

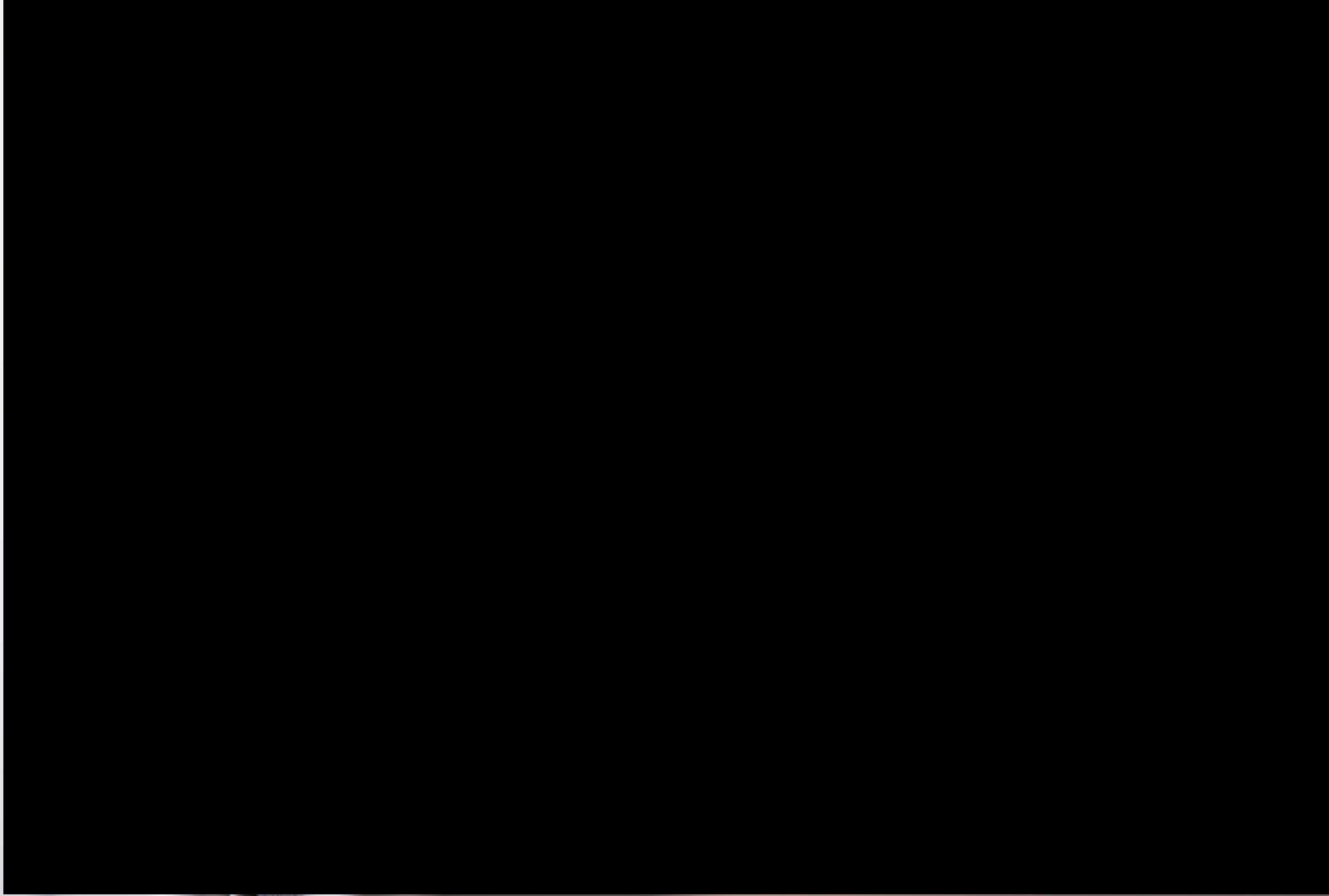


Department of  
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# Transform**ED**

## Policy Framework for General Qualifications in Northern Ireland

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## Introduction

This document sets out the revised policy framework for GCSE, AS and A level qualifications to be delivered in Northern Ireland. It is intended to support schools by providing clarity on:

- the direction of qualifications reform;
- what will change and what will remain the same;
- how revised CCEA qualifications will operate; and
- the conditions that qualifications from English and Welsh awarding bodies must meet to be delivered in Northern Ireland.

A new, detailed Regulatory Framework for general qualifications will now be developed based on this policy framework. It will in due course be accompanied by the policy framework for vocational qualifications delivered in schools.

## Background and Purpose

In March 2025, the Minister of Education, Paul Givan MLA, launched the TransformED Strategy, designed to achieve excellence in education in Northern Ireland through an ambitious reform programme.

Drawing on robust evidence and international practice, the TransformED Strategy is reviewing the curriculum, assessment and qualifications in Northern Ireland, to enrich the educational experience of all pupils.

A key action within TransformED is the review of qualifications taken by pupils in Northern Ireland to ensure they remain of high quality, are fit for purpose, support teaching and learning, continue to provide pathways and progression, and maintain portability and recognition locally, nationally and internationally.

It is also a key policy priority that revised qualifications reduce unnecessary assessment, easing workload for both teachers and pupils. This will create space for pupils to study their subjects in greater depth, building stronger knowledge and understanding.

## General qualifications in Northern Ireland

General qualifications are GCSE, AS and A level qualifications.

GCSEs, AS and A levels are a brand which is shared across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. That means that, while there are some differences in the approach to these qualifications in the different jurisdictions, they all share core characteristics, including the type of content, the level of demand and methodology for awarding. Critically, they are recognised as of a comparable standard across the three jurisdictions.

General qualifications offered in Northern Ireland must be of robust demand and quality, valued by key stakeholders, and provide meaningful pathways and progression for pupils. Through their achievements in these qualifications, Northern Ireland pupils must have optimum opportunities for access to further and higher education, and employment, in a local, national and global context.

Northern Ireland intends to keep the qualifications market open, allowing awarding organisations from England and Wales to offer their GCSEs and A levels where they meet the required criteria. This ensures learner choice and access to a broad range of subjects.

## Policy requirements for CCEA GCSE qualifications

CCEA GCSEs will follow the principles below:

### STRUCTURE AND ASSESSMENT

- CCEA GCSE qualifications will be linear in structure, with the exceptions of GCSE English Language, Mathematics, Single and Double Award Science which will be modular (while still allowing end of course entry if preferred).
- Most GCSEs will have no more than two written exam papers, unless the subject requires more to ensure appropriate assessment.
- Unit assessments for modular GCSEs may be taken at any exam series over the two years of the qualification.

### CONTENT AND DEPTH

- CCEA will reduce the amount of content in its GCSEs where possible, to allow for deeper learning and secure understanding within each subject.

### GRADING

- Grade outcomes must be reported on a nine-point alphabetical A\*– G scale.

### NON-EXAMINED ASSESSMENT

- Non-Examined Assessment such as coursework and controlled assessment will be used sparingly and only when essential, for example, where practical skills cannot be reliably assessed in a written exam.

### SUBJECT-SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS

- **English language:** no written controlled assessment unit; a speaking and listening component will contribute to the final grade.
- **Modern languages:** a speaking and listening component will contribute to the overall grade.
- **Science:** pupils must complete a set of prescribed experiments. Practical skills will be assessed through exam questions drawing on these experiments completed during the course.

## Policy requirements for CCEA A level qualifications

CCEA A levels will follow the principles below:

### STRUCTURE AND ASSESSMENT

- There will be a new 2-year modular A level.
- Modular A level qualifications will have three units of assessment.
- All three units of assessment can be taken at the end of Year 14 (i.e. in a linear format), but CCEA will also designate one unit that can be taken at the end of Year 13 if the school wishes to enter pupils early.

- The module that can be taken in Year 13 will be worth 30% of the qualification, and the remaining two assessments in Year 14 worth 70%.
- Once the new modular specifications are introduced, CCEA will no longer offer a separate AS level qualification.

### CONTENT AND DEPTH

- CCEA will reduce the amount of content in its A levels where possible, to allow for deeper learning and secure understanding within each subject.

### GRADING

- The grade outcomes of CCEA A level qualifications must be reported on a six-point A\* – E scale.

### NON-EXAMINED ASSESSMENT

- Non-Examined Assessment such as coursework and controlled assessment will be used sparingly and only when essential, for example, where practical skills cannot be reliably assessed in a written exam.

### SUBJECT-SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS

- **Modern languages:** a speaking and listening component will contribute to the overall grade.
- **Science:** pupils must complete a set of prescribed experiments. Practical skills will be assessed through exam questions drawing on these experiments completed during the course.

## Requirements for qualifications from English and Welsh Awarding Organisations

To maintain subject choice and comparability, Northern Ireland will continue to allow access to GCSE and A level qualifications from England and Wales, provided they meet the following conditions:

### STRUCTURE

- The structure of A levels can be modular or linear and may include AS levels.
- The AS qualification can be offered as a standalone qualification or coupled with an A2 outcome for full A level award.
- The structure of GCSE qualifications can be modular or linear.

### GRADING

- The grade outcomes of A level qualifications must be reported on a six-point A\* to E grading scale.
- The grade outcomes of GCSE qualifications must be reported on a nine-point scale, either the A\*–G scale or the 9–1 numerical scale.

### SUBJECT SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS

- **English Language GCSE:** must include a speaking and listening component which will contribute to the final grade.
- **Modern Languages:** must assess speaking and listening.
- **Science:** must provide for the development and assessment of practical skills. This may include assessment within written examinations.

## Next Steps – The Regulatory Framework

A new Regulatory Framework for General Qualifications taken in Northern Ireland will now be developed. This will include additional operational details such as the timing of exam series, resit opportunities, and tiering within subjects. The regulatory framework will reflect this policy framework and will inform the revision of CCEA's General Qualifications as well as the accreditation process.

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