses and engagement with stakeholders demonstrated that the vast majority of stakeholders are in favour of retaining the GCSE and A level brands. Stakeholders have confidence in the familiarity of the two brands and recognise their worth both educationally and in aiding progression to the next stage of education, training or employment.

The Department will, therefore, retain the GCSE and A level brands.

Proposal 2: Qualification Content

GCSE

In the consultation, the following question was asked: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to, where possible, reduce the overall content in each GCSE specification?”

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Strongly Agree	1580	44.73
Agree	1190	33.69
Neither Agree nor Disagree	271	7.67
Disagree	331	9.37
Strongly Disagree	160	4.53
Total	3532	100

78.4% of respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed with this proposal.

Of these:

91.66% of teachers Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

67.36% of pupils Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

66.92% of parents Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

92.57% of school leaders Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

Commentary from stakeholders

There was broad agreement from stakeholders that many CCEA GCSE specifications currently contain too much content, making them difficult to deliver within the available teaching time, and placing undue pressure on both pupils and teachers.

It was noted that excessive content restricts opportunities for deeper learning, active engagement, skill development, and meaningful classroom activities, instead encouraging rote learning and rushed teaching.

However, it was also noted that content reduction must be carefully balanced to maintain rigour and ensure smooth progression to A level, by preventing gaps in essential knowledge and skills.

A level

In the consultation, the following question was asked: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal that CCEA should aim to reduce the content of all CCEA A level specifications in order to reduce the burden on pupils and teachers?”

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Strongly Agree	1725	48.84
Agree	1031	29.19
Neither Agree nor Disagree	301	8.52
Disagree	286	8.10
Strongly Disagree	189	5.35
Total	3532	100

78% of respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed with this proposal.

Of these:

87.48% of teachers Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

70.29% of pupils Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

67.11% of parents Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

88.57% of school leaders Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

Commentary from stakeholders

For those in agreement with the proposal, there was a view that A level specifications have become content-heavy and that reducing content could potentially ease pressure on both pupils and teachers.

Comments described the volume of material as “*unmanageable*” and noted that it forces teaching to become rushed and highly exam-driven, leaving little space for deeper learning, discussion, creativity or enrichment.

Some comments reflected concerns that reduction in content could risk diluting the academic rigour of A levels and undermine preparation for higher education, particularly in subjects where foundational knowledge is essential for progression to university. Some responses stressed that content reduction should be carefully calibrated through detailed subject-expert consultation rather than applied uniformly across all disciplines.

DE Reflection on Proposal

The Department proposed that CCEA reduce the overall content in specifications where possible, while maintaining subject integrity and the continued facilitation of further study and progression.

The Independent Review of Education raised concerns about the burden of content in the curriculum and the pressure on teachers to cover this. The content of the current CCEA GCSE and A level specifications is part of this burden, leaving little time for deeper learning. The Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum noted that teachers and pupils perceived GCSEs to be content heavy. The review reported concern about the amount of content in qualification specifications. The review panel reported “*the effect of this perceived specification overload was that the assessment dominated the curriculum, with little space for anything additional to what was to be assessed*” This results in ... “*a lack of time for broader skills and important non-examined subject areas.*”

Concerns about the amount of content to be covered in GCSE and AS/A level specifications are not limited to Northern Ireland and are experienced by other users of these qualifications. In England, The Curriculum Review conducted by Becky Francis in 2024 has highlighted similar concerns regarding content overload. A recent survey from the platform *Teacher Tapp* found that 76 percent of the teachers surveyed felt there was too much content to cover in their GCSE classes and

57 percent indicated they were unable or only “just about” able to complete teaching their course prior to exam season.

The consultation responses and the engagement with pupils, teachers and school leaders further highlighted that the quantity of content in CCEA GCSEs, AS levels and A levels is a cause of concern.

Northern Ireland operates more exam series over two years than is the case in other jurisdictions. This means that teachers may have to accommodate up to six exam series over the two-year delivery of GCSEs, with two exam series for AS/A levels. This can be disruptive for teaching and learning, even in those subjects where there are fewer assessment opportunities, because of the wider impact the examinations have on pupil preparation and study leave.

When the requirement to prepare pupils for controlled assessments is also taken into consideration, teachers in Northern Ireland may be required to cover a GCSE specification in less time than is afforded to teachers in other jurisdictions who are currently delivering linear qualifications.

It was unclear from comments whether this pattern of constant exam preparation, study leave and exam sittings reduces teaching time to such an extent it magnifies the perceptions of content overload.

There is a strong rationale underpinning the proposal to reduce content, as this will increase opportunities for deeper learning thereby improving the learning experience of pupils in a qualification and aiding preparation for further or higher-level study.

There is also potential to reduce content across many CCEA qualifications and stakeholders were supportive of the proposals. The Department will, therefore, proceed with this proposal.

However, the Department is mindful that any changes *must* preserve the integrity of the qualifications and ensure they continue to support progression to further and higher education or employment. The Department has particularly noted the concerns raised by some stakeholders regarding the removal of content that is essential for progression. Reduction in content will require identifying the foundational knowledge and skills in each subject which are essential for sound understanding and progression. This will involve subject specialists and will be conducted by CCEA in

consultation with specific stakeholders, such as teachers, universities, further education providers and employer representatives.

Proposal 3: Reduce the overall number of assessments for each CCEA qualification

GCSE

In the consultation, the following question was asked: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal that CCEA GCSEs should be restricted to a maximum of two assessments per qualification, except in cases where more are needed to meet all the assessment objectives?”

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Strongly Agree	1152	32.62
Agree	1008	28.54
Neither Agree nor Disagree	278	7.87
Disagree	588	16.65
Strongly Disagree	506	14.33
Total	3532	100

61.1% of respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed with this proposal

Of these:

69.79% of teachers Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

45.39% of pupils Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

52.62% of parents Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

77.14% of school leaders Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

Commentary from stakeholders

A majority of stakeholder responses agreed with the proposal to restrict GCSEs to a maximum of two assessments per subject.

Respondents who disagreed argued that such a limit could increase pressure and heighten anxiety on pupils, as fewer exams in a subject increases the stakes of each exam. Some concerns were raised regarding creative, practical, and skills-based subjects, where restricting GCSEs to two assessments would diminish opportunities for pupils to demonstrate a broad range of competencies, particularly where practical

work, iterative project development, or varied skills form an essential part of the subject.

Respondents who disagreed also argued that variety of assessment units/components supports pupils with diverse learning needs by allowing them to demonstrate strengths across different formats.

A further theme was that assessment reduction should not be applied uniformly; some requested subject-specific consideration, noting that some disciplines require multiple components to maintain rigour and a fair representation of learning.

A level

In the consultation, the following question was asked: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to restrict the number of assessments for A level to two except where it is a necessary part of the qualification?”

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Strongly Agree	804	22.76
Agree	1009	28.57
Neither Agree nor Disagree	460	13.02
Disagree	617	17.47
Strongly Disagree	642	18.18
Total	3532	100

51.4% of respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed with this proposal.

Of these:

57.03% of teachers Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

40.17% of pupils Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

47.09% of parents Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

60.57% of school leaders Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

Commentary from stakeholders

A significantly higher proportion of respondents favoured the proposal compared to those who disagreed. A range of views were given.

For those in agreement, comments noted that reducing the number of assessments would ease assessment overload, allowing pupils to focus on learning rather than constant exam preparation, and would also free up teaching time.

For those who disagreed, there was a concern that the current CCEA A level subject specifications contain too much content, too many skill areas, and too much breadth to be meaningfully and fairly assessed through only two examination papers. They fear that such a move would create excessively long, high-stake exams and heighten anxiety.

In creative and applied subjects some respondents warned that compressing assessment into two units would inadequately capture diverse competencies and undermine progression routes aligned with practical or industry-related skills.

Although there were respondents who acknowledged that the current assessment landscape could be streamlined, they argued that any reform must be subject-by-subject, designed with discipline-specific expertise, and informed by genuine consultation with practitioners. Respondents warned against a “one-size-fits-all” model that risks damaging performance and diminishing subject integrity.

DE Reflection on Proposal

Through the consultation, the Department proposed limiting CCEA GCSE and A level qualifications to a maximum of two assessments where possible, other than in cases where other assessment arrangements are needed to meet all assessment objectives.

There has been an increase in the number of assessments required for many of CCEA's qualifications and to some degree this is a consequence of the modular structure used for GCSEs and A levels. This concern featured prominently in the *Independent Review of Education (2023)*. The Department is aware, too, that England's *Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report (2025)* also recommends exploring ways to further reduce the pupil assessment burden for GCSEs taken in England.

There does not appear to be a strong educational justification for exceeding two assessments in most subjects at GCSE. Furthermore, a clear majority of teachers and

school leaders agreed with the proposal to reduce the number of assessments at GCSE. This was evidenced from both the consultation responses and the engagement sessions held by the Department. The Department, therefore, intends to proceed with this proposal.

The Department notes the concerns raised that a reduction in the number of assessments would limit the variety of assessments. The Department recognises that there are differences across the suite of CCEA GCSE subjects and there will need to be detailed consideration given to each CCEA GCSE specification in order to reflect the specific assessment requirements of each subject.

By comparison to GCSEs, a smaller majority of respondents who were teachers and school leaders favoured a reduction in the quantity of assessments at A level. However, direct discussions with school leaders and young people reflected broad concerns that the number of assessments in current CCEA A levels is too high in a range of subjects. There is therefore a strong rationale to proceed with the proposal.

As with CCEA GCSEs, the Department recognises that there are differences across the suite of CCEA A level subjects and that in progressing the proposal to reduce assessment, there will need to be subject-specialist consideration given to each CCEA A level subject in order to preserve the integrity of the specifications.

Proposal 4: Reducing or removing the use of controlled / internal assessments from CCEA Specifications

*In the consultation, the following question was asked: **To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to reduce or remove GCSE controlled and internal assessments except in subjects where it is considered a necessary part of the qualification?***

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Strongly Agree	1098	31.09
Agree	692	19.59
Neither Agree nor Disagree	311	8.81
Disagree	627	17.75
Strongly Disagree	804	22.76
Total	3532	100

50.7% of respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed with this proposal.

40.6% of respondents Strongly Disagreed or Disagreed with this proposal.

Of these:

66.97% of teachers Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

26.15% of pupils Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

34.89% of parents Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

65.14% of school leaders Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

Stakeholder responses

Those respondents who supported the proposal highlighted growing concerns about the authenticity of coursework. With the increasing availability of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, private tutoring and parental assistance, many felt that coursework no longer reliably reflects pupils' own ability. This reinforced the need to remove or significantly reduce NEAs, except in practical subjects where they are essential. They felt that the result would be a fairer and more trustworthy assessment

system, ensuring all pupils are judged on work produced that is their own, without assistance that would not be permitted under the assessment regulations.

Far from assisting pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds, some consultation responses noted that controlled assessment/coursework could give pupils from more affluent families an undue advantage through increased parental assistance or paid support, further undermining fairness. There was also a concern about teacher workload and the administrative burden created by the current controlled assessment arrangements.

Comments opposing the proposal noted that coursework, practical assessments and speaking and listening activities may allow pupils to demonstrate a broader range of skills, including creativity, practical competence, communication, research and independent learning, which cannot be adequately assessed through external written papers alone. There was also a concern that reducing or removing controlled assessment might disproportionately disadvantage some pupils.

DE Reflection on Proposal

Over the past number of years, stakeholders and a number of reports have highlighted that controlled assessments increase teacher workload, with some questioning their value to teaching and learning.

Research has shown that controlled/internal assessments do not, on average, improve the grade outcomes. For example, it is sometimes assumed that NEA in the form of coursework or controlled assessment in a qualification can redress disadvantage on the part of those pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) or those from lower socio-economic status (SES). However, a study by Ofqual into the effects of NEA on both these cohorts found little or no impact of NEA on their performance in a specification:

“...coursework has no impact on outcomes for students of different SES and close to no impact for those with SEN...In other words, coursework offers neither advantage nor disadvantage ...’.

The Department proposed reducing or removing assessments in order to ease pressure on teachers and pupils, while recognising the need to retain such assessments in subjects where they are essential for demonstrating knowledge or skills detailed in the subject specification. This will reduce the assessment burden on pupils and the marking burden on teachers.

A recent survey² into the attitudes of teachers regarding NEA and its possible reintroduction into English awarding bodies' specifications, where it had previously been removed, found that the majority of teachers were opposed to such a move. It appears that teachers felt there were greater benefits to be had from the absence of NEA rather than its inclusion.

The Department acknowledges the further issues raised by respondents regarding authentication and academic integrity in the context of emerging AI technologies. In particular, the challenges in assuring the integrity of the qualification and that all work presented for assessment is authentically the work of the pupil. This is a challenge facing every country, so learning from the experience of others may help develop solutions and approaches that meet the needs of Northern Ireland pupils.

In responding to this proposal, a significant number of teachers and educators (67%) expressed strong support for limiting controlled assessment, reflecting their frontline experience of its educational limitations, the practical challenges of assuring authenticity and increasing concerns about the impact of AI on assessment integrity.

The concerns of parents and pupils in regard to the proposal are noted and it is important to clarify that the proposal to reduce controlled assessment is dependent upon the requirements of each subject. The Department would assure stakeholders that it is aware of the wide range of CCEA subjects covering many disciplines and the continued importance of controlled assessment in practical subjects, which are not impacted by these proposals.

The core aim of the proposal is to eradicate unnecessary assessment and duplication of tasks that assess the same knowledge and skills in multiple ways. It will also remove assessment that may not accurately reflect the attainment of a pupil.

² <https://teachertapp.co.uk/articles/ofsted-your-colleagues-and-a-return-of-gcse-coursework/>

There is strong evidence to support this proposal and strong support from teachers and school leaders. The Department, therefore, intends to proceed with the proposal.

The consultation responses and engagement sessions underlined further the Department's understanding that different approaches will be required for different subjects, because of the need to assess practical knowledge and skills in some disciplines. This will require CCEA to analyse each of its future qualifications to identify the most appropriate means of assessment to ensure validity and reliability without adding to the burden of assessment.

Proposal 5: Subject-Specific Qualification Changes

GCSE English Language: Controlled Assessment

In the consultation the following question was asked: “The Department specifically proposes removing controlled assessments from GCSE English Language. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this proposal?”

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Strongly Agree	859	24.32
Agree	616	17.44
Neither Agree nor Disagree	669	18.94
Disagree	658	18.63
Strongly Disagree	730	20.67
Total	3532	100

41.7% of respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed with this proposal.

39.3% of respondents Strongly Disagreed or Disagreed with this proposal.

Of these:

48.74% of teachers Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

27.61% of pupils Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

34.32% of parents Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

60.00% of school leaders Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

Commentary from stakeholders

Written responses to this proposal suggested a lack of clarity in how this was presented in the consultation document. The proposal aimed to address specific concerns about the *written* controlled assessment components of CCEA GCSE English Language.

The responses indicated that respondents viewed the question as also relating to the Speaking and Listening components (which were covered in a further question, below). Nevertheless, consultation with stakeholders has identified and underscored

concerns about the excessive volume of the written components of the controlled assessment for CCEA English Language, as well as questions about what it is designed to assess that is not already assessed in other units.

DE Reflection on Proposal

The Department has noted the mixed feedback on this proposal from stakeholders but also that there was some misunderstanding that this proposal also related to Speaking and Listening. This misunderstanding may have led some stakeholders to oppose the proposal. It is notable that there was strong support for this proposal from school leaders and this was also evidenced in engagement discussions.

It is clear that the written controlled assessment component of CCEA GCSE English Language reduces the amount of time available for teaching and learning. Furthermore, the assessment objective tested in this unit could be covered in an alternative assessment context.

There is, therefore, minimal educational rationale for retaining this element of GCSE English Language and the Department intends to proceed with this proposal.

GCSE English Language: Speaking and Listening Assessment

In the consultation the following question was asked: “The Department proposes to remove the formal assessment of speaking and listening for GCSE English Language as a contributor to the overall grade for GCSE English Language. However, schools will be required to endorse that students have had opportunities to build these skills through varied activities. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this proposal?”

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Strongly Agree	623	17.64
Agree	698	19.76
Neither Agree nor Disagree	629	17.81
Disagree	764	21.63
Strongly Disagree	818	23.16
Total	3532	100

37.4% of respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed with this proposal.

44.8% of respondents Strongly Disagreed or Disagreed with this proposal.

Of these:

36.21% of teachers Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

27.62% of pupils Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

41.75% of parents Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

49.14% of school leaders Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

Commentary from stakeholders

Those who supported this proposal noted concerns about the level of inconsistency evident across schools in relation to how Speaking and Listening controlled assessments are prepared for and arranged. Some noted the multiple repetition used

in some schools in order to practice for similar assessments, whilst other schools were seen as attributing less time to prepare pupils for the assessments.

Those opposed to the proposal described Speaking and Listening as an essential component for developing communication skills and growing confidence. The proposal to change to an endorsement-only model led to concerns that Speaking and Listening would become deprioritised by schools and pupils, as the activities would not contribute to grades and would as a result be taken less seriously.

DE Reflection on Proposal

The Department recognises the value of speaking and listening skills and notes the concerns raised regarding the proposal. Rather than proceed to remove assessment of these important skills, the Department will consider how best to develop an assessment model for speaking and listening; one that promotes consistency and ensures meaningful development and practice of these skills, rather than repeated, narrow, testing.

GCSE Science Practicals

In the consultation the following question was asked: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal that practical assessments in all CCEA GCSE science specifications should no longer contribute to final grades?”

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Strongly Agree	597	16.90
Agree	763	21.60
Neither Agree nor Disagree	587	16.62
Disagree	664	18.80
Strongly Disagree	921	26.08
Total	3532	100

38.5% of respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed with this proposal.

44.9% of respondents Strongly Disagreed or Disagreed with this proposal.

Of these:

39.10% of teachers Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

29.08% of pupils Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

40.23% of parents Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

47.43% of school leaders Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

Commentary from stakeholders

The written consultation responses show disagreement with the proposal to remove practical assessments from GCSE science specifications that contribute to the overall grade. Respondents were concerned that removing practicals from the final grade would significantly devalue laboratory work, leading schools to reduce hands-on experimentation. There was a view that the proposal would disproportionately harm pupils in non-selective schools, and those intending to progress into STEM pathways, as practical competence is fundamental preparation for A level sciences and further study.

Respondents were also concerned that the proposed “sign-off” model offers no incentive for schools or pupils to engage meaningfully with practical activities.

CCEA A level Science Practicals

*In the consultation the following question was asked: “**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal that practical assessments in all CCEA A level science specifications should no longer contribute to final grades?**”*

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Strongly Agree	483	13.67
Agree	669	18.94
Neither Agree nor Disagree	731	20.70
Disagree	703	19.90
Strongly Disagree	946	26.78
Total	3532	100

32.6% of respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed with this proposal.

46.7% of respondents Strongly Disagreed or Disagreed with this proposal.

Of these:

32.72% of teachers Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

24.27% of pupils Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

36.13% of parents Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

35.43% of school leaders Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

Commentary from stakeholders

A recurring theme for those who opposed this proposal was that removing graded practicals would devalue practical skills, leading schools and pupils to deprioritise laboratory work. Some argued that this would erode pupils' competence in experiment design and laboratory techniques. It was also highlighted that universities expect entrants to possess solid, demonstrable practical skills. Some noted that ungraded sign-off practicals could damage the reputation of Northern Ireland's science A levels and disadvantage applicants competing for STEM courses across the UK and Ireland. It was again iterated that simple teacher "sign-off" risks reducing practical tasks to a procedural requirement, diminishing pupil motivation.

DE Reflection on Proposal

Practical work is essential in science education, but when assessed for marks in a high stakes qualification, it can shift the focus from exploration to a rehearsed performance. This may limit opportunities for varied experimentation.

The Department understands the concerns expressed by many stakeholders about the risk of devaluing practical assessments if they do not contribute to the overall grade. The Royal Society's 2024 report "*Practical Inquiry in Secondary Science Education – an evidence synthesis*"³, noted that "...most practical inquiry undertaken in schools involves 'recipe' style activities that achieve a preordained result. Such activities do not closely emulate how scientific research is conducted...Over-emphasis

³ <https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/projects/science-education-tracker/practical-inquiry-in-science-education-evidence-synthesis.pdf>

on testing limits students' exposure to the full range of methodologies used by practising scientists."

It further notes that in countries with high stakes assessment *"...use of planning templates, exemplar assessment schedules and restricted opportunities for full investigations in different contexts, tends to reduce student learning about experimental design to an exercise in "following the rules".*

Grading practical assessments tends to lead to repetition of the required experiments "recipe style" to perfect them in order to achieve high marks, whereas it is the experimentation that is important rather than perfecting a particular experiment. Removing the pressure of having an experiment graded may encourage more risk-taking and experimentation.

The Department appreciates stakeholder concerns around this proposal but also notes the strong evidence provided by the Royal Society and others, which highlights the limited educational and scientific value of such practical assessments. It is also notable that in the young people survey 66% of young people agreed that students should have chances to do different practical experiments, but they do not have to count towards the final grade.

The Department with CCEA will give further consideration to this proposal over coming weeks.

CCEA GCSE Modern Language: Speaking and Listening

In the consultation the following question was asked: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to retain speaking and listening assessments for all CCEA GCSE Modern Language subjects and that they contribute to the overall grade for these qualifications?”

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Strongly Agree	1719	48.67
Agree	1186	33.58
Neither Agree nor Disagree	434	12.29
Disagree	92	2.60
Strongly Disagree	101	2.86
Total	3532	100

82.3% of respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed with this proposal.

Of these:

80.54% of teachers Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

72.18% of pupils Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

87.42% of parents Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

89.14% of school leaders Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

Commentary from stakeholders:

As indicated in the response statistics, respondents were overwhelmingly in favour of retaining Speaking and Listening, with fewer than 6% in disagreement. This reflects the broad understanding that the demonstration of speaking and listening skills are vital aspects of the fundamental development of core language skills.

There were views, however, that modern languages are more difficult than other GCSEs and are marked more harshly. There was also a view that the content could be reduced and there is too much rote learning.

DE Reflection on Proposal

The responses to this question reflect the widespread understanding that the study of Modern Languages requires opportunities to learn and subsequently assess the development of both speaking and listening skills. Given the strong evidence underpinning this proposal and the very strong support from stakeholders, the Department is content that future CCEA modern languages specifications will continue to require the development and assessment of these skills. This also aligns with the GCSEs and A levels offered by other awarding bodies in England and Wales.

Introduction of a CCEA A level Gaeilge

In the consultation the following question was asked: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal that CCEA should introduce a new A level in Gaeilge for students educated through the medium of Irish”

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Strongly Agree	1137	32.19
Agree	847	23.98
Neither Agree nor Disagree	1158	32.79
Disagree	137	3.88
Strongly Disagree	253	7.16
Total	3532	100

56% of respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed with this proposal, however, 32.8% were neutral.

11.1% of respondents Strongly Disagreed or Disagreed with this proposal.

Of these:

56.84% of teachers Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

54.18% of pupils Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

56.43% of parents Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

54.86% of school leaders Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

Commentary from stakeholders

A significant proportion of respondents were in favour of this proposal compared to those against. Those supporting it (a majority) reflected that it could provide recognition of linguistic proficiency gained in Irish-medium education and potentially offer an additional qualification pathway. A smaller proportion of respondents emphasised concerns about the fairness, necessity, and purpose of such a qualification. Some noted that there was no strong evidence of demand from Irish-medium teachers or pupils.

DE Reflection on Proposal

CCEA currently offers GCSEs in both Gaeilge (for those educated in the medium of Irish) and Irish (for those studying Irish as a second language). There is, however, a gap existing for an A level qualification designed to suit those pupils educated through the medium of Irish.

The Department proposed introducing a separate A level for pupils educated through the medium of Irish, distinct from that currently available for those learning Irish as a second language in English-medium schools. A dedicated A level, similar to GCSE Gaeilge, could allow those educated through the medium of Irish to demonstrate advanced written and oral skills.

The consultation responses indicated that the majority of stakeholders supported the proposal but that a small minority (11.1%) of respondents to the consultation notably from the Irish-medium sector were against this proposal whilst 32.8% of respondents were neutral to the proposal. The Department has noted the full range of comments indicating that there will need to be further detailed engagement with the Irish-medium sector on the potential for this new qualification.

Proposal 6: GCSE Grading Scale

In the consultation, the following question was asked: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to change CCEA GCSE grades from an A–G scale to a 9–1 scale as is used in England?”*

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Strongly Agree	377	10.67
Agree	442	12.51
Neither Agree nor Disagree	638	18.06
Disagree	591	16.73
Strongly Disagree	1484	42.02
Total	3532	100

23.2% of respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed with this proposal.

58.7% of respondents Strongly Disagreed or Disagreed with this proposal.

Of these:

25.05% of teachers Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

16.32% of pupils Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

21.54% of parents Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

29.14% of school leaders Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

Commentary from stakeholders

Respondents expressed a preference for CCEA retaining its familiar 9-point A*–G GCSE grading scale, with concerns that the proposed 9–1 scale would create unnecessary confusion for pupils, parents, and employers in Northern Ireland. The numerical system was described as less intuitive, with some noting that changing the scale offered no real educational benefit.

Those opposed to the proposal also argued that the current lettered grades are well understood. A smaller number of contributors supported the change on the grounds of the benefits of comparability across the UK.

DE Reflection on Proposal

The different GCSE grading scales used in England, Wales and by CCEA in Northern Ireland have the potential to cause confusion, particularly in university applications and employment. Wales (WJEC) uses an 8-point A*-G scale, while CCEA uses a 9-point A*-G scale that includes a unique C* grade. England also uses a 9-point scale, but with numbers (9–1) instead of letters.

To improve clarity, the Department proposed replacing CCEA's GCSE alphabetical grading with England's 9–1 scale, as this is the grading scale used by the majority of GCSE pupils across the UK. However, the consultation responses and engagement with stakeholders, has indicated that the proposal for CCEA GCSE grades to mirror the 9-1 scale used in England is broadly unpopular.

Whilst the Department maintains that a move to the 9-1 scale would have had potential to improve clarity across the UK, this proposal was not supported by stakeholders, and critically would not fundamentally improve teaching and learning, raise standards or reduce workload, so it will not be pursued at this time.

Proposal 7: Change the structure of CCEA GCSEs from modular to linear

In the consultation, the following question was asked: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to change most CCEA GCSEs to a linear structure.”

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Strongly Agree	494	13.99
Agree	561	15.88
Neither Agree nor Disagree	249	7.05
Disagree	650	18.40
Strongly Disagree	1578	44.68
Total	3532	100

29.9% of respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed with this proposal.

63.1% of respondents Strongly Disagreed or Disagreed.

Of these:

35.91% of teachers Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

16.11% of pupils Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

24.69% of parents Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

35.43% of school leaders Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

Commentary from stakeholders

The consultation responses indicate mixed views but with a significant majority not in favour of moving to a linear structure. Concerns were raised that a linear model could increase pressure on pupils, and disadvantage a wide range of young people, especially those in non-selective schools, or pupils with SEN. There were also views that the linear model would benefit high-achieving pupils while widening the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils.

Those who supported a move to a linear format, commented that modular exams interrupt teaching time, especially in Year 11, where pupils miss lessons for revision, exams and study leave. These respondents believed that a linear model would protect curriculum time, allowing for deeper learning, making the two-year course more coherent rather than the disruptive, stop-start nature of modular courses.

DE Reflection on Proposal

Many pupils in Northern Ireland currently face high-stakes CCEA GCSE exams throughout Years 11 and 12, reducing valuable teaching time. The Department proposed moving to linear GCSEs to encourage deeper learning and stronger long-term understanding, as well as to reduce disruption caused by constant high stakes external assessment over two years.

There are also concerns that the mixed pattern of entry involving both Year 11 and Year 12 pupils may disadvantage Year 11 pupils and lead to a pattern of unnecessary early exam entry, followed by a series of unnecessary resits for young people. In Summer 2025, CCEA recorded 26,919 resits across all single award GCSEs, with well below half of those entered improving their grade (39.9%). Even the minority who did achieve higher grades, may have done so in any case had they simply taken the exam later in the course and had the benefit of additional maturity and teaching time.

While the Department takes note of the concerns raised by stakeholders through the consultation processes, these concerns have to be balanced against, and considered within, the context of research (listed in Annex B) that demonstrates that, where a linear approach to GCSEs has been implemented, there is no evidence of disadvantage to overall outcomes or to any specific cohort of pupils. It should also be noted that modular exams were introduced not to address equity concerns or support particular groups of pupils, but rather it may have been the result of a commercial decision by awarding bodies to increase examination entries.

Regarding the concern that a modular structure would lead to a fall in grade outcomes, research by Ofqual and Oxford University's Centre for Educational Assessment looking at the impact of linear and modular exams at GCSE concluded:

*'We found no educationally significant effect of examination structure on grade outcomes in English, mathematics or science. Nor did we find any statistical evidence of effects of structure upon progression to A level. So, there was no evidence to suggest that either modular or linear GCSEs led to better educational outcomes. Importantly, equity gaps in gender, socioeconomic status and school type were not affected by structure once prior attainment was taken into account. While some teachers believed that certain groups of students would perform better in a modular system, this view was not supported by analysis of outcome data, where such beliefs could be investigated.'*⁴

Internationally, modular secondary school examinations are not commonplace. The Department continues to believe that there would be clear benefits for Northern Ireland pupils in a move to linear GCSE qualifications, with fewer exams taken and more time for teaching and learning

The Department is, however, also conscious that detailed consideration needs to be given to the concerns raised by stakeholders. In particular, we will give further consideration to arrangements in Single and Double Award Science qualifications, which are likely to require a continued modular structure, given the range of different subject content and assessments involved.

⁴ [Examination Reform: Impact of Linear and Modular Examinations at GCSE - GOV.UK](#)

Retaining Modular GCSE English and Maths

In the consultation, the following question was asked: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to retain a modular structure for both CCEA GCSE English and GCSE Mathematics?”

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Strongly Agree	2030	57.47
Agree	978	27.69
Neither Agree nor Disagree	299	8.47
Disagree	102	2.89
Strongly Disagree	123	3.48
Total	3532	100

85.2% of respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed with this proposal.

Of these:

83.61% of teachers Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

79.29% of pupils Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

89.70% of parents Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

91.43% of school leaders Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

Commentary from stakeholders

The stakeholder responses indicated agreement with retaining a modular structure for CCEA GCSE English Language and Mathematics. Respondents emphasised that modularity in these core subjects is essential to support pupils across the full ability range. Modular exams were viewed as reducing pressure by breaking content into manageable units, providing regular opportunities for feedback, and allowing resit opportunities that can improve outcomes.

A concern was raised that retaining modularity only for English Language and Mathematics, while removing it for most other subjects, would create inconsistency

and unfairness, the argument being that if modularity is educationally beneficial for these two subjects, then it should also apply across all or most GCSEs.

There were, however, respondents who felt that all qualifications should move to linear, on consistency grounds, i.e. there should not be two modular subjects with all others being linear.

DE Reflection on Proposal

The Department has noted the popularity of retaining modularity for these core, foundational subjects and is content to progress this proposal.

The Department's rationale for retaining modularity in these subjects is to reduce the scale of change for schools and the anxiety around change in these key gateway qualifications which are required to progress to the next level of education or training, rather than evidence that modular approaches impact overall outcomes.

Where there is an improvement in a grade after a resit for 50.7% of resitters in English Language and 33.4% of resitters in GCSE Mathematics, this should not necessarily be attributed to the modular structure meaning higher outcomes. Improvements in grades are likely to be a result of additional teaching and learning time and the maturity of the pupil, and it is likely many would achieve a higher grade if the exams had simply been taken at the end of Year 12 (at which the GCSE level is aimed) in the first instance.

It should be noted that schools in Northern Ireland already offer and deliver both linear and modular GCSEs, so there would be no inconsistency in progressing this proposal.

Proposal 8: Change the structure of CCEA A levels from modular to linear

In the consultation, the following question was asked: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal that CCEA A level qualifications should be changed to a two-year structure by removing AS levels?”

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Strongly Agree	365	10.33
Agree	283	8.01
Neither Agree nor Disagree	167	4.73
Disagree	634	17.95
Strongly Disagree	2083	58.98
Total	3532	100

18.3% of respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed with this proposal.

77% of respondents Strongly Disagreed or Disagreed.

Of these:

19.03% of teachers Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

9.21% of pupils Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

18.59% of parents Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

26.29% of school leaders Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

Commentary from stakeholders

The consultation responses show significant opposition to the proposal to move to a linear two-year A level structure. They noted that such a change could increase stress and anxiety for young people by concentrating all assessment into a single period at the end of the course.

AS exams are regarded by some as an essential component of the current system, providing pupils with a mid-course checkpoint, externally validated progress data, the opportunity to re-sit modules and to adjust subject choices based on Year 13 performance.

Stakeholders highlighted that the AS offers flexibility to begin with four subjects and drop one while still achieving a recognised qualification. Some viewed AS levels as being important for UCAS and CAO applications, enabling pupils to present reliable evidence of attainment.

For those in support of the proposal, comments included that linear A levels would increase time for teaching, for example noting that Year 13 currently loses several weeks to AS examination preparation and study leave. It was also noted that having four years of exams, with the associated preparation, has led to ‘teaching to the test’, rather than developing a deeper subject-specific knowledge and skillset.

DE Reflection on Proposal

The current modular approach in Northern Ireland means pupils often sit twice as many exams across Years 13 and 14 compared to pupils in England. The Department proposed a linear model that could free up teaching time, allow more curricular time for pupils to develop broader skills and provide more opportunities for independent inquiry,

Some stakeholders commented that the AS level is a useful “checkpoint” in terms of progress towards the full A level. The Department is concerned, however, that some schools use this “checkpoint” to prevent pupils from returning to school to complete the A2 level if an AS level result is deemed by the school to be unsatisfactory to progress to A2. The Department has written to schools to advise that AS outcomes must not be used for this purpose. Furthermore, AS should not be a substitute for ongoing in-year teacher-led assessment and feedback.

Despite stakeholder concerns, it is clear that AS levels are not essential for entry to university. Many Northern Ireland pupils take linear A levels (through English awarding bodies) and still progress to university. All A levels in England are linear, and the AS is not a consideration for English universities. Furthermore, Northern Ireland Universities will reflect the CCEA A level structure in their entry application process and requirements.

It is also important to acknowledge that the proportion of AS level pupils who improve their grade by resitting an AS level examination is statistically very small, and of those who re-sit their AS level, only 7% improve their overall A level grade.

The original purpose of the AS level was to encourage breadth in the curriculum with pupils taking four or five AS levels and then reducing to three A levels (A2 units) in Year 14. Statistics show that the vast majority of pupils in Northern Ireland only take three AS levels at the beginning of Year 13 and therefore the AS/A2 structure no longer serves the original policy intent. In addition, research by Cambridge Assessment argues that A levels remain a robust and effective foundation for the demands of high-intensity three-year undergraduate degrees because they promote deep subject knowledge and academic discipline rather than superficial breadth. This work stresses that strong performance at degree level depends on extensive cognitive resources built through sustained, coherent study, something linear A levels are designed to cultivate. Drawing on cognitive science and international comparisons, it argues that the three A level approach is an essential component of effective preparation for university.⁵

The Department notes, however, the strength of feeling from stakeholders on this proposal, in particular the concerns that leaving all assessment to the end of the course would increase pressure on young people. This is more acute at A Level than at GCSE given these qualifications are necessary for university entry and that the smaller number of qualifications, with most students normally only taking 3 A Levels, increases the stakes of each individual exam.

Stakeholders particularly emphasised their concerns that a fully linear approach may increase pressure for some pupils due to the high-stakes nature of the final exam series and that completing some assessment before Year 14 eases pressure.

In discussions with principals in January 2026, DE officials sought to better understand the underlying concerns around this proposal. In particular, whether the concern was about the ability to take some assessment before the end of the A level course, or the desire to retain the AS as a standalone qualification. A significant number indicated that completing part of the A level qualification in Year 13 was more important than attaining a standalone AS qualification.

⁵ [130106-tim-oates-paper-education-assessment-and-developing-a-comprehensive-qualifications-framework-.pdf](#)

This is a particularly complex issue with a broad range of views. The Department has listened carefully to all stakeholder views and evidence and will reflect on and consider this proposal further before making final decisions on the qualifications policy framework.

Proposal 9: A Future Northern Ireland Diploma of Education (NIDE)

In the consultation the following question was asked: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to develop a new diploma to be awarded to students at the end of Key Stage 4 entitled the Northern Ireland Diploma for Education (NIDE)?”

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Strongly Agree	548	15.52
Agree	959	27.15
Neither Agree nor Disagree	1135	32.13
Disagree	413	11.69
Strongly Disagree	477	13.51
Total	3532	100

42.7% of respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed with this proposal.

25.2% of respondents Strongly Disagreed or Disagreed with this proposal.

Of these:

45.37% of teachers Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

33.68% of pupils Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

39.85% of parents Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

58.29% of school leaders Strongly Agreed or Agreed.

Commentary from stakeholders

There was a higher proportion of responses in favour of the NIDE than against. However, those who provided comments noted some concerns and questions. There was also a significant level of uncertainty because key features of the NIDE are not yet clear.

Responses queried whether the NIDE is intended to replace, sit alongside, or simply rebadge existing GCSE pathways. Respondents wanted clarity on the purpose, structure, assessment, grading / equivalence, and how the award would be recognised

by employers, FE colleges, and universities within and beyond Northern Ireland. Some respondents highlighted a tension between earlier arguments for greater alignment with England and the introduction of a region-specific award.

Some saw potential benefits for lower-attaining pupils and those with SEN, especially for NIDE to provide accessible level 2 literacy / numeracy qualifications in place of GCSE. There were also calls for greater recognition of level 1 qualifications (e.g. GCSE grades D-G), not just level 2.

There was also a view that before any roll-out, the Department should provide detailed information, consult widely with front-line practitioners and end-users, consider piloting, and set out clear progression maps into post-16 academic and vocational routes.

DE Reflection on Proposal

This proposal relates to a recommendation in the strategic review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. It was included in this consultation to seek initial views from stakeholders. The NIDE would encourage schools to offer a broad, balanced curriculum to all pupils and, therefore, avoid undue narrowing of the curriculum for some pupils. It would potentially be structured as below:

- Both a level 2 Literacy and a level 2 Numeracy qualification.
- Full completion of a new Key Stage 4 Careers, Employability and Personal Development (CEP) programme.
- One or more level 2 qualifications in Science, Design & Technology, Computing, or Digital Technology.
- One or more level 2 qualifications in History, Geography, Citizenship, Modern Languages, Music, Drama, or Art.

The NIDE would recognise young people's achievements across the curriculum in existing qualifications, as well as a new careers, employability and personal

development programme. It is aimed at all young people in Northern Ireland. There was, however, a significant level of confusion among stakeholders in regard to the proposal, with many for example thinking it was a potential replacement for GCSEs for some pupils rather than a recognition of attainment across existing qualifications.

The Department continues to believe there is significant merit in progressing this proposal to ensure a broad and balanced curricular offer at Key Stage 4 for all young people and its value was recognised by a significant proportion of stakeholders.

Feedback on this question, however, indicates that the proposal needs to be fully developed and more detail provided to stakeholders. It will be important for the Department to continue to engage with stakeholders as we progress work to more fully articulate this proposal.

Part 3: Conclusion and Next Steps

The consultation on the future of CCEA GCSE, AS and A level qualifications generated a significant level of engagement, with 3,532 responses to the public questionnaire, 38 written submissions from individuals and organisations, and 4,496 young people participating in the bespoke youth survey.

Taken together, these responses provided a rich and detailed range of responses, reflecting a wide range of views from pupils, parents, teachers, school leaders, representative bodies and stakeholders across Northern Ireland.

Across the proposals, respondents highlighted both strong areas of consensus and issues requiring careful consideration. Clear support emerged for retaining the GCSE and A level brands, reducing excessive content, and reducing assessment. The Department intends to take forward these proposals in finalising the revised qualifications for Northern Ireland.

In some areas, responses demonstrated a degree of uncertainty and the need for further clarification and information for stakeholders, for example in progressing the proposals around the development of the Northern Ireland Diploma of Education.

There were also differences between various groups of stakeholders on some proposals, with for example teachers being much more supportive of the proposals to reduce NEA than parents and young people. There is a clear need to provide more information on the limitations of NEAs.

Stakeholders also raised concerns in several areas, notably on changing the grading at GCSE to the 9-1 scale and the potential impact of changing assessment structures to linear, particularly at A level. Given there are negligible direct educational benefits to changing the grading scale, the Department does not intend to pursue this proposal.

In light of stakeholder feedback, the Department will work with CCEA to give further detailed consideration to the structure of GCSEs and A Levels before finalising the new qualifications policy framework.

The breadth and depth of feedback provide the Department with a valuable understanding of stakeholder priorities, practical considerations for implementation, and the wider educational implications of reform. These findings will be used, together with research evidence, international comparators and the recommendations of recent reviews to form a robust basis for the final policy framework for CCEA qualifications which will be announced over the coming weeks.

Young Person Survey

In collaboration with the EA, DE designed a children and young persons' version of the consultation questionnaire which the EA Youth Service hosted and launched on 7 October 2025.

The survey attracted 4,496 responses from young people across Northern Ireland, providing some insights into the views of a proportion of young people on the proposed changes to GCSEs and A levels.

There was support for retaining the well-known GCSE and A level brand names, with 87% agreeing. Similarly, a clear majority (around 67%) supported reducing the amount of content in each subject. Views on limiting most subjects to a maximum of two exams were more mixed: 59% agreed, but over a quarter disagreed.

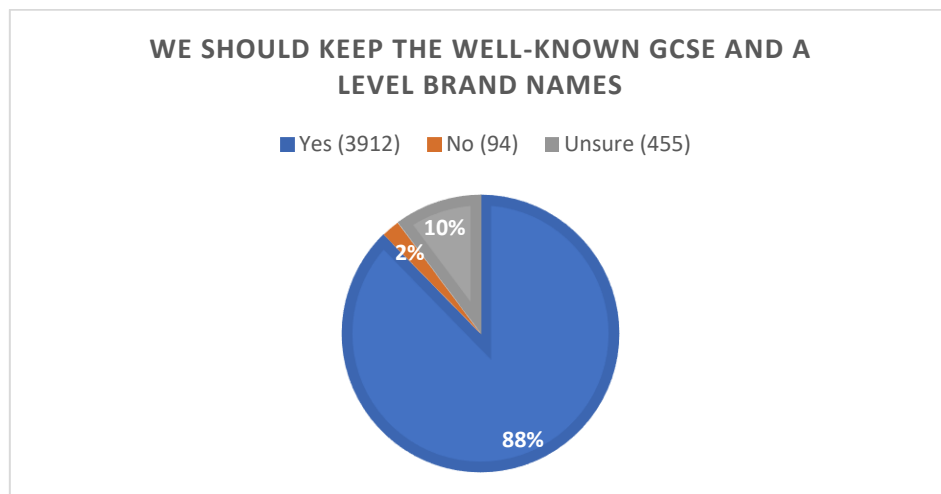
On coursework and controlled assessments, opinion was divided. A majority (54%) opposed cutting or removing these unless essential, indicating that many pupils see coursework as a way to balance exam pressure. Similarly, removing English Language controlled assessments drew more disagreement than support, with 48% against and 41% in favour. In contrast, there was strong consensus (66%) for retaining speaking and listening assessments in modern languages.

Science practicals were widely valued, with 66% agreeing they should remain as experiences but not count towards final grades. Support for introducing a new A level in Gaelge was moderate (46%), though a significant proportion were unsure (31%).

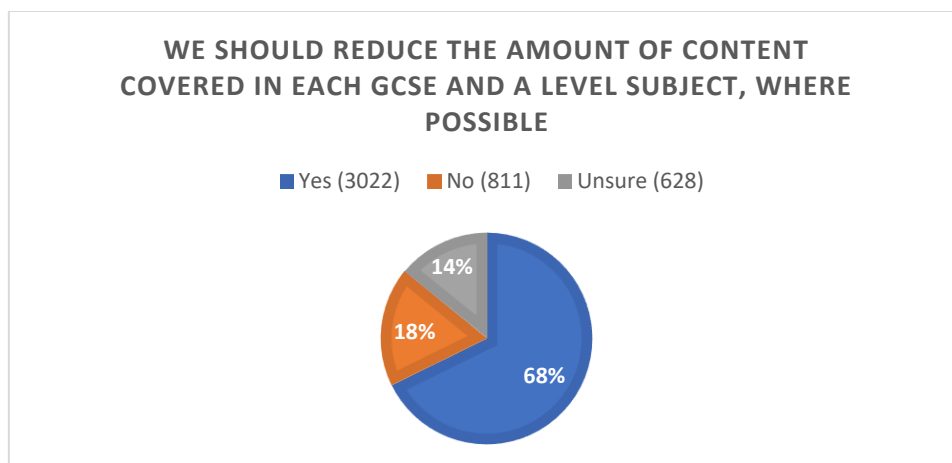
The proposal to change GCSE grading from letters to numbers was strongly rejected, with 74% opposed. Similarly, most respondents (64%) opposed moving GCSEs to a linear structure, while 81% strongly supported keeping modular exams for English and mathematics. For A levels, the proposal to move to linear exams and remove AS levels was unpopular, with 62% disagreeing.

Finally, views on introducing a Northern Ireland Diploma of Education were mixed: 47% agreed, 16% disagreed, and 37% were unsure (Question 18), suggesting the proposal needs further explanation and consultation.

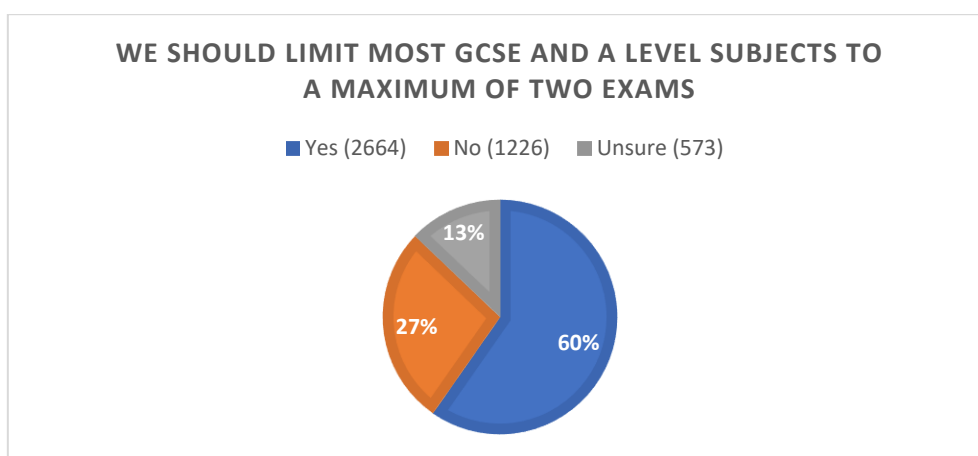
We should keep the well-known GCSE and A level brand names.



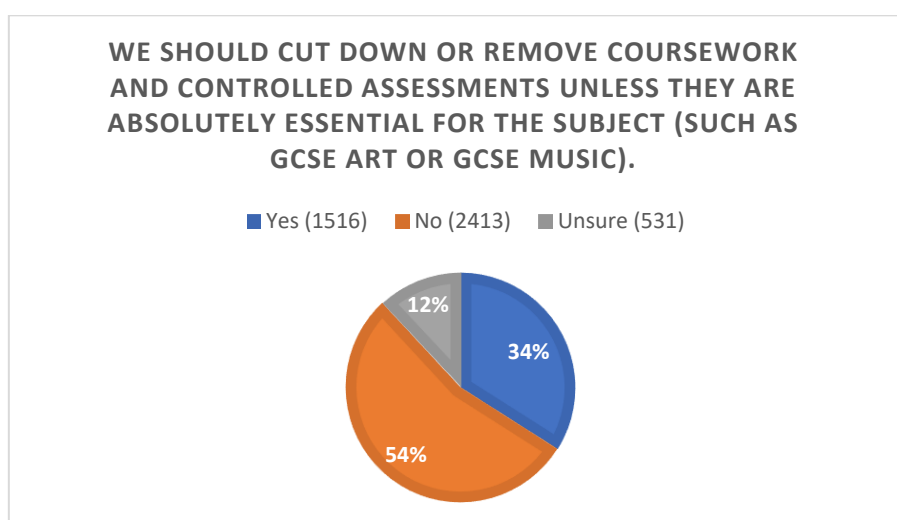
We should reduce the amount of content covered in each GCSE and A level subject, where possible.



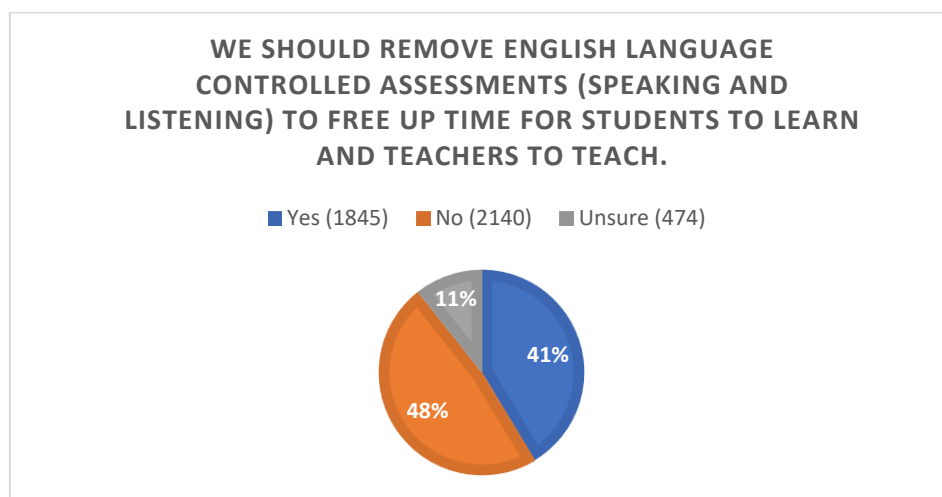
We should limit most GCSE and A level subjects to a maximum of two exams.



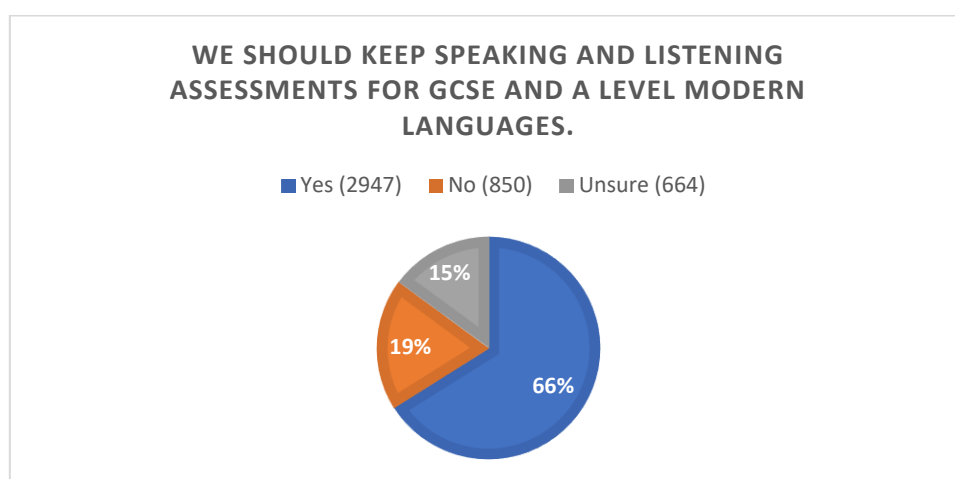
We should cut down or remove coursework and controlled assessments unless they are absolutely essential for the subject (such as GCSE Art or GCSE Music).



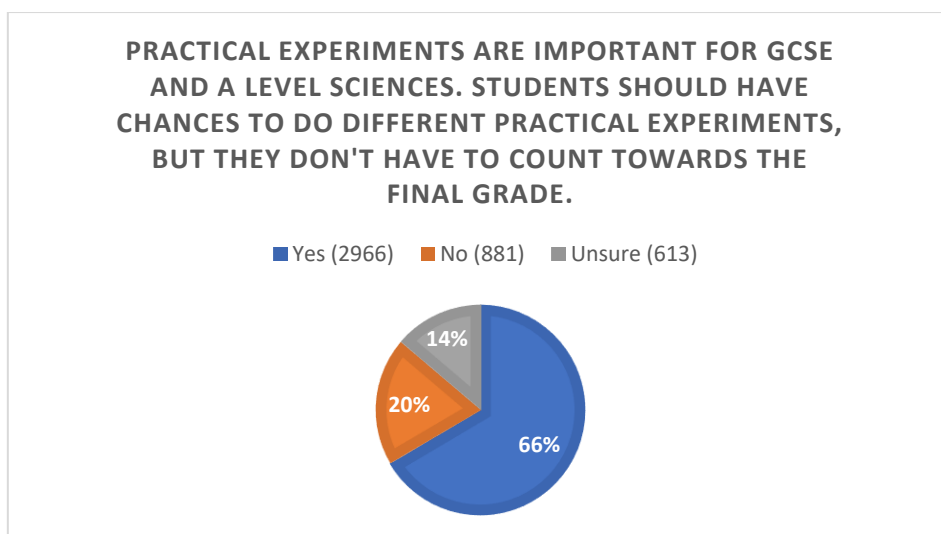
We should remove English Language controlled assessments (speaking and listening) to free up time for students to learn and teachers to teach.



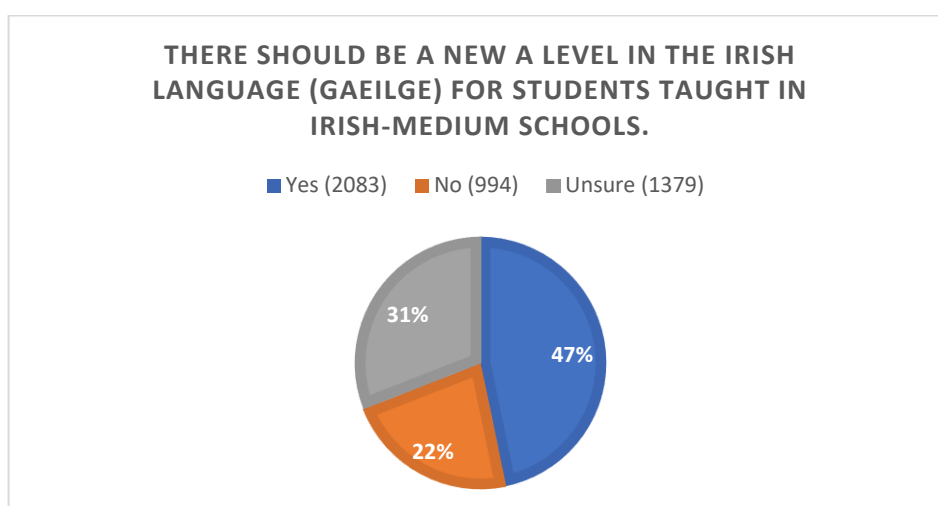
We should keep speaking and listening assessments for GCSE and A level Modern Languages.



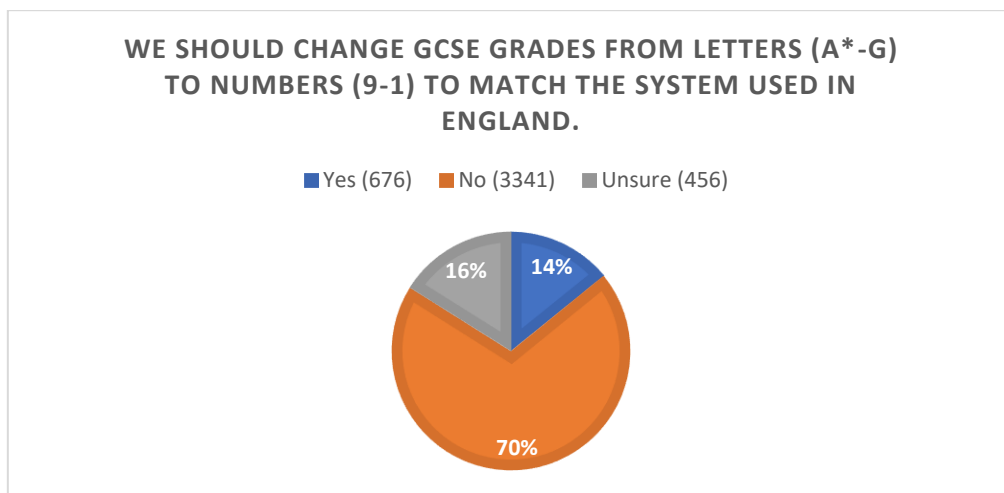
Practical experiments are important for GCSE and A level Sciences. Students should have chances to do different practical experiments, but they don't have to count towards the final grade.



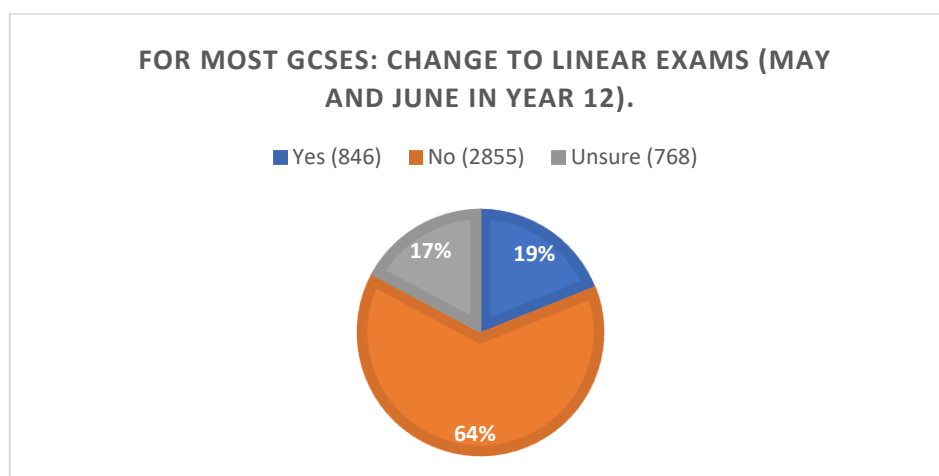
There should be a new A level in the Irish Language (Gaeilge) for students taught in Irish-medium schools.



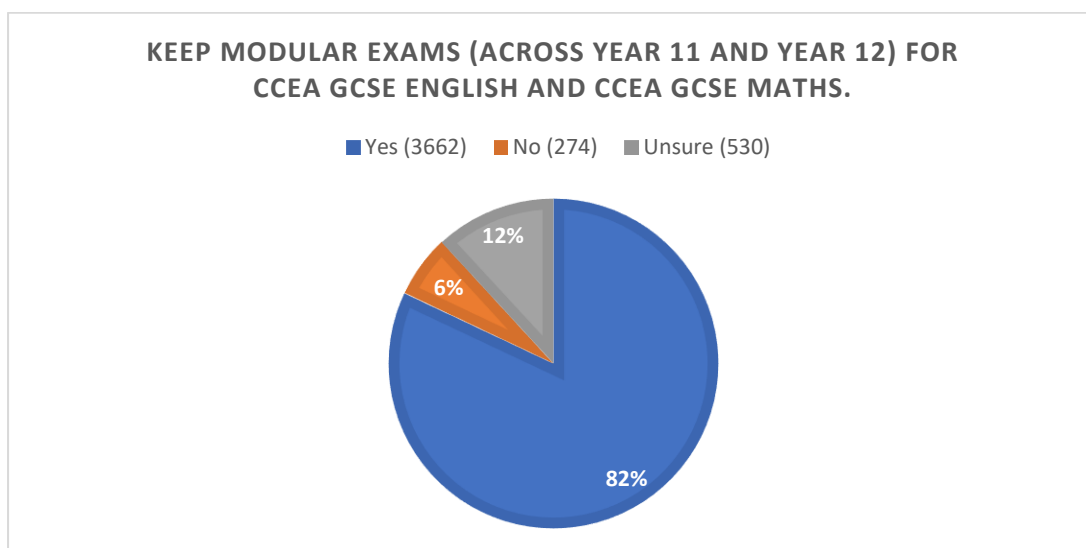
We should change GCSE grades from letters (A*-G) to numbers (9-1) to match the system used in England.



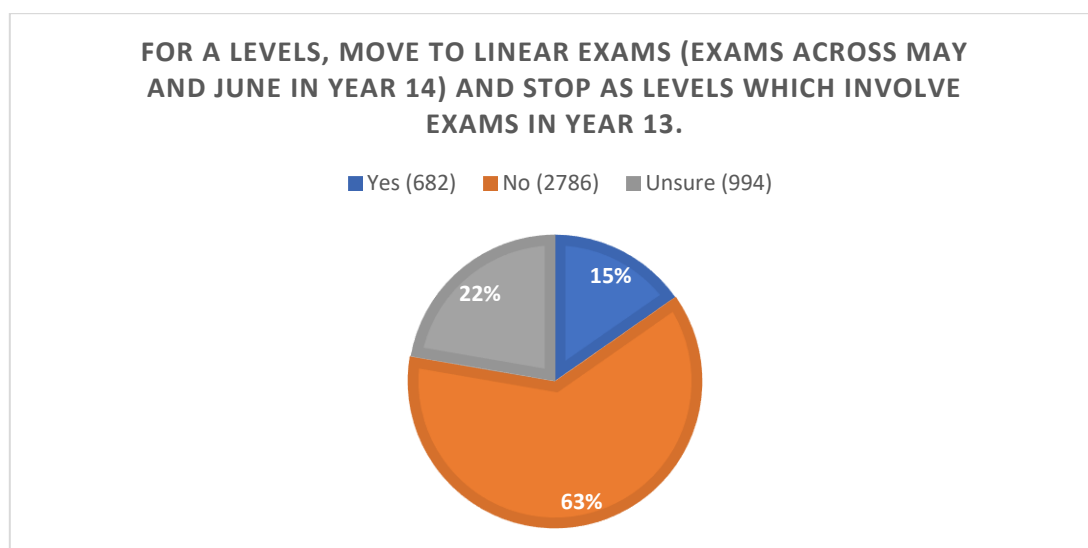
For most GCSEs: Change to linear exams (May and June in Year 12).



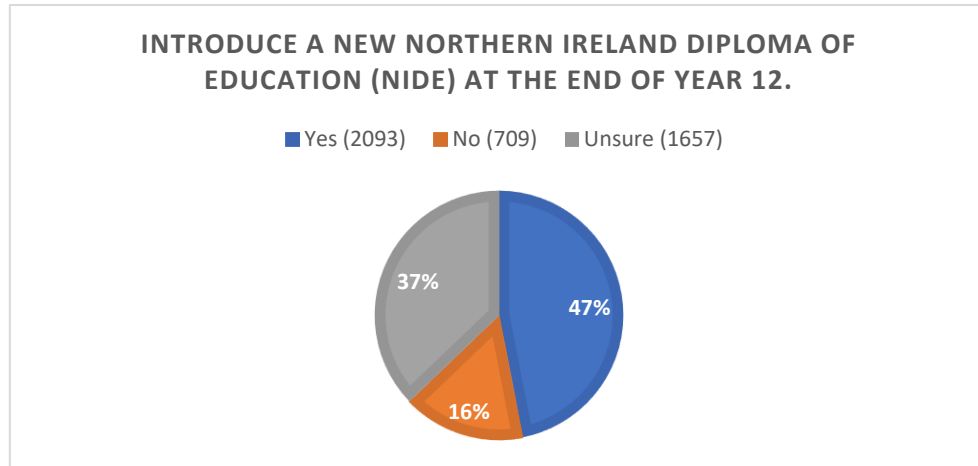
Keep modular exams (across Year 11 and Year 12) for CCEA GCSE English and CCEA GCSE Maths.



For A levels, move to linear exams (exams across May and June in Year 14) and stop AS levels which involve exams in Year 13



Introduce a new Northern Ireland Diploma of Education (NIDE) at the end of Year 12.



Evidence-gathering and Research

The TransformED Strategy committed to drawing on robust evidence-based research, including recent reviews of education in Northern Ireland, and best practice to inform its programme of curriculum, assessment and qualifications reform. There has also been extensive engagement with stakeholders in advance of the proposals and throughout the consultation process.

Pre-consultation evidence-gathering

The evidence-gathering processes included extensive engagement with school leaders from January to June 2025. DE officials visited area learning communities across Northern Ireland to listen to school leaders' views on the current qualifications system and to discuss issues and concerns. Feedback from these meetings helped to highlight some key concerns which the Department is seeking to address through the consultation proposals.

DE officials also engaged with pupils in a number of Area Learning Communities to discuss qualifications in February and March 2025, as part of research conducted by the OECD into upper secondary qualifications, including literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

DE officials have also participated over several years in a specific OECD international working group on upper secondary education, including qualifications and accreditation.

Reviews relating to education in Northern Ireland

The Department's proposals have considered a number of recent reviews and reports, specific to the Northern Ireland education system. Notably, the following reviews have shaped the engagement processes with stakeholders and informed the proposals:

The Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland (December 2023):

<https://www.independentreviewofeducation.org.uk/final-report>

A Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum (Crehan, June 2025)

https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/NI%20Curriculum%20Review_0.pdf

A Fair Start (June 2021)

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/fair-start-final-report-action-plan>

Developing a more strategic approach to 14-19 education and training: A framework to transform 14-19 education and training provision (June 2022)

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/framework-transform-14-19-education-and-training-provision>

‘A New and Better Normal: Children and Young People’s Experiences of the COVID-19 Pandemic’ – NICCY

[*‘A New and Better Normal: Children and Young People’s Experiences of the COVID-19 Pandemic’ - Niccy*](#)

OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education NORTHERN IRELAND, UNITED KINGDOM (2013)

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/oecd-evaluation-and-assessment.pdf>

External Research

Consideration of external research into the learning experiences at Key Stage 4 and post-16 has been vital, as has a review of core issues, such as linear and modular forms of assessment, gender differences and socioeconomic factors. A review of relevant research was conducted with specific focus on GCSEs, A levels, models of assessment in upper secondary and international perspectives. Key research reviewed included:

Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland: A comparative perspective | OECD Education Working Papers | OECD iLibrary ([oecd-ilibrary.org](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org))

https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/upper-secondary-education-student-assessment-in-scotland_d8785ddf-en.html

Oxford Centre for Education Assessment /Ofqual joint research on the impact of linear and modular examinations in GCSE; 2019

[Modular linear report final.pdf](#)

[Modular Linear GCSE summary final.pdf](#)

Gill, T. (2024). *The impact of reducing the number of exams on results in GCSEs*. Cambridge University Press & Assessment

<https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/728985-the-impact-of-reducing-the-number-of-exams-on-results-in-gcses.pdf>

Ofqual: *The Impact of coursework on attainment dependent on student characteristics* 2020

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5efb05acd3bf7f76970eed62/The_impact_of_coursework_on_attainment_dependent_on_student_characteristics.pdf

High-stakes testing after basic secondary education: How and why is it done in high-performing education systems?

[610965-high-stakes-testing-after-basic-secondary-education-how-and-why-is-it-done-in-high-performing-education-systems-.pdf](#)

Baird, J-A., Hayward, L., Meadows, M. and Hao, Z. (2025) *Assessment and learning loss in England: never let a good crisis go to waste*, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, Vol. 29, No. 5

Niemtus, Z. (2019) *GCSEs: what has been the impact of the shift to linear exams?* *Times Educational Supplement*

Ofqual (2019a) *Modular versus linear GCSEs: does the structure of exams matter?*

Ofqual (2019b) *Examination Reform: Impact of Linear and Modular Examinations at GCSE: Summary Report*

Ofqual (2019c) *Examination Reform: Impact of Linear and Modular Examinations at GCSE*

Pinot de Moira, A., Meadows, M and Baird, J-A, (2020) *The SES equity gap and the reform from modular to linear GCSE mathematics* University of Oxford, Ofqual

Rodeiro, C.L.V. and Nádas, R. (2010) *The effects of GCSE modularisation: a comparison between modular and linear examinations in secondary education* *Research Matters: A Cambridge Assessment publication*

List of organisations that submitted written responses to the consultation

There were 11 written responses submitted by individuals and 27 organisations also responded in writing.

Organisations that submitted written responses (sorted alphabetically)

Alliance Party

An Gréasán do Mhúinteoirí Gaeilge

Catholic Schools' Trustee Service

Children's Law Centre on behalf of Youth@CLC

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG)

Controlled Schools' Support Council

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)

Governing Bodies Association (GBA)

Into Film

Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO)

The King's Trust

Mid Ulster District Council

NAHT (National Association of Head Teachers)

NASUWT, The Teachers' Union

The Nerve Centre

Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)

Northern Ireland Screen

Office of the Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists Northern Ireland (RCSLT NI)

The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)

Secondary Students Union of Northern Ireland (SSUNI)

Sinn Féin

Six Further Education Colleges NI

Stranmillis University College

Ulster Teachers' Union

University & College Union at Queen's University Belfast

Youth Assembly for Northern Ireland