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GCSE and A level reform

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This paper considers the shared qualification arrangements across England, Wales and Northern Ireland and discusses current practice and plans for the reform of qualifications in these jurisdictions, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. It also explores approaches to maintaining standards at Key Stage 4; considers higher education destinations; and discusses a number of issues in regard to qualification reform.

Key Points

- A fundamental review of GCSEs and A levels was announced by the Minister for Education in October 2012, coinciding with plans for significant reform elsewhere;
- GCSEs and A levels are currently jointly owned by the three regulators in NI, England and Wales, and are operated on a three jurisdiction basis;
- However recent years have seen some divergence from this, and the Secretary of State for Education has suggested that a separation would be legitimate;
- GCSEs and A levels differ from equivalents in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland in size and breadth, however collaboration on frameworks facilitates portability;
- At Key Stage 4 major reforms are planned in England, although the GCSE brand is to be retained. The changes include a move from modular to linear assessment, avoiding tiering and including more demanding content;
- Wales also plans to keep the GCSE title, although some planned reforms are different to those in England with the retention of a modular approach;
- Changes are also underway at this phase in Scotland, with qualifications to include a greater focus on skills and the application of knowledge;
- In the Republic of Ireland the Junior Certificate is to be reformed, moving from the current linear approach to a combination of coursework and final assessment;
- In regard to A levels England plans to move to a fully linear approach, and changes include involving higher education in the development of qualifications;
- However in Wales strong support was identified for A levels and it is planned to maintain the same qualifications as England and NI where possible;
- A number of potential issues are associated with plans for reform, including internal assessment; titling; tiering; and the inclusion of mandatory subjects;
- Over a third (38%) of NI students cross jurisdictions for higher education;
- A number of issues could be given further consideration, including:
 - The sustainability of the three jurisdiction qualifications system and the potential implications of maintaining or diverging from it;
 - The use of the GCSE and A level titles for potentially very different qualifications in England, Wales and NI;
 - The forthcoming decisions by the Minister on GCSEs and A levels;
 - Issues such as tiering, levels of internal assessment, the inclusion of compulsory subjects and independent study and targeting the ability range.

Executive Summary

Introduction

A fundamental review of GCSE and A level qualifications was announced by the Minister for Education, John O'Dowd MLA, in October 2012. The review coincides with plans for significant reforms in other jurisdictions. This paper considers current practice and plans for the reform of qualifications in England, Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. It also discusses a number of issues in regard to qualification reform.

Three jurisdiction qualifications system

At present GCSEs and A levels are jointly owned by the three regulators CCEA in NI, Ofqual in England and the Welsh Government, and are operated on a three jurisdiction basis. The system aims to ensure cross-jurisdiction comparability of qualifications.

However, in recent years there has been some divergence from this system. At present, the regulators undertake "*parallel decision-making*" whereby similar issues are considered, but different decisions may be taken.

A key example of this is the response taken to the issues around the results of GCSE English in 2012. The Welsh Minister offered re-grading for Welsh candidates, while in England a resit was offered to candidates. The Secretary of State for Education has stated that separating qualifications would be a "*natural consequence of devolution.*"

Comparison of qualifications across jurisdictions

GCSEs and A levels differ from the equivalent qualifications in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland in terms of size, age taken and breadth of study. However, the portability of qualifications across the jurisdictions is facilitated through collaboration on National Qualification Frameworks.

Key Stage 4 and equivalents

Currently at Key Stage 4 GCSEs are available in NI, England and Wales at age 15-16. Some subjects are examined by tier, and many subjects include controlled assessments which count towards the final grade. In Wales the Welsh Baccalaureate is available, with a core of subjects including skills, a foreign language and a period of community participation, together with a number of options.

The Junior Certificate is taken by students in the Republic of Ireland at around age 15. This involves eight areas including language and literature, maths, science and religious education. Tiers are available and assessment is linear through a national exam taken at the end of the junior cycle.

Until the 2013/14 school year students in Scotland took Standard Grade exams at age 14-16, involving seven to eight subjects. There were three levels of study available, and students could then take Intermediate 1 and 2 qualifications.

Post-16 qualifications

In NI, England and Wales A levels are single-subject exams that can be studied in any combination (depending on the provider). AS contributes 50% of the A level – A2 is the second half of a full A level and covers more demanding material. In Wales the Welsh Baccalaureate is available.

In the Republic of Ireland the Leaving Certificate is taken by students aged 17-18. It assesses a broad range of skills and three distinct forms are available (from the traditional academic version to an approach aimed more at employment options). A more modular approach is taken in Scotland. Students aged 17 take Scottish Highers and may enter higher education if they have taken five subjects. Students aged 18 may take Highers; and students who have passed these may take Advanced Highers.

Key Stage 4 reforms

In Northern Ireland the Minister for Education is expected to make an announcement on the future of GCSEs and A levels in the coming weeks. Table 1 provides an overview of the planned changes to Key Stage 4 in each of the jurisdictions.

Table 1: Overview of planned qualification reforms at Key Stage 4 (or equivalent)

Jurisdiction	Planned reforms
England	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retain GCSEs but with significant changes • Move to linear approach and minimise internal assessment • Avoid tiering • More challenging subject content and C Grade to be more demanding
Wales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retain GCSEs but make some changes • Continue with a modular approach • Allow tiering and controlled assessment only where there is a clear case • Greater emphasis on the application of knowledge to real-life contexts
Scotland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standard Grades to be replaced with National 4 and 5 • Continue with modular approach including coursework and assessment • Increased flexibility for schools • Greater focus on skills and applying knowledge
Republic of Ireland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reform Junior Certificate • Move from a linear approach to combine coursework and final assessment • Limit number of subjects taken for qualification purposes • Strengthen key skills and address issues around rote learning

Post-16 reforms

In England the planned reforms for A levels include a move to a fully linear approach, a review of curriculum content and the involvement of higher education in the development of qualifications.

In Wales there was strong support for A levels among stakeholders. It is planned to maintain the same A levels as England and NI where possible, and to involve higher education in qualification development. In Scotland, the fundamental characteristics of Highers and Advanced Highers are to be preserved in the revised qualifications.

Qualification reform issues

There are a number of potential issues associated with the current plans for GCSE and A level reform. These include:

- **Levels of internal/ external assessment:** Internal assessment is evident in qualifications internationally; both forms have advantages and disadvantages;
- **Titling:** England and Wales plan to reform GCSEs while retaining GCSE and A level titles – this is likely to have implications for comparability and regulation;
- **Tiering:** While many teachers support tiering as it may challenge the most able students, potential disadvantages include demotivating students placed in lower tiers and factors such as socio-economic background influencing streaming;
- **Modular or linear assessment:** Modules can allow students to use results to inform their learning, although concerns include the fragmentation of subject knowledge. A linear approach is high-stakes in nature and may increase the potential for “*teaching to the test*,”
- **Breadth vs. depth:** A levels are unusual internationally in terms of the number of subjects studied (most countries use a baccalaureate-style approach);
- **Compulsory subjects:** A levels are almost unique in not including mandatory subjects;
- **Assessing across the ability range:** Qualifications expected to cover the whole ability range must be both accessible to the lower end while providing appropriate challenge to the top end;
- **Inclusion of independent study:** It has been suggested that independent projects make up some of the most demanding aspects of qualifications worldwide.

Higher education destinations

The majority of students in each of the jurisdictions tend to remain within their home jurisdiction for higher education. However, students from NI are most likely to cross

borders, with 20% attending an institution in England, 5% in Scotland and 3% in the Republic of Ireland in 2011/12. The limited availability of third level places and generally higher grade requirements in NI are thought to contribute to this trend.

Conclusion

The comparability and portability of qualifications across NI, England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland remains an important issue for students, with 38% of NI students crossing jurisdictions for higher education in 2011/12.

While this is facilitated through collaboration on national qualification frameworks, the significant reforms currently taking place may have implications for regulation and the maintenance of standards for GCSEs and A levels. A number of issues could be given further consideration, including:

- The sustainability of the three jurisdiction qualifications system given the different policy directions being taken and the remarks of the Secretary of State for Education;
- The implications of maintaining or diverging from the system for students and qualifications in NI;
- The forthcoming decisions by the Minister for Education, John O'Dowd MLA, on GCSEs and A levels;
- The use of the GCSE and A level titles for potentially very different qualifications in England, Wales and NI;
- Issues such as tiering, levels of internal assessment, the inclusion of compulsory subjects and independent study;
- How the new proposals for GCSEs and A levels will target the whole ability range.

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1 Introduction

On 1st October 2012 the Minister for Education, John O'Dowd MLA, announced a fundamental review of GCSE and A level qualifications in Northern Ireland. The review comes at a time of significant qualification reform in other jurisdictions.

This paper considers the shared qualification arrangements across England, Wales and NI and discusses current practice and plans for the reform of qualifications in these jurisdictions, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. It also explores approaches to maintaining standards at Key Stage 4; considers higher education destinations; and discusses a number of issues in regard to qualification reform.

2 Three jurisdiction qualifications system

Qualifications (and their regulation) at GCSE and A level are currently operated on a three jurisdiction basis, and are jointly owned by the three regulators: Ofqual, the Welsh Government and CCEA (Council for the Curriculum, Examination and Assessment). The following table considers some of the key aspects of this system.¹

Table 2: Key aspects of the three-country qualifications system

Aspect	Detail
Comparability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grade outcomes are monitored in line with predictions Meetings where grade boundaries are set are monitored Regulators carry out comparability studies comparing students' exam scripts across assessment objectives to ensure a similar standard of work is required to gain particular grades
Criteria development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CCEA works with regulatory colleagues in England and Wales to develop accreditation criteria GCSEs and A levels are re-accredited every five to six years Consideration is given to content and assessment arrangements (including the balance between internal and external assessment)
Awarding issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Issues relating to the awarding of grades are considered These include ensuring comparability of standards year-on-year in each subject (roughly the same proportion of students will achieve each grade as in the previous year)

¹ CCEA (2013) *Review of GCSE and A levels: Qualifications Issues Paper*

Initial moves away from the three country system

Decisions on the regulation of qualifications were taken jointly by ministers across Wales, England and NI until the establishment of Ofqual in 2010 removed regulation from ministerial control. Changes to regulation and wider policy changes have meant that Ofqual has moved away from making decisions on a three-country basis.²

In addition, it has been reported that regulation by two or more regulators of shared qualifications has become increasingly challenging.³ Currently, the qualifications regulators undertake “*parallel decision-making*,” in that similar issues are considered, but different decisions may be taken.⁴

2012 GCSE English results

Common standards across the jurisdictions are important in regard to joint ownership of qualifications. While GCSEs and A levels have comparable standards across the three regions, differences in approaches to regulation became apparent in 2012 when the results of GCSE English prompted concern.⁵

Ofqual in England responded to the issue over grade boundaries by offering a resit to candidates in November 2012, while the former Welsh Minister, Leighton Andrews, ordered re-grading for Welsh candidates, leading to increased grades for over 1,200 students. Ofqual was critical of the actions taken in Wales, highlighting significant challenges for maintaining common standards in the future.⁶

Uncertainty over joint arrangements

In May 2013 Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education in England, wrote a joint letter to the Ministers of Education in NI and Wales. He stated that separating GCSEs and A levels would be “*a natural and legitimate consequence of devolution*”.⁷

In June 2013 the House of Commons Education Committee commented that the events around GCSE English had tested the joint arrangements “*to the limit*”, suggesting that their future appeared to be uncertain. The Committee stated that the end of joint arrangements would be “*regrettable*” and urged Ministers to seek to retain joint ownership of GCSEs and A levels. The current system of joint ownership and regulation is set to continue until summer 2016 in some subjects and 2017 in others.⁸

John O’Dowd, the Education Minister, has stated his belief that the best way to ensure the transparency, portability and credibility of GCSEs and A levels in Northern Ireland

² Department for Education and Skills (2012) *Review of Qualifications for 14 to 19-year-olds in Wales* Caerphilly: Welsh Government and CCEA (2013) *Review of GCSE and A levels: Qualifications Issues Paper*

³ As above

⁴ CCEA (2013) *Review of GCSE and A levels: Qualifications Issues Paper*

⁵ House of Commons Education Committee (2013) *2012 GCSE English results* London: The Stationery Office Limited

⁶ As above

⁷ BBC News (2013) *Michael Gove proposes split in exams systems of England, Wales and Northern Ireland* [online] Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-22604899>

⁸ House of Commons Education Committee (2013) *2012 GCSE English results* London: The Stationery Office Limited

is to work together on a three-jurisdiction basis. Nonetheless, he has acknowledged the differing policy directions being taken and has maintained the importance of continuing discussions on the issue at both a policy and a regulatory level.⁹

3 Comparison of qualifications across jurisdictions

CCEA comments that GCSEs and A levels differ from the qualifications offered in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland in terms of size; breadth of study; and age taken. However, it notes that portability of qualifications across the different systems is facilitated through collaboration on National Qualification Frameworks.¹⁰

The National Qualification Frameworks begin at entry level and extend through higher education (HE) to Doctoral degrees. Table 3 indicates how Key Stage 4 and Post-16 qualifications can be compared, highlighting a number of key stages in education.

Table 3: Cross-jurisdiction comparison of qualifications¹¹

Main stage of education/ employment	Level	NQF (England and NI), CQF (Wales)	Level	CQF (Scotland)	Level	NFQ (Republic of Ireland)
Qualified/ skilled worker Entry to HE Completion of secondary education	3	AS and A level, NVQ Level 3, Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced	6	Highers (Advanced Highers are level 7)	5	Leaving Certificate, Level 5 Certificate
Progression to skilled employment Continuation of secondary education	2	GCSEs at grade A*-C, NVQ Level 2, Welsh Baccalaureate Intermediate	5	Intermediate 2, Credit Standard Grade	4	Leaving Certificate, Level 4 Certificate
Secondary education Initial entry to employment or FE	1	GCSEs at grade D-G, NVQ Level 1	4	Intermediate 1, General Standard Grade	3	Junior Certificate, Level 3 Certificate

Source: QAA, SCQF, CCEA, Ofqual, CQFW, NQA (2011) *Qualifications can cross boundaries: A rough guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland*

⁹ Minister for Education response to an Assembly Question by Mr Danny Kinahan MLA, 21st May 2013

¹⁰ CCEA (2013) *Review of GCSE and A levels: Qualifications Issues Paper*

¹¹ The table refers to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) for England and NI; the Credit and Qualifications Framework (CQF) for Wales; the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF); and the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) for the Republic of Ireland.

In addition, the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) links the qualifications frameworks of different countries together.

Employer recognition

Evidence to the House of Commons Education Committee stated that employers are currently used to different exam systems, for example between England and Scotland. However, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) asserted that Ministers must consider the practical implications of changes as businesses need to understand differences between qualifications.¹²

4 GCSEs in Northern Ireland

At the end of Key Stage 4 most students take GCSEs. Over 50 subjects are available and there are no regulations governing the minimum or maximum number of subjects that can be taken.

Tiering

At GCSE some subjects are examined by tier, with varied examinations for differing ability bands. There is a foundation tier which covers grades G to C and a higher tier for grades D to A*. However, for subjects where the evidence indicates that questions may be set that apply to the whole ability range, there is only one tier (for example, history, music and art).¹³

There are also 'double award' GCSEs equivalent to two GCSEs in vocational subjects such as applied art and design, business and health and social care.¹⁴

Assessment and grading

In 2009 controlled assessments replaced coursework in most subjects. This involves assessing students in supervised conditions (assessments are either set by awarding organisations and marked by teachers, or set by teachers and marked by awarding organisations).

Controlled assessments replaced coursework in order to address criticisms around its unsupervised nature and the fact that it was mainly undertaken as homework.

Controlled assessments at GCSE may make up either 0%, 25% or 60% of the overall assessment, depending on the subject. Typically, the final grade is partly based on controlled assessment and partly on examination.¹⁵

¹² House of Commons Education Committee (2013) *2012 GCSE English results* London: The Stationery Office Limited

¹³ European Commission (2012) *Assessment in General Lower Secondary Education* [online] Available at: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/United-Kingdom-Northern-Ireland:Assessment_in_General_Lower_Secondary_Education

¹⁴ As above

¹⁵ As above

An eight-point scale of grades is used: A*, A, B, C, D, E, F and G (students who do not meet the minimum standard for grade G are recorded as 'U' or unclassified). This is based on grade descriptions giving an indication of the standards likely to be shown by learners awarded particular grades.¹⁶

Reform

In October 2012 a review of GCSE and A level qualifications in Northern Ireland was announced. A public consultation was undertaken and a steering group of stakeholders from schools, employers and higher and further education institutions was established. CCEA's final report was due to be given to the Minister for Education in June 2013.¹⁷

5 GCSEs in England

There are no regulations governing the minimum or maximum number of GCSE subjects a pupil may take. However, schools may be influenced by the way in which information is published in league tables – in particular, the English Baccalaureate performance measure highlights where pupils have achieved at least a grade C in a core of academic subjects:¹⁸

- English;
- Mathematics;
- History or geography;
- The sciences; and
- A language.

There are more than 50 subjects available ranging from traditionally academic subjects to applied subjects. Students must have access to a course of study leading to at least two science GCSEs, or all three of physics, chemistry and biology (schools may offer other combinations in addition).¹⁹

Tiering, assessment and grading

In line with Northern Ireland, some subjects may be examined by tier, and many GCSE grades are based partly on controlled assessment and partly on examination.²⁰

¹⁶ European Commission (2012) *Assessment in General Lower Secondary Education* [online] Available at: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/United-Kingdom-Northern-Ireland:Assessment_in_General_Lower_Secondary_Education

¹⁷ Minister for Education response to an Assembly Question by Mr Mervyn Storey MLA, 3rd December 2012

¹⁸ European Commission (2012) *Assessment in General Lower Secondary Education* [online] Available at: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/United-Kingdom-England:Assessment_in_General_Lower_Secondary_Education

¹⁹ As above

²⁰ As above

Reform

In September 2012 the Department for Education launched a consultation on Key Stage 4 qualifications. The original proposals included replacing GCSEs with 'the English Baccalaureate Certificate'. However, on 7th February 2013 the Secretary of State, Michael Gove MP, announced that GCSEs in England will be retained but will undergo significant reform.²¹

The Secretary of State said that there should be new GCSEs in English language; English literature; mathematics; biology; chemistry; physics; combined science (double award); history; and geography. The qualifications were planned to be introduced for first teaching in September 2015 (for first examination in summer 2017). Changes in remaining subjects were proposed to follow.²²

While GCSEs will be retained by England and Wales, differences are likely to emerge in terms of modular and linear structures, tiering and the proportion of internal assessment.²³ A consultation on the proposed changes closed on 3rd September 2013. Proposed changes in England include:²⁴

- The **grade C must become more demanding** to achieve;
- **More challenging subject content and more rigorous assessment** structures should be implemented at the top end;
- Qualifications should be **linear** – with all assessments taken at the end of the course;
- New GCSEs should **avoid tiering** (new approaches to allowing for the whole ability range may include extension papers offering access to higher grades);
- **Internal assessment and the use of exam aids should be minimised**;
- In maths and science there should be greater emphasis on quantitative problem solving, while in English and history extended writing should be tested (with fewer bite-sized and overly structured questions);
- Potential for a **new grading scale** to be used.

On 6th September 2013 the Chief Regulator stated that due to the amount of change required to GCSEs, the planned timetable could not be met. Instead, the reform will initially focus on English Language, English Literature and mathematics (where concerns are greatest) – with these subjects ready for first teaching from September 2015. Other subjects are expected to follow in 2016.²⁵

²¹ Baird, J., Ahmed, A., Hopfenbeck, T., Brown, C., Elliot, V (2013) *Research evidence relating to proposals for reform of the GCSE* Oxford: Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment

²² Letter from Michael Gove MP to Glenys Stacey, Chief Executive of Ofqual, 6th February 2013

²³ House of Commons Education Committee (2013) *2012 GCSE English results* London: The Stationery Office Limited

²⁴ Letter from Michael Gove MP to Glenys Stacey, Chief Executive of Ofqual, 6th February 2013

²⁵ Letter from Glenys Stacey, Chief Regulator, to Michael Gove MP, 6th September 2013

6 GCSEs in Wales

The arrangements for GCSEs in Wales are currently similar to those in place in Northern Ireland and England. GCSEs are available in a range of subjects and students are not required to take a particular minimum or maximum number of subjects. Arrangements for tiering, assessment and grading are also similar.²⁶

From 2007 the Welsh Baccalaureate was introduced across Wales, sitting alongside and incorporating existing qualifications. Available at Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced levels, it includes a core and options. The options may be academic or vocational, while the core incorporates:²⁷

- Essential Skills Wales at either level 2 or level 3;
- ‘Wales, Europe and the World’: political, social, cultural and economic issues;
- An individual investigation;
- A modern foreign language module;
- Personal and social education;
- A period of community participation; and
- Work-related education, including a period of work experience.

A recent review described this qualification as “*well-established and respected*”, with a “*solid and growing basis of currency within and outside Wales*”. It noted that most higher education providers, employers and learners recognise it, and identified its strengths as including a broad range of skills and experience.²⁸

Reform

The Welsh Government has undertaken a review of 14–19 qualifications. The review identified “*very strong support*” for GCSEs, and recommended that they be retained. However, it recommended some changes, including greater emphasis on the application of knowledge and use of real-life contexts, and continuing to allow unitised GCSEs. It supported divergence between Wales and other parts of the UK where this is in learners’ best interests.²⁹

²⁶ European Commission (2012) *Assessment in General Lower Secondary Education* [online] Available at: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/United-Kingdom-Wales:Assessment_in_General_Lower_Secondary_Education

²⁷ Estyn (2012) *Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification Provision at level 3 in Secondary Schools* Cardiff: Estyn

²⁸ Department for Education and Skills (2012) *Review of Qualifications for 14 to 19-year-olds in Wales* Caerphilly: Welsh Government

²⁹ As above

Table 4: Key recommendations for reform in Wales

Area	Recommendations
Qualifications system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop new GCSEs where necessary for delivery within the Welsh BaccaLaureate framework from September 2015 • A revised and more rigorous Welsh BaccaLaureate model should be established, continuing to incorporate stand-alone qualifications, a core, literacy and numeracy and wider skills • Allow tiering and controlled assessment only where there is a clear case for it due to the nature of the subject/ learning to be assessed • Place greater emphasis on the application of knowledge
Comparability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Welsh Government should ensure that qualifications are comparable in standard to the best in the world
Profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launch a substantial UK-wide communication strategy to explain and promote the system
Regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Welsh Government should establish a single body, Qualifications Wales, to regulate, approve and assure the quality of qualifications

On 29 January 2013, it was announced that the Welsh Government broadly accepted all of the Review's recommendations.³⁰

7 Republic of Ireland Junior Certificate

Currently post-primary education in the Republic of Ireland comprises a junior cycle (comprising students aged 12-15) and a senior cycle (students aged 15-18). All post-primaries follow the Junior Certificate syllabus and students take the Junior Certificate at around 15.³¹ The curriculum is presented in a framework of eight areas:³²

- Language and literature;
- Mathematical studies;

³⁰ Welsh Government (2013) *Review of Qualifications 14-19* [online] Available at: <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/qualificationsinwales/revofqualen/;jsessionid=676BD928471F696F99992A8505DB3E25?lang=en>

³¹ Department of Education and Skills (2012) *OECD Review on Evaluation and Assessment Frameworks for Improving School Outcomes: Country Background Report for Ireland* OECD

³² European Commission (2012) *Secondary and Post-Secondary Non-Tertiary Education* [online] Available at: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Ireland:Secondary_and_Post-Secondary_Non-Tertiary_Education

- Science and technology;
- Social, political and environmental education;
- Arts education;
- Physical education;
- Religious and moral education;
- Guidance counselling; and
- Pastoral care.

Tiering, assessment and grading

Typically, subjects are studied at Ordinary or Higher Level, while Irish, English and maths may also be studied at Foundation level. Results are provided in the form of grades.³³

The Junior Certificate is a national exam taken at the end of the junior cycle. Students choose between eight and ten subjects and levels (Higher, Ordinary and Foundation) to include English, maths and Irish, unless they have been given an exemption.³⁴

Reform

Following consultation, in 2011 the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) put forward 'radical' proposals recommending that the Junior Certificate be reformed. The proposals were accepted by the Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairi Quinn T.D., and aim to:³⁵

- **Limit the number of subjects** to be taken for qualification purposes and reduce the content of syllabuses to focus on the process of learning (rather than exam strategy);
- **Address issues around rote learning and curriculum overload** while providing for greater creativity and innovation;
- **Strengthen key skills** and provide for more relevant and flexible forms of assessment.

Under the new system, from September 2014 schools will need to deliver a programme enabling students to develop a range of skills. Students will take between eight and ten full subjects. Students may substitute full subjects for a maximum of four short courses

³³ Department of Education and Skills (2012) *OECD Review on Evaluation and Assessment Frameworks for Improving School Outcomes: Country Background Report for Ireland* OECD

³⁴ As above

³⁵ NCCA (2011) *Minister Quinn backs National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) proposals for junior cycle reform* [online] Available at: http://www.ncca.ie/en/News_Press/Press_releases/November_3rd_2011_Press_release_Minister_Quinn.pdf

(each one equivalent to half a subject), allowing the inclusion of subjects such as Digital Media Literacy, Chinese and Programming.³⁶

The current linear Junior Certificate examination will be phased out over the next eight years. Subjects will instead be assessed through a combination of school work components (worth around 40%) and a final assessment (worth around 60%). Both elements will be marked by teachers in the school. Quality is expected to be maintained through a number of measures, including:³⁷

- Each subject specification will contain clear learning outcomes;
- Teachers will receive professional development in educational assessment, including moderation;
- The results will be sent to the Department of Education and Skills for monitoring of national and school patterns.

The first certification will take place in 2017. There will be 21 subjects available, with core subjects in English, maths and Irish. Differing levels of papers will only be available within the core subjects. Grades will range from 'Not Achieved' to 'Achieved with Distinction'.³⁸

8 Standard Grades and Nationals: Scotland

Scotland's approach has traditionally differed from that in England, Wales and NI. Until 2013/14 students studied for Standard Grades in the 10th and 11th years of schooling, taking exams at age 14-16. In comparison, GCSEs are taken in the 11th and 12th years of schooling at age 15-16.³⁹

Students took seven or eight subjects including maths and English, with three levels of study available: Credit, General and Foundation. Students typically took exams at two levels (Credit and General or General and Foundation) to give them the best chance of achieving as high a grade as possible.⁴⁰

Students who passed Standard Grades at general or foundation level could take Intermediate 1 and 2 qualifications, with Intermediate 2 acting as a stepping stone to Higher qualifications for some students.⁴¹

³⁶ Department of Education and Skills (2013) *Information on the Framework for Junior Cycle* Dublin: DES

³⁷ As above

³⁸ As above

³⁹ Machin, S., McNally, S., Wyness, G. (2013) *Education in a Devolved Scotland: A Quantitative Analysis* Economic and Social Research Council

⁴⁰ SQA *NQ Quick Guide* [online] Available at: <http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/14094.html>

⁴¹ Education Scotland (2013) *Exam guide* [online] Available at: <http://www.education.scotland.gov.uk/scottishschoolsonline/examguide.asp>

Reform

New qualifications are being introduced in 2013/14 in an attempt to simplify the system at SCQF levels 4 and 5 (named National 4 and 5), replacing the Standard Grade and Intermediate 1 and 2 qualifications. The new qualifications will continue to have a unit-based structure. The key differences include:⁴²

- **Increased flexibility:** schools may deliver the qualifications in a way that meets learners' needs, allowing them to develop at different times, rates and in different areas;
- **Greater focus on skills and applying learning:** students will be required to demonstrate skills, application of knowledge and attributes to equip them for life and work;
- **More scope for personalisation.**

Courses will be made up of a number of contributing units and coursework, allowing for the study of up to eight subjects. National 4 courses are to be assessed by teachers through coursework assessment, with no external assessment or grading. (SQA assessments and quality assurance processes are to be used for quality assurance).⁴³

National 5 courses will include coursework to be assessed by teachers, and an external SQA assessment (examinations where appropriate). The most able pupils would be able to omit the National qualifications and proceed to studying for Highers.⁴⁴

9 Ensuring comparability of standards at Key Stage 4

Awarding organisations seek to predict GCSE grade profiles in order to ensure that qualification standards are maintained year-on-year and across awarding organisations. The jurisdictions considered within this paper use different approaches, as outlined in the following paragraphs.

Northern Ireland: Common centre data

In Northern Ireland 'common centre' data are used to predict GCSE outcomes (as there are no Key Stage 2 tests). A common centre is a centre that has entered students for a subject in the previous two years. This approach works on the premise that centre's results tend to be similar to previous years, and that comparing results across common centres indicates whether standards are comparable year-on-year.⁴⁵

This approach is GCSE subject-specific. The Common Centres database includes outcomes from centres in England, Wales and NI (from various awarding

⁴² The Scottish Government (2012) *Frequently Asked Questions – National Qualifications* [online] Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0039/00397045.doc>

⁴³ As above

⁴⁴ As above

⁴⁵ CCEA (2013) *Review of GCSE and A levels: Qualifications Issues Paper*

organisations). The GCSE outcomes from the centre's previous year become the prediction for the current year.⁴⁶

The Department notes that this approach has limitations in that the predictions are made at the centre-level, while the most accurate predictions would be made at the individual student-level. As such, this approach cannot accurately measure changes in a pupil cohort; rather, it assumes that centres will maintain similar outcomes each year, regardless of student characteristics.⁴⁷

England: Comparable outcomes approach

In England a “comparable outcomes” approach is used. This is a statistical tool, whereby Key Stage 2 attainment data, taken from assessment at age 11, is used to predict the expected achievement of a cohort of 16 year-olds taking their GCSEs. Ofqual uses this approach for two reasons:⁴⁸

- To ensure that students taking new qualifications are not disadvantaged in the first years of the qualification (allowing for lack of teacher familiarity); and
- To ensure that grade standards between exam boards are comparable.

Challenges

Difficulties associated with this approach include a lack of understanding among schools, challenges in regard to subjects with a high performance element (such as drama) and a lack of comparability with other jurisdictions (using different approaches).⁴⁹

Judicial review

Following concerns regarding the results of GCSE English 2012 an application for judicial review was taken against two exam boards (AQA and Edexcel) and Ofqual by an alliance of professional bodies, councils, schools and pupils. The alliance called for a re-grading of the results in line with the January grade boundaries.⁵⁰

In February 2013 Lord Justice Elias found in favour of the exam boards and Ofqual, dismissing the application for judicial review. In his judgement he stated that there was “*nothing improper*” regarding predicted outcomes playing a key role in grade awarding, noting that Key Stage 2 predictions were “*widely thought to be the most reliable statistical evidence currently available for the purpose of comparing evidence year on year.*”⁵¹

⁴⁶ Information provided by the Department of Education, August 2013

⁴⁷ As above

⁴⁸ House of Commons Education Committee (2013) *2012 GCSE English results* London: The Stationery Office Limited

⁴⁹ As above

⁵⁰ As above

⁵¹ As above

Republic of Ireland: predetermined grade boundaries and script sampling

In the Republic of Ireland grade boundaries are predetermined and raw scores are not adapted. As such, the raw mark directly determines the grade, and once the raw marks are finalised no manipulation of the grade distribution is possible.⁵²

Where a large variation in the level of achievement is seen over a short period of time, it is assumed that this is due to the effects of a particular test instrument, rather than a sudden change in the achievement of the cohort. In such cases, adjustment may only be made to the raw marks on scripts (rather than the grade distribution).⁵³

At the start of the marking process each examiner marks a sample of scripts. Once they are marked an overall picture is given as to whether the grade distribution is satisfactory. If so, marking proceeds, but if it is not acceptable, marking criteria may be adjusted and scripts that have already been marked may be revisited.⁵⁴

It has been suggested that this fixed boundaries approach can pose ‘considerable difficulties’ for maintaining standards year-on-year.⁵⁵

Scotland: Archive of assessment materials

In Scotland the SQA seeks to ensure that standards are comparable with previous years by using an archive of assessment material and anonymised learners’ work (including examination scripts). This archive is also used to help benchmark standards across the UK.⁵⁶

Wales: Common centres

As Wales does not have Key Stage 2 assessments to draw on, it also uses the ‘common centres’ approach.⁵⁷

10 A levels in Northern Ireland

A levels are single-subject examinations that can be studied in any combination depending on the school or college. Courses tend to last two years with students completing the qualifications around the age of 18. An A level qualification includes AS and A2 units.⁵⁸

⁵² McManus, H. (2006) *Predicting final grade distribution of examination results – selection of sample scripts* The International Association for Educational Assessment

⁵³ As above

⁵⁴ As above

⁵⁵ As above

⁵⁶ SQA *Setting and revising standards* [online] Available at: <http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/33538.html#GradeBoundaries>

⁵⁷ Welsh Government (2012) *GCSE English Language 2012: An investigation into the outcomes for candidates in Wales*

⁵⁸ Eurypedia (2012) *Assessment in General Upper Secondary Education* [online] Available at: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/United-Kingdom-Northern-Ireland:Assessment_in_General_Upper_Secondary_Education

- AS is a stand-alone qualification worth half a full A level. It typically consists of two units that combined contribute 50% of the full A level;
- A2 is the second half of a full A level, covering more demanding material than at AS level. It usually includes two units that together contribute the remaining 50% of the full A level.

Since September 2008, pupils in post-compulsory education have been able to undertake an extended project as a standalone qualification in addition to A levels. This extended project is equivalent in size to half an A level and equivalent in standard to a full A level, and is intended to develop students' research and independent learning skills.⁵⁹

Grading

AS qualifications are graded on a scale of A to E, with A level passes graded from A*-E (the A* grade was introduced in 2010). A U grade denotes a fail. The regulator sets out subject criteria detailing grade descriptions which give an indication of the standards of achievement likely to have been shown by learners awarded particular grades.⁶⁰

Reform

A number of changes to A levels have already been announced. John O'Dowd MLA, the Education Minister, has stated that the current AS/ A2 modular approach will remain, but that there will be no re-sit opportunity in January (there will be an opportunity to re-sit in June).⁶¹

The Minister has requested that CCEA considers changing the weighting of AS/ A2 from 50:50 to 40:60. He has also stated that he does not support the involvement of Russell Group Universities in setting the content of qualifications.⁶²

11 A levels in England

The approach to A levels in England is currently broadly similar to that in place in Northern Ireland. A levels include AS and A2 units, and the approach to grading is the same. Students may also take an extended project as a standalone qualification in addition to A levels.⁶³

⁵⁹ Eurypedia (2012) *Assessment in General Upper Secondary Education* [online] Available at: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/United-Kingdom-Northern-Ireland:Assessment_in_General_Upper_Secondary_Education

⁶⁰ As above

⁶¹ Northern Ireland Executive (2013) *Education Minister, John O'Dowd, today announced changes to GCE A levels following a local consultation* [online] Available at: <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news-de-200513-odowd-announces-decision>

⁶² As above

⁶³ Eurypedia (2012) *Assessment in General Upper Secondary Education* [online] Available at: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/United-Kingdom-England:Assessment_in_General_Upper_Secondary_Education

Reform

In March 2012 the Secretary of State for Education wrote to Ofqual stating his view that A levels do not command adequate levels of confidence, and suggesting that higher education institutions should have greater involvement in developing qualifications.⁶⁴

The Government has since announced significant reform to A levels with revised qualifications in English; mathematics and further mathematics; physics; chemistry; biology; history and geography planned to be introduced from 2015 for first examination in 2017.⁶⁵

Ofqual has agreed that a further six subjects will be reformed within this timescale (including psychology, art and design and economics), and it is expected that further subjects will be reformed at a later date.⁶⁶ The key changes include:

- **Changes to the structure** of A levels: including a review of curriculum content requirements;
- The introduction of **standalone AS qualifications** that will not contribute to a full A level qualification;
- **Involvement of higher education** in future A level design;
- **All exams to be taken in the summer period** (none in January);
- In the longer term, **qualifications will become fully linear** (rather than assessments undertaken at the end of each year of A level study).

12 A levels in Wales

The implementation of A levels is similar to England and NI. In addition, the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification (WBQ), introduced in 2007, is an overarching qualification incorporating existing qualifications and a common core. This aims to promote breadth of study and to give equal recognition to academic and vocational qualifications.⁶⁷

Reform

A review of qualifications for 14-19 year-olds ran from September 2011 to November 2012, launched by the Deputy Minister for Skills, Jeff Cuthbert. The review

⁶⁴ Letter from Michael Gove MP to Ofqual, 31st March 2012 [online] Available at: <http://www2.ofqual.gov.uk/downloads/category/132-correspondence?download=1369%3Aletter-from-michael-gove-to-glenys-stacey-regarding-a-level-reforms-30th-march-2012>

⁶⁵ House of Commons Education Committee (2013) *2012 GCSE English results* London: The Stationery Office Limited

⁶⁶ As above

⁶⁷ Eurypedia (2012) *Assessment in General Upper Secondary Education* [online] Available at: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/United-Kingdom-Wales:Assessment_in_General_Upper_Secondary_Education

recommended retaining A levels as the main qualification for this stage of education, citing strong support among stakeholders.⁶⁸

It reported “*little appetite*” among stakeholders for divergence between the A levels used in NI, Wales and England; rather cooperation between the jurisdictions was called for. Key recommendations included:⁶⁹

- **Maintaining the same A levels as England and NI** where possible, but allowing variation where necessary to meet the needs of learners in Wales;
- **Ensuring that employers and higher education institutions are involved** in the development and/ or accreditation of A levels;
- **Retain the AS/ A2 structure;**
- Allow only **one resit** opportunity;
- A substantial and long-term UK-wide **communication strategy** should be launched to explain and promote the system.

13 Scottish Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications

Scotland’s approach to examinations is more modular than in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Students take Scottish Highers at age 17 and Highers and Advanced Highers at age 18. Students aged 17 may take five Higher subjects, enabling entry to higher education.⁷⁰

Students who remain in education to take Highers may leave school aged 17 (after one year of post-compulsory education) with some qualifications. In England, Wales and NI pupils can leave at age 17 with AS-levels, however, these are not adequate for entry to university.⁷¹

Highers are particularly aimed at students who have passed subjects at Standard Grade Credit level or have successfully completed a course at Intermediate 2. Highers are typically required for university or college entry.⁷²

Advanced Highers can be taken by students who have passed Highers, and aim to extend the skills and knowledge gained. They are typically taken in the sixth year of school or college, and are useful for entry to university or employment.⁷³

⁶⁸ Department for Education and Skills (2012) *Review of Qualifications for 14 to 19-year-olds in Wales* Caerphilly: Welsh Government

⁶⁹ As above

⁷⁰ Machin, S., McNally, S., Wyness, G. (2013) *Education in a Devolved Scotland: A Quantitative Analysis* Economic and Social Research Council

⁷¹ As above

⁷² SQA *NQ Quick Guide* [online] Available at: <http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/14094.html>

⁷³ As above

Reform

Although Scotland has been undertaking reforms of its qualification system, the fundamental features and characteristics of the Higher and Advanced Higher courses are to be preserved in the new courses. The new Higher qualifications will be introduced in 2014/15 with the new Advanced Highers to be introduced in 2015/16.⁷⁴

14 Republic of Ireland Leaving Certificate

All post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland follow the Leaving Certificate at senior cycle (students aged 15-18 years). At around the age of 17-18 students take the Leaving Certificate. There are three forms that students can choose at the end of the senior cycle which each have distinct aims and objectives.⁷⁵

Table 5: Three forms of the Leaving Certificate

Form	Detail
Leaving Certificate Established	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The more academic and traditional version • 34 subjects are available and students take the Leaving Certificate examination
Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduces vocational subjects and link-modules • Students take an examination paper and provide a portfolio in Link Modules – activity-based modules on enterprise education, preparation for work and work experience
Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aimed more at employment options and is not designed as an entry mode to third-level education • Students take a final examination and accumulate credits over the two years of study

Used as an entry qualification by higher education institutions and by many employers, schools, students and their parents tend to regard the Leaving Certificate as a high-stakes examination.⁷⁶

A broad range of skills is assessed by the Leaving Certificate examination, including assessment of knowledge-based skills; practical skills; research skills; interpretation skills; oral and aural linguistic ability; and creative skills.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ SQA New Qualifications Outline [online] Available at: <http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/58085.3588.html>

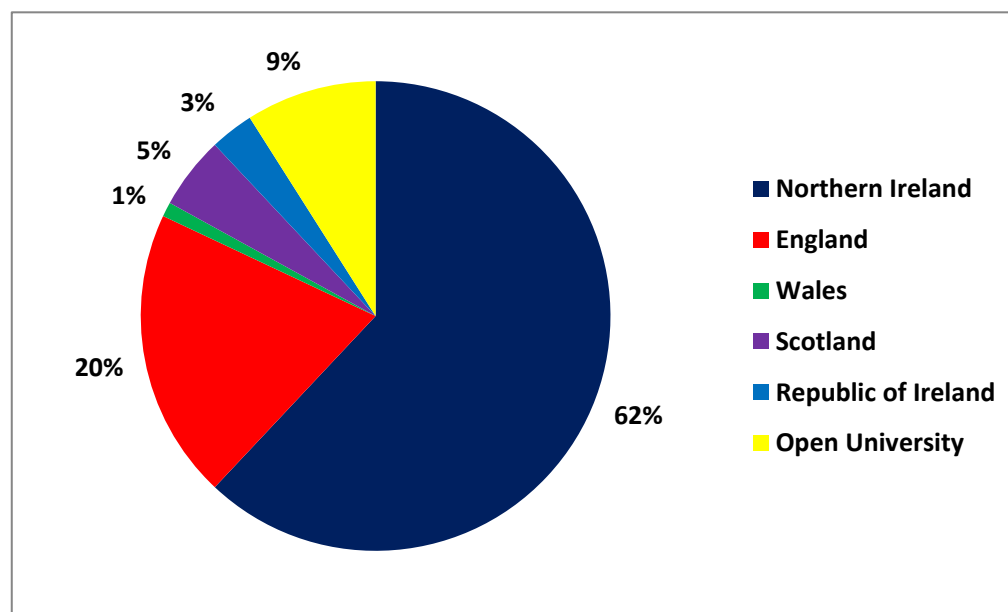
⁷⁵ Department of Education and Skills (2012) *OECD Review on Evaluation and Assessment Frameworks for Improving School Outcomes: Country Background Report for Ireland* OECD

⁷⁶ As above

15 Higher education destinations

Figure 1 provides an overview of NI domiciled students attending higher education institutions in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. It shows that of NI domiciled first year students attending a higher education within the UK and Republic of Ireland, 62% attended within NI compared to 20% attending an institution in England and 3% attending within the Republic of Ireland.

Figure 1: Overview of NI domiciled first year students attending HE institutions in the UK and Republic of Ireland in 2011/12⁷⁸



CCEA reports that grade requirements in Northern Ireland tend to be higher than in other UK jurisdictions due to the limited availability of third level places. It states that this leads to a significant number of students studying outside of NI.⁷⁹ Indeed, it is estimated that if all students domiciled in Northern Ireland wished to study here, an average of 5,400 would not receive a place each year.⁸⁰

Across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales the majority of students remain in their own jurisdiction to attend university. However, students from Northern Ireland and Wales are more likely to cross borders than Scottish and English students.⁸¹ The following figure illustrates the location of higher education institutions attended by students domiciled in NI, England, Scotland and Wales in 2011/12.⁸²

⁷⁷ Department of Education and Skills (2012) *OECD Review on Evaluation and Assessment Frameworks for Improving School Outcomes: Country Background Report for Ireland* OECD

⁷⁸ Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency and the Higher Education Authority

⁷⁹ CCEA (2013) *Review of GCSE and A levels: Qualifications Issues Paper*

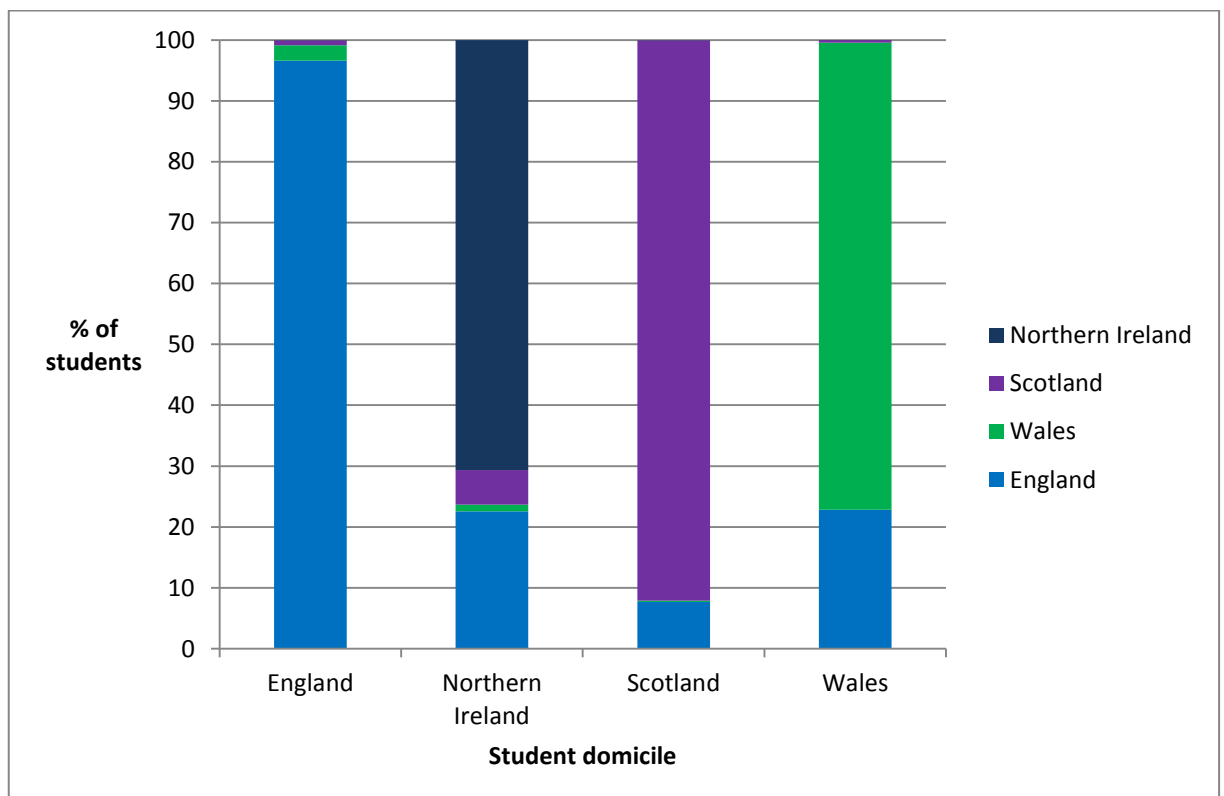
⁸⁰ Wakeling, P., Jefferies, K. (2013) "The effect of tuition fees on student mobility: the UK and Ireland as a natural experiment" *British Educational Research Journal* Vol. 39, No. 3, pp. 491-513

⁸¹ Higher Education Statistics Agency (2013) *Higher Education student enrolments and qualifications obtained at higher education institutions in the United Kingdom for the academic year 2011/12* [online] Available at:

http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2667&Itemid=161

⁸² Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency

Figure 2: Location of higher education institution attended by first year students by domicile, 2011/12



Republic of Ireland

As Figure 1 illustrates, just 3% of NI domiciled students in their first year at a UK or RoI higher education institution attended in the Republic of Ireland in 2011/12, equating to 622 students. There has been a slow decline in the number of NI domiciled students attending universities in the Republic of Ireland since 2004/05 (from 769 students).⁸³

In terms of students domiciled in the Republic of Ireland, in 2011/12 a total of 151,482 students attended university in the Republic of Ireland.⁸⁴ Of students from the Republic of Ireland attending a higher education institution in the UK and RoI combined, 91% attended in the Republic of Ireland. A total of 2% of all RoI students attended a higher education institution in Northern Ireland.

With regard to the 15,075 students domiciled in the Republic of Ireland attending higher education institutions in the UK, 8,015 attended in England (53%), 2,630 or 17% attended in Scotland and 910 (6%) attended in Wales. Just under a quarter (23%) of these students attended university in Northern Ireland, representing a decrease of 17.8% from 2010/11.⁸⁵

⁸³ EURES Cross Border Partnership (2011) *A study of obstacles to cross-border undergraduate education*

⁸⁴ Higher Education Authority *Student details* [online] Available at: <http://www.hea.ie/files/files/file/statistics/2012/Enrolments/FTCounty1112.xlsx>

⁸⁵ Higher Education Statistics Agency (2012) *Non-UK domicile students* [online] Available at: http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2663&Itemid=161

Obstacles to student mobility

A report in 2011 identified a number of barriers to student mobility across the island of Ireland, including a change in ‘equivalences’ between A level and Leaving Certificate grades. This was due to universities in the Republic of Ireland choosing to increase the requirement for high demand subjects (such as medicine and law) from three to four A levels at the highest grade.⁸⁶

The change came about as a result of a 2003 Oxford University-led Expert Group concluding that while UCAS had previously deemed results in each Leaving Certificate subject to be half the value of an equivalent A level, this should be adjusted to two-thirds of the value.⁸⁷

As such, universities believed that the change in requirements was necessary to avoid giving an unfair advantage for NI students over their counterparts with top Leaving Certificate results. The requirement for four top A levels tends to be seen by NI students as onerous in comparison to requirements at comparable UK institutions.⁸⁸

Table 6 provides an overview of the key obstacles to student mobility identified in the 2011 report.⁸⁹

Table 6: Overview of barriers to student mobility across the island of Ireland

From North to South	From South to North
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of information about universities in the other jurisdiction • Higher grade requirements for high demand courses • The high cost of living (particularly in Dublin) • Unfamiliarity with the applications process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of information about universities in the other jurisdiction • Introduction of ‘free fees’ in 1997 • Continuing concerns around the legacy of conflict and sectarianism • Unfamiliarity with the applications process • No financial assistance available

Trends in attendance

Figure 3 illustrates the number of first year students domiciled in Northern Ireland attending higher education institutions in each of the jurisdictions considered, and at the Open University (includes full and part time students), over a six year period.

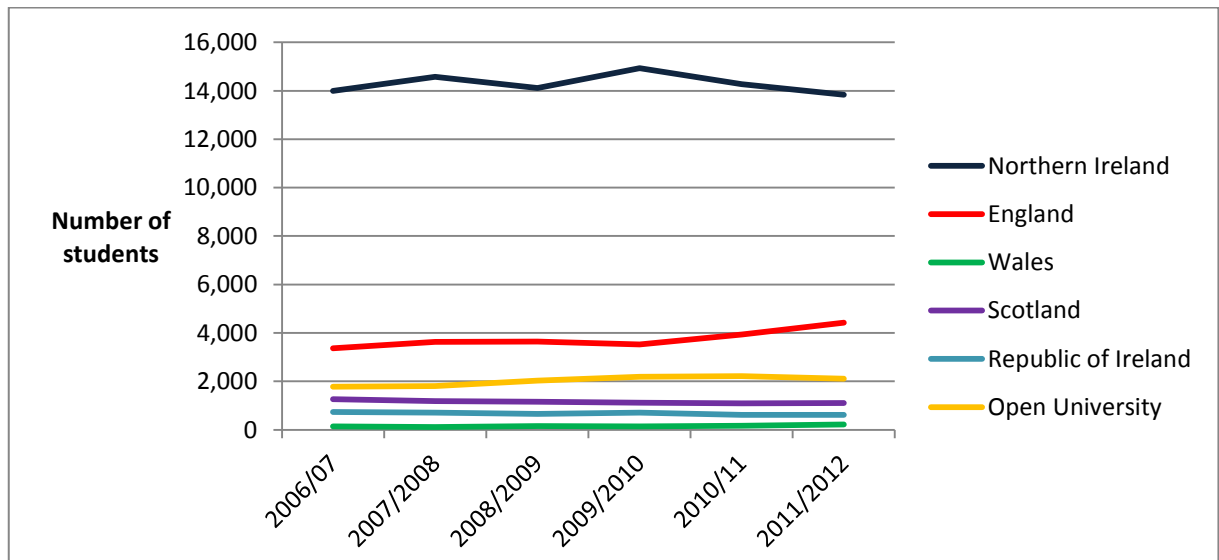
⁸⁶ EURES Cross Border Partnership (2011) *A study of obstacles to cross-border undergraduate education*

⁸⁷ As above

⁸⁸ As above

⁸⁹ As above

Figure 3: Location of Higher Education institutions attended by first year Northern Ireland domiciled students between 2006/07 and 2011/12⁹⁰



16 Qualification reform issues

Levels of internal assessment

Internal assessment is emphasised in senior secondary qualifications internationally. Michael Gove has commented that the new GCSEs should keep internal assessment to a minimum. However, the House of Commons Education Committee has stated that the proportion of internal assessment should be decided on a subject-by-subject basis.⁹¹

With regard to A levels, internal or school-based assessment tends to be less evident (typically comprising around 20% of the available marks). Forms of internal assessment can include:⁹²

- Oral tests to assess subject knowledge and skills: tend to be very demanding forms of assessment and educationally beneficial;
- Tests and written assignments;
- Self-directed research projects;
- Practical activities, fieldwork and projects.

While most qualifications contain elements of internal assessment, there is variation in emphasis. In the Republic of Ireland the Leaving Certificate (Established) is fully externally assessed, while in the Netherlands, New South Wales and Alberta the key

⁹⁰ Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency and the Higher Education Authority

⁹¹ House of Commons Education Committee (2013) *2012 GCSE English results* London: The Stationery Office Limited

⁹² Ofqual (2012) *International Comparisons in Senior Secondary Assessment: Full Report* Coventry: Ofqual

qualifications contain 50% school-based assessment. A small number of systems, such as Norway's Vitnemål, prioritise internal assessment over external exams.⁹³

However, emphasis on internal assessment has also been problematic in some cases. For example, the Ofqual investigation into the issues around GCSE English in 2012 highlighted the high level of controlled assessment (60%) as an issue affecting results. Such a situation can put teachers into a "sensitive" position as they have significant control over the assessment and there can be strong pressure to deliver good results.⁹⁴

Table 7: Advantages and disadvantages of internal and external assessment

	Internal	External
Potential advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be used where aspects of work cannot be validly assessed by end of course exams • Formative internal assessment may improve outcomes • Provides more opportunities for students to show what they know and can do under normal conditions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High reliability – all students are assessed on the same tasks and results are measured by the same standards • Conditions ensure the student's own work is assessed • Should be free from bias as assessors do not know the students
Potential challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often perceived as less reliable than external assessment • Where assessment requires interpretation teachers may be influenced by factors including gender, socio-economic background, and behaviour • Cheating can be an issue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May have lower validity in that only a limited range of curriculum goals can be covered • Gives limited information on students' competencies due to normal daily variations in performance • Teachers may 'teach to the test'

Source: Baird, J., Ahmed, A., Hopfenbeck, T., Brown, C., Elliot, V (2013) *Research evidence relating to proposals for reform of the GCSE* and OECD (2013) *Synergies for Better Learning: An international perspective on evaluation and assessment*

Titles

England and Wales are planning to reform qualifications while retaining the GCSE and A level titles. This is likely to have implications in terms of comparability across jurisdictions and the regulation of qualifications.

⁹³ Ofqual (2012) *International Comparisons in Senior Secondary Assessment: Full Report* Coventry: Ofqual

⁹⁴ House of Commons Education Committee (2013) *2012 GCSE English results* London: The Stationery Office Limited

Ofqual has stated that it is very difficult to ensure that standards are consistent where qualifications vary significantly in structure, assessment and content. Michael Gove has indicated that Wales and NI may have to relinquish the titles GCSEs and A levels. In response, Leighton Andrews stated:⁹⁵

“We wish Mr Gove well with his plans to re-name these qualifications in England.”

The Minister for Education here, John O’Dowd MLA, has stated that he has asked CCEA to engage fully with the qualifications regulators in England and Wales, particularly with regard to the issue of titles.⁹⁶

Tiering

In England the Secretary of State for Education has stated that he would like reformed GCSEs to avoid tiering, as it may limit students’ ambitions by allowing an optimum attainment of grade C.⁹⁷

Research suggests that high levels of accountability based on grades, particularly centring on students achieving a grade C, may make it more likely that teachers “play it safe” by choosing the lower tier. This may limit students’ achievement.⁹⁸

Many teachers favour tiering, viewing it as challenging the most able students. However, many report that students entered for lower tiers become de-motivated, and high performing students within these tiers cannot move to a higher set. In addition, research indicates that factors such as gender and socio-economic background may influence streaming.⁹⁹

Modular or linear assessment

The potential advantages of modular assessment include that it can allow students to use results and feedback to inform their learning and support teachers in their planning. Challenges include the appropriateness of a modular approach for particular subjects, and concerns around the fragmentation of subject knowledge.¹⁰⁰

The evidence indicates that modular exams are not necessarily easier. Challenges around the linear approach include the high stakes nature of testing, and the potential that teachers may be more likely to ‘teach to the test.’ Other issues include the format of assessment. For example, the evidence suggests that boys tend to perform better than girls on multiple choice questions, while girls generally do better where questions require a longer written response.¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ House of Commons Education Committee (2013) *2012 GCSE English results* London: The Stationery Office Limited

⁹⁶ Minister for Education response to an Assembly Question by Mr Danny Kinahan MLA, 21st May 2013

⁹⁷ House of Commons Education Committee (2013) *2012 GCSE English results* London: The Stationery Office Limited

⁹⁸ Baird, J., Ahmed, A., Hopfenbeck, T., Brown, C., Elliot, V (2013) *Research evidence relating to proposals for reform of the GCSE* Oxford: Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment

⁹⁹ As above

¹⁰⁰ As above

¹⁰¹ As above

Breadth vs depth

An international study of post-16 qualifications has found that A levels are very unusual in terms of their structure. A level students typically study the fewest subjects (three to four), while most countries use a baccalaureate- or diploma-style approach (often including around ten subjects). Few systems offer qualifications on an individual subject basis (like A levels).¹⁰²

Within this approach students study a core of compulsory subjects supplemented by optional specialisms. In many countries students are required to study:¹⁰³

- A social science;
- Science;
- Mathematics;
- A foreign language; and
- A home language.

Ofqual comments that studying a broad range of disciplines may limit the breadth and depth of study possible within individual subjects. For example, in a comparison of international qualifications, A level Mathematics was found to offer one of the broadest programmes of study. However, in most other systems students may choose optional topics which are studied in greater depth or in different contexts.¹⁰⁴

Compulsory subjects

A levels and equivalent qualifications in New Zealand are identified as the only assessments for which there are not mandatory subjects. Internationally the number of compulsory subjects differs, ranging from one in the Republic of Ireland (Irish) and New South Wales (English), to 13 in Denmark. Where jurisdictions include two or more mandatory subjects, mathematics is compulsory.¹⁰⁵

Assessing across the ability range

Where a qualification is expected to cover the whole ability range, it needs to be both accessible to the lower end while providing appropriate challenge to the top end. Approaches to this include:¹⁰⁶

- **Tiering:** entering students for one of two or more papers varying in difficulty;

¹⁰² Ofqual (2012) *International Comparisons in Senior Secondary Assessment: Full Report* Coventry: Ofqual

¹⁰³ As above

¹⁰⁴ As above

¹⁰⁵ As above

¹⁰⁶ Baird, J., Ahmed, A., Hopfenbeck, T., Brown, C., Elliot, V (2013) *Research evidence relating to proposals for reform of the GCSE* Oxford: Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment

- **Multiple papers:** students may sit two adjacent tiers (there are a number of tiered papers). The Scottish Standard Grade involves three tiers and most students sit two;
- **General and extended papers:** a general paper is taken by all students, with some taking an additional paper to access higher grades;
- **Computer adaptive testing:** one question is posed at a time, based on the student's knowledge level and responses;
- **Individual modules:** students could be differentiated for at the individual level by taking modules appropriate to them.

Inclusion of independent study

Ofqual has found that independent projects (for example research or essays) make up some of the most demanding elements of worldwide qualifications. Such elements can support the development of skills such as synthesis, research and self-directed learning, as well as providing additional depth.¹⁰⁷

In some systems independent study projects are contained within the syllabus for individual subjects (typically across all disciplines), while in others they form a separate study area that may stand alone or cut across two or more subjects.¹⁰⁸

CCEA's statutory duty to ensure comparability

CCEA's statutory duties include ensuring that standards of examinations here are equivalent to the standards of examinations and assessments conducted by other bodies or authorities exercising similar functions in the UK.¹⁰⁹ The reforms taking place in England and Wales may have implications for CCEA in terms of fulfilling this duty.

17 Conclusion

The comparability and portability of qualifications across NI, England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland remains an important issue for students, with 38% of NI students crossing jurisdictions for higher education in 2011/12.

While this is facilitated through collaboration on national qualification frameworks, the significant reforms currently taking place may have implications for regulation and the maintenance of standards for GCSEs and A levels. A number of issues could be given further consideration, including:

- The sustainability of the three jurisdiction qualifications system given the different policy directions being taken and the remarks of the Secretary of State for Education;

¹⁰⁷ Ofqual (2012) *International Comparisons in Senior Secondary Assessment: Full Report* Coventry: Ofqual

¹⁰⁸ As above

¹⁰⁹ Part 8 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998

- The implications of maintaining or diverging from the system for students and qualifications in NI;
- The forthcoming decisions by the Minister for Education, John O'Dowd MLA, on GCSEs and A levels;
- The use of the GCSE and A level titles for potentially very different qualifications in England, Wales and NI;
- Issues such as tiering, levels of internal assessment, the inclusion of compulsory subjects and independent study;
- How the new proposals for GCSEs and A levels will target the whole ability range.