



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

Veronica Bintley
Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer
Department of Education
Rathgael House
Balloo Road
Bangor
BT19 7PR

10 May 2013

Our Ref: PMcC/CMcN/535

Dear Veronica

Potential Short-term Changes to A-Levels: consultation response

The Committee received a Departmental briefing on 1 May 2013 on responses to the consultation on Potential Short-term Changes to A-Levels and also considered responses from its informal stakeholder event held on 20 March 2013. The following was agreed by the Committee at its meeting on 8 May 2013.

The Committee agreed that, in line with feedback from stakeholders, it viewed Northern Ireland GCE A-Levels as the gold standard of educational qualifications and that these are quite rightly generally recognised as such by employers and universities in this and other jurisdictions. The Committee recorded its appreciation of the hard work of pupils and the dedication and professionalism of teaching staff which have consistently led to Northern Ireland pupils out-performing others at A-Level.

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The Committee noted that it was difficult to assess the immediate and longer term impact of Departmental proposals including: a restriction on the number of resits; the scheduling of all exams in June and none in January; and changes to the AS mark weighting and its status relative to the overall A-Level qualification. However some Members strongly felt that the latter proposal was worrying and might lead to the devaluing of AS qualifications and the narrowing of choices at lower sixth.

The Committee agreed that the curricula for Northern Ireland GCE A-Levels should continue to be both challenging and linked to the particular needs of our local economy. That said the Committee also agreed that it was opposed to changes by the Department to important qualifications such as A-Levels which would lead to Northern Ireland being out-of-step with other jurisdictions – in particular the rest of the UK.

Consequently the Committee agreed that it would cautiously welcome the proposed changes but only insofar as they maintain the standards and transferability of A-Levels for Northern Ireland students.

Given the concerns set out above, the Committee further agreed that if the proposals are adopted, the Department should monitor closely the impact on: the pattern of A-Level choices; the uptake of individual A-levels and the results achieved both in overall terms and in respect of individual subjects. The Committee agreed that it would be alarmed if the proposals led to significant changes in either choice, uptake or results and would expect corrective action from the Department if that situation arose.

The Committee also agreed to welcome in principle the engagement of universities in the development of A-Levels. However, in line with stakeholder feedback, the Committee agreed that it expected to see all universities involved (not just the Russell group) and that it would also see an enhanced role for employers in the development of these important qualifications.

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Members highlighted concerns about an apparent or perceived disconnect between the needs of employers and the local economy and the content and selection of A-Level courses that are presently available. Members also stressed the vital importance of careers guidance for pupils indicating that such guidance should not merely be based on filling university places but should rather be focused on the correct choice of a long term career path.

The paper from the informal stakeholder event is enclosed for your information.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter McCallion', written in a cursive style.

Peter McCallion
Committee Clerk
Enc.