



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Consultation on CCEA Report on Review of
GCSEs and A Levels: DE and CCEA Briefing

12 February 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr Robin Newton
Mr Seán Rogers
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

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

The Chairperson: We welcome back to the Committee Mr David Hughes, Dale Heaney — welcome back — and Roger McCune. It is good to see you; it is a while since we have had you with us. I have no doubt that you have been very busy; you have had a busy period recently. David, are you going to make a comment?

I have to say that we underestimate neither the considerable amount of information that has been provided to us, particularly by CCEA, which we appreciate, nor the work that has been done by the Department. There is a lot in this, and I think that it will take a lot of time to tease out its practical implications. David, we are happy to take your comments.

Dr David Hughes (Department of Education): Thank you very much. I am grateful for the opportunity to update you on the outcome of the consultation exercise that followed CCEA's fundamental review of GCSEs and A levels. I make the point at the beginning that the Minister has not made any final decisions around this. He is keen to hear the views of the Committee to inform his decision-making process.

The Committee will recall the background to the fundamental review. Rather than respond in haste to policy changes being made in England, the Minister sought advice on the range of issues from CCEA, and CCEA concluded its review in June 2013. That review included extensive engagement with stakeholders, and a final report was provided to the Minister. The report contains some 49

recommendations, and the Minister asked officials to consult on the report and its recommendations. That consultation ran from the end of September until 20 December.

The two preceding consultations that were conducted by CCEA as part of the review each had over 500 responses. The response rate to the Department's consultation was somewhat lower, at 92 in total. So, to ensure that we were not missing any particular views, we conducted a number of additional exercises, including a couple of focus groups with parents and three workshops with pupils.

The summary of the main findings has been included in your briefing pack. I will just pull out the headlines. The main headline figures are that a large majority agree or strongly agree with the direction of travel that was set in the recommendations. There were exceptions to that, but nevertheless there was a strong message of consensus, particularly around the first questions on the nature of GCSEs and A levels, on questions around non-general and vocational qualifications, on the place of literacy, numeracy and ICT and so on. Those counted as agreeing or strongly agreeing ranged between 73% and 87%. So, I think that that is confirmation that there is a degree of agreement around the direction that things are being taken in.

It is around the longer-term policy options, covered really under question seven of the consultation, where there was a greater degree of variation, without the same degree of consensus on the way forward. The majority of respondents disagreed with the concept of having no high-stake assessment at the age of 16, or with the proposal that potentially there should be an assessment that would be taken largely internally at the age of 16. Overall, 67% disagreed that there should be radical change in the longer term. The comments made during the consultation exercise in the responses actually provided a very useful indication of views on a wide range of qualifications issues, a number of which go considerably further than the consultation invited, but were, nevertheless, very useful. The point has been made that there was support for the more considered and steady approach to addressing policy in this area and seeking evidence to make decisions. There was a very strong message about the importance of portability and comparability of qualifications, and there were questions around how that could be secured and ensured.

The first couple of recommendations included reference to qualifications being taken by learners here reflecting the education policy and the context in this jurisdiction, and we got a number of responses interpreting that as embracing a rather insular approach to qualifications, whereas in actual fact I think it was possibly a misreading of the intention of the question, and that can be addressed in the longer term.

There were specific requests in the consultee responses to keeping the qualifications market open here and keeping choice open for pupils and schools. A number of the responses made the connection between qualifications being taken and the use of the results of qualifications being used for accountability purposes. Some respondents made very particular points around the use of controlled assessment in core GCSEs and the impact of controlled assessment, and we believe that many of those concerns will be addressed by recommendations in the review. Other respondents referred to seeking clarification about the likelihood of using a different grading pattern for GCSEs in the future, and the possibility of that creating confusion.

So, on the basis of responses to the consultation, including comments from teachers, principals, universities, the unions, parents and pupils — and, of course, subject to the Committee's views — we make a number of observations arising from the consultation exercise. First, I do not think that anything arising from the consultation poses a fundamental challenge to the original 49 recommendations, although it is useful to log concerns and interests that consultees have raised. Secondly, it is probably fair that it will be useful for us to simplify the message going forward. Some of the 49 recommendations are recommendations of principle, some are recommendations for actions and some of them have already been actioned or acknowledged. Therefore it will be possible, in taking any of this work forward, to focus on probably about 30 recommendations, which are actually recommendations about action going forward.

A third observation was that portability and comparability of qualifications are absolutely central to the qualifications debate and discussion. Those things have been raised consistently and, up until now, it has been a matter of articulating the question of the type of changes that we are considering and the reasons behind those changes, but not necessarily explaining the how and the means of securing the confidence of the teaching profession and the public and pupils in particular, as well as universities and colleges, as to portability and comparability. Therefore, there are issues that we need to address there, and a number of options in respect of that are already available. An expert group was

established to inform CCEA's review, and there is the possibility of using that expert group in a continuing fashion to inform current and further options in the longer term.

There is also an offer from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Services (UCAS) to provide the Department with statistics on applications to universities and so on. That would be enormously useful in order to understand the range of qualifications that higher education institutions already recognise and process.

Keeping the qualifications market open is certainly a part of those measures. The Minister has already said that the qualifications market should remain open, provided that the specifications that are provided by awarding organisations that are based in England and Wales do not risk corrupting the teaching of the curriculum as it is here. Obviously, that is a matter that needs to be kept under review in the sense of needing to ensure that that kind of distortion of the curriculum is not taking place. Repeating that position, which the Minister has already articulated — repeating that publicly — should help to address some of the concerns that were expressed by consultees.

CCEA will revise the specifications for GCSEs and A levels over the coming months. The outcome of this consultation needs to be drawn specifically to CCEA's notice, as well as any concerns that consultees have raised informing that process.

To conclude from my point of view, I am keen to hear the Committee's views and to reflect them as we go back to the Minister with the results of the consultation. I am happy to answer any questions.

The Chairperson: Thanks, David. I smiled when you talked about keeping the qualifications market open. Is that more to do with CCEA's commercial interests in this as opposed to, maybe, where it goes in terms of the whole qualifications issue? That is obviously an important issue for CCEA, Roger.

Mr Roger McCune (Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment): Certainly from my point of view as a regulator, it is not. I have no real concern about whether CCEA has the market here or not. As an awarding body in a market situation, CCEA would want to get as much of the market as it could.

In the consultation, there was a very strong view supporting an open market. That comes from the fact that it has always been here. There are not many countries that have a market for qualifications, if you want to call it that, at 14 to 19. In fact, in the South of Ireland and Scotland they do not really have one, even within these islands. The culture has always been there, and schools, centres, principals and heads of departments feel that it gives them a little bit of power to look at the different specifications which, after all, have to meet common criteria, and to see which is the best for their pupils.

CCEA would have roughly 70% of the market — slightly more for GCEs than for GCSEs. It varies across subjects, of course, and in some subjects the market from another awarding body is quite strong here.

The Chairperson: It would seem that the respondents appeared generally to indicate that they did not support a radical change to GCSEs. I have to commend you for the way that this has been handled. You probably picked up from the previous presentation that we might not have the same views as to how that consultation was handled. We are dealing with a very sensitive issue here, which can raise very serious concerns. It has huge implications for our young people, some of whom are in the Public Gallery today. This is all about how their qualifications are valued, what those qualifications are and what their purpose is.

I am really interested in where we are at the moment. There are two things that I want to tease out. Some of this has come upon us as a result of a reaction to Gove; unfortunately, we always get ourselves into that position because of our geography and our history and all that. That is the nature of where we are at. It was wise counsel just to be cautious. You can see already that what was proposed in England is maybe not now going to be translated as it was originally proposed, so things are not as they are there. The portability, reliability, robustness and value of our qualifications are still important elements for employers and young people. Aligned to that — I see it from CCEA's point of view and commend it for its work on this — I detect the issue of whether 16 is the appropriate age for qualifications and a question over alternative qualifications.

At long last, the Department agrees with DEL on a 14 to 19 policy. However, on reading a question for written answer this week, it looks as though the policy will not be written down. It will be some sort of aspiration up in the sky. The Minister does not want it written in a document — that would be awful. There is general acceptance that we need to focus on 14 to 19s and realign post-primary and FE. That will be music to the ears of my colleague Mr Newton, who has championed that cause for many years.

If we are beginning to get the ducks in a row, it is a question of how we cautiously make those moves in a way that does not scare anybody off the field. I sense from this document that there is the potential to do something that will be of huge benefit to our young people. David, I take your point that some of the 49 recommendations have been implemented and others still need a bit of work. How do we take this and implement it in a way that gives us confidence? You put it out there; the system did not go into free fall, as it did with the common funding scheme; and you have taken on board the issues raised. So how do we take it to the next step? I think that the Committee is very keen to be involved in that. I trust that our stakeholder event made a valuable contribution to what you are trying to achieve.

Dr Hughes: There will be a number of steps because some of the recommendations are that we take a long, hard look at the longer-term issue. By all means, that process needs to begin. We can use the experience of the fundamental review: an expert group, consultation and the associated engagement of stakeholders and reference to what other jurisdictions are doing. If we are to take a longer-term view, there must be that kind of open and, dare I say, porous process so that all involved are interested and there is a flow of information.

There will be issues on which the recommendations for actions are for a particular organisation, such as the Department or CCEA, and some of those need to be taken quite quickly. As a result of raising the question of qualifications in what you describe as a fluid situation, with changes being made in other jurisdictions at the same time, it is also important to provide assurances and messages that explain the situation. It was not part of the consultation exercise, but, as it happens, the permanent secretary and a couple of his colleagues, including me, have been visiting the area learning communities and hearing from head teachers. Fairly consistently in those meetings, one or two questions are asked about the status of GCSEs and A levels: where is the Department on this, and where is CCEA in its engagement with the Department for Education in England or Ofqual and so on. There are questions to which clear and timely answers are needed. In taking this work forward, there will be certain things that need to be addressed quickly; messages that need to get out quickly; and decisions that need to be taken. It is a case of ensuring that we have identified correctly when all the decisions need to be taken, when messages need to be issued and where continuing dialogue is still the appropriate way forward.

The Chairperson: Roger, CCEA refers to a disconnect between attainment at Key Stage 3 and attainment at GCSE. Does that mean that pupils taking GCSEs are experiencing a deficit in the skills that they are being tested on at Key Stage 3? Does that raise a question about the revised curriculum and how it is being implemented?

Mr McCune: In the move from Key Stage 1 or Key Stage 2 into Key Stage 3, and then from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4, which is the qualifications area, there has always been an issue about the appropriate preparation at Key Stage 3 — ages 11 to 14 — which prepares pupils for the qualifications. There is no doubt that there is a bias, or an important element, under knowledge and understanding as well as skills, and I do not see them as being completely separate; they are linked. We want to ensure that the benefits of the curriculum up to age 14, which puts an emphasis on skills development in the hard skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT, and the softer skills, which are the employability skills, are further developed from the age of 14 to 19 in the context of an examination system that is biased towards the written papers. It is about getting that right.

We want all our young people, at the age of 19, to be in a position to stay at the same GCSE standard so that they can compete for university places anywhere. I think that the 14 to 16 GCSE is in a difficult position. It is the filling in the middle of the sandwich. We want to ensure that there is no disconnect. There needs to be continuity from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4, and, at the same time, we must provide the basis for 16 to 19 so that there is a standard at 19 that is common across GCSEs.

The Chairperson: Dale might have some comment on this issue. Given the cohort of this year's exams, particularly now that it is seven years since the revised curriculum was introduced, are you concerned that the results could be worse? Maybe "worse" is not the right word, but could they be

less good than what has been achieved previously? On the basis of those observations, Roger, is that a worry? I know that you cannot be definitive about it, but is it a concern?

Mr McCune: At this stage, no. We will look carefully at the issue. We will talk about the maintenance of standards over time and across awarding organisations. As you know, we work closely on GCSE and GCE, awarding as regulators across the three countries. Although there are changes in policy, that does not mean that I do not still work closely with Ofqual and the Welsh Government on these issues. It is in all our interests to make sure that the standards are common across the board.

The Chairperson: Is that tripartite arrangement still working reasonably well despite the variances in Wales, the changes in Scotland and whatever it is that Gove is doing in England? I do not think that he is even sure what that is.

Mr McCune: There is no doubt that the tripartite arrangement is more challenging than it was 10 years ago. We work with Scotland, particularly on the vocational side, but it is a wee bit different because it has a different qualification system.

The Chairperson: They have made changes at 16 and almost moved away from external examinations.

Mr McCune: I have been long in this game and like to think that I keep my ear to the ground, but, in the consultation, the very strong support for the GCSE surprised me. There is no doubt that it is a qualification with great flexibility. Some pupils take 13 or 14 GCSEs, and others only one. The GCSE is also very inclusive. It suffers a wee bit because of the wide range of grading from G to A*, but there is very strong support for it. You suggested, as David said, that there are other ways of doing this. Even the South of Ireland is thinking about not having as much teacher involvement in the assessment. There is very strong support here for the externality of the GCSE at 16.

I must say that, for 16 to 19, there is very strong support for A levels. However, pupils can pick a very narrow range of subjects, and we pushed that a bit with the focus groups: for example, somebody can do physics, maths and further maths; or English, French and German. That is incredibly narrow. Michael Gove has said that he would like to move towards everybody in England doing some form of maths at age 16 to 19. Here, at 16, we can channel people into the arts — English, history and geography — or sciences — physics, chemistry and biology. There are not too many countries in Europe that do that; elsewhere the range remains quite broad, as is the case in Scotland and the South of Ireland. There are a lot of issues. However, there was very strong support in the consultation, and the figures are very strong, for GCSEs and A levels as they are, complemented by vocational qualifications and skills development. If we got into any discussion at all, it was about the importance of the core subjects of GCSE English, maths and ICT and the skills that they develop. That links back to what you said about skills.

Mr Dale Heaney (Department of Education): Chair, your question seemed to imply that there might be a deficit at Key Stage 3. What we were trying to emphasise was perhaps the other way around. We constantly ask employers what they want from qualifications at age 16. They talk about the softer skills, which are very difficult to test and assess at that age. It is more about integrating that development with assessment at GCSE, or equivalent qualifications, than the deficit at Key Stage 3. Building the skills aspect into those qualifications is the biggest challenge.

Mr Kinahan: Chair, you have touched on what I was going say. I wanted to congratulate Roger on the thoroughness of the document, particularly when looking at the long term, given that everything is moving and changing, and, as you mentioned, we do not know what is happening in England. Portability and being able to get a job are key.

The document refers to changes to GCSE English and maths and mentions IT. Yet there is a great drive towards the science subjects and relating those more to everyday life. I studied physics, and, when I closed the book, that was the end of it. Will you go into more detail on how you will work that into the system? What are the practicalities of how that takes young people on to getting a job?

Dr Hughes: Let me make sure that I am answering the right question. You are asking me about the applicability of the subjects studied to the wider environment so that they are not isolated, a subject unto themselves or not connected.

Mr Kinahan: Yes

Dr Hughes: You make a very valid point. The habit in schools of ensuring that subjects are taught with reference outside the subject area is strengthened by some of the cross-cutting elements in the curriculum at Key Stages 2, 3 and so on. The curriculum at Key Stage 4 should inform the way that teaching takes place. There are specifications for particular qualifications routes. However, there is still a requirement on schools to ensure that there is reference beyond that. Some subjects are very amenable to their subject matter being referenced to a practical application. A point worth making in that context is that employers, scientists and academics outside the education system highlight the fact that it is important that practical skills are taught and assessed and form part of the course. There is an acknowledgement that the assessment of practical skills is a more complicated matter than the assessment of writing skills. However, that should not be a reason for not assessing it or for separating it out in some way.

Mr Kinahan: I am all for it. It is just that the document refers to looking at English and maths. Yes, it is about English and maths, but it is about all the other subjects, too. The sciences, for example, have much more application to what we do in daily life and to getting a job.

Mr McCune: I think that you are right about English and maths, particularly maths. There are two functions of the GCSE: enabling young people to equip themselves to live effectively in a democratic society; and the preparation for further study at level 3. In fact, in GCSE maths, we have always had additional maths, which we now call further maths. That was an indication that there is some form of maths that everyone should do, and, hopefully, do as well as they can in it, but that those who intend to go on to study maths at level 3 — A level — would benefit from having that additional maths content. Eventually, England has caught on to that and is talking about what is colloquially referred to as a "fat maths" GCSE, which is an attempt to bring more maths into its existing GCSE. I think that we have a far better system here. Our performance at A level supports there being a benefit from that system: over 80% of those who take GCSE maths with CCEA have done further maths as a GCSE.

Mr Kinahan: It is more about trying to push the science subjects. I totally appreciate that that is where you are going with maths and English, but we need to do that with the other subjects because they are almost more important for some jobs, given the technical world that we are slipping into.

Mr McCune: The other aspect of science is the skills dimension. There are concerns being expressed in England about Ofqual proposing to take out the skills element at A level and assess it and report it separately. I did chemistry and am quite passionate about it. The knowledge and understanding are important, but so are the skills. As you said, it is about the teaching so that the sciences are seen as having a realistic application to young people and the lives that they lead.

The Chairperson: We can always be sure of an "explosive" conversation with you, Roger.

We received some correspondence, and we will forward it to the Department. It may not be fair to ask you about it, but I am curious to know whether you are aware of it. It relates to the use of randomised controlled trials (RCT) in primary schools. A primary-school teacher raised the issue of "mathletics" with us. Dale, are you aware of that?

Mr Heaney: We received the same correspondence and have asked CCEA to reflect on what it is saying. We had not come across it before.

The Chairperson: Given that the Olympics are on, I was intrigued by the mathletics element. It is an interesting letter from a teacher — a practitioner — who raises an issue.

Over to you, Trevor.

Mr Lunn: Thanks, Chairman. I did chemistry, too.

The Chairperson: We will not start asking around the room who did what.

Mr Lunn: I am looking at the survey responses and the percentages. I presume that most responses are from educational practitioners who are experts in the field.

Mr McCune: Yes, a lot were from teachers.

Mr Lunn: Do you agree that, in surveys, there are always contradictions that can be highlighted? In responses to the first four of five questions about the robustness of the current system and to what extent it needs to be tinkered with or changed, very high percentages are in favour of what we currently do, or more or less what we currently do. However, in response to question 7 on longer-term work and parallels with other qualification systems, only 20% agree that there should be no change. Question 8 caught my eye:

"To what extent do you agree that the review recommendations ensure our qualifications will have the confidence of learners, educational institutions and employers across these islands and beyond?"

I know that we are in a fluid situation these days, but only 50% agreed that those recommendations will ensure that our qualifications are sufficiently robust. Those are the same people who said at the start of the survey that they were more or less satisfied with our present qualifications.

Mr McCune: I am quite happy to try to put some sort of interpretation on that. There is no doubt — teachers are right to be conservative on this — that a qualification system is not something that you change quickly. Think back to the problems with Curriculum 2000 or the problems that Scotland later had when it tried to change quickly. I think that that is what was being said at the start, "We do not want to receive a letter in a year's time to say that the whole thing has changed." Nevertheless, there is a recognition that we need to look ahead and have a reasoned debate on how we move forward. If you asked teachers simply whether they thought that A levels would still be a valid method of assessment in 10 years' time, they might say no. We need to look at that now, and that was why we used an expert group in the review. It was very interesting to bounce those ideas off a very broad range of people, including teachers, employers and those working in higher and further education. We need to think ahead to what we should be doing and about the nature of assessment, the curriculum and the qualifications that we want for young people moving into a world that will be very different in 10 to 15 years' time.

Dr Hughes: That was quite a tricky question to answer: do you think that other people will take a view that you hope is the right one? I suspect that part of the contradiction could be down to caution. Consultees tell us that they know what they think should be the case but that they also know that the situation is becoming more diverse and more fluid. They want to have confidence that changing it to what they think is the right set of arrangements will engender confidence more widely. However, it may not be that the consultees could say, hand on heart, that they know that, if they do everything that they think is right, everyone will accept it as the right outcome. It is quite a tricky question to ask of consultees, but it is worth finding out what they think.

Mr Lunn: Chairperson, you mentioned getting the ducks in a row. You cannot really know whether all the ducks are in a row and our qualifications are comparable and sufficiently robust until they start to be questioned. It will almost be a matter of looking back: we might come to a point where, gradually, our school leavers were finding it slightly more difficult to obtain entry to certain institutions. If we found ourselves in the situation in which we were out on a limb when it comes to qualifications, or if we were the only authority in these islands or in the western world still holding on to GCSEs and A levels, that would worry me straightaway. It is about comparability.

Dr Hughes: It is worth saying that there are reasons to have confidence. One of the key voices here will be the higher education institutions, from which we hear doubts expressed about some of the decisions taken in England, in particular about no longer having AS and A2 as a coupled qualification. Some universities say that they really value the AS and that, if English students do not have an AS result when applying to a university, they are at a disadvantage. In some ways, we have greater confidence in some of the decisions already taken, in that they are not disadvantaging but maintaining an advantage. It is about that contact with the higher education sector in particular about how they will think of A levels and how they will deal with the qualifications that young people here bring to them. That is an ongoing conversation.

The Chairperson: Are you content, David, that that is an ongoing conversation? It is only a personal view, but I have always held the opinion that the universities stayed out of the conversation because they were the net beneficiaries of whatever came out of the process of post-primary provision. Now, however, they are beginning to raise concerns because they see that there is a need for them to be engaged. Are you confident that, in the context of Northern Ireland and our universities, that is a fluent, two-way conversation that is beneficial to informing where the debate is going?

Dr Hughes: It is important that that conversation takes place on a wide scale. The conversation is most valuable where the higher education sector is dealing with the education sector across the jurisdictions. In effect, the higher education institutions have been drawn into this very effectively, not least by decisions around how content is set in A levels. We would not do this on our own. We want to see the conversation taking place on a wide scale.

Mr McCune: The only thing that I will add to that is that the universities have been drawn in. Four years ago, Ofqual did a survey of qualifications, and higher education gave a very positive view of the GCE qualifications. The universities made points, yes, and those points were certainly taken up in the policy changes made, but they have been pulled in and seem to want to engage in the debate. We had Queen's University and the University of Ulster represented on the expert group, and it was very good to have them there. I remember that, when we met Queen's, the vice chancellor said, "I am very interested in the nature of the assessment and how it relates to assessment in third-level education". Those are areas that we talked through. The system is very much modularised in higher education.

Mr Rogers: Thanks, gentlemen, for a very good piece of work, from an educational and, as it may prove to be, commercial point of view.

Roger, as a mathematician, and given your position on maths and additional maths, do you think that the same argument does not hold for English and English literature?

Mr McCune: I think that it does. As you know, at A level, there are actually three English subjects. There is English language, English language and literature, and English literature. The main subject taken here is English literature. I agree with you. I see English and maths as the double subjects. In other words, there is single maths, single English, double English and double maths. I think, as a preparation for A level, the double is required for both.

Mr Rogers: Another very good and interesting comment is that some of the post-primary measures should be more broadly based than five or seven GCSEs. What new measures of school performance is CCEA thinking of or developing?

Dr Hughes: I think, when we come to school evaluation, there are the beginnings of work on how that might be developed further. There has been a very clear message that, if one has a limited set of performance measures, that can distort behaviours in order to hit the right marks. That is not the purpose of having measurement, but we know that it happens. A more sophisticated and nuanced set of performance measures should support education rather than distort it. That is work that is beginning and will take quite some time to work through, because it needs to be done very carefully and in a very sophisticated way.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report on the evaluation assessment framework had some very interesting points to make overall, not least a reminder that school evaluation is not simply a quantitative set of measures. There is also inspection and qualitative evaluation of schools. Sometimes, we can get system evaluation and a measurement of the education system overall. The Programme for Government does have a very simple set of measures, which is quite limited in many ways. School evaluation is a much more nuanced way of measuring. Those are issues that can be taken up, and the OECD report is a very useful vehicle with which to begin the work of looking again at performance measurement. Dale is starting that off.

Mr Rogers: It is a very interesting area. Whether you take the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, the President's Award, the Pope John Paul II Award or whatever, it would be nice to see our young people get some accreditation for the skills that they learn.

Dr Hughes: It is also very interesting to see that, sometimes, some people will make very quick judgements on a relatively limited amount of data about a school. When very important decisions are being made about a school — for example, when parents are making decisions about which post-primary school they want their child to go to — a very sophisticated analysis will be done of the school's quality. Parents will not just look at a set of figures, the details of league tables or whatever. They will go to the school, look at it, and listen to teachers and the principal. They will talk to friends whose children have been there and look at an inspection report. They will take a very sophisticated approach to school evaluation in a private way. That is probably the most important approach of all.

Mr Newton: I thank the delegation for coming along. I identify myself with the Chairman's remarks at the beginning. This is a very valuable piece of work, and I wish you well as it rolls out. I want to ask you about one paragraph, which concerns meeting the needs of employers and CCEA's recommendations? I will not read the whole paragraph:

"CCEA therefore recommends that employers have a role in developing GCSEs/A-levels and that consideration be given to supplementing the A-level subject offering to include skills development and enrichment programmes."

How might that be developed? What would be the breadth of it? How would it get used? What would the value be?

Mr McCune: We engaged widely with employers as part of the review, and we saw the importance that they place on qualifications. We also saw the importance that they place on wider skills, right down to things such as commitment, loyalty and punctuality. Obviously, you cannot set a GCSE in commitment or punctuality. It is all part of the process. The certificate of personal effectiveness (CoPE) is a qualification that tries to get beyond, let us say, GCSEs. What employers are saying is that GCSEs have a place but that there are other qualities and skills needed. I use the word "qualities", but those include attitudes and broader skills that need to be developed. We need to look at how best those can be developed. It is a very difficult area. I think that it is important to talk about the curriculum at 14 to 19 as well as about the qualifications, because a lot of that comes with the teaching. To go back to Mr Kinahan's point about the sciences, it is about how the teaching brings in the applications as well as the assessment does. It is a challenging area, but there are schools that are addressing it and looking at how you can support the GCSEs with applied or skills qualifications that will help to promote those skills and qualities that employers say are very important to them in the workplace and also in higher education.

Dr Hughes: In the development of certain specifications, CCEA will work with an industry sector to ensure that the specification of the qualification contains what the sector genuinely thinks is important to be taught in the subject. That is enormously valuable. Therefore, the development of the software systems A level, and the further development of a GCSE that feeds into it, will have involved engagement with the IT sector. Similarly, the agriculture and land use GCSE will have had agriculture sector involvement. Where there are qualifications that have a very clear connection — applied qualifications — then, of course, in the development of the qualification and its specification, contact with the sector is very important.

Mr Newton: Employers make the point about a qualification being ready for non-academic progression routes or apprenticeships. However, in the event that a young man or woman decides to go to university, how will the university place a value on that type of qualification and allow entry to a university course? How does that qualification benchmark against the traditional A level?

Dr Hughes: There is a requirement on an A level in its content and level of stretch, which is what a student is required to do to achieve a certain standard. Some of the practical questions probably involve asking DEL officials how their work ensures that there are as many pathways into the various levels of study and training as possible and that there are appropriate pathways. That may well be something that its officials need to look at. There is a process to ensure that the equivalence of different qualifications is maintained so that it can be said, as a standard, that an A level in one subject has the same weighting as an A level in another subject, even if the two subjects do not look anything alike.

Mr Newton: You are quite convinced that —

Mr McCune: I am very supportive of what you are saying about a broad 14 to 19 provision that provides different pathways to progression, be those to university or not. There is the academic route — if you want to call it that — through the GCE. There are the applied GCSEs and BTECs, etc, in the middle. You are then into occupational apprenticeships. There is revision of apprenticeship programmes in England and here. The whole aim is to promote the higher levels of those apprenticeships to provide that progression. I think that, over the next 10 to 20 years, you will see a great change in how progression occurs. Perhaps it was previously too biased towards higher education through the academic route. The apprenticeship route is going to become more important.

Mr Newton: I hope that you are right.

Mr McCune: I know that you would support that.

Mr Newton: I would be very supportive of that. An awful lot of work that is done in the area in Germany is of value to us. I hope that we end up with those routes and those pathways.

The Chairperson: David, the review was launched in October 2012. Time trundles on. Work has been done. There has been a considerable amount of engagement and assessment, and we have the views. I notice, for example, that teachers have strong disagreement with, and opposition to, assessment at 16. There are things such as that reflected in the document. How does the Department propose to keep the journey going? What is the action plan, for want of a better term? This piece of work cannot just be set aside. It is always responding to other, external circumstances, but where do you see it being taken over the next weeks and months?

Dr Hughes: On the back of a determination by the Minister as to precisely which of the recommendations to take forward, there will clearly need to be an implementation plan or action plan, with timescales, that brings in all those who can contribute to it and identifies those things that need to be done immediately, those things that need to be done in the short term and those things that need to be done in the longer term. The conversation between the Department and CCEA about understanding how that can be done is already under way. It needs to inform the way in which next year's business is allocated, both in CCEA and the Department.

Decisions on and changes in qualifications areas need to be very carefully scheduled. Any changes in a specification, or even in the criteria for GCSEs under a certain title, need to be developed and made available to schools 12 months before anyone can start teaching the subject. Therefore, it will be almost 24 months before anyone gets results. There are long timescales for a lot of these things.

What would we do if we were to take a completely fresh look at the qualifications arrangements? Some of the longer-term work genuinely is long term. That is recognised, and it needs to be recognised. Any action plan arising from the review would come with scheduling to ensure that the decisions that are taken inform roll-out.

The Chairperson: Do you have any indication as to when the determination on the recommendations may be made?

Dr Hughes: In this session, we are just rounding off the process. It is not a delayed issue at all.

The Chairperson: Roger, David and Dale, thank you very much. We appreciate all the work that has been done on this. We look forward to continuing the discussion with you and wish you well.