



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

A-level Exams: Consultation on Proposed
Changes

1 May 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Trevor Lunn
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Mr Roger McCune	Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment
Mr Dale Heaney	Department of Education
Dr David Hughes	Department of Education

The Chairperson: David, Dale and Roger, you are very welcome to the Committee. Thank you for coming. David is the director of curriculum, qualifications and standards at the Department, along with Dale, who is the head of assessment and qualifications, and Roger is qualifications, skills, accreditation and policy manager at the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). I believe that we are going to have some discussion in CCEA's headquarters later today, so I look forward to that.

Dr David Hughes (Department of Education): Thank you very much, Chairman and the Committee, for the opportunity to update you on the consultation. It will be helpful if I cover the background to the consultation exercise and then cover the main issues raised and put to the Minister for his consideration. I should add that the Minister has not made any final decisions and is very keen to hear the views of the Committee to inform his consideration.

I will remind the Committee of the background. Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, wrote to Minister O'Dowd on 30 March 2012 informing him of his plans to reform GCE A levels in England. He feels that universities should have a greater input to their design and development. He wants to see that awarding organisations can provide proof that they have engaged with the universities, such as those in the Russell Group, before their qualifications are accredited. He has also raised concerns about the current modular structure of A levels and the opportunities to resit exams.

Ofqual made some policy recommendations following its consultation last year on the proposed changes to A levels in England. Key findings from that consultation were published in November

2012, which showed support for the principle of higher education engagement in the content of A levels, although there was less support for universities endorsing the detail of A-level specifications. There was support for students being assessed at the end of their first and second year of study, support for the AS level as a bridge between the GCSE and the A level, and support for the removal of January exams and the reduced number of opportunities to resit. There was also support for an increasing synoptic assessment in A levels, allowing students to integrate and apply their skills, knowledge and understanding with greater breadth and depth, and for a reduction in internal assessment.

Secretary of State Gove believes that there are problems with the current modular nature of A-level assessment and the repeated opportunities for resitting. He also claims that universities have deep concerns about the current structure. He has concluded for himself that AS levels should be discrete, stand-alone qualifications covering half the content of a full A level. This would mean that they would no longer be taken as part of a full A-level course. In contrast, as I have just mentioned, Ofqual's consultation indicated strong support for retaining the current structure of AS and A2 as part of A level.

Alongside that, Mr Gove wants full A levels to be a linear qualification, and, therefore, assessed solely at the end of the two-year course. Initially he wanted that change to commence in September 2014, with the first exams in June 2016, but we understand that in his recent correspondence with the chair of Ofqual, he has extended that by 12 months. That is the background, so I will move on to our consultation.

It has been a consultation on the nine points on which Ofqual consulted. It has not been extended any wider than those points, and has really been undertaken so that we can gauge the views on those same points within Northern Ireland and to ensure that we are taking consideration of what is being done in England within the parameters of the shared A-level examination. We are certainly not simply adopting any of the positions that are being taken elsewhere but are giving due consideration to the position of the students here who are and will be sitting A levels.

The consultation was launched at the beginning of December last year and concluded at the beginning of March. In addition to an online consultation response document, there were four focus group events, which engaged a total of 53 principals and five further education representatives. There were three events for young people, and a presentation was delivered to representatives from the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). Prior to the consultation, colleagues also met representatives from the universities and a small number of school principals last summer simply to gauge initial reactions to the proposed changes in England.

Your briefing packs contain a summary of the main findings. The main headline figures centre on a very clear majority who have spoken out against a return to a solely linear examination and indicated a high level of support for maintaining the status quo, with AS courses taken as part of the full A level rather than being counted as only a stand-alone qualification. I point out that those involved in the consultation events were very keen to stress the importance of the qualifications offered here being portable throughout these islands and beyond. They also expressed concern about the pace of change and the very challenging timescale that is being dictated in England.

I included quite a lengthy annex in the briefing pack to reflect the comments made to back up the answers provided by consultees. For your information, those comments have been left unedited.

It is worth homing in on the three key points arising from the consultation. Those were: the linear assessment issue; the relationship between AS and A2; and the involvement of the higher education institutions.

First, there was very little support for moving to the use of a linear assessment at the end of a two-year course. Some school principals were clearly in favour of maintaining modularity and exams being taken at the end of each year. There was some support, mainly from the non-selective sector and the further education sector, for the retention of a January assessment.

Secondly, there was a high level of support for maintaining the status quo, with an AS level being taken as a part of a full A-level course or counting as a stand-alone qualification if that is what the learner chooses. There was no support for the position taken in England to establish a discrete AS-level course that is not available as part of a full A-level course.

Thirdly, the proposal to involve higher education institutions in the design of A levels raised some concerns among school principals; in particular, the extent to which Russell Group universities should

be allowed to decide on the content of A levels. Their concern was that A levels should serve a number of purposes, not just gaining entry to Russell Group universities. Principals made that point, but employers whom we have spoken to tend to agree with that position.

So, on the basis of the responses to the consultation and the comments from teachers, principals, unions and young people, we have set out some analysis for the Minister, and that is what we are setting out to you.

In the first instance, although there was support for retaining January assessments, a finely balanced decision will need to be made on that. Some favoured the withdrawal of January assessments; others spoke in favour of a compromise by having a single resit opportunity in the January of the second year of A levels. We can see the benefits of that for some learners, but schools were very clear that offering resits in one school but not in another placed an unnecessary pressure on schools to make similar resit opportunities available. It would be a cleaner and simpler option, I suppose, to limit resits to the June of each year. Of course, any change in practice would reasonably apply only to those beginning from September 2013 onwards.

Secondly, there is a strong case, therefore, for one assessment or resit opportunity for an AS or an A2 in June. Thirdly, there is strong support for retention of the AS/A2 structure, meeting the needs of learners by providing that bridge between GCSE and A levels. Consultees clearly supported the role of the AS level in helping learners to move from the one type of learning to the other. Fourthly, if the AS/A2 model were to continue, AS levels could make up the first module of a two-module A level. This would be something specific to this education system, but a broader AS/A2 modular structure would provide greater opportunity to integrate the learning in the first and second years of A-level study. Fifthly, there is a risk that an AS resit opportunity in the June of the second year could be seen as some compromising of the standard in A levels taken here. There may be benefits in putting in place measures that could support a more robust A level, and a possibility is to look at moving from the current position where performance at AS and at A2 is deemed to have 50:50 weighting between the two exams and move it to a 40:60 weighting between AS and A2. That would give emphasis to awarding the A2 element, which may well, quite properly, contain more challenging material as students move on. We have recommended that that be considered and looked at by CCEA as part of the consideration of that issue.

It is also worth noting the message that I flagged earlier coming from consultees on concern about the timing and concern about a degree of uncertainty that still exists about what may yet happen in England or, indeed, may not happen, if decisions have not yet been finalised.

For the Committee's information, it is worth noting that we have also been in touch with officials in the Welsh Assembly Government. They have indicated that the Education Minister in Wales sees the benefit of some degree of alignment of their policy position with ours where possible. On 15 April, the Welsh Assembly Government announced that they would offer a January assessment opportunity in January 2014 for existing A-level students but that they would make an announcement about other aspects of change in the summer term this year. Their position has not been declared in a final word. Similarly, it is very useful to hear the Committee's views to feed those into the consideration that the Minister will make on these issues of short-term changes to A levels.

The Chairperson: Thank you, David. Clearly, the Department has tried to tease out a huge number of issues. I am bit amazed that — if I heard you correctly, David — three principals were present at one of your focus groups.

Dr Hughes: It was 53 principals.

The Chairperson: My apologies. I had turned to the Committee Clerk and thought: "only three; surely you are not going to go down that road". That clarifies the point for me. If we have not yet done so, we will include, as part of our response, an event here where over 30 schools were represented. We had 60-plus people here, and I thought that we had a very useful exchange that gave us a list of issues around defining the assessment of achievements, defining A-level grades, AS/A2, the linear and modular systems and AS-level stand-alone qualifications. All those issues were raised, and we found going through that practice very helpful in informing us.

One of the issues that comes up repeatedly is the timetable. As soon as you start to discuss any of these things, there is a concern out there that this will have an undue impact, first, on the day-to-day running of the school in the qualifications that it provides and, secondly, on the value and the worth of

the qualification that would be set if there were to be any other change in other jurisdictions. As we said earlier, we do not want our qualification system to end up becoming the Ulster Bank £5 note in that when you go to a shop in another part of the United Kingdom, someone looks at you and says that that is not legal tender, even though it is stamped on it that that is the case.

We do not want that situation. In fact, we want to maintain the high quality and outcome that our A-level results and benefits for our pupils has had. What confidence or concern is there around how the timetable is being worked at, albeit that we are subject to what Gove decides to do? The Minister has been very clear that there is a review, and we will conclude that review, but are we still keeping confidence in the system that there will not be a widespread change that will have a huge impact on the schools that value process, with limited changes here and there?

Dr Hughes: I will ask Dale and Roger to provide input to this issue, but the first point to make is that the Minister has made it very clear that it is critical for young people that the work that they do and the qualifications that they get are in no way compromised, through no fault of their own, as a result of the changing situation around them. That is the bottom line. That is a starting point from which all the work will be taken forward. Dale may want to say more, but it is quite important that Roger explains the efforts that go into ensuring that that confidence can be maintained.

Mr Dale Heaney (Department of Education): The comments that we heard when we were face to face with principals was that there was a need for clarity for next year and a need to arrive at a decision in time for next year. Schools are telling us that they are already in the process of planning in respect of the offer that they might make available. Although they are conscious that timescales have been set back in England to a certain degree, they have made clear the direction of travel in which England intends to go. The sooner that we can arrive at a decision here, the sooner schools will find that comforting. At the same time, the message coming back to us was very clear about what schools and pupils would value in respect of areas for change, including the January assessment opportunity potentially ending, which would free up and provide more teaching time to schools, which schools would value. Secondly, if the Minister agrees, there would be clarity for the AS and A2 relationship to continue as it is. That was the consistent message that we heard throughout. If we got agreement from the Committee and the Minister, schools would value that.

Mr Roger McCune (Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment): The area that I have most remit for is comparability. That is very important, and it was made very clear in consultation that it was vital so that there was portability in the use of the qualification. I do not see that comparability has to be the same. What we are proposing is a sensible way forward. The AS and A2 were designed that way, and it seems to me a bit perverse to suddenly pull out the AS and say that this is how you get breadth in A levels. If you ask somebody how they would like to have greater breadth in a 16-to-19 study, I do not think that they would say that you would take half of geography or half of English and do it to the same standard and do three other subjects. That is not real breadth. That seems to be the only reason for holding the AS in England.

To some degree, the number of resits is exaggerated. You get the idea that people do the resit six times until they get the right result. Those are not the statistics that are being shown at all. I see no reason why there should not be an opportunity for a limited number of resits, and I do not see that that affects standards as such. There is no doubt that the January assessment has an impact on teaching and learning. Even schools that wish to see it continue agree that it has an impact on teaching and learning across the period from the start of December through to the end of January.

The Chairperson: We will be seeing you later on, because some of us see a slight conflict of interest in CCEA being both regulator and provider. That is a separate debate and discussion that we will have this afternoon. David referred to universities. One of the universities here has close associations with the Russell Group. Is it your understanding that that university is using the number of student repeats of modular exams as a tiebreaker for entry and that, in some cases, students are doing modular exams three, four or five times?

Mr McCune: I have not heard that, and I have close links with both universities. We discussed with both universities the issues around the A2 and the AS. I have not been told in any case that they see the number of resits as something they use as part of a selection process.

The Chairperson: In a broader sense, in this process, I have felt for some time that the universities have had a degree of luxury to be able to sit at the end of the food chain of education and wait to see what comes out. They can take whatever is there and then decide to go in a particular direction. I

think that there is a sea change in our universities whereby they are realising that they are an integral part of the overall provision, particularly in their need to ensure that we are producing students who have the qualifications and competencies that are relevant to the world of work.

It again comes back to the whole issue of how it all links up and how it all fits in for the overall provision. With the greatest respect to our universities, if we are producing graduates that can do certain things that there is no employment for or no likelihood that there will be employment in, we will have created a major problem. You can see that some of the investors that have come to Northern Ireland over the past of the number of years have done so specifically on the basis of the quality and breadth in the pool of graduates in particular spheres and fields.

I have attended a number of meetings at Queen's and other universities where this issue has, thankfully, been raised by the universities, but where has the input from the universities been to this discussion? Are they just sitting and waiting to see what the outcome will be and will decide to rearrange their furniture on the basis of the outcome of that? Have they been an integral part of that overall discussion so that they are tied into it as much as they possibly can be? They do receive a considerable amount of money from the public purse.

Mr Heaney: Yes, the Minister was very keen that that engagement took place, and it happened early on in the process, as early as June 2012. Some of the notes in your pack illustrate the initial views that we were able to establish with the vice chancellor of Queen's and the pro-vice chancellors of the University of Ulster. They were keen to take time over their views on the Ofqual consultation and the statements that Gove had made at that time.

They both emphasised the critical nature that they took on the modularity of A levels, and they felt that reducing that modularity would help to lead to a better and wider understanding of the subject. At the same time, school principals argued that universities continue to deliver in that way and asked why. Those details were captured early on in the process. They felt that A levels were not broken but recognised that they would value some modifications being made. This is reflected in the proposals that we hope to put to the Minister on the January assessment potentially ending. The universities and the schools that we spoke to largely supported that direction of travel.

Dr Hughes: I think it is also worth adding that that was the engagement on those quite specific issues that are being raised. The Minister has commissioned CCEA to conduct that fundamental review of GCSEs and A levels, for which there is an expert group, including representatives from the universities, so they are also engaged in the big and significant long-term questions. There are two sets of issues being run at the same time.

The Chairperson: One of the issues raised in your consultation was the concern that CCEA does not offer a wide enough range of qualifications. Is that area being considered in the overall review of the process? That is something that was being picked up as a concern.

Mr McCune: Is that a wider range of GCE titles?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr McCune: CCEA has recently accredited another six GCEs to accommodate the requirements of the entitlement framework. Apart from Greek, Latin and Japanese — we call them minority languages, and those tend to be shared across the awarding organisations — it offers a broad range of GCEs. Then you have other titles and other level 3 qualifications that can be used. Increasingly, university entrance does not only require GCSEs. It can be GCSEs with a mixture of other level 3 qualifications, or other level 3 qualifications.

Mr Hazzard: Thanks for the briefing so far. Like the Chair, I have some concerns about the involvement of universities, especially if they move beyond having input to having control. I would certainly have big concerns about any idea of the Russell Group being able to sit and design a shop window for themselves and being able to pick the cream of the crop.

It has also been flagged up that teachers, in their professional judgement, had some concerns about that. I strongly believe that A levels should serve a number of purposes, not just for university but for a wider range. So, I have some concerns about the extent to which the Russell Group or anyone else can get involved in the process. I think they are a fundamental part, and I do want them to be involved, but I certainly do not want any notion of control. I am sure that is not the case.

Mr McCune: I think that both universities here — we have spoken to them — would say exactly the same thing. Eight years ago, when we were designing the present A levels and their revision, I remember having a pool of people from the University of Ulster and Queen's as part of the input. They would say that they do not want to be the sole deciders of what content should be in physics. In fact, in our meetings with both universities, the nature of the whole assessment process was of much more interest to them.

It is interesting, because they are now very much sold on modular courses in universities. It was not that they were against modularity, they were against it being excessive, because of the importance of having a synoptic overall view within the subject so that learners did not become too compartmentalised. They felt at the time that students would say that there was a question on it that was not exactly what they thought was going to be on it and that they were not told exactly what was going to be on it. They did not want that to happen. They were more concerned about that than about, as you say, sitting down with the Russell Group and saying, "Here is the physics we want". In general, the research findings, even by Ofqual, have been strongly supportive, both employers and higher education, of A levels in broad terms. There are certainly concerns about some aspects of modularity and resits if they are excessive, but, in broad terms, they are supportive of them.

Mr Hazzard: That is reassuring to hear. On the subject of portability of qualifications, historically we have always had difficulties with North/South portability, but there is now a fear growing around east-west portability, as you alluded to. What is the Department doing now, practically, to resolve those issues? I know that North/South is an ongoing issue. What are you doing now to deal with it? I know that it is ever-changing, and Minister Gove seems to act on the hop rather than following any bilateral situation, but what actions are taking place now to address those problems?

Mr McCune: Scotland and the South have different systems. Therefore, comparability is required. Yesterday, we had a meeting with the Irish Universities Association on those broad issues. One of the difficulties is that they are having a review, which is quite comprehensive, and they are reviewing from the school side and from the higher education side on the future of the transition year and the grading system that they use. So, there is a lot going on.

We are doing a fundamental review, but we are keeping in touch, and a number of issues are becoming clear to us. You will know that a lot of this started with the simple introduction of the A* when the Central Applications Office (CAO) system moved the A down to 135. A more fundamental issue is the fact that the CAO system uses four A levels as the basis of its count. The Irish Universities Association is now aware of that.

The other difficulty is the number of offers against acceptances, particularly to Trinity and UCD. The percentage is something like a quarter. These are fundamental issues that we are addressing with the Irish Universities Association.

Dr Hughes: On the east-west issue, there is the question of comparability between Scotland, which has a different system, and the system in England, Wales and here. The fact that we all share A levels, between England, Wales and Northern Ireland, means that there is a single brand. What is being raised now is how far that brand definition can be stretched? That question is kept under constant review. It is an issue that all three responsible Ministers have in their sights. Contact will go on at official level between London, Cardiff, and ourselves in Belfast and Bangor. There will also be contact between the Ministers and the respective responsibilities of CCEA, Ofqual and the relevant Welsh authority. Those are issues in everyone's minds as these things go forward. The desire on all sides to retain inclusion in a brand that people understand, that the public believe in and that has credibility is going to be firmly in view.

Mr Hazzard: Roger, you touched on the notion of the analysis of a new grading system elsewhere. Is the need to develop more breadth to our rigid A to E grading system also in your thoughts?

Mr McCune: To some degree, the leaving cert grading is quite granular with A1, A2, B1, B2, etc. To some degree, they are moving back to the A level with the broader bands.

Mr Hazzard: At times, we have come across the need for a value-laden context in respect of grades to show achievement between grades more finely.

Mr McCune: The two things are at tension. The more grades you can put in, the more differentiation there is, but the more pressure you put on the awarding to do that. In reality, a grade can be one mark, so if you are using the A1, A2, B1, B2 system, there is a large number of grades. At the moment, there are no plans to change the grading in A levels.

Mr Hazzard: No problem. I have one final question. I noticed the mention of the young person's online consultation. I thought that some of the findings were quite interesting. Three quarters of young people opposed linear exams, and two thirds were in favour of the six-monthly modular exams. I was interested to see that the majority felt that they were unprepared for university learning. Does the Department have any plans to drill down into that to find out why that is, or to what extent they feel unprepared for that learning? What is it about university learning that they feel unprepared for? Is that part of the process in developing A levels?

Mr Heaney: That is a good point, and it is something that we would be keen to follow up. Face-to-face engagement with young people in schools was particularly valuable in the consultation. We found that we were able to touch on a wide range of issues that were not just specific to this consultation. That is something that we are keen to do.

On the wider fundamental review, there might be opportunities for us to ask wider questions. We are very keen to continue that engagement process.

Mr McCune: One of the biggest things that came out of the discussions with the University of Ulster is that there is a feeling that students do not realise how much independence they have and how much they need to control their own learning at a university.

I suppose that you could argue that you do not have much control in the linear type, where you simply learn for two years and do an exam; whereas a system in which there are some aspects of internal assessment that you have to control is helpful. That is maybe too simplistic, but it seems to be one of the big things in the transition to university. Not only do students go away from the safety of the home into a new environment but they have to manage their own learning, and there is no one looking after them in the way teachers do in school.

Mr Hazzard: You mentioned an important point about the need for synopsis and the development of an analytical mind. At AS and A level, that is very important. At undergraduate level, you find that students say that they have to analyse something, rather than just —

Mr McCune: That is why the universities do not want excessive modularisation. They realise its benefits, but if you break something down too much, you lose the overall within the subject.

The Chairperson: I want to get clarification on one point before I bring in Jo-Anne. Is the recommendation that you will put to the Minister that there will be only one resit opportunity in June. If so, do you have any idea of the number of students that that would affect?

Mr McCune: Do you mean how many currently do the January assessment?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr McCune: The percentage for the first year of the January assessment is lower than the second year, as you would expect. I can get the figures for you, and it probably would be better if I did not try to do it off the top of my head. I suspect that around 30% are currently doing the January assessments.

The Chairperson: That is a considerable number. It would be useful to have the figures. I am sure that the Minister would want to see that information for the impact that it would have, even on the current process.

Mr McCune: Slightly linked to that — and this again goes back to the synoptic aspect of trying to bring things together — is that the AS currently consists of two modules and the A2 consists of two modules. The proposal is for a single module at AS and a single module at A2 to give greater coherence in the two elements that make up the A level.

Mrs Dobson: In the responses that you have received to the consultation, there is clear consensus — I think it is 79% — that the number of resits should be reduced. How concerned is the Department about this, and what plans do you have to reduce the number of resits? Can you also outline what the Department has been doing over the years to ensure that exam results are more reflective of pupil performance and to ensure that, when pupils are studying for modules, they do not have to take the time to look backwards and resit past exams?

Mr Heaney: I will answer the first part of the question. Essentially, the key message from our face-to-face engagement with school principals and the online consultation was that schools would value the January assessment ending and that that would provide a reduction in the resit opportunities that pupils would be able to avail themselves of. We also heard that it would free up schools and teachers to deliver A levels and provide more teaching time and, therefore, provide for more coverage of the subject and would not interfere with the process that schools value most, which is being able to deliver the subject face to face with pupils. They saw that as being one of the greatest benefits. As far as the other part of your question is concerned, Roger might be able to say how they go about their job.

Mr McCune: Interestingly, at GCSE, the rules say that you can have only one resit. I spoke about misconceptions, and one seems to be that there is constant resitting. The figures show that up to 50% will resit once, but then the figure drops down to 2%. Out of those 50%, only half will improve their grade. There is a justification for it, but there is no constant resitting. You are right that when somebody is in their A2 modules, the difficulty is that they go backwards, and the school has to go backwards to some extent to take account of that and to do it again.

Dr Hughes: You can see the pros and cons that occur here. If there were no resit opportunities, would that be fair to someone who, frankly, crashed and burned the first time? In practice, individuals will make choices about how many times they are going to resit if the value is on continuing — putting that to one side and keeping going with what else is required. The benefit of having teaching from the beginning of the academic year right the way through is impacted by the disruption of having a resit opportunity in January. If you have the disruption in January, that disturbs things. At the same time, it may be a very good time for some people to resit. As I said in the first instance, it is a very finely balanced issue, but it was useful to have such a clear message coming out from those who are dealing with those issues all the time.

Mrs Dobson: I know that it has been touched on, but can you outline whether the Department prefers the modular approach to the linear approach? There is clear support for modulation, with 74% of young people opposing linear exams. On that basis, why is the Department recommending to the Minister that all exams are held in June? I know that you touched on the disruption in January and the interference that brings, but the pupils would prefer January and June exams, which motivate them, so what is the rationale behind that? Have their views not been taken into account?

Mr Heaney: The position that we are setting out here reflects what consultees told us, so it is not so much the Department's position as what the vast majority of consultees felt. We feel that it is a good compromise position for the Minister to consider, in that it is not a Michael Gove scenario of an exam at the end of two years, which is the purely linear delivery that England is taking forward. Ours is not a continuation of A-level delivery, where you have an assessment in January and at the end of June; rather, you would have an assessment in modular format at the end of June of the first year and at the end of June of the second year. We felt that it was a good compromise position to recommend based on what consultees told us.

Mrs Dobson: I am mindful of what pupils are telling us as well. I have a final quick point. You say that you want to reduce the number of multiple choice questions. Why is that? Do you feel that exams have got out of hand? Is the balance all wrong? Can you expand on the rationale behind that?

Mr Heaney: I am not certain that that is what we are saying. One of the commissions that the Ofqual consultation covered was whether a variety of question types could be used more broadly across a range of subjects, including extending the use of multiple choice, as well as the use of extended writing. It was simply asking consultees in England, and we put the question here, whether they felt that it would be a good thing to use that mix of question types. The vast majority agreed that that seemed a good thing to do, but it needed to be appropriate. So, we are not recommending a reduction in multiple choice; rather, to look at the circumstances and perhaps extend multiple choice, where it is appropriate, and extend the use of writing longer answers to questions, where appropriate.

Mrs Dobson: Are you concerned that Ofqual is fixated with the issue of multiple choice questions?

Dr Hughes: I am not aware that there is a particular issue around that. The important thing is to ensure that assessment is being done in ways that actually assess what the learner has learnt. Depending on what that is, there will be different ways of assessing. A balance of different types of assessment is always going to be a more appropriate way than focusing entirely on one type of assessment, which does not reflect the weight of learning and the content of the course that they have followed. Roger is more than happy to explain any other points in more technical detail, possibly, or more expert detail.

Mr McCune: I am involved in chemistry, and I would say that you could produce 40 good multiple choice questions that would test the knowledge and understanding of young people at A-level chemistry. One of the big things is the importance of extended writing. I believe that a chemist should be able to write and communicate like anyone else. Therefore, the balance of questions is important. Certainly, multiple choice can be used, if they are good multiple choice. One of the difficulties is getting different questions each year and getting the distractors. You do not want two good distractors and two that are obviously not the answer, because, when you have that, guessing comes in. There is no doubt about it; there has been a feeling, even in GCSE science, that maybe the balance has swung too far. It is much easier to mark multiple choice. You can run it through a machine. You need to have teachers with experience of marking to be marking in marked schemes, and so forth, and to mark the extended writing. Extended writing is important in most subjects, apart, possibly, from maths. In most other subjects, such as geography and history, it is important that they are able to do extended writing and to put forward arguments, and so forth, at GCSE and GCE.

Mr Lunn: Gentlemen, I am sorry that I have been dodging in and out and missing your valuable presentation. I do not pretend to have any expertise in this area. I have to be guided by experts such as yourselves. In simple terms, what is the rationale for Northern Ireland having a different approach in this area from the rest of the UK? Given that we want to have equivalent qualifications — we do not want to have the Ulster Bank five pound note, and all the rest of it — why should we be different? Why should we retain an AS, if the UK is not going to do that?

Finally, and I do not mind admitting that I do not know this, what is an A2?

Dr Hughes: I will knock the second bit on the head first. A2 is the second year of your A level.

The critical point for us is to ensure that the qualification structure here is appropriate and reflects the desire for the best educational outcomes. If changes are being made to A level in England, which are based on reasons that have no particular educational basis, we would want to examine that. Is it the right thing to do? Is it the right change to make here? We certainly do not want to be in a position of blindly following changes being made elsewhere, if those changes do not have a solid rationale that we would recognise as being useful.

Mr Lunn: I am going to ask you about Scotland. Does Scotland have a variation from the norm as well?

Dr Hughes: It is completely different. It is not a variation; it is a completely different system.

Mr Lunn: This will sound frivolous, but I do not mean it to be. Why should we not draw from the much greater and wider experience of England and Wales, in terms of population numbers, universities, experience? What right do we have to assume that what they are doing is wrong? We do that in all areas of our government here; it is not just in the Department of Education. I constantly ask myself why Northern Ireland should be different. In this particular area, it is the perception that I see. I hear about the Russell Group universities and the way they perceive our qualifications against Great Britain's qualifications. If there is a doubt, somebody would really need to explain to me why we should be different.

Dr Hughes: It is worth going back to the point about the value of having a qualifications regime that supports the best educational outcomes. It is better, I think, to develop policy around qualifications that is informed by the educational perspective. It is not simply a matter of scale; it is a matter of value. Therefore, we would need to look very carefully at proposals that are being made to change A levels in one education system. You group England and Wales together, but you have to remember that Wales does not necessarily see that the changes that are being made in England have an

educational value either. At this stage, when it comes to policy development, we are also not looking at scale. We are looking at a Minister taking a particular position from one perspective and other Ministers taking a particular position from other perspectives. The scale of the jurisdiction does not make any difference in those circumstances.

You touched on a very interesting point about the Russell Group of universities. We have two universities here, one of which is a member of the Russell Group. Therefore, the involvement of the Russell Group automatically changes the context. The Russell Group is a group; we would not say that we should hive off the one university in this jurisdiction and talk to it.

It is important to say that this is not about developing policy on the basis of scale. It is about developing the right policy and the right qualification regime.

Mr Lunn: I know that Michael Gove has thrown the cat among the pigeons, and all this came out of the blue. He appears to have already changed his mind in some respects. However, when all the dust settles, I presume that the English will have a system that they are pleased with and which they can stand over as providing good qualifications that will stand up internationally. I know that you do not want to talk about scale, but there are 50 million of them and 1.5 million of us. It baffles me why we are constantly different. You have given the explanation, and that is fair enough.

The Chairperson: Without getting into the wider debate, Trevor, why was Gove put in the position where he had to do what he had to do? Some of us will argue that it was because he inherited a system that went down a particular road of schools dumbing down, wanting to become all things to all people — a comprehensive system with qualifications that were not worth the paper they were written on. Now, he has had to do a somersault or a U-turn, or whatever you want to call it, to rectify the situation of the academies and all the stuff that has gone on.

We have retained a core element of our provision, which has quality in its outcomes for our pupils. One is going one way and the other is going another way, and we need to make sure that we stay in the right place and focus on the right things. On this issue, I think that the Department has taken a balanced view around protecting what we have but not being totally blinkered about what is going on around us. Although geographically we live on an island, we do not live in isolation. Chris raised points about what happens in the Republic. There is an issue for an element of our pupils about the disconnect that exists in that regard. Equally, it is about getting east-west and North/South all right. Our focus is our pupils, irrespective of whether there are 50 million in England or 20 million in Wales, or whatever it is. That is not the population of Wales; they would love to have that population. It is about the outcome for our pupils.

Mr Lunn: That is fair enough, Chairman. I know that our Minister has had trouble trying to arrange a meeting with Michael Gove. In fact, I think that it has been refused. Is there consultation between the Department here and the English? Is there any kind of co-operation to bring forward something that is satisfactory to all, or are you operating in different silos?

Dr Hughes: It is important to make the point that there is communication between us and the Department for Education in London and our counterpart in Cardiff. There is communication between CCEA and Ofqual and the Welsh regulator. There is communication. I know that the meeting between Ministers has not been easy to arrange. That can be addressed. There will be meetings of Ministers. So, there is communication and discussion. Decision-making, of course, is a matter for Ministers. It is not a matter of officials pre-cooking answers behind the scenes.

Mr Lunn: Is the purpose of all that discussion and consultation to produce parity of qualifications?

Mr McCune: I made the point that comparability is extremely important for portability. However, I do not think that comparability means that they have to be exactly the same. It is important, therefore, as David mentioned, to work closely with Ofqual and the Welsh Government on standards issues — standards for Northern Ireland, not just for CCEA.

Mr Lunn: As we stand at the moment, are our A-level qualifications regarded any differently in the wider world from, let us say, UK qualifications?

Mr McCune: No, and that is extremely important. As far as a university anywhere is concerned, a GCE that is taken in Cardiff, London or Belfast is treated as the same. That is extremely important for

portability. That needs to continue. I do not think that by having differences at this level that will not be the case.

Mr Lunn: If the English go down the route of the linear approach, which I understand to mean one exam at the end of a two-year period — which, I must say, was good enough for my generation — and we stick to an alternative with AS levels, A2s and all the rest of it, can you foresee a situation in which there could be a difference if they go one way and we go the other? There is a comment in your paper that the Russell Group of universities may start to look at the number of resits, and so on.

Mr McCune: There has been no indication from universities that that would be the case. As I said, the survey that has been done by Ofqual of universities and their view of A levels has shown that they are strongly supportive of them. However, they have a "but", which is that they do not want there to be excessive resit opportunities and modularity, particularly with regard to the wholeness of the subject and the synoptic aspect of it.

Dr Hughes: Part of what the Department and CCEA do is to demonstrate the equal value, and it is important that that is possible. If A levels look very different in the different jurisdictions, it is still important that the equal value of those A levels is demonstrated — not merely saying that we cannot possibly be different, but rather that we can be different with the value of those qualifications maintained.

Mr Lunn: Was there a situation for a while — it might have been before I joined the Committee, Chairman — when some of our better schools encouraged their pupils to take examinations that were set by the English boards because they were perceived to be easier?

Mr McCune: The statistics do not show a breakdown that is as simple as that. As you know, schools here have the opportunity and are allowed to use any of the five awarding organisations. Percentages across the boards vary across subjects. There are no distinct patterns.

Dr Hughes: There may be any number of reasons why a particular syllabus for a particular qualification suits a school.

Mr Hazzard: Is there a big variance in cost?

Mr McCune: No.

Mr Hazzard: Why might a school choose an English board?

Mr McCune: In many ways, a lot of it is historical. When a school sets on a course and does it with a particular awarding organisation, there are issues of changing books, their programmes of teaching, and so forth, if they change boards. In many cases, the subject criteria are quite tight. This is the point: you would not want the content of the physics syllabus to be different here from elsewhere. Physics is physics. It prepares for higher education physics. You would not want it to be different. There may be some differences. Obviously, there will be differences in subjects such as English literature, geography and history. The flexibility to have great differences across GCSEs is not great because the criteria on which they have to develop the specification is tight.

Mr Hazzard: Would there be a situation, in GCSE history for example, where, of two classes in the same school, one sits an exam with an English board and the other with CCEA?

Mr McCune: No, that is very unlikely.

Mr Hazzard: Unlikely or does not happen?

Mr McCune: I would not like to say that it does not happen. It is not in any way the case generally, because there is a policy in the Department in the main that is supported by the nature of the specification.

The Chairperson: We are getting to an issue that, I think, is important.

Mr Lunn: I find it amazing and always did that, after all the work that people such as you do to set the criteria, the examinations and the standards, some of our grammar schools should be able to go off and let their pupils do another board's exams. The only reason that I can think of is that, at that time, it was perceived that those examinations were easier, so the school's results were better under that board's exams. I do not know whether that is still going on. As we know, it is all about league tables, and so on. That is really where I was going with this.

Mr McCune: It is a fair point, and, to some degree, that is historical. There was a perception years ago that CCEA was a grammar school awarding body, and that is not the case. The grade outcomes do not show that. A lot of work goes on with comparability on grade outcomes. A lot of it is, to some degree, historical, and choices are made. It is just a different system. There is a market for qualifications, and, historically, that has been the case. I think that schools would guard that jealously. You will have seen that in the consultation.

Mr Lunn: If it were the other way round and our schools perceived that the English qualifications were of a higher standard than ours and were more gratefully received by universities, I could understand why they would put forward their pupils to do slightly harder exams. If they are going for an easier route to improve their performance in the league tables, that is appalling. Is it still going on?

Mr McCune: That schools are entering their pupils for qualifications from other boards because they think that it is easier?

Mr Lunn: Yes.

Mr McCune: When I say historical, I mean that the English awarding bodies moved into modularity quicker than CCEA did, years ago. One of the reasons then was that they may have gone for the modular route. I use an analogy that is oversimplistic, but, to some degree there is truth in it, particularly with resits. If someone has passed their driving test and you get into their car, you are happy that they have passed the test. You do not ask them how many times they took the test or whether they did it twice. To some degree, why should there not be a second opportunity with resits?

The Chairperson: You might.

Mr Lunn: He does not watch YouTube.

The Chairperson: You have not been watching YouTube, recently, no?

Mr McCune: You would be worried about someone who had done the test 17 times before they passed. That is excessive resitting, as I see it. With an opportunity to do a resit, you feel that that person has the knowledge, understanding and skills to drive that car, and you are happy to sit beside them. Also, I think that there is a difference across subjects. In the content subjects such as maths and science, there is particular value in modularity and unit, whereas, in the skills subjects that build up skills, such as history and English literature, there is more value in the linear approach. A limited degree of flexibility in how assessment operates in GCE is good.

The Chairperson: I have one comment that ties into this. We are getting slightly off the track, but that is nothing new for us on the Committee. CCEA decided on the basis of the concern about fines and on the issue of finance to withdraw from the English market. Roger, you said that there is a market for qualifications and that it is seen as a business. That raises concerns. It is not all just a one-way process about the standard of the qualification. It is also about whether the awarding body decides that it wants to be in that market. We need to be very careful that we are not in any way inhibiting the breadth of provision for our young people in what they can and cannot do. That is still an issue of concern around the way in which CCEA operated, having made that decision a year ago.

Mr McCune: That was an awarding body decision, not a regulatory decision.

The Chairperson: Therein lies the difficulty in being poacher and gamekeeper.

Mr McCune: I was honestly not involved at all in that decision.

The Chairperson: That is something that we will want to discuss later today.

Mr Kinahan: I want to come in on this. I thought that people were able to take, say, Welsh board or English board exams that cover different subjects. By being able to take different subjects, some of which might be seen as easier, that allowed them to get higher standards and therefore lift them up the table. Is there not an element of that in the system?

Mr McCune: You mean different titles. That does not happen excessively. As I said, for some of the minority subjects, there is a sort of sharing across boards. In the main subjects, all the awarding organisations would offer exams. There are slight differences in some of them; for example, design technology would be a bit different from technology and design. However, by and large, they all offer history, geography, chemistry, maths, English, English literature, etc.

Mr Rogers: Apologies for missing the earlier part of the meeting.

Although we all have grandiose ideas about what education and learning are about — learning is for life — the reality is that learning is to pass exams. If I am teaching CCEA maths in the maths department in my school and we get our results at the end of the year, and another school down the road is teaching some other board to similar kids and gets results that are a lot better, I am sure that, when we sit down at the beginning of the next year to plan, we would be looking at the other exams out there.

There has been a lot of discussion about the east-west dimension to this. I think that that is very important. Reading the documentation, I see that the Welsh seem to have their mind totally made up. Certainly, I am very much in favour of a more linear system and fewer modules in January. However, if the Welsh or English decide to keep quite a few modular approaches, if Michael Gove takes a U-turn or does a somersault, that could cause us problems, in that school A will be taking the linear route but school B will have repeats in January. That puts extra pressure on schools. People will say, "Oh, if I go to that school, I will get another repeat." That point is very important. Related to that is this question: what effect will going linear have on raising standards? Certainly, when I was in the classroom, it happened the other way around through going modular. Most teachers would agree that the modular approach gives better results.

Mr McCune: One of the difficulties in that, and I am sorry to get technical, is whether raising standards is directly related to better outcomes. You could argue that you could raise the outcomes as much as you wanted to but that would not necessarily mean that you have raised standards. You may have reduced them.

Mr Rogers: We are driven so much by exams and results. It is about changing that mindset.

Chris made the point earlier about a more analytical approach at A level because it is preparing people for third level. You really need to begin that preparation earlier. At present, some GCSE subjects almost have modules on demand. If we make a change post-16, we have to look at what we do at GCSE.

How does this compare with what happens in our colleges, which maybe use a slightly different exam system that is more modular?

Mr McCune: Do you mean with qualifications other than GCE?

Mr Rogers: Yes.

Mr McCune: In those qualifications, the range of assessment is a lot broader and there is much more internal assessment. You are into a different nature of qualification and assessment. All those issues come together in the mix that is standards and grade outcomes. It is a very complicated area.

Mr Rogers: I am just making the point that although we are talking about post-16, it really affects everything that we do.

Mr McCune: Especially between the ages of 14 and 19. There needs to be continuity between the ages of 14 and 19.

The Chairperson: I am very tempted to ask this: would that confirm that the Department might be of a mind to introduce a 14-to-19 policy, something that members are well aware that I have been rabbiting on about for a number of years?

Dr Hughes: The issues that arise in the 14-to-19 education space, as it were, are immensely complicated. What was being explored there is just one tiny corner of it, to be honest.

Mr Kinahan: The input from employers, or employability, is mentioned once or twice in the papers. You cannot test a lot of it in exams. When someone leaves school with great A levels, that does not necessarily mean that they are going to find it easy to get a job, although everything is now moving towards box-ticking. The guy who can look you in the eye and has great confidence but has not got great passes might actually be the better person to employ. I wonder whether there is any input into all this from employers to make sure that the robust system suits them.

Dr Hughes: My colleagues will want to come in on that. It is quite useful to reflect that the consultation on these particular points is quite specific, and there is a fundamental review of GCSEs and A levels, with the opportunity to engage with employers as well as further education, higher education and the whole stakeholder body. There are larger questions about the meaning of a qualification against the educational outcome at the end of a certain number of years. Clearly, the revised curriculum here brings to the fore the skills that we want children to gain and develop as they go through. Of course, those skills are gained and developed in the context of learning in particular subject areas as well.

That ties to the point that was made earlier about the variety of assessment types. One of the values of having a variety of assessment types is that it reflects the skills that are being developed. For example, extended writing is an excellent skill, as is oral communication. So, it is useful that the examination takes account of those skill developments as well as the subject content.

The conversation that has been taking place as part of the fundamental review and that will continue to take place on the basis of what comes out of that is about what the different stakeholders are looking for when an individual comes out of lower secondary or upper secondary and what a qualification says about their knowledge, skills and attributes. That is part of that much bigger debate. That said, a conversation with CBI is feeding into this.

Mr Heaney: I acknowledge that we have struggled to get engagement with genuinely high numbers of employers. I think that CCEA would admit that it also struggles with that. However, as David said, your question takes us into the wider review that is, as you know, ongoing and due to report at the end of June. Reassuringly, there are a number of business and employer representatives on the steering group that CCEA is managing. So, at least we know that they are wholly involved in that process. Yes, it was quite difficult to get a clearer view from them on the technical aspects of this. However, the comparability and portability issue was paramount in everyone's mind, including that of employers. The feedback that we have tried to put across represents everyone's views, including those of the employers that we spoke to.

Mr McCune: The two points, one focusing on this particular aspect, are that employers are not in favour of excessive resits or excessive modularity. There is no doubt about the broader point that you were making, which is that they are also saying that it is not the fact that you get an A but that you have to go in and sell yourself in an interview to get the job. The A may get you the shortlisting, but it is about skills, communication and selling yourself, which are equally important now for employment and employability skills.

The Chairperson: Dale, David and Roger, thank you very much. That was useful. We look forward to further discussions on these issues.