



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

**Committee for Education**

**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

**GCSE: Proposed Changes**

**25 January 2012**

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Education

### GCSE: Proposed Changes

**25 January 2012**

**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)  
Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Michaela Boyle  
Mr Jonathan Craig  
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson  
Mr Conall McDevitt  
Miss Michelle McIlveen

**Witnesses:**

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| Mr Roger McCune | Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment |
| Mr Dale Heaney  | Department of Education                                |
| Mr Paul Murray  | Department of Education                                |

**The Chairperson:** This session is on the proposed changes to GCSEs. It will be covered by Hansard, because I think that it is important that we have an account of what is being said on the issue. The matter has arisen because of the proposed changes to GCSEs in England. We have with us Mr Paul Murray, Mr Dale Heaney and Mr Roger McCune. You are very welcome. Roger, it has been a long time since you were with us. We are glad to see you back again.

**Mr Roger McCune (Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment):** You were worried about GCSE grades C and D at the time.

**The Chairperson:** This is clearly an ongoing issue. Dale, it would be helpful if you would give us an update. You have supplied us with a considerable amount of information about the responses. Some of the comments are very interesting. There is a wide variety of opinion; and I think that that is putting it mildly. I would appreciate it if you would bring us up to date on where we are, on what you see as the process in which we are now engaged and on where we are going with this.

**Mr Dale Heaney (Department of Education):** Thank you, Chairman. Thank you, Committee members, for the opportunity to update you today. I thought that it would be helpful to cover some of the background, as the Chair suggests, to identify the key issues and to say what we propose to do to address them.

Ofqual provided advice to Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education in England, following the 2010 White Paper 'The Importance of Teaching'. The Ofqual advice confirmed that the integrity of GCSE qualifications would not be put at risk by a move to linear assessment. It indicated that schools would need time to prepare and that the earliest examination series for which change could be

introduced would be 2014. In separate advice, Ofqual agreed that the benefits of increased emphasis on spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPaG) would best be achieved if certain subjects were targeted. In light of Ofqual's advice, the main changes to GCSEs in England are as follows: for two-year GCSE courses beginning September 2012, all external exams will have to be taken at the end of the course; resits of individual modules will end, but students will still be able to retake full GCSEs, and there will also be an opportunity to retake a full GCSE in maths or English or English language in November; and assessments taken from 2013 will have marking schemes that strengthen the emphasis on spelling, punctuation and grammar in English literature, geography, history and religious studies.

Michael Gove wrote to Minister O'Dowd regarding those changes. He expressed the view that the module approach had damaged the reputation of GCSEs, and he felt that it had raised concerns over the burden of assessment, the reduction of teaching time and the possibility of fragmented learning. There was also the issue of younger learners at 14 or 15 performing less well with early assessment. His letter indicated his desire to have additional marks introduced for SPaG in a wider range of subjects. Minister O'Dowd responded indicating that he would consider the matter and consult with a wide range of stakeholders before making any decisions regarding changes, if any, to GCSEs here. Consequently, we felt that it was important not to take a policy decision on those issues before taking into account the qualitative and quantitative data available.

An important part of our process was to listen to what key stakeholders here felt about the issues. We launched our consultation from 10 October to 30 December, which took 12 weeks in total. We received 460 responses. Ofqual's consultation on Michael Gove's decisions generated about 1,000 responses. To put that in context, about 90% of all GCSEs are taken in England, 6% in Wales and 4% here, so 460 responses seems to have been a very good response. We also held three very useful workshops with representatives from schools and the FE sector. That involved representatives from about 47 post-primary schools selected at random from across all sectors. Youth Action NI together with the Participation Network also helped to facilitate a workshop involving 13 young people to glean their views first hand on the consultation that we and representatives from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) regulatory side attended.

A summary of the main findings has been included in your briefing packs. The main headline figure can be found at question 1. Of the 460 returns received, 56% said that they would prefer to retain unitised GCSEs, 16% said that they would prefer a return to linear, and 28% said that they would prefer a mixture of unitised and linear GCSEs, depending on subject type. As you said, Chair, I have included quite a lengthy annex in the briefing pack that reflects the comments made to back up the answers provided by consultees. Those comments have been left unedited.

I move now to the key learning points, and, first, I will touch on unitised and linear routes. The majority of school principals we spoke to at the workshops recognised the importance of comparability of standards across these islands and stressed the importance of standards being maintained. They also recognised the importance of the need for flexibility. Some students may respond well to assessment at the end of two years and many will not. Those who might be most impacted on tend to be the ones with a different learning style and who need to be motivated and encouraged through their learning and development. Unitised GCSEs provide that motivational element, and many school principals expressed concern at the potential impact on those pupils if that option were removed.

School principals explained that the maturity of students can be an issue and that the timing of assessments for younger students needs to be carefully considered. They do not see that as a sufficient reason to bring an end to unitised GCSEs. The system currently in place allows individual schools to determine when pupils are entered for GCSE unit examinations.

It was felt by many that resits are an important part of the learning process and that the opportunity to resit units is essential in such subjects as English and maths. School principals also emphasised that, currently, there is only one resit opportunity per unit. It is not the case that a pupil can continually resit the same unit.

One of the key messages we were left with was the absence of robust data to support changes in assessment. Many commentators saw no reason to make such a change so early in the implementation of unitised GCSEs, which, for some subjects, have been in place for only two years.

Results for English and maths will not be seen until 2012. A number of respondents to the consultation felt that it would be sensible to wait until the next review of GCSEs in 2014-15 before considering which assessment measure is best, based on a longer range of data. The key aspect of change that we want to emphasise to the Committee is that this is about the timing of assessment. Schools are currently free to deliver a unitised GCSE specification in a linear format, should they wish to do so, simply by taking all of the assessments at the end of the course. Many of them already do.

Figures for 2011 show that 85% of those taking GCSEs here chose to take assessment at the end of the two-year period. If we were to recommend that there should be no change, schools could continue to do so in the future or they could conduct assessment throughout the two years.

Marks are currently provided for spelling, punctuation and grammar in English and English language. The question is whether it makes sense to award a small number of additional marks for those aspects in a limited number of other subjects. We feel that it would be sensible to do so, not least in light of the Department's literacy and numeracy strategy. It would also be important, from a three-country point of view, for us to maintain mark schemes that mirror what is happening elsewhere across these islands. Any perceived diminution of GCSE standards could, potentially, mean GCSEs in England and GCSEs here being perceived as being different, and that needs to be resisted.

A number of school principals we spoke to could see the value of SPaG. They stressed that a balance needed to be struck between subject content and spelling, punctuation and grammar. They also said that if extra marks were to be introduced, examination markers would have to be provided with simple, clear guidance to ensure that marks were applied consistently.

If we are to mirror the change in marking schemes in respect of SPaG, there are, potentially, some section 75 implications for which we would have to consider mitigating measures. For instance, we would need to assure ourselves of the robustness of the access arrangements/reasonable adjustments guidance that the Joint Council for Qualifications produces to ensure that due regard is given to people with a disability and those, such as newcomer children, whose first language is not English.

It is also important to emphasise that, throughout the process, we were not simply going through the motions of a consultation. We were genuinely interested in hearing the views of people in Northern Ireland. There is no requirement to follow England. Indeed, Wales has already decided not to do so and will be looking at GCSEs as part of its wider 14-to-19 review. We are keen to put in place a system that is appropriate for pupils here. Balanced against that, we must also bear in mind the importance of the portability of qualifications. If our GCSE specifications are different from England, we must ensure that our students are not disadvantaged in how they are viewed by employers or higher and further education institutions.

We are likely to recommend several proposals to the Minister: first, that there should be no change to GCSE specification, and that decisions about the assessment arrangements for GCSEs, unitised or linear, should be made in the best interests of learners, enabling all young people to achieve their full potential. We believe that schools are the best placed to make decisions on a unitised or linear assessment route. Secondly, a small number of marks should be available for spelling, punctuation and grammar in English literature, geography, history and religious studies. CCEA has been asked to bring forward clear guidance for examination markers in consultation with other regulators. Thirdly, CCEA has also been tasked to ensure that its reasonable adjustments guidance for access arrangements is fit for purpose, and, if not, to bring forward recommendations for change. The Department will monitor the number of requests for access arrangements and special considerations on an annual basis. Fourthly, an evaluation of GCSEs should be undertaken in 2014-15 to establish what changes to specifications are required.

In conclusion, we are keen to hear the Committee's views and to reflect those views in our recommendations to the Minister. We are happy to answer any questions members may have.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Dale. Someone's mobile phone is affecting the system, so please pay attention to that.

Dale, I think that this is very valuable, I have to say. It is the first time I have seen the Department giving us real comments and quotations. Normally, all we get is a figure, a statistic or an assessment, but reading through these views gives a sense of the variance therein. However, the figures indicate that 56% of the 460 respondents said they would prefer to retain unitised GCSEs. One comment states:

*"I have been teaching for 30 years. To me it seems like a backward step to go back to just linear exams. Some children are suited to unitised assessments while others are ok with linear. Weaker children achieve better results doing unitised assessment. I think having a mix of both gives more choice and a better success rate."*

I think that is a very telling point. My query is how can we link the clearly proposed changes that I assume Michael Gove will introduce in September this year with comments of concern around the controlled assessment?

I noticed in the same paper, although it was not specifically an issue that was being consulted on, that one teacher stated:

*"I feel that the aspect of controlled assessment — especially in subjects such as languages where 60% is controlled assessment needs looked at. The amount of controlled assessment is putting untold pressure on students and is making the running of schools and the pupil experience very dissatisfying for all stakeholders."*

Is it right to link the two things, and will the Department take those particular calls on board in its recommendations to the Minister? Controlled assessment has only come in. If we were proposing to make changes, it would end up going out as well as bringing in new assessment arrangements or new structures in line with proposed changes in England. I do not think that is the best way forward for pupils in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Heaney:** No; it is not entirely right to link the two since controlled assessment would apply irrespective of the assessment —

**The Chairperson:** They are still keeping controlled assessment in England; is that right?

**Mr Heaney:** Yes; it will still exist. A number of consultees raised that as a concern, and it was raised during our workshops in the face-to-face session that we had with school principals. Roger can probably pick up on some of the detailed issues around controlled assessment.

A review was completed by MORI last year, and CCEA is currently examining the outworkings of the recommendations flowing from that review to see whether improvements can be made in controlled assessments, because schools say it has a significant impact on the running of exams and assessments for the children. So, although we are not part of this consultation, we are keen to ensure that schools' concerns are taken on board and are addressed, and we will work with CCEA to ensure that that happens.

**The Chairperson:** Roger, perhaps it would be useful at some stage for us to get a view from CCEA and the Department about the introduction of controlled assessment and the issues coming out of that. I am glad you have clarified for me, as I was not exactly sure, that they are two separate things, and that they are not being consulted on but are having an impact on schools.

**Mr McCune:** The arrangements for assessment within GCSEs reflect the different nature of subjects. For instance, there is no controlled assessment in maths; there is no internal assessment. In maths, because of the nature of the subject, you simply go in and do the exam. However, at the other extreme, you could never do that with art. Art and design, PE, and design and technology have an internal assessment worth 60% that is done as controlled assessment. There is then the middle group of subjects; English, geography, religious studies and so on, for which internal assessment counts as 25%.

The issue of linear or unitised relates only to external assessment; in other words, the assessment that is done, sent off, and then marked by the awarding body. Last year, I was talked to by a lot of principals about controlled assessment, and there are particular issues in modern languages, which, quite rightly, you have picked up on. Dale referred to the review that MORI has undertaken across the three countries, and there are issues. We need to look at issues to do with the settling in process for controlled assessment because I am long enough in the tooth to remember when course work was introduced and letters came in asking how we could ever collect all of the course work after the two years in a short period around Easter. Yet, course work came in. The problems that we had with course work towards the end related to the authenticity issue that teachers had because of the lack of control. Therefore, controlled assessments attempt to address that. There is no doubt that issues have been raised, and we have particular issues with modern languages. As you will know, the numbers of people doing them are declining. That may be an issue, and we are addressing that, but the two issues are separate.

**The Chairperson:** This is a very interesting discussion. I will open the floor to members.

**Mr Craig:** I find the argument around linear and unitised GCSEs interesting. I have had the privilege — and I count it as a privilege — of being through both systems in my youth. When I was doing my O levels, as they were back then — not GCSEs — they were very much linear, and that was just the way things were. Having done A levels, I then moved on to the technical college system, which was very much unitised, and I can clearly see advantages and disadvantages in both systems. Whether we like it or not, and the Chair has already hinted at this, to a large extent, linear learning in schools has gone. I have a good reason for saying that, because huge emphasis is now being put on the Department to tackle underachievement, and one of the difficulties will be how to detect it.

Most schools have moved to some form of interim assessment for all exams. The fact that the exam is a linear exam, and, at the end of it, there is only one exam that really counts, is neither here nor there. You will find that practically all schools now do some form of assessment throughout the two or three years leading up to the linear exam. Therefore, is this not a bit of an academic argument that we are having here that schooling practice has forced people into a unitised system in all but name?

Having been through both systems, I have a very firm opinion in my own mind of which is better. I am very strongly of the unitised line of thinking with regard to detecting problems and areas that need to be addressed. However, do you agree that, in practice, a lot of schools have moved to that anyway in all but name?

**Mr Heaney:** Yes, I think you make a valid point. Roger has a nice analogy of the difference between linear and unitised GCSEs, which he might explain to the Committee. However, the issue for most commentators and, certainly, for school principals was comparability and perception, whether rightly or wrongly, that GCSEs in the future might be seen as being a more difficult standard than unitised GCSEs, if we decided not to follow suit. The message that we want to emphasise today is that there is no question of the levels of difficulty being different. They are exactly the same. When the specifications were designed in 2009 for the introduction of unitised GCSEs, CCEA and other awarding bodies were very clear about the standard required and that linear and unitised GCSEs should be of the same standard.

So, I think that, provided we ensure that that message comes across loud and clear to universities here and across the water and to employers, it will not necessarily be a concern. Yes, there are ongoing issues of delivery within schools, but, in practice, I agree that that seems to be the direction in which most schools are heading. You can see from some of the consultee responses we got that there is a small and important school of thought that still believes that linear assessment is important. Therefore, the solution we are suggesting is a flexible one. Those schools that wish to still apply that can do so; whereas, if we were to introduce a decision from the centre, as Michael Gove has done, it would restrict that level of choice. I think that it is important for that to be maintained.

**The Chairperson:** That is a very good point.

**Mrs Dobson:** I thank you for your presentation, Dale. I start by following on from the comments that Jonathan made. In your analysis of linear and unitised GCSE results, is it a concern that A\* results seem to have gone down in each of the subjects shown? Why do you feel that that is the case?

**Mr Heaney:** We feel that, to date, information is not available on which to base a decision on that matter. We asked CCEA to look at a range of subjects on which we could test whether there has been an increase or decrease in standards. CCEA gave us the subjects outlined in your packs. There have obviously been some decreases at A\* level, but, similarly, those are offset by increases elsewhere. We felt that we could not draw any clear conclusions from that information. Along with the recommendations that we are making, we feel that, with a longer range of data available, we will be able to take a much clearer view on whether it has made a difference to performance. At the moment, it is still very early in the introduction of unitised GCSEs. For example, we will not see the impact on English and maths until this year; we will not see the impact on science until 2013. There is still a lot of data that it is simply too early to call upon. We were not overly concerned by the small variations, some of which were below 1%. We prefer to wait until we have more robust evidence to hand.

**Mrs Dobson:** I wonder, as Jonathan said, whether those results would have gone down had GCSEs stayed linear.

**Mr Heaney:** It is very difficult to say, because there are so many different issues at play. It is about not just the standard of teaching and the ability of the children but, as we are discussing today, the assessment methodology. It is difficult for us to determine to what extent each part has a role to play in the overall story of the academic achievements being delivered.

**Mrs Dobson:** Do you suspect that it had an impact?

**Mr Heaney:** We suspect it had a limited impact. I will be more content to look at that again once we have the English and maths results. The number of students sitting those qualifications is much higher.

**Mrs Dobson:** Will you bring your findings back to the Committee when you have the English and maths results?

**Mr Heaney:** Absolutely.

**Mrs Dobson:** I want to raise another point. The GCSE workshop and the Let's Talk GCSEs event raised the issue of comparability between a GCSE taken here and one taken in England. Are you concerned about that issue?

**Mr Heaney:** That goes back to the comparability issue. I am at pains to emphasise that there is no difference in standards or levels of difficulty. The standard is the same for unitised or linear GCSEs. The only difference is the timing of assessment. With the option that we are proposing to take forward, schools have a choice of when those assessments can be taken. Even if a school chooses the unitised GCSE specification, it can choose to take the assessment at the end of two years.

**Mrs Dobson:** The linear or unitised debate is something that we can discuss here, but that may not impact on employers. I am concerned that employers could have the sense that a GCSE taken in Northern Ireland can be seen as being worth less or is easier than a GCSE taken in England. Is that a concern of yours?

**Mr Heaney:** A lot of the feedback from school principals touched on that. However, a lot of employers still talk in terms of O levels. The level of understanding about the detail covered here does not seem —

**Mrs Dobson:** I did O levels as well, and I still talk in "O levels".

**Mr Heaney:** So I am not sure whether they would appreciate the subtleties here. We would certainly be at pains to emphasise the fact that the standards are the same irrespective of the route chosen, and it is not really an issue for employers. There is a potential concern from some higher education

institutions where courses are oversubscribed. We need to be aware of that and to keep an eye on it. However, that would not change the proposal as outlined. We think that keeping the choice open for schools is the most important thing. When we have more robust evidence to call on, we could revisit that decision.

**Mrs Dobson:** I would like to do so, because it is a concern of mine.

**Mr McCune:** I have just a wee bit to add. The analogy that —

**The Chairperson:** I was going to ask you about that.

**Mr McCune:** The analogy that I used at the start when I was talking to Dale and Paul was about looking at GCSE achievement in the same way as climbing a mountain. Two people at the bottom of a mountain have to get to the summit. So one climbs straight up the face of the mountain, which Michael Gove might say is the hard route, while the other person climbs round and up the mountain. It could be argued that those are two different ways to get to the same place, one of which could be described as the unitised route and the other as the linear route. The questions and the papers are the same for both. There are not special unitised questions and special linear questions.

It was really a surprise me that there has not been more of an outcry in England. As Dale says, Wales and Northern Ireland are not going in line with what Michael Gove has decided. Unitised specifications have, of course, been designed to be unitised, and they are being made linear by all the units being taken at the end. If you set out to design a linear specification, you would not have units in the specification; there would simply be a specification with, probably, two papers at the end. In England, the specifications are changing to linear, because all the units will be taken at the end.

I agree with you: comparability is a big, important issue. It is probably bigger with GCE because of its impact on university entrants. English is extremely important for comparability. We have had to deal with comparability anyway, because there has always been a unitised route, particularly in maths and science, even before the 2009 review. So we have had to deal with that issue. The fact that both have the same questions is important.

**Mrs Dobson:** Chair, do I have time to raise one final point?

**The Chairperson:** Yes.

**Mrs Dobson:** It is recommended that a small number of marks be made available for — Dale highlighted this — spelling, punctuation and grammar. Roughly what percentages are you thinking of?

**Mr Heaney:** In England, we believe that it is 5%.

**Mrs Dobson:** I noticed that the focus group was concerned that individual assessors might grade that differently and that that could disadvantage some pupils. Are you concerned about that?

**Mr Heaney:** CCEA's advice will be critical on that issue. We are conscious that, if that is taken on board, the marking scheme has to be applied consistently. That message came across at our workshops. So we have tasked CCEA with coming back to us with recommendations as to how that would be done.

**Mrs Dobson:** When is CCEA bringing back that guidance?

**Mr Heaney:** Once we make the recommendations, if the Minister agrees to them.

**Mrs Dobson:** So it will be very quickly after that. Is the same percentage offered in England?

**Mr Heaney:** Yes.

**Mr McCune:** I would like to explain something. In current GCSEs, there is what is called the quality of written communication (QWC), which includes three elements: SPaG, although it is not called "SPaG";



the context in which whatever is written is set; and the understanding that is brought. In other words, it is no good having a perfectly written piece of work in geography if the geography is rubbish. So those three elements come together.

What Michael Gove said is that there should be greater emphasis on spelling, punctuation and grammar. There is a feeling that, in subjects that require extended writing — English, history, geography and religious studies — it is wrong not to place an emphasis on the fact that people should be able to spell and punctuate. If you go too far, you could have a situation in which there is a beautiful piece of writing that is wrong in terms of religious studies or geography.

**Mrs Dobson:** I understand that. However, I am concerned about the way in which individual assessors grade work and any fluctuations.

**Mr McCune:** It will be important that the awarding bodies ensure that, in standardisation, they all treat the awarding of those extra marks in the same way, because it could be argued that a geography or history examiner is not an English specialist.

**The Chairperson:** Is specification revision done periodically? You said that an evaluation of GCSEs should be undertaken in 2014-15 to establish whether specification changes are needed. If we had not had the White Paper and Michael Gove, would there have been a review of the specifications in 2014-15 anyway ?

**Mr McCune:** There is a rough rule of thumb that accreditation of specifications lasts for five to six years. The specifications that were put in place, if it has been done in that way, were that most of the GCSEs in 2009 were for first assessment in 2011. The reason that English and maths were held back is because of the previous discussion about building the skills of communication and application of number into English and maths. They came in in 2010. There were changes to the science curriculum in 1996, and they were being put in place only then, so they were delayed a further year. It could be argued — the awarding bodies in England argue — that there should have been a five-year period after which the review could have been taken forward, with the inclusion of the linear/unitised debate. However, that is the way in which Michael Gove wanted to go forward in England. It could be argued that he has intervened in England to speed up that process .

**Mr McDevitt:** For the record, I am sympathetic to the idea that we do not abandon the unitised approach, certainly not this early. I am going to ask a question that I have wanted to ask for months. What is the policy objective of sitting an exam at 16 years of age in Northern Ireland? Why do we still have GCSEs?

**Mr McCune:** You are right — it is a very good question. There is no doubt that GCSEs — the high-stakes examinations at 16 years of age — were designed at a time when quite a lot of people left school to get jobs or to go into apprenticeships at 16. Now the thinking is about continuity from the age of 14 to 19, but many people still say that 14 to 19 is a long period not to have some sort of check, whether that is through high-stakes GCSEs with the extensive range of subjects that are studied. The support that I give for GCSEs is that some check is needed along the route, because, after 16, there is a divergence. People start to say that they are going to be doctors, take up apprenticeships or undertake training, and so forth. Things happen at 16, and it is important that there is some check. The issue has been raised before of whether the extensive range of subjects, with all the grades, from design and technology to art and music, is needed. Some people say that it would be better to focus on the main core subjects such as English, maths and science and not have such high-stakes examinations for others. It is a good question, because perhaps it would be better to have a broad assessment at 14 years of age, followed by a quality check along the way at 16, leading up to 19.

**Mr McDevitt:** If we look at the jurisdictions against which we benchmark ourselves, which I understand are generally Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, is it not the case that the most prevalent model is a benchmark at 14, some assessment at 16 on critical subjects, and then an exit exam of some description or another? In some ways, piling it in by doing very little at 14, a big punctuation at 16 and then on to 18, is a bit out of kilter with the OECD.

**Mr McCune:** Added to the picture is the fact that, in many cases, in those countries, the breadth continues, as is the case in the South of Ireland and Scotland. The England, Wales and Northern Ireland model is to go deeper into a narrower range of subjects from the ages of 16 to 19. In France, for instance, there would not be the idea that pupils do not do any maths at all after 16 years of age. How come? That has to be added to the mix, but one reason why pupils do it up to 16 years of age is that that is the point at which they are asking what they are going to "specialise" in, if you want to call it that.

**Mr McDevitt:** We have a fantastic tradition of producing world-class professionals and an awfully bad habit of encouraging children and young people to become so. We are often accused of not having an expansive enough approach to learning. Are we reaching the point at which we need to evaluate critically whether the pyramid structure, which focuses young people on an increasingly small number of subjects with a predetermined outcome of a university place or a professional career, militates against the building of an intellectual capital base that would better fit the 21st century?

**Mr McCune:** Those are obviously decisions for the Department. It would possibly ask us for advice. We are now in a situation in which the numbers who are staying on in education and training are at 90% to 95%. You were hinting at a system that was based on quite a lot of people leaving at 16 years of age and getting jobs and apprenticeships, and so on. That debate is opening up. Wales is embarking on a complete review of its 14-19 arrangements. Last week, I spoke to the person who is chairing that debate. They are talking about the short term and the long term.

I always caution departmental officials when I am talking to them. You do not want a revolution when it comes to qualifications, because when you have a revolution, it always leads to a disaster, like Curriculum 2000 or what happened in Scotland when it tried to effect radical change. In an evolutionary process, it is an extremely good point. It is about what we want to do with people between the ages of 16 and 19 within the broader 14-19 group. I think that the skills agenda is important, certainly from 14 to 16. Many people will say that the chances of progression depend a lot on the skills of communication, application of number and ICT skills.

**The Chairperson:** In this process, one of the keys that would be useful is looking at the breadth of subjects and whether we narrow down is having the flexibility to ensure that we are designing a system that is appropriate to the child rather than the other way round. We need to keep a clear focus as we move into uncharted territory if someone decides that he or she wants to make changes.

In light of Dale's overview of the current direction, there is a general sense, given members' comments, of acceptance that that would be a good way to progress. We are keen to have further information from you, subject to you producing the final paper that will go to the Minister and will be shared with us. The best way for us to leave it, should we find that there is some specific issue on which we want clarification or advice in the meantime, is that we will contact you. Thank you all very much.