



Research and Information Service Briefing Note

Paper 50/15

31st August 2016

NIAR 301-16

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GCSEs and A levels: a brief overview

1 Introduction

This briefing note provides a short overview of some of the key issues around GCSE and A level reform. It aims to support the Committee for Education's consideration of potential areas for inquiry, and is not intended to be comprehensive.

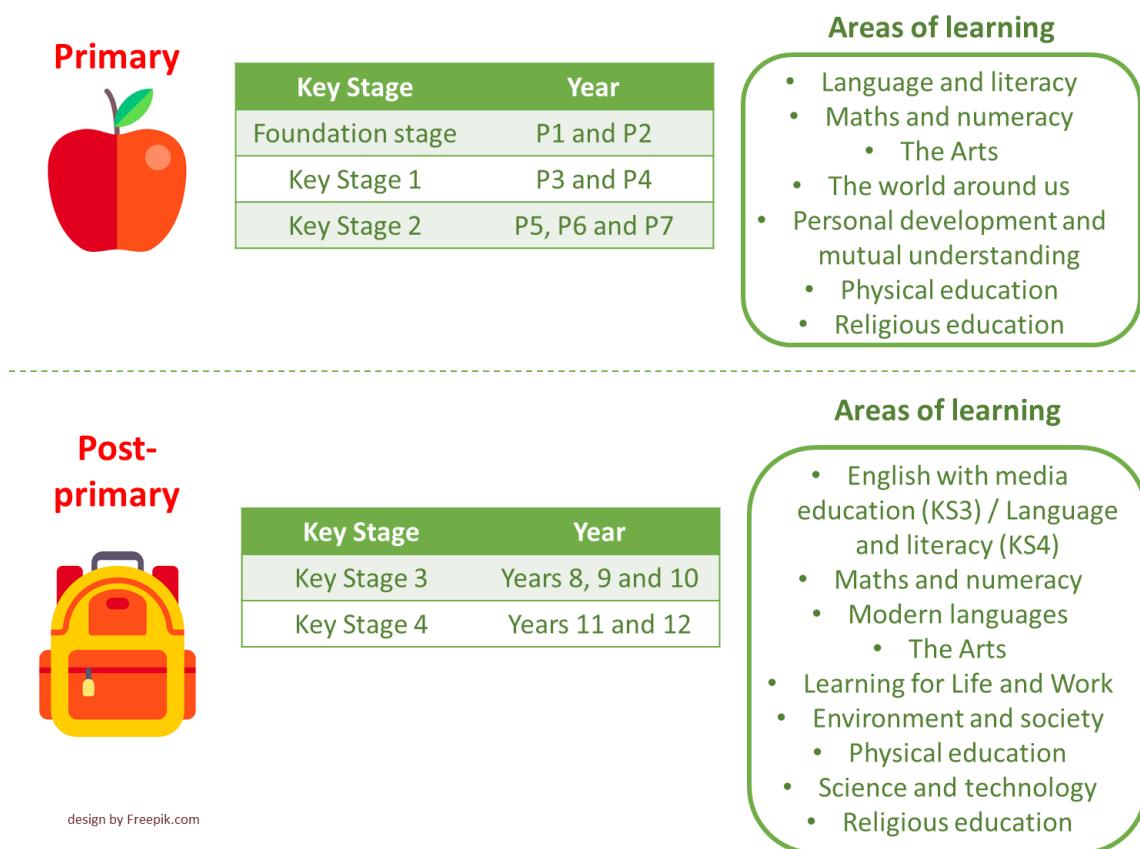
2 The statutory curriculum comprises four Key Stages

Introduced in 2007/08, the current curriculum applies to all 12 years of compulsory education. It is based around Key Stages, and a number of areas of learning.¹ GCSEs take place at Key Stage 4. An overview is illustrated in Figure 1 overleaf.

The curriculum also includes a number of cross-curricular skills: communication, using mathematics and using ICT, and skills including being creative and thinking, problem-solving and decision making.

¹ Department of Education *Statutory curriculum* [online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/statutory-curriculum>

Figure 1: Overview of the statutory curriculum²



3 GCSEs and A levels have been under review

In October 2012 the then Minister for Education, John O'Dowd MLA, announced a fundamental review of GCSE and A levels in Northern Ireland, at a time of significant qualification reform in other jurisdictions.

The Minister for Education commissioned the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to conduct a “root and branch” review of GCSEs and A levels in 2012. The Minister accepted all 49 recommendations in March 2014.³ The principles and recommendations included that:⁴

- Qualifications should reflect the policy and context of Northern Ireland;
- The Department of Education and CCEA should work with partners to ensure the comparability of qualifications;
- Accountability measures should be broader and considered holistically; and
- A strategy on education for 14-19 year olds should be developed urgently.

² Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment *Curriculum* [online] Available at: <http://ccea.org.uk/curriculum>

³ Department of Education *Qualifications* [online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/qualifications>

⁴ Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (2013) *Review of GCSE and A Level Qualifications: Final Report with Appendices* Belfast: CCEA

4 The reforms mean that students across the UK will hold different qualifications with the same name

In March 2014 the Minister for Education announced the way forward for qualifications in Northern Ireland, resulting in CCEA beginning a programme to revise its suite of GCSEs and A levels. The new A levels will be introduced for teaching in 2016, with GCSEs introduced in 2017.⁵

In September 2015 some awarding organisations based in England began to introduce revised GCSEs, starting a process of change due to last for many years. This means that GCSEs and A levels across the UK have already begun to differ in terms of their content and assessment.

Table 1 below provides an overview of reformed GCSE and A levels across the three jurisdictions. It highlights variations in assessment, with some qualifications assessed only at the end of the course (on a linear basis) and some taking a modular approach. It also highlights differences in approaches to grading and AS levels.

Table 1: Overview of GCSE and A levels in Northern Ireland, England and Wales⁶

	Linear/ modular	Grading	AS level count towards A level grade?
Northern Ireland	Both	Alphabetical	Yes
England	Linear	Numerical: 9-1	No: stand-alone qualifications
Wales	Both	Alphabetical	Yes

Nonetheless, there continues to be an open qualifications market in Northern Ireland, meaning that schools can access qualifications by awarding bodies other than CCEA; including those whose qualifications are graded numerically.⁷⁸

The current Minister of Education, Peter Weir MLA, has stated that he will consider options for grading in light of England's numerical approach.⁹

⁵ Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment *Why the ReVision?* [online] Available at: http://cceaa.org.uk/qualifications/revision/why_revision

⁶ Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (2013) *Review of GCSE and A Level Qualifications: Final Report with Appendices* Belfast: CCEA, Ofqual (2016) *Your qualification, our regulation: GCSE, AS and A level reforms in England* Coventry: Ofqual, OCR (2016) *Reform update* [online] Available at: <http://www.ocr.org.uk/ocr-for/exams-officers/support-and-tools/siu/reformed-quals-wales-220616/>

⁷ Department of Education (2016) *Oral statement on GCSE qualification market and grading*, 28th June 2016

⁸ Please note: there are some exceptions to reflect the Northern Ireland curriculum, for example, speaking and listening assessment must contribute to the overall grade for GCSE English Language (in England it is given as a separate result).

⁹ Minister of Education response to an Assembly Question by Mrs. Rosemary Barton MLA, 25th May 2016

5 The three-country approach to qualifications is changing

In light of the increasing divergence in policy across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the three-country approach to qualifications development, accreditation and monitoring has changed significantly. However, the regulators across the jurisdictions continue to work together to fulfil their statutory obligations to ensure that qualifications are comparable.¹⁰

6 The Republic of Ireland has also implemented reforms

In the Republic of Ireland, the Junior Cycle (the first three years of post-primary education) has undergone significant reform in recent years. The current linear exam is being phased out and will be replaced by a combination of school work components and a final assessment (externally assessed).¹¹

Under the revised arrangements there is greater emphasis on balancing learning with skills, on providing a dual form of assessment and on reporting a broader picture of student learning.

Implementation began in September 2014 with the subject of English and will continue through to September 2019 when all subjects will be introduced.¹² However, due to an industrial dispute, not all schools are implementing the reforms.¹³

7 A UK withdrawal from the EU could have implications for wider student mobility

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF), established in 2008, aims to facilitate the comparison of qualifications across countries to promote student and worker mobility.

Although its implementation is voluntary, each member state has chosen to take part, and CCEA acts as the National Coordination Point for Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland has received EU funding to support its implementation, including work on qualifications referencing, communication and European liaison.¹⁴

It is possible that a UK withdrawal from the EU could have consequences for qualification recognition across EU member states, with implications for students wishing to study, train and work abroad. This may be particularly relevant for students from Northern Ireland wishing to study in the Republic of Ireland.

¹⁰ Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment GCE & GCSE [online] Available at: http://ccea.org.uk/regulation/gce_gcse

¹¹ Department of Education and Skills (2015) *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* Dublin: Department of Education and Skills

¹² Department of Education and Skills (2015) *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* Dublin: Department of Education and Skills

¹³ O'Brien, C. (2016) *Education experts highlight urgent need to reform 'outdated' Leaving Cert* [online] Available at: <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/education-experts-highlight-urgent-need-to-reform-outdated-leaving-cert-1.2697003>

¹⁴ CCEA (2016) *EQF Implementation in the UK* [online] Available at:

http://ccea.org.uk/regulation/european/european_qualifications_framework/eqf_uk

8 Conclusion

Qualifications policy has undergone significant change across the UK and the Republic of Ireland in recent years. This has led to diverging approaches to GCSEs and A levels across Northern Ireland, England and Wales, meaning that students from these jurisdictions will have qualifications with the same name, but different structures and contents.

It is possible that these changes could have implications for qualification comparability and portability. In addition, a UK withdrawal from the EU could have further consequences for student mobility, particularly for students wishing to study or work in the Republic of Ireland. Areas for consideration could include:

- The comparability of qualifications across Northern Ireland, England and Wales;
- The implications of the diverging approaches to qualifications for learners, schools, further education providers, higher education providers and employers;
- The revised suite of CCEA GCSEs and A levels, for example, the extent to which they target the whole ability range and meet the needs of all stakeholders;
- The extent to which existing accountability measures take account of all learners within the education system;
- What progress the Department of Education has made on a 14-19 strategy; and
- What, if any, actions the Department is taking to ensure comparability and portability of qualifications in the event of a UK withdrawal from the EU.