

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Education

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION CONSULTATION ON THE FUTURE OF CCEA GCSEs, AS LEVELS AND A LEVELS

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Mr Givan (The Minister of Education): Earlier in the year I identified a review of qualifications as a core action within my TransformedED strategy. Today my Department has launched a public consultation entitled 'The Future of CCEA GCSEs, AS levels and A levels'.

Purpose of the Consultation

This consultation seeks views on proposals to modernise and improve qualifications for students in Northern Ireland. It is open to all those with an interest in improving the qualifications available to our young people including students, parents, schools, further and higher education institutions and employers. Their input is essential in shaping a qualifications framework that is modern, inclusive and responsive to the needs of our learners and our economy.

Qualifications formally recognise the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through study, training or experience. They provide assurances to employers and educational institutions that individuals have achieved a certain standard and are ready to progress.

My Department has a statutory responsibility to ensure that qualifications in Northern Ireland remain current, fair and portable. CCEA, as the awarding body for GCSEs, AS levels and A levels is legally required to review its qualifications regularly. The last full review of GCSE and A level specifications took place in 2015–16 making this an opportune time for review.

The case for change

Members will be aware that the education landscape has evolved significantly in recent years. My Department is keen to ensure that qualifications remain fit for purpose for our students and support the broader goals of the TransformedED Strategy for educational excellence. It concerns me that many students are now sitting formal examinations across four consecutive years. This places undue pressure on them, their families and their schools. Over time many qualifications have become overly complex in their design and execution. Feedback from school leaders, teachers and students has raised key concerns about the current CCEA qualifications — specifically, excessive content, heavy assessment demands and the volume of coursework and controlled assessments. These issues are placing pressure on teaching time and limiting opportunities for deeper learning. Key concerns include:

Excessive Content: Many qualifications contain too much content; this limits time for deeper learning and increases pressure on teachers and pupils.

Assessment Overload: Many students face exams over four consecutive years, impacting wellbeing and teaching time.

Teacher Workload: Internal assessments such as controlled assessments and practicals increase the workload burden on teachers and students. There has been broad support for reducing or removing controlled assessments where this is possible.

Exam Structures: Some school leaders supported a linear exam structure with exams taken at the end of the course for promoting deeper learning, freeing up teaching time, and allowing students more space for extra-curricular and developmental opportunities.

Grading Concerns: There was broad support for aligning the CCEA GCSE grading scale with England's 9–1 scale to improve clarity and recognition. The current system, where three grading scales operate across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, is seen as confusing.

Proposals for Reform: This important feedback from stakeholders, as well as a review of international best practices has informed the development of proposals for a new, refreshed qualifications policy framework, which I am now consulting on. This framework will inform the future structure, content, assessments and grading of qualifications and will guide a full revision of all CCEA's GCSE, AS and A level specifications.

The key proposals are as follows:

CCEA GCSEs

- Retain GCSEs as the main Key Stage 4 qualification in Northern Ireland.
- Reduce overall content in specifications to support deeper learning.
- Limit GCSEs to a maximum of two assessments per subject (with exceptions).
- Reduce or remove controlled/internal assessments where possible.
- Remove controlled assessments from GCSE English Language.
- Remove formal assessment of speaking and listening from GCSE English Language.
- Retain speaking and listening assessments in Modern Languages.
- Remove grading from practical science assessments; require completion of a range of practical experiments during the programme of study.
- Change GCSE grading from A*–G to 9–1 scale to align with England.
- Move most GCSEs to a linear structure; whilst retaining modularity for English and Maths.

CCEA A Levels

- Retain A levels as the main post-16 qualification.
- Reduce content across A level specifications.
- Remove AS levels; move to a two-year linear A level structure.
- Limit A level assessments to two per qualification wherever possible
- Remove grading from practical science assessments; require completion of a range of practical experiments during the programme of study.
- Introduce a new A level in Gaeilge for Irish-medium students.

I am also consulting on the proposal to develop a new Northern Ireland Diploma for Education (NIDE) at Key Stage 4, combining:

- Level 2 Literacy and Numeracy
- Full completion of a new Key Stage 4 Careers, Employability and Personal Development (CEP) programme.
- One or more Level 2 qualifications in Science, Design & Technology, Computing, or Digital Technology.
- One or more Level 2 qualifications in History, Geography, Citizenship, Modern Languages, Music, Drama, or Art.

The proposals reflect a clear ambition: to reduce unnecessary pressures, enhance teaching and learning, and ensure qualifications remain relevant both locally and internationally.

I encourage all stakeholders to take part in this consultation and help us build a framework that empowers our young people, supports our schools and strengthens our economy. Together, we can deliver a qualifications system that reflects the values and aspirations of the education sector in Northern Ireland.

Thank you