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\(^1\) Copies of the online questionnaires are available as separate documents.
Introduction

The scope of this Review extends to GCSE and A level qualifications. Qualifications are an important element of post-primary provision and they currently serve a range of purposes. As well as recognising achievement and providing credentials for progression, qualifications’ outcomes are used to measure school and teacher performance and provide metrics to assess the performance of a ‘national’ system. They are part of the assessment and evaluation framework for the education system. This framework includes all statutory and non-statutory assessment, the evaluation of effectiveness of schools and the quality of school leadership and teaching. It is important to consider a review of qualifications within this broader educational context.

In order to be effective, the different elements of an assessment and evaluation framework must align with the educational objectives of the system as a whole. All of these objectives should be learner centred. There is a unique opportunity at this time to consider the evaluation and assessment framework across the system in N. Ireland in a holistic way. Taking account of the educational goals of the system, the purpose of each of the different elements needs to be defined and connections made between them. In this way some of the risks and unintended consequences of using educational assessments for purposes other than those for which they were designed can be minimised.

Assigning ‘high stakes’ to educational assessments can influence behaviours and cause unintended and undesirable consequences. This is evident when outcomes are used for accountability purposes. Accountability is critical to the success of a system but reliance on a limited range of indicators should be avoided. It is critical that accountability measures are broad and holistic, based more on the educational value that is added by high-quality interventions than on unsophisticated absolute measures.

Much of the current focus is on the outcomes of qualifications. The core purpose of a qualification should be seen to be something more fundamental. It should be to support and encourage engagement in and enjoyment of learning and to recognise and reward that learning. A qualifications system should facilitate all young people in developing knowledge and skills to prepare them for life and society. It should reflect the education policy and the needs of the society which it serves.

N. Ireland, England and Wales currently operate a common qualifications system in which the main qualifications offered are GCSEs for learners aged 16 and A levels for learners aged 18. These qualifications, and the Awarding Organisations that provide them, are jointly regulated by the Regulators for England (Ofqual), Wales (Welsh Government) and N. Ireland (CCEA Accreditation). Qualifications for 14–18 year olds in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland differ from GCSEs and A levels in
size and breadth of study and are taken by learners at different ages in the schools system. The equivalency of qualifications within the different systems is ensured by collaboration on National Qualifications Frameworks.

Before the establishment of devolved administrations in N. Ireland and Wales, the curriculum content for 4–14 year olds was, largely, common across England, Wales and N. Ireland. Subsequently the devolved legislatures developed curricula to support the differing needs of their jurisdictions. The qualifications Regulators continued to jointly manage, where possible, jurisdictional differences across the qualifications systems. The last 12 months have seen significant change to the nature and operation of the qualifications system with divergence in education policy across the three jurisdictions. There are proposals for further developments under consideration and these will add to the difficulties in continuing with the current joint regulation of qualifications.

The Department of Education in N. Ireland has developed education policies which focus on the needs and aspirations of all young people. Much work has been done to address concerns such as underachievement and to support the development of literacy, numeracy and ICT across 4–14 education through ‘Every School a Good School’ and ‘Count, read: succeed’. The revised curriculum arrangements in place at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 embrace the development of skills, knowledge and understanding and encourage the cross-curricular development of literacy, numeracy and ICT skills as well as Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities. The Entitlement Framework (EF) aims to provide all learners aged 14 to 18 with access to a broad, balanced curriculum and a greater choice of general and applied qualifications, to enable all young people to reach their full potential.

To underpin existing education policy, and ‘in the context of a wider programme of reform designed to improve the quality of our education system’, there is now a need to consider the role of assessment and the scope of qualifications needed for young people at 16 and 18 and to question whether the current suite of GCSEs and A levels is the most appropriate system. It was to this end that the Minister for Education commissioned CCEA to carry out a Review of GCSE and A level Qualifications in N. Ireland. The findings and recommendations of the Review are presented in this report.

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2 Further information is available in Appendix D, Section 1.3.
3 'Every School a Good School - A Policy for School Improvement', Department of Education, April 2009.
Executive Summary

The engagement with stakeholders during this Review has indicated that it is important to develop a qualifications system in N. Ireland that will meet the needs of all learners, reflect education policy and align with the needs of the economy and society. The Review is evidence based and is supported by a high level of engagement with stakeholders throughout its three research phases.

At this time of significant change in the three-country qualifications system, there is an opportunity to consider what is best for the future of qualifications in Northern Ireland. This could potentially lead to regulatory collaboration where qualifications are shared, with joint-country regulation of qualifications continuing where flexibility will allow. Changes made to similar qualifications in other jurisdictions should be kept under review, in particular the risk of damage to the perception of Northern Ireland qualifications as a consequence of changes elsewhere or unsubstantiated claims that explicitly undermine confidence in GCSEs and A levels.

A qualifications system should be capable of stretching learners and differentiating between them whilst, at the same time, being inclusive and recognising the achievement of all young people. It is important that qualifications are designed in such a way that the assessment of a subject is mapped onto content and appropriately supports pedagogy. In addition, qualifications should support the development of a wide range of skills not all of which can be assessed through written examinations. Stakeholders felt that there is a need for flexibility in GCSE and A level qualifications’ design to meet the needs of as wide a range of learners as possible and individual subject requirements. It was noted that the current qualifications are not providing young people with agile and transferable skills. Learners focus on what is to be assessed rather than putting their knowledge into context and they often find it difficult to make connections in their learning or see the relevance of some of their studies. There is a need for our young people to develop wider employability skills.

It is Council’s view that in the short term both GCSEs and A levels should be retained with revisions to reflect the needs of N. Ireland education policy and the economy. This would allow the strengths of the qualifications to be developed and changes to be made which support the focus of the Northern Ireland Curriculum and reflect the needs of employers and higher education. The Review makes recommendations about how GCSEs and A levels might be taken forward, and also how the focus on improvements to literacy, numeracy and ICT skills could be supported by the qualifications system.

Changes to GCSEs and A levels in England and Wales, based on different education policies from those in N. Ireland, may stretch the current shared use of the qualifications’ brand names beyond what might be considered tenable. This Review reflects opinions about the need for short-term arrangements as well as an imperative to take a longer-term view of the qualifications system in N. Ireland. If
necessary, this may include consideration of a system which is independent from – although demonstrably comparable with – neighbouring jurisdictions.

All learners should have the opportunity to take qualifications that motivate and engage them and which recognise and reward their efforts. All qualifications should facilitate learners’ progression. It is important that a qualifications system provides opportunities for every young person to achieve his or her potential. To this end, qualifications other than GCSEs and A levels were considered. Although this was outside the scope of the Review, Council believes further work needs to be done in this area. Recommendations have been made to develop, support and value alternative qualifications routes in N. Ireland.

The portability and currency of qualifications taken by learners in N. Ireland must be assured. Qualifications in N. Ireland need to be comparable in standard to similar qualifications taken by learners in other jurisdictions. In this report, Council recommends that work should be undertaken to ensure young people in N. Ireland have qualifications that will take them wherever they wish to go.

In the longer term the sustainability of this strategy will have to be considered, taking account of changes being made to the qualifications in England and Wales and discussions on the use of the qualifications’ brand names. Council recommends that the opportunity should be taken to learn from international best practice and consider how this can be taken forward to promote continuous improvement in our qualifications system.
1. The Northern Ireland Qualifications System

1.1. Current debate about qualifications in N. Ireland provides an opportunity to review the system to ensure provision reflects existing education policy and provides qualifications that are fit for purpose for the needs of N. Ireland learners and the local economy.

1.2. It is critically important that qualifications taken by learners in N. Ireland are, and remain, comparable to similar qualifications in other jurisdictions. This is challenging if the qualification’s ‘brand’ is the same but the structure, content and assessment methodology used is different between jurisdictions. Discussion about the use of the qualifications’ ‘brands’ should take place across jurisdictions.

1.3. Current GCSE and A level qualifications are highly valued by stakeholders. There is strong support in N. Ireland for the brand names and the recognition that GCSEs and A levels command. There is not widespread support to follow the developments in GCSEs and A levels in England. Stakeholders identified a number of areas where changes are needed to ensure that our qualifications meet the needs of learners and users in N. Ireland. Stakeholders believe that qualifications here should reflect local needs. The ability to have a variety of assessment methods which best suit different subjects was felt to be important.

1.4. The Review has identified the need for short and longer-term considerations. In the short term, ensuring the existing GCSE and A level qualifications remain highly valued in the context of unilateral changes in England and, in the longer term, recognising the need for considered deliberation about the future nature of qualifications in N. Ireland.

1.5. Council recommends that GCSE and A level qualifications should be retained with amendments made to reflect the needs of N. Ireland education policy and the economy. That is, building upon what is already in place in N. Ireland, adapting to our particular context, whilst maintaining the brand recognition. The brand names have considerable status and, provided they can be protected from being undermined implicitly or explicitly by change or comment elsewhere, they should be retained.

1.6. Proposals for changes to GCSEs and A levels in England are currently under consideration in that jurisdiction, with recommendations for the future of the qualifications in Wales already reported. The retention and amendment of GCSEs and A levels in N. Ireland should be monitored in line with changes in England and Wales, and discussions on the use of the qualifications’ brand names should take place.
1.7. Changes to some GCSEs and A levels are proposed in England and Wales for first teaching in 2015. Revisions to the corresponding qualifications in N. Ireland should be ready for teaching from September 2016. Revision of qualifications or specifications requires careful consideration and consultation to ensure high quality and fit for purpose products. This takes time. Changes should not be made to specifications which would affect learners who have already started courses of study. It is imperative that revised specifications are available in good time to allow teachers to become familiar with changes and to prepare their teaching.

1.8. It is recommended that new or revised specifications are available in schools one year before first teaching. Allowing time for the revision and accreditation of revised qualifications in N. Ireland makes first teaching in 2015 very challenging. First teaching from 2016 would be more realistic. However this would mean that for some subjects ‘new’ GCSEs in England and Wales would be available in schools one year in advance of revised N. Ireland specifications.

1.9. Longer-term proposals and recommendations are presented in Section 10.

Recommendations:

Qualifications taken by learners in N. Ireland should reflect the education policy and context in this jurisdiction.

GCSE and A levels should be retained with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland education policy and the N. Ireland economy.

Changes in England and Wales should be kept under review and discussions about the use of qualifications’ brand names should take place.

Qualifications’ revision should be undertaken on the basis of short- and longer-term considerations.
2. The Three-Country Regulatory Approach

2.1. A three-country regulatory system currently exists for general qualifications across England, Wales and N. Ireland. To date, the development and revision of GCSEs and A levels has been carried out jointly with the regulator in N. Ireland (CCEA Accreditation) working with Ofqual in England and the Welsh Government. However, divergence in education policy, particularly during 2012/2013, has led to a preference by the Department of Education in England (DfE) and Ofqual for parallel rather than joint decision-making with Wales and N. Ireland. This has led to divergence in approaches to qualifications.

2.2. Decisions taken in England to make GCSEs and A levels linear qualifications have not been followed in Wales or N. Ireland, as consultations in both jurisdictions showed a lack of stakeholder support for this change. Further decisions are being taken in England regarding the future of GCSEs. The Welsh Government has indicated its intention to retain and strengthen GCSEs ensuring they are fit for purpose for candidates in Wales.

2.3. Stakeholders felt strongly that the recent divergence in the three-country approach to qualifications provided an opportunity for N. Ireland to take a considered view about the future of qualifications here. This includes deciding what assessments are most appropriate for learners at ages 16 and 18 in order to prepare them for the future demands of education and employment in the 21st century. It also allows for consideration of how our examination system can best meet the needs of all young people as individuals and contributors to our society and economy as well as reflecting international best practice. This Review has raised awareness of the importance of qualifications and the need for debate about their future. It is recognised that changes to qualifications should be inclusive, evidence based and carefully considered. Time for development is needed to effectively manage any proposed changes.

2.4. GCSE and A level specifications are regularly reviewed. In the past this review, generally every five years, has been based on three-country collaboration on qualifications development. Regulators have worked jointly to consult upon and develop criteria for GCSEs and A levels, to set the overall parameters within which qualifications must be designed in order to be accredited. Subject criteria have been developed in consultation with subject experts. These previously were consulted upon to ensure that for each subject, areas such as the aims and learning outcomes, subject content, assessment objectives, scheme of assessment and grade descriptors could be reviewed by stakeholders and amendments made to ensure the subject

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6 Further information is available in Appendix D, Section 1.2.
criteria were fit for purpose. Taking account of the divergence of policy in relation to modularity and linearity, the qualifications’ criteria have been adjusted across the three jurisdictions.

2.5. For the future development of GCSEs and A levels consideration should be given to how the qualifications’ criteria can provide flexibility: allowing different approaches to be taken in different jurisdictions. Where qualifications here diverge from those of other jurisdictions, it is an absolute priority to ensure comparability for learners in N. Ireland.

2.6. At GCSE level, the current proposals in England indicate significant change which may include using a different title than at present. If this is implemented in England, consideration should be given to the Regulators in Wales and N. Ireland working together to review and update GCSE qualifications’ criteria and subject criteria, to allow for the future development of aligned or different qualifications in these jurisdictions. Work should be undertaken to establish the accreditation arrangements to ensure the continued quality, rigour and robustness of qualifications offered in the two jurisdictions.

Recommendations:

Work should be undertaken by the Regulators in England, Wales and N. Ireland to identify flexibility in the three-country qualifications criteria to allow jurisdictional differences to be accommodated in qualification revision.

Where qualifications are being shared by two jurisdictions or offered in N. Ireland only, the Regulators should work to review the current qualifications criteria and subject criteria to facilitate the future development and accreditation of qualifications.
3. **Portability of Qualifications**

3.1. The term portability refers to the currency of a qualification. That is its value in different jurisdictions in terms of comparability. This issue is a primary concern of all stakeholders. A programme of comparability studies should be conducted between similar qualifications offered in N. Ireland and in other jurisdictions to ensure the fitness for purpose and equivalency of subject content, assessment demand and learners’ performance.

3.2. For qualifications which may be accredited for delivery in N. Ireland only, a review of the regulation and quality assurance process should be undertaken. This should establish appropriate mechanisms to support the accreditation and introduction of GCSE and A level qualifications tailored for N. Ireland.

**Recommendations:**

The Department of Education and CCEA, in its Regulation capacity, should work with partners to ensure the comparability of qualifications taken by learners in N. Ireland with similar qualifications taken elsewhere.

Work on benchmarking GCSE and A level qualifications should be carried out to ensure rigour and comparability with qualifications taken in other jurisdictions.

A review of the regulation and quality assurance of qualifications available in N. Ireland should be undertaken to support N. Ireland GCSE and A level qualifications.
4. Meeting the Needs of All Learners

4.1. One of the key areas of divergence from policy proposed in England is the support in N. Ireland for flexibility in assessment arrangements. In particular this includes: modularity; internal assessment; and tiering, where these are deemed appropriate and valid for the subject and learner. The need to cater for different learning styles, intelligences and abilities and to have a variation in assessment strategies was identified as important. This is to ensure that a broad range of learners is recognised and rewarded fairly, and also to enable schools to make the most appropriate choice of qualification for their learners. It was also felt that this is important to meet the needs of the different types of students now staying on in education post-16. Employers and higher education representatives felt it was important to have an assessment system that facilitated learners doing the best that they could in their chosen subjects. It was noted that, when introduced, GCSEs were intended to provide an inclusive qualification which facilitated engagement of all, by using a range of assessment methods. It was felt that this principle continues to be important.

4.2. Qualifications are expected to serve a variety of different purposes including providing information about the performance of schools. Some attainment in qualifications that are designed to be inclusive, recognising a broad range of achievement, may be undermined if only the highest performance is valued. Care should be taken to ensure frameworks for accountability are not incompatible with recognising the achievements of all learners. The different elements of an evaluation framework must align with the educational objectives of learners and the system as a whole. Accountability is critical to the success of a system but reliance on a limited range of indicators should be avoided. Accountability measures should be broad and holistic, based on the educational value that is added by high quality interventions.

‘High-stakes uses of evaluation and assessment results might lead to distortions in the education process as a result of school agents concentrating on the measure to hold them accountable. For instance, excessive focus on teaching students the specific skills that are tested, narrowing the curriculum, training students to answer specific types of questions, adopting rote learning styles of instruction, allocating more resources to those subjects that are tested, focusing more on students near the proficiency cut score’.

Recommendations:

The qualifications system in N. Ireland should facilitate and encourage the engagement and motivation of all learners. It should recognise and reward a range of achievement and provide valid information about attainment.

Accountability measures should be broader and considered holistically across the system. Achievement by some should not be referred to as ‘good’ as it infers that other achievement is not.

Modularity

4.3. Over 83% of stakeholders expressed the wish for modular assessment overall or a combination of modular and linear assessment. The need for flexibility in assessment to allow for subject differences, variations in learning styles and equal access of opportunity was viewed as important. It was felt a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach is not appropriate. This is supported by Department policy and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) views of students learning in different ways, with no single approach likely to suit all students. It is important to ensure changes to assessment mechanisms do not create an inequality in the system by favouring one type of learner more than another. Those preferring a linear route commented on the perception that this would bring rigour back to GCSEs. Research does not support the view that linearity alone will increase rigour. There is no conclusive evidence that a linear route is more rigorous than a modular one.

4.4. Whilst modularity is valued as a route to allow flexibility and motivation of learners, stakeholders are clear that resit opportunities should remain limited, with a requirement to assess a fixed proportion of the qualification at the end of the course. The need for flexibility in assessment and breadth of subject offer was highlighted, with stakeholders indicating the importance of providing qualifications which meet the needs of the larger number of learners now staying on post-16 to study A levels. Likewise assessment models should accommodate subject differences, variations in learning styles and access of opportunity. At A level 83% of stakeholders also expressed the wish for a modular structure overall or for a combination of modular qualifications alongside linear models. The January assessment opportunity was viewed as disruptive to teaching; therefore, examinations should be available in summer examination series only.

4.5. There remain concerns about the variety of perceptions of linear qualifications, particularly the perception that they increase rigour and reduce ‘teaching to the test’. This view is not supported by research. Those preferring a linear route believed that this would bring rigour to GCSEs.
Research has shown that linearity alone will not provide rigour, and there is no conclusive evidence that a linear route is more difficult than a modular one. Research has shown that the issue of ‘teaching to the test’ remains whether a modular or linear route is chosen, and that a linear route does not offer the flexibility to spend more time holistically on the delivery of topics.

4.6. Many stakeholders are concerned about the misconception that a culture of multiple resits exists, which leads to a lack of understanding about the rigour of modular qualifications. It is important that perceptions of differing assessment routes are managed, and that the rigour of modular GCSEs and A levels is understood and reinforced. The same standard of GCSE or A level will be expected irrespective of the assessment route offered.

Recommendations:

GCSEs and A levels should have modular or linear assessment that is appropriate for the subject and needs of the learner.

GCSEs, where modular, should have only one resit opportunity per unit and require 40% of assessment to be taken at the end of the course.

A levels, where modular, should have examinations available in June only, with only one resit opportunity per unit.

Internal assessment

4.7. Stakeholders, particularly teachers, expressed concerns about the management and delivery of the current controlled assessment system used within GCSEs. However, there was no strong imperative to remove internal assessment from GCSE qualifications. Just under three-quarters of stakeholders believe there should be internal assessment, with over half indicating that this should be limited to where it assessed the subjects in a valid way. The skills developed in some subjects cannot be assessed by written examination and written examinations are not always the most appropriate form of assessment. It was felt the breadth of some subjects would be diminished by the removal of internal assessment. If internal assessment was to be removed due to fears about quality assuring the process, then further work should be carried out to improve the process and to allow the most valid assessment method to be used. It was recognised that controlled assessment was an attempt to do this, but that managing its wholesale introduction, weighted at 25% or 60%, across so many subjects, has caused significant challenges for schools. A review of internal assessment arrangements should be carried out to identify where it is most appropriate and to allow subject weightings and requirements to vary. This will allow schools to better facilitate its delivery.
4.8. There was little support for removing internal assessment from A level qualifications with almost three-quarters of stakeholders supporting the inclusion of internal assessment. Almost 56% indicated that this should be considered in line with the specific needs of individual subjects and should be included to support the development of subject-specific skills where appropriate.

**Recommendations:**

GCSEs and A levels should have internal assessment where this is the most valid method of assessing skills integral to specific subject requirements.

The internal assessment process should be reviewed to improve quality assurance procedures where needed.

**Tiering**

4.9. In line with the need for flexibility in assessment and development of qualifications to best suit the needs of the subject and learners, tiering (the use of differentiated examination papers for Foundation Tier and Higher Tier learners) – or a similar model which addresses the challenge of targeting all-ability examination papers – should be provided where it is felt this is appropriate for the subject.

**Recommendation:**

GCSEs should have tiered examination papers, or a similar assessment model, where there is a need for this due to the nature of the subject.

**Qualifications other than GCSEs and A levels**

4.10. Stakeholders believe that the current general qualifications, GCSE and A level, do not meet the needs of all. It was felt that a range of qualification types is required to accommodate learners in N. Ireland. The importance of different routes and pathways to learning was highlighted, as well as the need to value all pathways, as is the case in other countries. There is also a need for an expansion of, and a greater recognition of, valid non-general qualification pathways that reflect the diversity of types of learners and prepare them for different progression routes.

4.11. Although the scope of this Review was confined to general qualifications, it is important to consider the nature and scope of all assessment and qualifications needed for young people leaving school at 16 or 18 (including progression pathways to training and employment) or continuing in education.
4.12. There are currently general and non-general elements of 14–18 learning in most schools in N. Ireland. The Entitlement Framework (EF)\(^8\) was developed to ensure a broad, enriched qualification offer for learners. Potential changes to GCSEs and A levels need to be considered in the context of complementary qualifications being offered in schools here. The EF ensures that a breadth of ‘general’ and ‘applied’\(^9\) courses will be offered at ages 14 to 18. Courses designated as ‘applied’ include some GCSEs and A levels, as well as all non-general qualifications of an appropriate size\(^10\).

4.13. Many learners in N. Ireland now take qualifications other than GCSEs and A levels, and the purpose and breadth of these non-general qualifications should be considered. Stakeholders believe that these qualifications provide an important and valid route for learners as they feel that the current GCSEs and A levels do not meet the needs of all learners in terms of access to and outcomes from the qualifications. Stakeholders took the opportunity to highlight other types of qualifications, due to their suitability for a range of learners and the number of these qualifications currently being taken in schools in N. Ireland. They feel the continuing breadth of the current qualification offer is important. ETI reports have also stated that ‘where learners have had their educational pathways limited, this can lead to a negative impact on their educational attainment’\(^11\).

4.14. Whilst outside the scope of the Review, the feedback from stakeholders regarding the range of alternative qualifications being taken alongside GCSEs and A levels by learners here supports the need for a single, co-ordinated approach to the education and qualifications policy 14–19. This is particularly important given that two departments share responsibility for education in this phase. A common strategy is of critical importance for 14–19 education.

**Recommendations:**

A strategy for 14–19 education should be developed as a matter of urgency. This should consider all aspects of education, including qualifications; ensuring provision is seamless and provides maximum choice and flexibility.

All students should have the opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills required for further study and working life and, in line with the Entitlement Framework, should have access to qualifications that offer appropriate routes of progression.


\(^10\) Currently 120 guided learning hours (GLH) at Level 1 or 2 and 360 GLH at Level 3.

High quality non-general and vocational qualifications should be made available to all 14–18 year old learners in N. Ireland including those whose needs are not met by GCSEs and A levels.

4.15. Whilst many teachers felt that some of their students would be better served by qualifications other than GCSEs or A levels, there was a lack of awareness of the availability and benefits of other qualification types. Careers information, advice and guidance was noted as being important to support those teachers and employers with limited experience of alternative qualifications due to their having come through a traditional academic route. It was believed that non-general qualifications can provide real-life contextualisation and develop the independent learning skills valued by many stakeholders. The employer focus and involvement in the development of many non-general qualifications was noted. It was felt that currently ‘only the academic pathways are valued’, and there was a consensus that qualifications other than GCSEs and A levels are not given the currency or recognition they deserve by some educational stakeholders and employers. Interest was shown in the Welsh Baccalaureate model and its approach to foregrounding the importance of employability and personal skills, supporting parity between academic and vocational pathways. It was felt that the Entitlement Framework provides a similar opportunity in N. Ireland.

Recommendation:

A programme should be undertaken to promote the value of non-general qualifications.

4.16. Further work is needed to ensure that there is a valued, non-general route available for learners in N. Ireland at post-16. Stakeholders indicated a need for valid, rigorous Level 3 vocational qualifications as an alternative for those who do not wish to study A levels.

Recommendation:

The current qualifications provision should be strengthened with options for those who do not wish to take A levels.
**Learners working below GCSE level**

4.17. Teachers of learners with special educational needs (SEN) and providers of Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) indicated that GCSEs are not suitable for their learners. A small percentage of mainstream learners also leave school without achieving GCSE qualifications. Stakeholders working with lower achieving or disengaged learners believe different qualification types with alternative learning and assessment routes would better recognise the challenges being faced by their learners and would allow their differing achievements to be rewarded appropriately.

4.18. Qualifications that allow an accumulation of credit as the learner progresses and which will reward learners for the work they have done, should they not be in a position to complete the whole qualification, were felt to be valuable for their learners. Competence-based, pass/fail models of qualifications that allow candidates to be rewarded when they are proficient in the skills being assessed were considered beneficial. It was felt such qualifications motivate learners and allow them the opportunity to progress without having to repeat learning when they go on to further education or training.

4.19. Similar considerations have influenced discussions in Scotland regarding qualifications for those working below the equivalent of Level 2. Work is currently being undertaken by CCEA on an SEN project. This is encouraging the delivery of accredited, credit-based qualifications in special schools and learning support units to ensure learners are receiving recognition for units of work completed and to facilitate progression to employment and further education and training courses.

**Recommendation:**

Consideration should be given to a credit-based qualification approach to engage learners working below GCSE level. Currently this could consist of accredited, credit-based qualifications which facilitate learners meeting the requirements of the statutory curriculum. In the design of this approach, consideration should be given to the Nationals Levels 1–4 model being introduced in Scotland.

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Further information is available in Appendix D, Section 4.2.

Further information is available in Appendix B.
5. **Literacy, Numeracy and ICT**

**Improving levels of literacy and numeracy**

5.1. *Count, read: succeed*\(^{14}\) identifies the skills of literacy and numeracy as ‘vital to the success of our children as they progress through school and beyond into further learning, work and life … The skills of literacy and numeracy are key drivers for the future growth of our economy.’ ETI note that ‘improvements in English and mathematics remain a key priority’\(^{15}\). Some stakeholders, including many young people, are concerned at the current level of literacy and numeracy skills and feel they need to be improved.

**Literacy, numeracy and ICT skills at GCSE**

5.2. Qualifications at Key Stage 4 (KS4) in the core subjects of English, mathematics and ICT should continue to improve competency in the relevant subject skills and support the further development of learning from the Cross-Curricular Skills of Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT. All view achievement in these key GCSE subjects as important for progression and for accessing learning in other subjects. The current importance of achievement of grade C or above in English and mathematics was highlighted by all.

**Recommendation:**

**GCSEs in English, mathematics and ICT should support progression from the Levels of Progression in Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT at Key Stage 3.**

5.3. *Count, read: succeed* states that ‘all post-primary schools will be expected to ensure that, by the time their pupils leave school, they have qualifications that record their achievements in literacy and numeracy. This would normally be expected to be GCSEs at grades A* - C in English and in mathematics and, for pupils learning through the medium of Irish, in Gaeilge’. A small percentage of learners are currently not achieving a GCSE in English or mathematics, while about one-third do not achieve grades A* to C. Furthermore GCSEs do not provide a guarantee of competency in literacy and numeracy due to the compensatory model of assessment in the qualification – the grade awarded is based on the total number of marks achieved across all assessments but does not guarantee competency in each assessment or subject requirement. GCSEs should support the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy skills. However GCSE qualifications in

\(^{14}\) *Count, read: succeed – A Strategy to Improve Outcomes in Literacy and Numeracy*, Department of Education, March 2011.

subjects such as English and mathematics, which are taken by almost all 16 year olds and therefore sat by almost the entire ability range, cannot validly accommodate all candidates achieving at A* to C level. Stakeholders felt there is, therefore, a need to educate users as to what achievement at a particular grade at GCSE means.

5.4. It is vital that underachievement in literacy and numeracy is addressed to improve standards for all. There is a need for the development of an alternative Level 1 and Level 2 qualification model to complement GCSEs. ‘Proficiency in English and mathematics is crucial … while appropriate accreditation creates opportunities for progression to the next stage of education, training or employment’\textsuperscript{16}. Alternative qualifications must therefore provide valid recognition and opportunities for progression.

5.5. As all learners do not learn in the same way, alternative qualifications with differing delivery and routes of assessment are important. Stakeholders felt there was a place for robust, competence-based qualifications in the core subject areas of English, mathematics and ICT at Levels 1 and 2. Employers indicated they are looking for assurances of competence in the core subjects and that a pass/fail qualification model would meet their needs. The current availability of Essential Skills was discussed; however, stakeholders indicated that work needed to be done on updating the delivery and improving the reliability and rigour of the assessment in the current qualifications.

Recommendation:

Rigorous, competency-model skills qualifications at Levels 1 and 2, to recognise achievement in Literacy, Numeracy and ICT, should be developed.

**GCSEs in English, mathematics and ICT**

5.6. A review by CCEA has mapped the Key Stage 3 (KS3) Levels of Progression for the Cross-Curricular Skills to current GCSE qualifications in English Language, Mathematics and ICT. This identified gaps in terms of successful skills progression from the revised curriculum to the GCSE qualifications which have an increased focus on content. The GCSE in English Language does allow teachers to build on skills developed in KS3 Language and Literacy and the Cross-Curricular Skill of Communication, although there were concerns that the media focus at KS3 was not as evident in GCSE. Progression from Using Mathematics and Using ICT to GCSE Mathematics and GCSE ICT seems to be more challenging.

5.7. Currently three subjects exist within the GCSE English subject area: GCSE English, English Language and English Literature. (GCSE English is a hybrid of Language and Literature.) GCSE English Literature facilitates candidates wishing to progress to further study in this subject at A level; if these candidates take a second GCSE in the subject area, it must be GCSE English Language. Candidates studying a single GCSE in the subject area can study GCSE English Language or GCSE English. This has caused confusion for some schools in N. Ireland since being introduced for first teaching in summer 2010.

5.8. The opportunity should be taken to streamline the provision in English/English Language for first teaching in September 2015. This would facilitate a focus on the progression for candidates now coming through from Communication at KS3, as currently the linkages between KS3 and GCSE are not overt. This should be supported by a focus on integrating accuracy in communication skills into all subjects, so that quality of written communication is not solely the responsibility of the English teacher. The revision of GCSE English/English Language could encourage the development of real-life literacy and skills relevant to the world of work. The study of literature should continue to be an integral part of the subject. The current 60% controlled assessment weighting is judged too high for a subject that is used in school performance measures. This should be reduced to an internal assessment weighting of no more than 40%. Further consultation, research and trialling are needed before final decisions are taken.

5.9. For GCSEs in English and English Language operating in England, it is proposed that, from 2014, the Speaking and Listening (S&L) component – a controlled assessment component worth 20% of the GCSE marks – be removed from the grading of the subject and reported separately. The remaining controlled assessment will then contribute 40% to the final grade, with the exam contributing 60%. Subject experts have expressed concerns about the removal of an integral part of the subject which, if not being included in the candidate’s grade, could impact on how it is valued or indeed whether it is taught. S&L at GCSE level is a continuation of the focus in the N. Ireland revised curriculum on developing effective oral communication.

5.10. The decision taken in England is based on concerns following the awarding of GCSE English in summer 2012 and the lack of effective moderation of S&L marking prior to the awarding of grades in England. It is believed that this puts a very specific pressure on a teacher-marked component in a high-stakes subject which is used for accountability measures. All schools taking GCSE English/English Language with CCEA are visited by subject moderators, and have their marks checked and, if necessary, adjusted prior to subject grades being awarded. This quality assures the marking of the S&L component in N. Ireland. Schools here who take GCSE English/English
Language with other awarding bodies are not moderated for S&L prior to awarding. Further consultation is needed on this issue in N. Ireland alongside monitoring of decisions taken in England.

Recommendations:

Consideration should be given to the streamlining of the GCSE English and GCSE English Language subject offer to one GCSE in the subject area. This should support progression from Communication in Key Stage 3 and develop the literacy skills of learners.

The current 60% weighting for controlled assessment in GCSE English/English Language should be reduced to no more than 40% in the revised qualification.

5.11. Stakeholders expressed concern that unrealistic expectations are placed on the current GCSE Mathematics qualification; it is expected to fulfil too many purposes. Teachers indicated that the majority of the subject content is geared towards preparation for further studies in mathematics post-16 and that current teaching is focused on this to ensure those wishing to progress in the subject have the tools to complete further study. This is very different from the skills that are required to be functionally numerate, and it limits the ability to make the delivery of the subject relevant to all. It was believed that the focus on numeracy skills at KS3 is not preparing learners adequately for the content of GCSE Mathematics as it is currently. Only a quarter of the specification is number based; therefore, numeracy is not a main component.

5.12. Stakeholders felt that there is a need for a GCSE qualification which focuses on developing challenging, valuable and relevant real-life mathematical concepts in a range of contexts. This may include differing content but should be of an equally demanding level. This would be complemented by a qualification which focuses on core skills and principles for progression to mathematically related disciplines. This will provide an opportunity to reinforce positive messages about the importance of mathematical skills in line with the findings of the Literacy and Numeracy Taskforce¹⁷ and the ETI¹⁸. To facilitate the broad range of learners accessing the subject, GCSEs in Mathematics need to be externally assessed, modular, and tiered. Further consultation, research and trialling are needed before final decisions are taken.

Recommendation:

Further consideration should be given to the development of a second GCSE Mathematics qualification. This should include a core qualification

focusing on mathematical capability that reflects the needs to be able to use mathematics at a high level in daily life; complemented by a qualification relating to mathematical concepts for those intending further study in subjects which will require this level of knowledge.

5.13. Teachers indicated that the main challenge facing GCSE ICT in terms of progression from KS3 is due to ICT being delivered as a cross-curricular skill in Years 8 to 10 and not being taught as a discrete subject. This may not adequately prepare students for the delivery of ICT as a qualification at age 14–16. Stakeholders also expressed concerns about the current focus of GCSE ICT. It was felt that ICT skills are generally highly developed in many young people and that a qualification at 14–16 which would better prepare students for computing-related disciplines should be considered.

5.14. There is a need for a broad, skills-based ICT qualification which focuses on preparation for the world of work, problem-solving and real-life applications. Alongside this there is a need for a qualification which is more closely related to computing disciplines and which provides a base for learners for whom computing/ICT skills will be the focus of further study and possibly a career. Further consultation, research and trialling are needed.

Recommendations:

A more specialised, systems-based, GCSE IT qualification should be developed.

The current GCSE ICT qualification should remain to prepare young people for the world of work. It should focus on practical elements of ICT and develop problem-solving skills and an appreciation of real-life applications.

Literacy, numeracy and ICT at A level

5.15. Significant concerns were expressed throughout the Review about A level candidates not having the appropriate levels of literacy and numeracy skills required for further study or employment. The development and reinforcement of these skills, and of ICT skills, should be integrated into the delivery of A level subjects wherever possible.

Recommendation:

A level qualifications should support the development of literacy, numeracy and ICT skills where appropriate to the subject.
6. Meeting the Needs of the Revised Curriculum in GCSEs

6.1. There is strong support for the GCSE brand and qualification structure. However, it is clear that changes are needed to the current qualifications to ensure they continue to be fit for purpose.

6.2. The revised Northern Ireland Curriculum supports progression of learners from Foundation Stage (Years 1 and 2) to Key Stage 4 (Years 11 and 12)\textsuperscript{19}. Work is ongoing on statutory assessment across Key Stages 1 to 3 in order to support the aims of the revised curriculum in assessing skills, knowledge and understanding. There are a number of areas relating to GCSE qualifications which need to be reviewed in line with the embedding of learning and skills development through the revised curriculum at Key Stage 3.

6.3. Learners who have followed the revised curriculum throughout Key Stage 3\textsuperscript{20} are now taking GCSEs. Subsequent candidates will have been following the revised curriculum from primary school. This provides an ideal opportunity to review the qualifications in light of the different learning and skills these students will have experienced up to age 14.

Recommendations:

GCSE qualifications should be retained at Level 1 and Level 2.

The qualifications should:

- have subject content which reflects the needs of N. Ireland;
- be aligned to the principles of the Entitlement Framework;
- support progression, in their delivery, of the Cross-Curricular Skills of Communication (Literacy), Using Mathematics (Numeracy) and Using ICT (ICT); and
- support progression, in their delivery, of the other skills of Problem-Solving, Self-Management and Working with Others.

6.4. To ensure that the delivery and teaching of GCSE qualifications provide for progression from the revised curriculum at Key Stage 3, it is important to recognise how the purposes of GCSE assessment differ from those of statutory assessment. Data provided as a result of ongoing statutory assessment for learning allows individual strengths and areas for improvement to be identified and appropriate interventions made. In this way all the school population can work to improve the Level of Progression achieved, allowing overall cohort attainment in the Levels of Progression to

\textsuperscript{19} Further information is available in Appendix D, Section 2.

\textsuperscript{20} The revised curriculum became statutory for all learners in 2009.
improve. GCSEs, however, are assessments of learning with rank-ordered outcomes based on achievement in individual assessments. They provide a picture of attainment at a point in time and allow for selection of learners based on their comparable grade achievement against their peers.

6.5. GCSE subjects should support the development of skills alongside the revised curriculum. However, the compensatory model of assessment of GCSE qualifications is different from the end of Key Stage statutory assessments, which use a competency model.

6.6. Stakeholders noted that, individually, GCSE subject specifications are generally well constructed. The challenge is to support teaching to ensure that links between subjects can be brought out in the classroom and allow learners to use their knowledge holistically. Learners are currently unable to make links between subjects or understand how they can work together, which means that they struggle when required to transfer the skills they have developed to new or different contexts.

**Recommendation:**

**GCSE qualifications should identify opportunities for links between subjects to connect learning and support the development of transferability of skills.**

6.7. It is recognised that recent unilateral policy changes in England, and media coverage relating to GCSEs, have had an adverse effect on the brand. Stakeholders believe it is important that any negative commentary is addressed to ensure the currency of the qualification for those currently undertaking GCSEs and those who will take them in the future. Comparability of qualifications developed in N. Ireland with those taken in England and Wales is extremely important and, therefore, qualifications here must be – and be seen to be – robust, especially where assessment delivery varies across the jurisdictions.

**Recommendation:**

**A programme of work should be undertaken to promote GCSE qualifications in N. Ireland.**
7. Meeting the Needs of Further and Higher Education

7.1. GCSEs and A levels currently provide a benchmark for learning to facilitate progression into further and higher education (FHE). Stakeholders feel it is important that qualifications at 16 should, alongside developing subject knowledge, develop a broad range of skills and provide the opportunity for personal development. Learners should have confidence that their learning is valid and connected to the world beyond school. Council recommends that all GCSE qualifications should provide progression opportunities to develop the skills acquired in KS3, particularly in Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT.

7.2. GCSEs and A levels are generally viewed as supporting progression to further study. This may be to pursue a course at a further education college and, at 18, also at university. When revising GCSE and A level qualifications the opportunity should be taken to include content and assessment which encourages the development of learners' knowledge and skills in a way which supports their next stage of education.

7.3. The need for the qualifications to provide lateral and vertical progression routes for all learners was emphasised. Stakeholders felt it important to recognise the valuable alternative progression routes for learners achieving at the lower grades at A level. The opportunities provided by qualifications with professional and technical outcomes were highlighted, alongside the academic progression route to university. It was felt rigorous alternatives to A level are important.

7.4. Stakeholders believe universities and colleges should play a role in A level development to facilitate progression and continuity for learners at age 18. In the revision of A level qualifications the opportunity must be taken to build on, and further develop, current university, college and subject community links. This is to ensure that revised qualifications are fit for purpose in terms of content, skills development and level of demand.

7.5. FHE representatives and other stakeholders highlighted the need for greater development of the higher-order thinking skills. Independent learning, problem-solving, creative thinking and teamwork were areas where it was believed that learners needed to develop their skills. It was felt that learners are unprepared for the demands of further study when they leave school and that the current culture of ‘teaching to the test’ stifles candidates’ abilities to develop in these areas. It was noted that learners seem to be taught ‘what to learn’ when a valuable skill for progression to further study is ‘how to learn’. It was noted that learners need to be able to contextualise learning, think beyond the subject and evaluate critically.
7.6. Concerns were also expressed regarding the level of literacy and numeracy skills of learners leaving school to pursue further study. It was felt that learners particularly did not enter university with the necessary literacy and numeracy skills to engage with their courses. This is in line with what is discussed previously in section 5.

**Recommendations:**

Qualifications should have the support of local further and higher education institutions in their development.

GCSEs and A levels should allow learners to develop the skills valued by further and higher education to support continuing learning. In revising the qualifications the opportunity should be taken:

- at GCSE – to incorporate, alongside the required subject knowledge, the progression of the skills embedded in the revised curriculum at Key Stages 1 to 3; and
- at A level – to incorporate independent learning, creative thinking and problem-solving skills.
8. Meeting the Needs of Employers

8.1. Stakeholders felt the main purpose of GCSEs and A levels was to facilitate progression to the next stage of education; it was also noted that they must support progression into training and employment.

8.2. Employers have indicated that the development of literacy and numeracy skills are particularly important in qualifications at 16. GCSEs in English and mathematics are used as a baseline for recruitment purposes in the expectation that grade C in these subjects represents an appropriate level of literacy and numeracy skills; however, concerns were expressed that skills were not developed to the level that was required. This is discussed previously in section 5.

8.3. Employers overall were more concerned that the qualifications system for 16 year olds supported the development of rounded individuals, than in what the actual content of the individual GCSE subjects was. The importance of integrating independent learning, enterprise and employability skills into qualifications to facilitate learner development was noted. This was supported by teachers, who felt that the focus at KS4 was on learning for exams. Opportunities to do other subject-related work and activities which developed wider skills were not valued by learners.

8.4. Whilst it is expected that A level qualifications should provide preparation for further study, stakeholders also believe it is important that they prepare young people for work and life. In the current economic climate, taking account of the rising costs of higher education, it is important that these qualifications provide an appropriate preparation for apprenticeships and/or employment for young people, who now see these routes as more viable progression options at 18. This was also highlighted due to the number of larger employers in N. Ireland who are now offering progression for students directly from A level.

8.5. Employers admitted to often not being as familiar with current qualifications as they would like to be. Some of the areas where it was felt further information would help support employer understanding were: the differences in attainment represented by different grades at GCSE and A level; the comparability of the variety of Level 1, 2 and 3 qualifications on offer; and the breadth of qualifications other than GCSEs and A levels. This is supported by the discussions in paragraphs 4.15 and 5.3.

8.6. Equally it was believed that schools are not as familiar as they could be with how the qualifications they offer relate directly to the world of work. Firstly, the importance of appropriate, impartial careers advice was highlighted so as to ensure learners do not close down possible future progression routes. This was supported by learner feedback who felt that advice was needed on
alternative, relevant routes other than university. Secondly, it was believed if learners were given the opportunity to appreciate how their studies related to ‘real world’ application of skills it would encourage them to see the relevance of subjects, help motivate their interest and encourage further study.

8.7. Stakeholders believe employers should have input into qualifications development to ensure that content is related to real-life contexts where appropriate, so that consideration is given to the appropriate development of relevant skills and the needs of the future workforce are met.

**Recommendations:**

**GCSEs and A levels should have the support of local employers in their development.**

**GCSEs and A levels should facilitate young people in developing the wider knowledge and skills for working life.**

8.8. Employers indicated the value they place on enrichment activities undertaken by learners during post-16 studies; this was supported by HE. Concerns were expressed that this aspect of student experience is being diminished by the focus on qualifications outcomes. It was believed that young people do not want to undertake developmental activities unless they are linked to achieving qualifications. Work should be undertaken on a general skills qualification which could complement the existing A level subject offer and encourage young people to develop the skills valued for progression into employment or further study. Further consultation and research are needed to consider models which are in use elsewhere, such as the extended project.

**Recommendation:**

**Consideration should be given to developing a mechanism to complement the A level subject offer and to support the value that employers and FHE put on skills development and enrichment programmes post-16.**
9. **Short-Term Changes at A Level**

9.1. There is strong support for the A level brand name and the continued delivery of comparable A levels across the three jurisdictions. A levels are highly valued, provide progression for learners and are understood by users. However, areas for improvement were identified. There is limited support for the changes to A levels currently being implemented in England. The majority of stakeholders support the retention of the qualifications as they currently exist here, with amendments, where appropriate, to suit the needs of learners in N. Ireland.

9.2. There is widespread support for the retention of the AS qualification as part of the full A level. It provides an effective bridge between GCSEs and A level and a basis for decisions about transition to A2 level and university. In addition, it provides opportunities for added breadth of study within Years 13 and 14.

9.3. Interim changes to A levels in N. Ireland have been announced by the Minister for Education following consultation. These include the removal of January assessments and the retention of the current relationship between AS and A2.

**Recommendations:**

GCE A level qualifications should be retained as the main qualification taken at Level 3. They should be similar in demand to A levels offered in England and Wales with variation where necessary to meet the needs of learners in N. Ireland.

AS should be retained as part of the A level qualification.
10. Qualifications in Northern Ireland in the Longer Term

10.1. Stakeholders have reservations about moving too far away from the current system of GCSE and A levels. Given that the well-established, three-country approach has been in place for a long time, stakeholders expressed some concerns about potential negative consequences of not mirroring changes in England. However, stakeholders indicated only limited support for the direction of the changes in England. It is unclear whether this divergence in three-country education policy can be accommodated in the longer term in the qualifications system, and whether the flexibility to accommodate individual jurisdictional needs can be managed. As a result, work should be undertaken to consider a possible longer-term strategy, which should include exploring options for a separate qualifications system.

10.2. The responses from stakeholders in N. Ireland indicated the need to avoid being driven by the approaches proposed in England without considering the kind of qualifications system needed for N. Ireland. In addition, concerns were raised about timescales for change in England. Stakeholders believe changes to GCSEs and A levels are needed but do not wish to implement changes in line with England. This is reflected in the short-term recommendations.

10.3. The Review has identified areas for improvement for qualifications in N. Ireland. Further work is needed to establish whether a different kind of qualifications system is needed in the longer term. The Review has facilitated a level of debate and engagement on qualifications and assessment at ages 14 to 18. Many stakeholders, particularly practitioners, welcomed the chance to consider these issues. A wish to be better informed about education policy nationally and internationally was expressed.

10.4. Whilst longer-term preferences chosen were conservative they indicate a wish not to follow policies which do not take into account the needs of N. Ireland. Stakeholders expressed the desire in the longer term to follow a similar strategy to the short-term proposals: retain the GCSE and A level qualifications with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland. However, announcements made during May 2013 about the potential future of a three-country system of qualifications, particularly at age 16, mean that this option may not be available.

10.5. In discussions, stakeholders felt consideration should be given in the longer term to what is needed to make the N. Ireland system better. The future direction may involve diverging or aligning with proposals for qualifications taken in England or Wales, depending on the final direction chosen in either jurisdiction, or it may involve a move towards a different model which is
aligned with international best practice when this has been given greater consideration by stakeholders.

**Recommendation:**

Work should begin on the longer-term vision for learning, assessment and qualifications in N. Ireland at ages 14 to 18. In considering what the system should look like ten years from now, qualifications, systems and experiences from the UK, Ireland and internationally should be explored, as well as lessons from academic research into qualifications and assessment.

10.6. Support remains for external high-stakes examinations at age 16 in the longer term. Stakeholders feel that qualifications: set out the basic education that should be completed by 16; provide a target for learners to work towards; give benchmarks for those leaving schools; and, provide evidence of learner progress. The role of qualifications in determining whether learners continue in education or enter employment was also noted, as was how qualifications at 16 allow student choice and provide opportunities.

10.7. It was noted that the enjoyment of learning and the development of independent learning skills are often diminished by the focus on exams, and that assessment at GCSE and A level can narrow teaching and limit students’ abilities to make links. Whilst employers and universities value independent thinking and creativity it was noted that the good examination candidate is often the one who follows direction. It was felt that assessment should be for learning and should support the way students learn whereas currently the focus is on what is learnt. For many, the purpose for retaining high-stakes examinations was linked to 16 being the statutory school leaving age in N. Ireland. If this should change in the future, it is important that the purpose of qualifications at 16 is reviewed. It was also noted that the majority of young people are now staying on in education and training post-16, so the purpose of qualifications at age 16 has changed.

10.8. Models of teacher-based assessment systems at the statutory leaving age in the majority of international qualifications systems were discussed during stakeholder engagement in the Review. National qualifications, which will be taken by the majority of learners in Scotland, will be available at Levels 1 to 5, with Levels 4 and 5 at a similar level to GCSEs. Up to Level 4, Nationals comprise teacher-based assessment in a pass/fail competency model. Rank ordering of candidates in assessments begins at National 5. Nationals are also credit based, allowing the learner to achieve a certificate for work completed. In the Republic of Ireland, the Junior Certificate has moved from a high-stakes external examination to teacher-based assessment. Many
stakeholders agree that teachers are best placed to make a judgement about a learner’s ability and that such an approach would support assessment for learning and allow a refocus of teaching. However, during the Review it was difficult for stakeholders to envisage how such other qualifications systems could operate at age 16 within N. Ireland without also reviewing other aspects, such as the current directed delivery of internal assessment and the impact of school accountability measures.

10.9. GCSEs and A levels are currently expected to fulfil a range of purposes for which they were not designed. Stakeholders believe that the expectations of our qualifications go beyond what can reasonably be met and that this is causing tension in the system and distorting teaching and learning towards assessments. It was noted that the core purpose of qualifications is to facilitate learning for the individual and to develop their knowledge, skills and confidence. Any assessment should support this; however, it was felt that GCSEs and A levels are not doing this at present. They are being seen as an end point rather than a springboard to the next stage of development in a process of lifelong learning. Consideration needs to be given to the purposes that qualifications in N. Ireland should serve in the longer term. Depending on agreement on the key purposes of the qualification system, different approaches may be necessary. Further work is needed to establish how other jurisdictions manage the development and progression of their young people.

10.10. Concerns were expressed about the small scale of N. Ireland and the viability of having a separate qualifications system. Some stakeholders felt it may not be possible to have a quality qualifications system if it differed substantially from those of England and Wales. Others referenced the high value placed on the Scottish and Irish qualifications systems. Learning from experiences in neighbouring jurisdictions and internationally would be crucial for N. Ireland to ensure the recognition, portability and currency of qualifications taken here.

10.11. Stakeholders found much of merit in qualifications systems in Scotland, Ireland and internationally: the facilitation of progression for all learners; support for personal skills and development; parity of esteem of academic and vocational routes; the enabling use of assessment; and the holistic approach to learning. Significant work is needed to understand the opportunities other qualifications systems could provide. Consideration needs to be given to how other aspects of education here may be changed in line with international best practice.

10.12. A detailed appraisal of other qualifications systems and international best practice needs to be undertaken alongside the implications of implementing them here. Extensive academic research has been undertaken into successful qualification systems and successful implementation of systemic
qualifications change. It is important that lessons from this work should be brought into any further considerations of change in N. Ireland.

Recommendations:

Proposals for a longer-term qualifications system for N. Ireland should be developed over a period of at least three years. Opportunities for working with other jurisdictions should be considered.

Any system should be aligned with internationally-recognised best practice.

Proposals should be trialled, tested and evaluated with a view to subsequent implementation in a longer timeframe which is appropriate for all users.

At GCSE level this should incorporate consideration of both developing/aligning with an alternative 14–16 qualification system and the removal of high-stakes external assessment at age 16.

At post-16 the rigour, portability and currency of qualifications must be ensured.

10.13. There is anxiety about further change within the education system in N. Ireland, as there has been a significant amount of educational change. This has put pressure on schools and teachers and has left other stakeholders unclear about the nature and role of qualifications currently offered in schools. The number of recent announcements relating to qualifications policy led to many stakeholders admitting during the Review that they were not fully aware of the context, as it is changing so quickly. It is important in looking at a longer-term qualification strategy for N. Ireland that an appropriate amount of time be given for consultation, trialling and implementation, were more significant changes to be introduced. It would also be important to allow adjustments to qualifications to embed and not be subject to political change, to allow the education sector relief from the constant change that has been experienced in the past number of years.

Recommendation:

Changes proposed for the longer-term future of qualifications in N. Ireland should be allowed to be fully embedded before periodic evaluation and review begin.
Appendix A: Report of Research Findings

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Section 1: Introduction

CCEA was commissioned by the Education Minister, John O’Dowd MLA, to carry out a consultation on GCSE and A level qualifications provision in N. Ireland. The Minister stated that the aim is: ‘to ensure that we have a world-class suite of qualifications capable of testing and rewarding the learning and attainment of students at the end of compulsory schooling and at the end of sixth form/Year 14’.

The objectives of the research were to ensure that CCEA obtains valid and reliable information that supports the formulation of recommendations which meet the Minister’s overall aim and objectives for the Review of GCSEs and A levels as set out below. These were that the qualifications:

- reflect the aims and objectives of the revised statutory curriculum;
- test skills as well as knowledge;
- reflect and represent progression from the Levels of Progression in core subjects (English/Gaeilge, Mathematics and ICT);
- are robust and credible;
- meet our economic and societal needs;
- are designed to test students fairly and robustly, and reward them appropriately; and
- are seen as the pinnacle of the statutory assessment scheme.

1.1 Executive Summary

1.1.1 GCSE Feedback

Overall, the majority of respondents from all three phases of the Review did not want GCSE qualifications replaced in N. Ireland. However, there was a strongly-held view that changes to the current GCSE qualifications are needed. Generally, the respondents agreed that the main purpose of GCSE qualifications is to prepare students for further education, employment or other progression routes. However, there were a number of areas which those taking part in the research thought could be reviewed to lead to an improved qualification and ensure that GCSEs meet the needs of all learners. The suggestions for improvement are outlined within the main report.

Issues regarding the general skills essential for progression to A level arose in the questionnaire feedback and workshop interviews. For some, GCSEs were not providing a sufficient grounding for the rigour required at A level and did not contribute sufficiently to the development of independent, critical thinking skills. In
addition, interviewees also noted that some of their students lack the requisite levels of English and mathematics.

Teachers and representatives from further and higher education (FHE) believed the number of resit opportunities caused problems for the qualification. Feedback from the workshops indicated that the ‘resit culture’ affected students’ attitudes towards examinations with the expectation that they will ‘always get another chance’. One of the consequences of multiple resits was a congested examination timetable for many students. Interviewees also expressed concerns that, for some students, resits had a detrimental effect on their ability to think more holistically about their subject because they were concentrating too much on passing exams. The majority of feedback did not advocate a total ban on resits but generally called for a limit on the number of opportunities available.

The majority of respondents indicated that they would prefer a combination of linear and modular assessment to suit individual subjects. Qualitative feedback on the modular GCSE structure was split. Those critical of the modular structure believed it fostered a sense of teaching and learning to the test rather than learning the subject as a whole. Some teacher feedback from the workshops described what they felt were very prescribed and packed specifications which left very little room for creativity or deeper learning or teaching. Such respondents felt the modular structure exacerbates the problem because of the number of examinations. Criticism was also directed by some at the differing levels of control applied by schools and the amount of weighting placed on controlled assessment.

However, there was feedback that suggested that the modular structure has its merits. This included that it allows workload to be managed appropriately and provides more opportunities for a wider spectrum of learners to succeed. Student feedback also suggested that it allows them to have a greater appreciation of their own progress.

There was recognition throughout the research that GCSEs are not appropriate for all types of learner. Respondents called for greater recognition and value to be given to vocational qualifications. Many participants stressed the importance of carefully advising the best pathway for students who may not obtain a grade C in GCSE. It was felt particularly that other qualification types need considered for those who are less able or have special educational needs (SEN).

### 1.1.2 GCSE Options

Based on the research findings from the earlier phases of the Review a series of options was developed for the future of the qualifications system in N. Ireland. This questionnaire allowed respondents the opportunity to give views on options for the review of qualifications taken at ages 14–16 and 16–18, and to consider the
best options for the short to medium term and the longer term. These options are set out below:

a) Retain GCSEs in line with the policy direction in England.
b) Retain GCSEs, with amendments to reflect the needs of N Ireland educational policies and the N Ireland economy.
c) Develop new 14–16 qualifications for N. Ireland.
d) Remove the emphasis on high stakes examinations at age 16 –for example externally assessed qualifications in core subject only and school-based assessment in other subjects.
e) None of the proposals.

The majority of respondents would like to retain GCSEs with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies and the N. Ireland economy in the short to medium term (61.7%, n=334)\(^2\) and the longer term (47.6%, n=257).

The second most frequent response was for retaining GCSEs in line with the policy direction in England in the short to medium term (27.5%, n=149) and for the longer term (26.1%, n=141). Many of the qualitative comments revealed that such respondents believed that this would help maintain the currency and portability of the qualification.

1.1.3 A Level Feedback
Similar to the GCSE feedback, the majority of respondents do not want A levels replaced with a new qualification. It was generally felt that the main purpose of A levels is to prepare students for university. Confidence in the A level system was higher than in the GCSE system. However, there were a number of areas which could be reviewed to lead to an improved qualification.

A levels were perceived to provide students with an opportunity to develop more in-depth knowledge of a smaller number of subjects. A levels were also perceived by many to remain as the ‘gold standard’ for Level 3 qualifications. However, questionnaire and workshop feedback revealed that some felt A levels do not provide the skills essential for university undergraduate courses. Specific skills mentioned included researching, independent thinking, and the wider skills of problem-solving, analysis and critical thinking. There were some comments made in relation to the level of development students need in these broader skills prior to higher/further study. Interviews with higher education representatives revealed that programmes existed to get first year undergraduate students to the right level in their courses. Such representatives were critical of the lack of these skills in the first instance and felt they should be developed before university.

\(^2\) The value ‘n’ in the report is the number of actual respondents to the items being presented, described or illustrated.
Similar to the GCSE feedback, research respondents were critical of the number of resits that are available to students. It was again stated that some students approach examinations with the attitude that they can repeat modules. One consequence noted by stakeholders from the higher education sector was that some first year undergraduates initially struggle because they cannot retake higher education examinations to improve marks, which can cause problems for the student in adjusting to the academic expectations at university.

Teachers and further and higher education representatives also spoke of the pressure of assessment and the negative consequences of teaching and learning to the test. It was felt that students fail to gain a real depth to their learning as they are learning to pass examinations and not studying their subjects at a deeper level.

In keeping with the GCSE feedback, the majority of respondents indicated that they would prefer a combination of linear and modular assessment to suit individual A level subjects. Qualitative comments were again split on the effectiveness of the modular structure. Those against felt the modular structure comes at the expense of deeper learning, especially in cases where the subject content in a module is only taught at one point in the course and is not required elsewhere in the A level. However, respondents also spoke of the benefits of the modular system, stating that it allows workload to be managed appropriately and provides more opportunities for a wider spectrum of learners to succeed. Furthermore, the majority of research participants favoured retaining the current system of AS/A2, where achievement is measured after one year. Many noted that the AS level allows students to make the transition to A2 more easily.

Feedback also suggested that A levels are not appropriate for all types of learner. Many participants stressed the importance of advising students on a pathway suited to their needs. Such respondents called for the expansion of vocational qualifications to a wider range of learners and a greater recognition to be given to the value of these qualifications.

1.1.4 A level Options
At the end of the consultation questionnaire, respondents were asked to select their preferred option for 16–18 qualifications in N. Ireland in the short to medium term and the longer term. The options are set out below:

a) Retain A levels in line with policy direction in England.
b) Retain A levels, with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies and the needs of the N. Ireland economy.
c) Develop new 16–18 qualifications for N. Ireland that retain features of A level qualifications.
d) None of the proposals.
The majority of respondents would like to retain A levels with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies and the needs of the N. Ireland economy in the short to medium term (61.9%, n=334) and the longer term (48.3%, n=261).

The second most frequent response was for retaining A levels in line with the policy direction in England in the short to medium term (27.4%, n=148) and the longer term (25.2%, n=136). Many of the qualitative comments revealed that such respondents believed this would help maintain the currency, portability and sustainability of the A level qualification.

### 1.2 Recommendations

The research has highlighted a number of issues documented within this report. Recommendations from the research are in the main body of the ‘Review of GCSE and A level Qualifications: Final Report: June 2013’.

The research findings suggest that additional focused research is required to allow for further clarity of the issues identified in this report and to ensure that all the qualifications are apposite at subject level. It is therefore recommended that further research is undertaken to support the main recommendations. This should include:

- individual subject-specific investigations into qualification structure to include:
  - tiering;
  - weighting of controlled assessment; and
  - modularity and linearity;
- research into viable alternatives for those students working at the lower grades at GCSE; and
- continued engagement to ensure that changes to GCSE and A level qualifications are appropriate and meet the needs of stakeholders.

### 1.3 Overview of Research

The first phase of the Review involved an online questionnaire, which was available between 19 November 2012 and 21 January 2013, to allow stakeholder opinions on the current GCSE and A level qualification system to be gathered. The content of the questionnaire is included in Appendix H. Research workshops were also delivered, gauging the views of various stakeholders on the current GCSE and A level qualification system.

The second phase of the Review built on the initial stakeholder engagement through the online questionnaire. It involved the detailed analysis of the questionnaire responses. The key messages from the questionnaire responses
were used to formulate questions and options for discussion in further detail at stakeholder consultation workshops. Face-to-face discussions with stakeholders at these events and further meetings were recorded for research purposes. Comprehensive research detailing the views of stakeholders on the current qualifications system is available in results section 3. The schedule of stakeholder engagement is included in Appendix C.

Findings were presented in a research report and used to inform the options and recommendations required for the second online consultation and June 2013 report.

Table 1 below summarises the main primary research audiences for all phases and the qualitative methods used to conduct the research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audiences</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-primary representatives (teachers, principals, vice principals)</td>
<td>Research workshop events</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HE, FE and Training representatives</td>
<td>Research workshop events</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) representatives</td>
<td>Research workshop event</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English, ICT and mathematics teacher representatives</td>
<td>Research workshop events</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills representatives</td>
<td>Research workshop events</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employers</td>
<td>Research workshop events</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-primary students</td>
<td>Research workshop events</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further education students</td>
<td>Research workshop event</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>332</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In total, 26 events were conducted over ten weeks. The exact composition of each group of participants is described in Appendix C.

A detailed issues paper was developed to allow full consideration of the impact and opportunities of the Review of GCSE and A level Qualifications. The paper was made available to stakeholder groups, including the Expert Group, to support their full engagement with issues relating to the Review. The paper also informed the development of options and recommendations for phase three of the Review. The issues paper is included in Appendix D.

This third and final phase of the Review developed detailed options for improving, changing or replacing GCSEs and/or A levels in N. Ireland. The options were drawn from the feedback received from all stakeholder engagement in phases one and two and from the desk research into other countries' qualifications systems.
A summary of international systems reviewed is available in Appendix E. The options were based on the continuum of choices available for the future of the qualifications system here at 16 and/or 18. The options are set out below:

1.3.1 For 14–16 Qualifications
- Retain GCSEs in line with the policy direction in England.
- Retain GCSEs, with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies and the N. Ireland economy.
- Develop new 14–16 qualifications for N. Ireland.
- Remove the emphasis on high stakes examinations at age 16 – for example externally assessed qualifications in core subjects only and school-based assessment in other subjects.

1.3.2 For 16–18 Qualifications
- Retain A levels in line with policy direction in England.
- Retain A, levels with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies and the N. Ireland economy.
- Develop new 16–18 qualifications for N. Ireland that retain features of A level qualifications.

CCEA’s Research and Statistics unit consulted with stakeholders on the possible options through an online questionnaire, which ran from 9 April to 31 May 2013. During this period further deliberative research events with stakeholder groups were held. The outcomes of the consultation and all face-to-face stakeholder engagement are included in the main body of this report. The findings of the research report will facilitate the development of a fully considered set of recommendations, alongside consideration of related implementation issues.

1.4 Details of Quantitative Research

1.4.1 Online Questionnaires
The first online consultation questionnaire22 sought the views on the current GCSE and A level qualifications and on future qualifications provision in N. Ireland (see Appendix H for the full Consultation Questionnaire). There were 532 respondents to this phase one online questionnaire, including one Irish Medium response.

The second questionnaire explored detailed options for improving, changing or replacing GCSEs and/or A levels in N. Ireland. The options were drawn from the feedback received from all stakeholder engagement in phases one and two and from the desk research into other qualifications systems. There were 541 respondents to the phase three questionnaire, including two Irish Medium responses.

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22 Both questionnaires were available in English and Irish language.
1.4.2 Interpretation of Tables
The value ‘n’ in the report is the number of actual respondents to the items being presented, described or illustrated. In some instances, where the respondents have been asked to provide multiple responses to an item, ‘n’ may be greater than the total respondent figure. Percentages are also reported throughout the report.

1.4.3 Demographics of Respondents to Questionnaires
Respondents were asked to specify the category which best represents their responses to the questionnaire. The number and proportion (%) in each category is listed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Phase 1 Stakeholder Questionnaire</th>
<th>Phase 3 Final Options Questionnaire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers, post-primary</td>
<td>(n=342, 66.8%)</td>
<td>(n=315, 60.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals, post-primary</td>
<td>(n=32, 6.3%)</td>
<td>(n=33, 6.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupils/Learners</td>
<td>(n=31, 6.1%)</td>
<td>(n=30, 5.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Educational Professionals</td>
<td>(n=23, 4.5%)</td>
<td>(n=27, 5.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>(n=23, 4.5%)</td>
<td>(n=51, 9.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further education</td>
<td>(n=16, 3.1%)</td>
<td>(n=13, 2.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals, primary</td>
<td>(n=13, 2.5%)</td>
<td>(n=3, 0.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group response</td>
<td>(n=11, 2.1%)</td>
<td>(n=8, 1.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers, SEN</td>
<td>(n=7, 1.4%)</td>
<td>(n=6, 1.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals, SEN</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>(n=2, 0.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>(n=6, 1.2%)</td>
<td>(n=15, 2.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers, primary</td>
<td>(n=5, 1.0%)</td>
<td>(n=1, 0.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employers</td>
<td>(n=3, 0.6%)</td>
<td>(n=14, 2.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not identified</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>532</td>
<td>541</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.4.4 Analysis of Data
All data collected was analysed using SPSS for Windows. Thematic Content Analysis was undertaken to analyse all qualitative data.
1.5 Details of Qualitative Research

1.5.1 Discussion Guides
Separate discussion guides were developed for each stakeholder group; these contained the most appropriate research questions for the audience/stakeholder. In general research workshop events lasted two hours. Student interviews tended to last for approximately 45 minutes. All interviews and groups were recorded and transcribed to aid analysis.

The discussion guides were structured around the research objectives and, as is best practice for qualitative research, these were revised throughout the fieldwork period. This meant that more fruitful lines of enquiry could be prioritised over those which turned out to have little analytical value.

1.5.2 Analysing and Interpreting the Qualitative Findings
It is important to note that although qualitative research provides more detailed insights into experiences, the views obtained are not necessarily statistically representative of the entire population. Throughout the report, use is made of verbatim comments from the interviewees. Where this is the case, it is important to remember that the views expressed are to illustrate analytical points made in the report and do not necessarily portray the majority view of participants. The report aims to provide a summary of responses therefore not all individual comments are included.

The report has been structured around the main research objectives. This is intended to enable links to be made between the objectives and any resultant policy or structural changes. In practice, the objectives all have some connection to one another, so some internal referencing is provided to help move between sections.

A thematic database was developed, structured by variables that described participants (for example subject taught, type of school or industrial sector), to help draw out links in the data, case studies and examples of best practice. The outcome of this analysis is reported in the following sections.
Section 2: Results – Phase 1
This section captures the research feedback from the first phase of the Review of GCSE and A level qualifications. It includes feedback from the first online questionnaire, available between 19 November 2012 and 21 January 2013 (phase one), and the research workshop events that took place between February and March 2013 (phase two). Research workshop findings are presented in the shaded boxes throughout this section.

The majority of workshop attendees were post-primary representatives. However, there were also smaller scale representation from further and higher education, employers, teacher unions and other educational professionals.

2.1 GCSE Qualifications
2.1.1 GCSE Summary
The majority of respondents, 62%, indicated that they do not want GCSE qualifications to be replaced in N. Ireland. Of these, however, two-thirds (n=215) suggested changes that are needed to the current GCSE. Just under one-quarter of respondents (24.4%) requested change but felt some aspects of GCSE should be kept, with 9.8% believing that GCSEs should be changed totally. Among the 21.2% who felt no change was needed, the credibility and robustness of the current system was noted, as were the positives of accessibility for all, modularity and controlled assessment.

The majority of respondents, 62.3%, believe the current GCSE qualifications meet the needs of pupils. Over 55.7% believe GCSEs meet the needs of teachers, 41.5% the needs of employers and 49.1% the needs of FHE. 46% of respondents felt GCSEs reflect the achievement of all learners, with the modular system, tiering and the suite of academic and vocational qualifications noted by various respondents as being suitable for all types of learners. 57.9% were satisfied with the current level of demand of GCSEs, with over half indicating the current suite of qualifications sufficiently encourages the development of literacy (54.7%) and numeracy (54.4%) skills.

However, 34.1% feel GCSEs do not meet the needs of pupils, and 36.3% believe they do not meet the needs of teachers. 40% feel that GCSEs do not meet the needs of employers, and 34% believe they do not meet the needs of FHE. Opinions were expressed as to skills for employment not being provided or transferred to the workplace and students not being prepared for the independent learning required for third level education. 54% indicated current GCSEs do not reflect the achievements of all learners. 27.8% do not think the current level of demand for GCSEs is appropriate.
Around one-third of respondents (36.3% and 33% respectively) felt literacy and numeracy were not being suitably developed in current qualifications. Some expressed the opinion that too many young people are leaving school with insufficient skills in these areas, with others noting that the foundations for these skills should be developed before 14–16 years of age.

2.1.2 Purpose of Qualifications at 16
At the start of the research workshop events participants were asked to detail what they thought were the main purposes of qualifications at age 16. Their responses are summarised below.

**Workshop findings**
Participants stated a large number and broad range of main purposes for qualifications at age 16. The most frequently stated purposes are as follows.

- For progression to:
  - A level
  - further education/another qualification
  - higher education
  - work placement/apprenticeship
  - employment
- As a performance measure for students/an indication of ability, strengths and weaknesses
- For career planning/to aid decisions regarding future pathways
- As a performance measure for schools
- As preparation for whatever follows school/the future
- As preparation for life and society
- To record achievement
- To provide a broad educational experience
- To provide pathways for all students
- To foster a love of learning/develop a love of and interest in a subject
- As a benchmark for employers
- To meet the needs of the economy/provide a workforce
- To develop core skills.

2.1.3 Meeting the Needs of Stakeholders
Respondents were asked to indicate if the current GCSE qualifications meet the needs of relevant groups of stakeholders. The proportion (%) of respondents who indicated each response appears in Table 3, followed by more details about the number and proportion (%) of respondents in each case.
Table 3. Proportion (%) of respondents indicating each questionnaire response for GCSE qualifications and the issue of meeting the needs of stakeholders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Do the current GCSE qualifications meet the needs of:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students? Teachers? Employers? FHE?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>62.3       55.7         41.5         49.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>34.1       36.3         40.0         34.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>3.6        7.9          18.5         16.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Needs of students

62.3% of respondents (n=331) indicated that the current GCSE qualifications meet the needs of students. Some respondents viewed GCSEs as a fair method of determining ability and recognising achievement (n=5) and believed that they help prepare learners for A level study (n=5). A number of respondents felt that there was sufficient breadth of subjects to allow learners to engage meaningfully with different topics (n=9). Eight respondents viewed the qualifications as robust, allowing learners to display distinct subject knowledge. Others felt that the current structure allows teachers to manage their workload appropriately (n=7). A number of respondents (n=15) also believed the unitised structure of GCSEs provides more opportunities for a wider spectrum of learners to achieve success. Five respondents stated that the content is insightful, dynamic and interesting for learners.

Just under 35% (34.1%, n=181) of respondents did not think that the current GCSE qualifications meet the needs of learners. A number of respondents (n=12) felt that GCSEs did not provide a sufficient grounding for A level study. Nine respondents called for more rigour and depth to be applied to GCSE content in modern languages so that learners do not find the AS level such a ‘jump’ in standard. A small number of respondents felt that the modular system increases workload and puts undue pressure on learners (n=5). Others commented that increasing demand, including the level of depth to be explored within the different topics, has affected student enjoyment of GCSE subjects (n=5).

Respondents also felt that the pressures placed on teachers by the current system mean that teachers are ‘teaching to the test’ and learners are emphasising rote memorisation. This has resulted in fewer opportunities for creative and abstract thinking skills (n=11). A number of respondents believed that there are differing levels of ‘control’ across centres (n=15) regarding controlled assessment and that this mode of assessment does not give a true reflection of learners’ ability (n=4). Eleven respondents felt that there is an inappropriate weighting placed on controlled assessment. A number of respondents (n=8) reiterated the view that controlled assessment had led to an increase in student stress. A number of respondents believed the current system is designed for the academically able and that fewer options are available for less able learners (n=12). Some took an alternative view and felt that GCSEs do not provide enough scope for the
development of independent, abstract and critical thinking skills (n=11). Similarly, some respondents felt that GCSEs do not provide sufficient challenge for the most able learners (n=13). Five respondents felt that the level of difficulty in some particular subjects offered at GCSE is not comparable to that of other subjects. A further five respondents felt that the present system does not meet the needs of learners with SEN (n=5).

A small percentage of respondents (3.6%, n=19) were unsure if the current GCSE qualifications meet the needs of learners.

**Workshop findings**

The majority of participants across all of the workshops did not believe that GCSEs meet the needs of all learners. Such feedback suggested that GCSEs are not meeting the needs of the less able learner (particularly those achieving D–G grades) and SEN students. Certain teachers stressed the importance of recognising different abilities and giving validity to the achievements of less able children.

Participants were keen to discuss the need to engage all students and there was much debate about whether a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach was appropriate. Some teachers felt that there should be qualifications that prepare people for different routes. Some participants indicated that there needs to be clarity in the purpose of qualifications and what the routes are. They felt that there should be a range of qualifications and not a view that one qualification is doing different things. Examples included one qualification that prepares students for university, and another that prepares them for a different, more practical and vocational route. Certain participants stated that people appear only to value the academic and not the other pathways available. There was general consensus that some alternative qualifications are not given currency or recognition by various educational stakeholders (schools, colleges, DE, universities and employers). Certain participants also stated that there should be a range of assessment methods on offer to ensure all learning abilities are catered for. It was also believed that practical learners are not best served by the current modes of assessment within GCSE.

There was debate on the often poor grasp of basic skills (communication, literacy, numeracy). Some debated the merits of alternative literacy and numeracy qualifications. Some felt that these could be branded under the GCSE label; others felt that they should be separate. There was no consensus on this issue.

There was much discussion amongst teachers about the pressure of accountability within the system and the negative effects caused by using qualification outcomes as performance measures to judge schools. Many teachers felt that they are under a great deal of pressure to get students through the content, so that they are
prepared for the exam, or to ensure that they have got their controlled assessment completed, to achieve results. Teachers also spoke of the pressure that students are under due to increased assessment. There was general agreement that an overabundance of testing has skewed learning outcomes and teaching practices, leading to ‘teaching to the test’, narrowing of the curriculum and preventing broader study.

Some grammar school teachers were of the opinion that certain GCSEs were not stretching the top end candidates. However, they acknowledged that not every student is capable of achieving an A*-C grade.

The workshop findings that follow refer to the perception of attainment at GCSE grades D–G alongside the perception of high attainment in a Level 1 qualification, for example Level 1 Award for IT Users. Both achievements represent Level 1 attainment on the National Qualifications Framework.

**Workshop findings**

There was discussion across the workshop events about finding a way of recognising the achievements of less able children. There was acceptance that many in society perceive grades D–G as a failure, even though for many students they represent a real achievement and a foundation on which to build. The majority of teachers present at the workshops indicated that further and higher education institutions and employers place added value on GCSE grades A*-C.

However, many participants believed that a student would prefer to receive a pass, merit or distinction in a Level 1 qualification than a D–G grade. Such participants felt that a pass in a Level 1 qualification gives formal recognition of learning and offers opportunities for progression.

A considerable number of participants believed employers display a lack of knowledge regarding alternative (GCSE equivalent) types of qualifications. Such stakeholders felt that more should be done to raise the profile and prestige of vocational learning. Some college representatives indicated that this is being exacerbated by the fact that colleges are finding it increasingly difficult to promote their qualifications in schools. They explained that schools are especially reluctant to risk losing their students – not to mention the associated funding – after they have completed their GCSEs by allowing rival institutions to advertise their courses. Some college representatives felt that not enough is being done to educate parents – and even some teachers – about the benefits of vocational education.

One attendee stated: ‘Parents and teachers do not challenge young people’s perceptions of vocational qualifications and, as a result, relatively few young people taking general qualifications had actively considered vocational options.’
Those in favour of vocational qualifications for students who may not access grade A*-C at GCSE felt that they can equip learners with the skills required in the workplace.

Debate amongst teachers again focused on the pressure of accountability within the system and the negative effects of performance measures. One group at the workshops believed that the Department of Education (DE) applies double standards to examination grades. Such participants stated that DE has to decide whether exams are for measuring schools or about students and their learning achievements.

The workshop findings below refer to alternative qualifications for learners working at the lower grades at GCSE.

**Workshop findings**

Many participants stressed the importance of carefully advising the best pathway for students for whom, for a variety of reasons, attainment at GCSE grade C in subject may not be achievable.

Many attendees indicated that there are a number of vocational qualifications on offer that students can choose. Some felt that ill-informed attitudes persist in the education system because of poor careers information, advice and guidance, as well as a failure to counter the prevailing prejudices within society. Some college attendees suggested that those in positions of influence and power in education have inevitably little or no direct experience of vocational areas, having come through the traditional academic route, i.e. A level, degree, and directly into education. Others contended that the vocational education and training system is seen by many providers and even learners themselves as confusing because:

- teachers are often unable to provide professionally informed advice and guidance to the learners;
- employers experience difficulties in assessing the value of the multitude of vocational qualifications that exist and too often experience problems gauging the applicants’ ability and employment potential;
- some parents continue to strongly influence their children’s choices and are often confined by their own educational background;
- college and university admission tutors experience problems trying to map the equivalence of the multitude of vocational qualifications;
- the learners often have insufficient access to impartial, up-to-date and informed information, advice and guidance about courses and careers; and
- there is little recognition that many vocational qualifications can lead to careers that are as [financially] rewarding as those based on more academic ones, and can be more relevant for those who want to develop their own business.

Certain attendees stressed the importance of creating qualifications that are practical in nature and have a work experience element related to them.
Needs of teachers
55.7% (n=296) of respondents felt that the current GCSE qualifications meet the needs of teachers.

36.3% (n=193) of stakeholders did not believe that the current GCSE qualifications meet the needs of teachers. Some respondents felt that controlled assessment has placed an administrative burden (n=17) and impacted on teaching and learning time within schools and colleges (n=30). Nine such respondents specifically mentioned that the ‘teaching to the test’ approach is disruptive to both teaching and learning. Five respondents referred to ‘teaching to the test’ but did not mention disruption of teaching and learning time. A number of further respondents (n=5) felt that the modular system has placed greater pressure on teachers.

Nearly 8% (n=42) of respondents were unsure if the current GCSE qualifications meet the needs of teachers.

Needs of employers
41.5% (n=220) of respondents felt that the current GCSE qualifications meet the needs of employers. A number of respondents commented that GCSEs provide adequate preparation for employment or training post-16 (n=5). Respondents (n=5) indicated that GCSEs can act as a bridge to further education and training.

40% (n=212) of respondents do not believe the current GCSE qualifications meet the needs of employers. A number of respondents (n=8) suggested that GCSEs do not provide the specific skills necessary for employment and that skills gained at GCSE do not always transfer to the workplace (n=6). Eight respondents believed that employers do not understand the nature and value of GCSE qualifications. 18.5% (n=98) of respondents were unsure if the current GCSE qualifications meet the needs of employers.

Needs of further and higher education (FHE)
Almost half of the respondents (49.1%, n=260) felt that the current GCSE qualifications meet the needs of further and higher education. Such respondents (n=8) commented that N. Ireland’s GCSE system allows for progression to further and higher education.

34% (n=180) of respondents do not believe that the current GCSE qualifications meet the needs of further and higher education. A small number of respondents (n=5) felt that the unitised structure of GCSEs and the introduction of controlled assessment have meant that some learners are not prepared for the degree of independent learning and abstract thinking required for third level education (n=7).

16.8% (n=89) of respondents were unsure if the current GCSE qualifications meet the needs of further and higher education.
Respondents also provided a range of general comments about GCSE qualifications. A number of respondents maintained that GCSEs had been ‘diluted’ by the ability to repeatedly retake modules (n=12) and felt that the modular system encourages ‘bite-sized learning’ (n=5).

A number of respondents (n=11) reiterated the concern that too much emphasis and weighting is placed on controlled assessment. Respondents also commented on additional concerns regarding controlled assessment, such as lost teaching time, detrimental effects on learning experiences and reduced student motivation. A small number of respondents (n=6) recommended a return to the linear examination structure to help reduce the risk of over-assessment and increase the opportunities to teach subjects in a joined-up way rather than in bite-sized chunks. Six respondents indicated that time needs to be taken to consider the modular/linear debate to ensure that N. Ireland qualifications are as robust and portable as those in England.

2.1.4 Reflecting the Achievements of All Learners
46% (n=244) of respondents felt the current suite of GCSE qualifications reflects the achievements of all learners. Those in support of the qualification indicated that the current modular system is suitable for all types of learners (n=14) and commented that tiering allows for the true abilities of young people to be recognised (n=10). Nine respondents felt that this was dependent on the subject.

54% (n=287) of respondents did not think the current suite of GCSE qualifications reflects the achievements of all learners. Respondents cited their opposition to controlled assessment, with some believing it to be open to abuse and responsible for inflating student achievement (n=33). A number of respondents (n=27) were of the view that GCSEs are not challenging enough for the most able, and are too difficult for the less able student. Sixteen respondents stated that grades A*–C are celebrated whilst D–G are regarded as ‘fails’ and felt that this was demotivating for the less able learner. A similar number of respondents (n=15) felt that GCSEs are not suitable for many SEN learners. Five respondents commented that it is difficult to create one qualification to suit all learners.

The following workshop findings refer to the appropriateness of all 14–16 year olds studying GCSEs.

**Workshop findings**

The majority of workshop participants did not believe that GCSEs should be studied by all 14–16 year olds. Participants agreed that it is impossible to classify all 14–16 year olds in one category as they have different interests and abilities. Certain attendees believed that there should be a qualification system that is flexible in allowing students of differing abilities and aspirations to develop on courses that motivate their interests. A number of participants felt particular...
Some teachers felt that GCSEs do not prepare students for the rigour of A level study. Some grammar school representatives felt the present GCSE system encourages rote learning, discourages independent learning, and offers too many opportunities to resit examinations.

Some participants suggested that more value must be placed on vocational qualifications to ensure that they receive the same currency and portability as GCSEs.

2.1.5 Level of Demand
Almost 58% (57.9%, n=308) of respondents were satisfied that the level of demand of GCSEs is appropriate. Qualitative comments reveal that a number of respondents felt that the level of demand is appropriate for the age range and ability of learners (n=6).

27.8% (n=148) did not think the level of demand of GCSEs is appropriate. A number of respondents felt there should be more rigour applied to GCSE qualifications (n=12). Respondents indicated that the most capable learners are not ‘stretched’ or ‘challenged’ sufficiently (n=8). Four respondents commented that a ‘one size’ approach to qualifications is not appropriate, as the current GCSE system is not challenging enough for the most able learner and too challenging for the less able learner. A further four respondents commented that it is difficult to have a system that encompasses all ability ranges. Three respondents indicated that GCSEs are difficult for lower ability learners. A further three respondents felt the skills-led approach of the revised curriculum at primary level and Key Stage 3 does not prepare learners adequately for GCSE.

Respondents also expressed their views on controlled assessment. Eight respondents felt that there remains a lack of consistency in how controlled assessment is regulated across schools. Respondents reiterated the view that controlled assessment places undue pressure on learners (n=6).

Respondents were also of the opinion that the level of demand differs between subjects (n=20), with some subjects more difficult than others. Once again languages were given as an example, with one respondent stating that the level of demand [in languages] deters many learners from choosing such subjects.

Six respondents indicated that they believe that GCSE content has been diluted over the decades. These respondents offered examples to substantiate their views.

A small number of respondents were critical in their comments on the modular system (n=14), suggesting that the opportunity to retake modules encourages
under-preparation and a lethargic attitude towards important examinations in general. Respondents felt that too many learners sit papers on the assumption that they can have a second attempt at any of the modular examinations if necessary. Respondents argue that the testing of individual modules does not encourage ‘joined-up’ thinking; a lack of experience with terminal examinations can also put learners at a disadvantage at university, where ‘finals’ are almost seen as ‘a rite of passage’ in many institutions. Other respondents were unsure if GCSEs adequately prepare learners for further study (n=8).

14.3% (n=76) of respondents were unsure if the level of demand of GCSEs is appropriate.

2.1.6 Options for the Future of GCSE Qualifications
Respondents were asked to indicate if, in general, they think GCSE qualifications should be replaced in N. Ireland with a new qualification. Workshop feedback is also integrated in this section.

It should be noted that during the workshop phase of the research a significant policy announcement occurred in England that had consequences for N. Ireland. In February the English Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove announced that the English Baccalaureate proposal would not be implemented and GCSEs would be retained in England. The N. Ireland Minister for Education, responding to the statement, said: “Michael Gove has decided to make a decision on post-14 education that affects students in the north of Ireland and Wales without any form of consultation with the administrations here and in Cardiff… As the Minister responsible for education policy here, I am determined to make decisions that are in the best, long-term interests of learners.”

Retain GCSEs but make changes (n=215, 40.4%)
The majority of respondents (40.4%, n=215) to the phase one consultation questionnaire did not want GCSEs replaced in N. Ireland, but felt that changes are required.

A number of respondents felt that change is necessary, as the current modular system has brought about an increase in the number of examinations and led to increasing pressure and anxiety on learners and teachers (n=15). Eight respondents believed that more rigour needs to be incorporated into the assessment process and indicated that the current modular system does not adequately prepare learners for further study or work. Respondents were concerned that the pressures of the current system suggest that teachers are ‘teaching to the test’, emphasising memorisation and excluding the possibility of creative and abstract thinking skills (n=10). Other respondents (n=8) were of the

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23 [http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news-de-070213-odowd-comments-on](http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news-de-070213-odowd-comments-on)
view that some subjects are not being recognised as requiring more depth of learning and teaching time.

A small number of respondents (n=6) again felt that GCSEs are not always reflective of less able or SEN students’ ability. A similar number of respondents (n=5) commented that in some cases the gap is too wide between GCSE and A level.

Both the respondents who indicated that they did not want GCSEs replaced at all (n=113, 21.2%) and those who did not want them replaced but felt they needed some change (n=328, 61.6%) were asked an additional question. This asked ‘If N. Ireland retains GCSEs it will have a different 14–16 qualification system from England and possibly Wales. The challenge for N. Ireland therefore is to pursue qualifications which will ensure that young people from N. Ireland have a first-rate qualifications system and do not end up with qualifications seen as second-rate by employers in other parts of the UK and beyond. Do you think that this is achievable?’

238 respondents (72.1%) thought that this was achievable. Some respondents commented on the prestigious reputation of the N. Ireland education system (n=17), believing it to be superior to other UK systems (n=13). Respondents believed having a separate system is achievable and pointed to the ‘standalone’ systems that operate successfully (n=19) in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland.

43 respondents (13%) to this question did not think that it was possible for N. Ireland to retain GCSEs and have a first-rate qualification system if it differed from that of England and Wales. Qualitative feedback revealed that a number of respondents felt that N. Ireland must have a similar system to that of England (and possibly Wales) to maintain currency and comparability with these countries (n=13). Respondents were not specific regarding the type of qualification system they would support, but stressed the need for N. Ireland qualifications to be portable and have currency (n=9) in comparison to other qualifications.

49 respondents (14.8%)24 to this extra question stated that they did not know. The respondents who indicated that they did not know whether the GCSE qualification should be changed or kept were not asked any additional questions.

**Change but keep some aspects of the GCSE qualification (n=130, 24.4%)**

The second most popular choice in phase one was for the GCSE qualification to be replaced but to retain some aspects of the qualification.

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24 Please note: the total number of respondents who answered the additional questions is higher than the number of respondents who answered the initial question, due to some respondents answering this as part of the hard copy questionnaire.
Qualitative feedback confirmed that certain respondents (n=7) are satisfied with the present modular system as it accommodates different types of learners (n=5). Five teachers stated that small changes may be required but pointed out that problems can arise from constantly changing the examination system. A number of respondents believed that controlled assessment should be retained (n=9).

Those respondents who indicated that they would like to change the GCSE system totally or partially (n=182, 34.2%) were asked a further two questions.

The first of these asked about the proposed English Baccalaureate. This option has since been abandoned by the Secretary of State for Education in England. Responses to the question, however, have been included in this report as they provide additional feedback on N. Ireland stakeholders’ views on alternative qualification options.

(i) ‘A baccalaureate model has been proposed for England 25, with the emphasis on a core of subjects with only final exams. Would you support this model in N. Ireland?’

56% (n=103) of respondents outlined their support for a baccalaureate model to be introduced in N. Ireland. Ten respondents supported this model to ensure qualifications have comparability and portability with English qualifications. Seven respondents outlined their support for a linear structure. A further seven believed that a baccalaureate model would reintroduce academic rigour to the qualifications system. Five respondents called for the removal or reduction of controlled assessment.

27.2% (n=50) of respondents would not support the introduction of a baccalaureate to N. Ireland. Those in opposition to the proposed model explained their reasoning behind their position. Eleven respondents felt that the baccalaureate model would not suit all learners, with some believing that less able learners would not be well served in such a system. A small number of respondents (n=5) felt that an element of controlled assessment should be maintained to allow for flexibility and a range of learning styles to flourish.

16.8% (n=31) of respondents were unsure whether they would support the introduction of a baccalaureate model to N. Ireland.26

(ii) ‘Should N. Ireland introduce a standalone 14–16 qualification similar to Scotland or Republic of Ireland?’


26 Please note: the total number of respondents who answered the additional questions is higher than the number of respondents who answered the initial question, due to some respondents answering the incorrect part of a hard copy questionnaire.
16.8% \( (n=31) \) outlined their support for a standalone 14–16 qualification similar to that of Scotland or Republic of Ireland. Eight respondents felt it could work if the new ‘brand’ identity is good, meets the needs of stakeholders and has portability.

Just under half of respondents \( (48.4\%, \ n=89) \) indicated that they would not support a standalone 14–16 qualification similar to that of Scotland or Republic of Ireland. Those in opposition maintained that the present system allows for comparison and consistency with other UK countries \( (n=34) \). Thirteen respondents felt that N. Ireland is too small to introduce a standalone system.

Almost 35% of respondents were unsure whether they would support a standalone 14–16 qualification similar to that of Scotland or Republic of Ireland being introduced to N. Ireland \( (34.8\%, \ n=64) \). Such stakeholders indicated that they did not have sufficient knowledge of the Scottish and Republic of Ireland systems to comment \( (n=12) \).

**Retain the current GCSEs \( (n=113, \ 21.2\%) \)**
Qualitative feedback revealed that a number of respondents felt that the current suite of GCSE qualifications is credible, robust, and allows skills to be applied and tested \( (n=21) \) and is accessible to all types of learners \( (n=7) \). Seven respondents welcomed that the current system enables learners to have a ‘second chance’, particularly for those who ‘may have had a bad day’.

**A total change is needed \( (n=52, \ 9.8\%) \)**
The least popular choice was for GCSEs to be totally replaced in N. Ireland. Respondents favouring a total change of qualifications at age 14–16 were critical of the impact of controlled assessment on GCSEs. Such respondents believed that controlled assessment must be removed or regulated more effectively \( (n=47) \). Other respondents commented that there is a lack of consistency across schools regarding the way controlled assessments are administered \( (n=30) \) and that the element of control also varies across different subjects. Respondents indicated that controlled assessment is difficult to administer and manage, explaining that it takes up a large proportion of teaching \( (n=20) \) and learning \( (n=9) \) time. A smaller number of respondents believed that controlled assessment should carry less weighting \( (n=14) \) and that more focus should be placed on the outcomes of a terminal examination. A similar number of respondents \( (n=13) \) felt that a review on the future of controlled assessment should take place. Concern was also expressed by respondents regarding the strain on learners undertaking controlled assessment. Respondents felt this method of assessment puts substantial pressure on the learner and impacts on their enjoyment of a subject \( (n=7) \).

Respondents \( (n=16) \) also recommended expanding the range of vocational qualifications to a wider range of learners. This would allow more options for less able learners to include a mix of practical/vocational and applied qualifications that
have validity, currency and relevance. A number of respondents (n=7) commented on the benefits of a two-tier system that would permit schools to enter learners into an appropriate tier and therefore allow learners to achieve within their capabilities.

A number of respondents (n=16) commented that N. Ireland must change to be viewed as comparable and to have the same currency as new qualifications that may be taken in England and Wales. Such respondents were concerned that the GCSE qualification may be discredited and disadvantage potential N. Ireland learners applying to universities in such countries.

Respondents also indicated that linear examinations/assessments should only be available at the end of Year 12 to ensure credibility and reliability and maintain parity across all GCSE qualifications. Nine respondents called for a reduction in the level of modularisation and a return to a more summative approach.

Eight respondents felt that 14–16 qualifications must meet the needs of employers, allowing learners to build skills demanded for future careers and employment.

Seven teachers recommended increasing the level of difficulty of GCSEs to allow for more application of knowledge, deeper understanding and deployment of higher skills.

**Workshop findings**

Participants were asked which of these three options they felt best meets the needs of learners in N. Ireland:

a) For N. Ireland to offer GCSEs as designed for England and adopt developments when they emerge.

b) For N. Ireland to retain the brand name of GCSE but to develop N. Ireland-only, high-quality and rigorous GCSEs to reflect the curriculum in N. Ireland.

c) Completely new, high-quality and rigorous qualifications (not called GCSEs) for 14–16 year olds that reflect the statutory curriculum in N. Ireland.

There was little consensus within or between the groups at the research events with regards to the proposed options. However, the majority of individuals indicated their preference for Option b). Some individuals suggested that Option b) could be used as a short-term change with a view to pursuing Option c). Many indicated that they were opposed to Option a) while others opposed Option c) as they felt that N. Ireland is too small to sustain its own qualification system. Concerns were also raised in relation to a potential lack of competition in exam provision and the possibility of CCEA operating a monopoly in the provision of examinations in N. Ireland.

The majority of groups indicated that their greatest concern was in relation to the portability and comparability of qualifications. Respondents indicated that they did not want whatever qualification system is implemented to compromise students’
chances of obtaining university places in England. Supporters of Options b) and c) highlighted Scotland and Republic of Ireland as examples of success in operating separate education systems, and one group felt that portability would not be an issue if the N. Ireland qualification system fell under the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ).

There was also mixed opinion about the proposed GCSEs in literacy and numeracy in Wales. Support for such qualifications highlighted that they: were applicable and necessary for everyday life; would be more suitable and more attainable than GCSEs in English and Mathematics; and would provide a credible benchmark of literacy and numeracy skills for employers. One participant favoured maintaining GCSE English and GCSE Mathematics as the core qualifications.

2.1.7 Effects of the Media on the ‘Brand’ Image of GCSEs
The consultation questionnaire was issued in November 2012 following many months of press coverage about GCSEs, specifically GCSE English, in England and Wales. All respondents were therefore asked if they felt the GCSE ‘brand’ had been affected by the events of summer 2012 and the subsequent press coverage.

Almost 65% (64.8%, n=344) of respondents felt that press coverage about GCSEs in England had affected the GCSE ‘brand’. Such respondents believe actions taken, and statements made, have significantly tarnished the GCSE ‘brand’ (n=21). Similarly, 20 respondents felt that the negative press coverage undermines the hard work and application of young people. The respondents commented that the press narrative was of a poor qualification that is not fit for purpose (n=16) and the subsequent perception that GCSE qualifications are easy (n=15). As a result, some respondents indicated that there is now less public confidence in the GCSE grading process (n=14).

Just over one-quarter of respondents (26.7%, n=142) did not think that the press coverage damaged the GCSE brand. A number of respondents (n=12) believed that most of the impact has been felt in England and Wales, and not in N. Ireland. Eight such respondents spoke of the excellent reputation in N. Ireland for standards, achievements and success. However, respondents also voiced criticism of Ofqual (n=7) and awarding bodies (n=6) for the issues.

8.5% (n=45) of respondents were unsure whether the GCSE ‘brand’ has been affected.

2.1.8 Recognising SEN Students’ Achievements
Respondents were asked for their opinion on how the achievements of SEN learners can be recognised within the 14–16 qualifications system. Fourteen respondents were satisfied that the current qualifications system recognises the ability range of all types of learners. A larger number of respondents (n=31) were
more specific and reported that GCSE qualifications have sufficient scope, indicating that many learners with a special educational need perform well at this level. Ten respondents indicated that SEN learners should have the same access to examinations as mainstream learners to ensure equality is maintained.

A number of respondents discussed other types of qualifications that they believe recognise the achievements of SEN learners. Such respondents spoke of the need to maintain, promote and expand vocational (n=34) and entry level (n=17) qualifications. Some respondents requested the development of separate/standalone SEN qualifications (n=24), whilst others felt qualifications could be developed that can be tailored/differentiated to match individual learners’ needs (n=10). A smaller number of respondents (n=6) spoke of the need to increase skills-based qualifications including Key Skills and Essential Skills.

Respondents (n=15) also discussed the importance of ensuring that special circumstances or arrangements are put in place for SEN learners. Thirteen respondents commented on the benefits of having a tiered system, allowing teachers to enter SEN learners at levels reflective of their ability; nine respondents indicated that this would depend on the nature and severity of the special educational needs in question. A number of respondents acknowledged the difficulty of recognising all SEN learners’ achievements (n=6) and commented that there is too broad a range of special educational needs to have one qualification (n=6). A number of respondents (n=6) requested that a standalone grading/marking system be created specifically for the SEN sector.

2.1.9 Assessment of 14–16 Qualifications
The largest group of respondents (49.8%, n=265) believed that a combination of both internal and external assessment was the best method of assessing 14–16 qualifications. Respondents indicated that a mix of both meets the needs of all learners as it recognises different learning styles (n=9). Six respondents believed that external assessments should carry greater weighting, whilst five respondents called for more stringent regulation of internal assessment.

Just under 48% (47.9%, n=255) indicated their preference for external assessment only. Such respondents believed that external assessment is the only method that can provide equality of opportunity and fairness to all (n=10).

A small percentage (2.3%, n=12) felt that 14–16 year olds should be assessed by internal assessment only. The qualitative comments revealed that a small number of respondents (n=6) believed that this type of assessment should be completed internally but marked externally.

Again, respondents reiterated their concerns about controlled assessment. It was stated that schools monitor controlled assessment in different ways (n=52) and that
this threatens to undermine the reliability of the assessments. Respondents also suggested that the amount of time spent supervising controlled assessment has reduced teaching and learning time and placed undue pressure on both teachers and learners (n=25).

**Compulsory core skills at 16**

**Workshop findings**

All participants discussed the importance of including core skills at age 16. However, participants’ views were split between some who believed that some standalone core skills should be compulsory at 16 and others who felt these should be developed and included within GCSE subjects.

Those in favour of compulsory core skills pointed to declining standards of literacy and numeracy and felt that ‘something needs to be done to readdress this’. Some groups favoured the Welsh Baccalaureate model which has a core programme with a mix of skills and academic content.

Other participants believed that core skills should be inherent within GCSE subjects. A number of participants indicated that there may be a difficulty defining a core set of skills that is agreeable to all. Teachers were mainly in agreement that they require more time and less assessment to develop and enhance students’ core skills.

A small number of teachers commented that children need to be mastering the key concepts of literacy and numeracy at primary level and then developing them further at post-primary level.

2.1.10 Literacy and Numeracy Development

The majority of respondents believe that the current suite of qualifications for 14–16 year olds sufficiently encourages the development of literacy (54.7%, n=291) and numeracy (54.4%, n=289).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Does the current suite of qualifications for 14–16 year olds sufficiently encourage the development of:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Literacy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>291 (54.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>193 (36.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>48 (9.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents commented that literacy is addressed in most GCSE subjects (n=7) and both literacy and numeracy are encompassed in many subjects (n=12).
However, respondents also pointed out that many GCSEs are very content heavy, and often the main objective is to get the courses finished rather than developing literacy and numeracy skills (n=20). A number of respondents (n=11) felt that the foundations for literacy and numeracy should be developed ‘long before’ 14–16. Other respondents commented that too many young people leave school with insufficient skills in these areas (n=8) and recommended that more literacy and numeracy skills be introduced within GCSE specifications (n=6). Respondents (n=7) were also unsure if GCSE qualifications meet the literacy and numeracy needs of less able and SEN learners.

2.2 A Level Qualifications

2.2.1 A Level Summary

65.9% of respondents think A level qualifications should not be replaced in N. Ireland with a new qualification. Of these, 32.8% did feel some changes are required to the current A levels. 6.4% of respondents requested a total change to A levels, and 16.4% want change but feel some aspects of the current qualifications should remain. Areas for change indicated by respondents across all categories combined included the modular system and A level content/demand.

The views of respondents were split about whether the current A levels adequately equip students for employment. 35.8% believe they do, 38.2% believe they don’t, and 26% don’t know. 57.9% consider that current A levels adequately equip students for further study. 54.7% and 47.7% believe A levels encourage the development of literacy and numeracy skills respectively, although it was noted that this is dependent on subject choices and that numeracy is often not addressed at A level except in subjects with mathematical content.

62.4% of respondents felt that the current A levels meet the needs of learners, with 63% believing that they meet the need of teachers. 43.7% believe that A levels meet the needs of employers and 48.6% the needs of FHE. Opinions were expressed as to A levels providing an appropriate skills set, being well regarded by employers, and being an effective foundation for FHE.

55.6% feel that A levels currently reflect the achievements of all learners. Comments were expressed that there is a broad qualification and grade range, which allows for all learning styles and levels of attainment. However, it was also noted that there is a need for the qualifications package to reflect a broader ability range and for more vocational qualifications.

A level demand was deemed appropriate by 59.8% of respondents, with 35.8% feeling they adequately equip students for employment due to their providing students with transferable skills and a broad subject range. Similarly, 57.9% are
content that A levels equip students for further study, with comments indicating that they provide a solid foundation for FHE.

25.6% feel that current A levels do not meet the needs of learners, with 22.6% indicating they do not meet the needs of teachers. A similar proportion, 27.9% and 26.9% respectively, believe that A levels do not meet the needs of employers and FHE. 38.2% feel that A levels do not equip students for employment. Opinions were expressed as to students leaving education without interpersonal, life, independent or team working skills, and the need for more vocational qualifications and practical training opportunities. 27.5% believe that A levels do not equip students for FHE, with concerns expressed regarding the lack of encouragement of independent thinking and higher-order reasoning skills, as well as the impact of ‘spoon feeding’ in education pre-19.

44.4% of respondents think current A levels do not reflect the achievements of all learners. 23.7% think A level demand is not appropriate, with comments on variation across subjects and demand being too high for some learners; however, others believe there is not enough rigour.

77.7% of those who responded to the question on the current AS/A2 structure indicated support for the current relationship, although there were comments on removing the January assessment window. Generally it was felt that AS allows flexibility, breadth and an exit point for learners, and provides an enabling pathway upon which to build.

### 2.2.2 Purpose of Qualifications at 18

Participants at the research workshop events were asked what the main purposes of qualifications at 18 were. Their responses are summarised below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workshop findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants stated a range of main purposes for qualifications at age 18. The most frequently stated purposes are outlined below.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Preparation for/Progression to:
  - university/higher education
  - other qualifications
  - employment
  - apprenticeships
  - whatever follows next
- To provide pathways for all students, ensuring equality, flexibility and inclusivity
- To develop skills and knowledge for the next stage
- For career planning/to aid decisions regarding future pathways
- To develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes for a person’s role in society/for personal development
2.2.3 Meeting the Needs of Stakeholders

Respondents were asked to indicate if they think the current A level qualifications meet the needs of relevant groups of stakeholders. Table 5 shows the proportion (%) of respondents who indicated each response.

Table 5. Proportion (%) of respondents indicating each questionnaire response for A level qualifications and the issue of meeting the needs of stakeholders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Do the current A level qualifications meet the needs of:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>62.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>25.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Needs of students**

62.4% (n=332) of respondents felt the current A level qualifications meet the needs of learners. Such respondents were satisfied that there is a wide range of subject options and variety within A level qualifications (n=11). A similar number of respondents (n=11) believed that the suite of qualifications at A level has sufficient academic rigour and challenge. Other respondents felt that current standards in place are a fair measure (n=10) and that grades offer a fair reflection of a student’s ability (n=6). Respondents were of the opinion that A level qualifications are inclusive of different skills and ability levels (n=8) and felt that the current structures enable achievement (n=5).

Just over one-quarter of respondents (25.6%, n=136) did not think that the current A level qualifications meet the needs of learners. Respondents (n=28) expressed the view that resits of examinations can potentially damage A level qualifications and were also critical about unreliable and inaccurate marking (n=6). Similarly, it was reported that the modular structure is not conducive to holistic learning (n=14). Respondents (n=17) also expressed concern that some learners are not sufficiently developed to adapt to the high level of independent study and higher-order skills required for A level qualifications. A number of respondents (n=14) believed that A levels are becoming consistently easier and that grades have been inflated. Other respondents took an alternative view and felt that A level qualifications are either too difficult for learners (n=11) or not inclusive of all learners’ abilities (n=10). Eight respondents commented that schools are under pressure ‘to teach to the test’ to obtain results, often excluding time for creative and abstract thinking skills.
12% (n=64) of respondents were unsure if the current A level qualifications meet the needs of learners.

**Workshop findings**

Overall, A levels were viewed positively by all the research audiences when asked whether they meet the needs of stakeholders. Generally, teachers and those associated with higher education agreed that the A level qualification prepares most students for higher education undergraduate degrees. When compared with alternative Level 3 qualifications higher education sector interviewees felt A levels remained the ‘gold standard’ for their subjects.

However, those taking part in the research suggested that A levels could be reviewed to lead to an improved outcome both for the A level student and for the organisation receiving the qualified student. In addition, the majority of participants did not believe that A levels were appropriate for meeting the needs of less able students.

Teachers’ views varied as to whether A level students enter higher education with an adequate level of subject knowledge. However, most higher education sector interviewees were generally content with the knowledge content of A levels across subjects.

Overall, the current A level system is perceived to encourage students to develop more in-depth knowledge of a small number of subjects which enables universities to design suitable requirements for their courses.

**Needs of teachers**

63% of respondents (n=335) felt that the current A level qualifications meet the needs of teachers. A number of respondents (n=8) commented that the structure and content of current A level qualifications are manageable and enjoyable to teach.

22.6% (n=120) of respondents did not think that the current A level qualifications meet the needs of teachers. Nine respondents felt that the structure and content of current A level qualifications place a burden on teaching staff.

14.5% (n=77) were unsure if the current A level qualifications meet the needs of teachers.

**Needs of employers**

43.7% (n=232) of respondents believed that the current A level qualifications meet the needs of employers. Such respondents believed that A levels provide those entering employment with an appropriate skills set (n=10) and that employers hold the qualifications in high regard (n=6).
27.9% of respondents (n=148) did not think that the current A level qualifications meet the needs of employers.

A number of respondents also commented that too many learners lack the appropriate and specific skills for employment (n=13). A further 13 respondents commented that academic learning does not provide adequate preparation for employment. Nine respondents indicated that it is difficult for employers to differentiate between the attainments of candidates at the high grades at A level.

Just under 29% (n=151) of respondents were unsure if the current A level qualifications meet the needs of employers. Such respondents commented that this is very much dependent on industry/employer requirements (n=11).

**Workshop findings**

Many participants felt that employers use A levels as an indicator of general aptitude and a measure of the willingness of a student to apply themselves to a task. A levels were viewed as providing a more academic progression route. Many felt that employers do not view individual A level subjects as particularly important (although the requirement for English and mathematics at GCSE was noted). For others the A level is the minimum level of qualification they believe employers would accept: in the past, this would have been the GCSE. However, it is important to highlight that the majority of participants in the research were representatives from post-primary schools and colleges; therefore, this view is a teaching community view and may not be the view of employers. It should be noted that the Review targeted employers considerably by offering five employer-only research events across N. Ireland, in addition to promoting the general workshop events to employers. However, despite support from the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), the Northern Ireland Science Park (NISP) and other representative organisations in promoting these events widely, there was a very poor response to the consultation from employers.

One group of workshop participants felt that employers do not possess adequate knowledge of the qualifications system. They stated that they do not understand the myriad of qualifications available. The same group of attendees reported that there is too much pressure for students to have employability skills on top of their academic qualifications. They acknowledged that A levels are more knowledge based and therefore do not all apply skills-based learning but stated that this suits their purpose. Some grammar school teachers stated that A levels must not lose their academic richness in favour of a skills-based approach.

**Needs of further and higher education (FHE)**

Just under half of the respondents (48.6%, n=258) felt the current A level qualifications meet the needs of further and higher education. Such respondents
(n=17) believed that A level qualifications act as an effective foundation for further and higher education.

Just over one-quarter of respondents (26.9%, n=143) did not think the current A level qualifications meet the needs of further and higher education. Fifteen respondents felt that learners lack the skills required for further and higher education due to the unitised nature of A level qualifications. Fourteen respondents also felt that learners lack these skills but did not make any reference to the structure of the qualifications. Seven respondents commented that it is difficult for universities to differentiate between learners obtaining similar grades. Some felt that further and higher education would be better served by a broader range of subjects and learning experiences (n=6). A smaller number of respondents (n=5) stated that universities must be clearer about their specific entry requirements.

Just under one-quarter of respondents (24.5%, n=130) were unsure if the current A level qualifications meet the needs of further and higher education.

**Workshop findings**

It was stated that topics taught within a subject at A level do not always coincide with the knowledge requirements of higher education. Some stated that this can lead to a greater variety of knowledge among first year students and also gaps in their knowledge. Issues about some of the general skills essential for undergraduate learning arose in discussions with higher education sector participants and some teachers. These included both specific academic skills, such as researching, finding sources, essay writing and referencing, and the wider skills of problem-solving, analysis and critical thinking. Interviewees also noted that some of their students lack the requisite levels of English and mathematics. Some A level teachers made similar observations about the English and mathematics skills of GCSE students, which suggests that the issue is wider than solely the skills acquired at A level.

Many of those taking part in the research events believed that resits caused problems for the A level qualification. Some attendees also believed that the ‘resit culture’ affected students’ attitudes towards examinations. Teachers in particular said that some A level students approach examinations with the expectation that they will always be able to repeat. Whilst this may relax some students, such teachers thought it was detrimental overall, because this ‘isn’t how life works’. Some teachers and HE representatives noted that first year undergraduates cannot retake examinations to improve a grade and therefore felt that students struggle to adjust to the academic expectations at higher education, particularly around examinations. There was also discussion about the negative consequences of ‘learning and teaching to the test’. Some felt this contributes to first year undergraduate students failing to take control of their own learning because they are used to being shown what they need to know to pass an examination. HE
attendees said first year undergraduates sometimes expect a great deal of support and are surprised when it is not given to them.

Some teachers and higher education representatives said they would appreciate changes to the A level system that would help to ensure better core and critical thinking skills among A level students.

2.2.4 Reflecting the Achievements of All Learners

Respondents were asked to indicate if they think that the current A level qualifications reflect the achievements of all learners.

Just over 55% (55.6%, n=295) of respondents believe that they do. The qualitative comments reveal that respondents believe that A levels reflect the achievements of learners who take the qualification (n=6). Six respondents commented that grades A–G provide enough scope for learners to achieve a grade appropriate to their level of understanding and five believed that if learners work hard, they achieve the best grade that reflects their ability. A further five believed the choice of qualifications accommodates a range of different learning styles. Five respondents called for more vocational qualifications to be developed.

44.4% (n=236) of respondents did not think that the current A level qualifications reflect the achievements of all learners. A number of respondents (n=20) had general concerns about inconsistencies of grading within and between subjects. Respondents repeated the concern that the use of controlled assessment\(^\text{27}\) can potentially inflate marks and felt that too much weighting (n=10) was attributed to this form of assessment. Eight respondents reiterated their view that the opportunity to retake modules encourages under-preparation and a lethargic attitude towards important examinations in general. There appeared to be a perception that it is more difficult to achieve a top grade in some subjects than others (n=5). Other respondents felt that A level qualifications are too academic/theory-based to suit all learners (n=6).

2.2.5 Level of Demand

Almost 60% (59.8%, n=318) of respondents believe that the level of demand of A level qualifications is appropriate. Qualitative comments reveal that a number of respondents were satisfied with the level of demand required for this level of study (n=12).

23.7% (n=126) of respondents did not think that the level of demand of A levels is appropriate. A number of respondents indicated that the level of demand varies from subject to subject (n=22) and commented that some subjects are more

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\(^{27}\) Note: controlled assessment is not applicable at A level; however, the comments appeared in relation to this section of the A level questionnaire. Internal assessment does feature in many A level specifications.
challenging than others (n=12). Ten respondents believed that the level of demand is too high for certain learners. A smaller number of respondents (n=5) called for greater demand/more rigour to be applied to A level qualifications.

16.5% (n=88) of respondents were unsure if the level of demand of A levels is appropriate.

**Breadth in the current system post-16**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workshop findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This prompted much debate and there was no consensus amongst participants at most of the events.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Those satisfied with the breadth in the current system were resistant to broadening the curriculum at A level. Such teachers at the events were resistant to the idea of compulsory broadening of the academic curriculum in Years 13 and 14, and the strong consensus was in favour of the status quo. Some felt that, in choosing which A levels to take, students had been influenced by their GCSE grades, interest in the subject, and in some cases, their future plans. For many A level teachers the overwhelming view was that the three subjects students were studying were demanding enough, both intellectually and in terms of time and organisation. Furthermore, they felt that it was important to study the subjects in depth and to maintain standards. Such teachers mentioned students’ natural desire to concentrate on the subjects they enjoyed, and they felt more breadth may lead to some students in Years 13 and 14 becoming uninspired, even bored, by many of the additional subjects they were required to take.

However, there were also those who would like more breadth incorporated into the current system at post-16. Their reasons are outlined below. Some attendees indicated that the specialisation of the post-16 curriculum does not follow the pattern of most other western countries, which tend to offer a much broader curriculum until a later stage. Such participants felt that more breadth would benefit young people in terms of their development as individuals and learners. This view was supported by some teachers who felt that the current offer is too narrow, programmes of study are too narrow, and that the current system encourages premature specialisation. Certain participants felt that A levels do not meet students' needs for studying at a higher level, as they do not address such aspects as numeracy, communication skills, reasoned hypotheses and higher-order thinking skills required for university. For these participants the issue of lack of breadth was due to a restricted range of subjects being taken by each A level student, leading to over-specialisation and a narrow understanding of the world. Increasing both the number and the range of subjects taken would be a solution to the issue.
2.2.6 Preparing Learners for Employment and Further Study
Respondents were asked to indicate if they think that the current A level qualifications adequately equip learners for employment. Respondents were asked a similar question with regards to further study. Table 6 details the number and proportion (%) of respondents who indicated each response for both employment and further study.

Table 6. Number and proportion (%) of respondents indicating each questionnaire response for A level qualifications and the issue of adequately equipping learners for employment and further study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Do the current A level qualifications adequately equip learners for:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>190 (35.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>203 (38.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't Know</td>
<td>138 (26.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Employment**
Respondents’ views were split on whether A level qualifications adequately equip learners for employment. 38.2% (n=203) believed that they did not. Such respondents felt that A level qualifications do not provide learners with the skills required for the workplace (n=20). Fourteen respondents felt that they are primarily designed to enable learners to progress to further education/university. Some respondents felt that learners leave education without adequate emotional intelligence or social and ‘life’ skills required for work (n=6). A number of respondents criticised the culture of ‘teaching to the test’ (n=7), believing that this method of delivering A levels has led to a large number of learners lacking the independent and abstract thinking skills that are required in the workplace (n=6). Respondents felt that a number of key skills have not been developed in young people, including interpersonal skills and team working (n=6). Seven respondents called for the development of more vocational qualifications and greater opportunities for practical training. Five respondents felt that the main focus of A levels is on preparing learners for higher education and not employment. A further five respondents commented that the content within A level subjects should be updated for the modern workplace.

Those who felt that A level qualifications adequately equip learners for employment (35.8%, n=190) commented that A levels provide learners with transferable skills which they can take into the workplace (n=6).

26% (n=138) were unsure whether A level qualifications adequately equip learners for employment. Some felt this is dependent on subject choice (n=14) and the nature/area of employment in question (n=9).
Further study
Almost 58% (57.9%, n=307) of respondents were satisfied that A level qualifications adequately equip learners for further study. Such respondents made general comments that A level courses provide a solid foundation for further/higher education study (n=23).

27.5% (n=146) did not think that A level qualifications adequately equip learners for further study. Such respondents felt that they do not encourage independent thinking (n=30) and were concerned that higher-order thinking skills and reasoning (n=6) and analytical ability (n=7) are not sufficiently developed at A level. A number of respondents felt that A level qualifications are too narrow/lacking in breadth (n=9) and indicated that some learners struggle with the demands of further study as they have been ‘spoon-fed' through school and college (n=9).

14.5% of respondents (n=77) were unsure whether A level qualifications adequately equip learners for further study. A number of respondents felt that this depended on the subject (n=14) and how it is taught in school (n=5).

2.2.7 Options for the Future of A Level Qualifications
Respondents were asked to indicate if, in general, they think that A level qualifications should be replaced in N. Ireland with a new qualification. Listed below are the number and proportion (%) of respondents who indicated each response.

Just over 33% of respondents to the questionnaire (n=176, 33.1%) did not think that A level qualifications should be replaced in N. Ireland with a new qualification. Twenty-one of the 176 respondents commented that they believe that the current suite of A level qualifications is robust, demanding, and of a very high standard, and provides an opportunity to study in depth. Eleven respondents indicated that change is not necessary and that the education system needs to have a period of consolidation and continuity. Other respondents (n=7) believed that A level qualifications have currency and portability within the educational community and beyond. A further seven respondents were happy with the level of content within A level qualifications.

174 (32.8%) respondents did not think that A level qualifications should be replaced in N. Ireland with a new qualification, but felt changes are needed. The qualitative comments showed that 12 of the 174 respondents believed that learners should be allowed to choose a broader range of subjects at A level. A smaller number (n=10) felt that there should be more advanced content incorporated to stretch the top ability range, secure integrity of grades, and encourage independent thinking.

The respondents who indicated that they did not want A levels replaced, or only wanted change (n=350, 65.9%), were asked whether the current structure of A
level qualifications, AS/A2, should be maintained. The majority of respondents supported the current structure (n=272, 77.7%). Such respondents suggested that the current AS/A2 structure allows an exit point for learners with a recognised qualification (n=7). Other respondents indicated that the AS/A2 provides sufficient breadth of study (n=6) and that the AS acts as an enabling pathway to build on for A2 (n=5). A further five respondents provided general comments that they would like the current structure to remain as it is.

Seventy-eight of the 350 respondents (22.3%) did not want the current AS/A2 structure maintained. Reasons provided focused on the linear/modular structure of exams and on the number of resit opportunities allowed in the current structure. A number of respondents proposed that examinations should only be available at the end of AS and A2 (n=28). Such respondents called for the removal of January series examinations. A number of respondents (n=17) also requested a return to the linear examination structure. A smaller number of respondents (n=9) believed that the opportunities for resits should be restricted.

Sixty respondents (11.3%) indicated that they did not know whether the current GCE A level qualifications should be replaced.

Eighty-seven respondents (16.4%) to the overall questionnaire were in favour of changing A level qualifications but maintaining aspects of the qualification. Seven respondents believed that it serves as an effective progression route for the majority of learners.

Thirty-four respondents (6.4%) to the overall questionnaire were in favour of changing the A level qualifications totally. A number of these respondents (n=17) felt that if change takes place in England, N. Ireland must follow to maintain the currency of the qualification and to ensure comparability of standards with international qualifications. A number of respondents called for the removal of controlled assessment28 (n=11), whilst others requested that it be significantly reduced (n=8). A small number of respondents commented that teachers can potentially inflate attainment at A level using the controlled assessment units and felt that they do not give an honest reflection of learners’ ability (n=7).

Respondents also suggested limiting the number of repeat opportunities to one per module (n=22), whilst a smaller number felt there should be no opportunities to resit assessments (n=7). A number of respondents called for the removal of the modular system and a return to linear examinations (n=20); the removal of January modules (n=13); or a reduction in the number of modules available (n=8). Eight teachers indicated that they would prefer examinations in the summer terms of Years 13 and 14. Seven respondents further criticised the modular system,

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28 Note: controlled assessment is not applicable at A level; however, the comments appeared in relation to this section of the A level questionnaire. Internal assessment does feature in many A level specifications.
claiming that it leads to fragmentation of learning as teachers are pressurised and 'teach to the test'.

Respondents suggested a number of alternatives to A level. These included:

- a system in line with the Irish Leaving Certificate (n=10);
- a return to a linear examination structure (n=9);
- a baccalaureate type of qualification (n=7);
- an International Baccalaureate (n=6); and
- a system similar to the Scottish model (n=4).

**Workshop findings**

The majority of participants were in favour of retaining modular A levels or the flexibility to offer modular or linear qualifications to suit individual subjects. This was primarily related to modular qualifications suiting a broader range of learners, including students with special educational needs. Some participants noted problems associated with a 'resit culture' in N. Ireland and called for a reduction in the number of resit opportunities.

Most participants did not feel that a standalone AS qualification was suitable, and favoured retaining the current system of AS/A2. A number of participants suggested assessing students in June of the AS and A2 years only as a compromise that would maintain an element of modularity within A levels while addressing some operational concerns, for example a loss of teaching time resulting from the January exam series.

Participants were generally not in favour of the English Baccalaureate, citing reasons that included its giving some subjects higher worth, being academically biased and having implications for students because schools would be driven by it as a measure of school performance. Concern was noted about potentially disadvantaging N. Ireland students if they did not have the same system as England. One participant favoured the model and felt that some subjects should be taught as core subjects and not ‘dumbed down’. A number of teachers called for qualifications in N. Ireland to maintain or further develop rigour.

The Welsh Baccalaureate model was subject to much debate, with no consensus in favour or otherwise of such a model for N. Ireland. Support for the Welsh Baccalaureate was based on it being innovative, flexible, tailored to Welsh learners and including core skills. A number of participants felt that it was quite similar to what is already in place in N. Ireland and some felt that it was worth exploring further. Concerns regarding this model were that it was prescriptive and too skills-based, that skills should be inherent within subjects and not taught separately, and that it may limit portability.

Many participants stressed that any qualifications in N. Ireland must have
portability and currency for learners. A number of participants believed that applied subjects and vocational routes should be given equal status, while some participants noted that they were not in favour of radical change.

Appropriateness of current system of AS/A2, where achievement is measured after one year

Workshop findings

The vast majority of participants were in favour of retaining the current model of AS/ A2. A number of participants believed that AS has value and that this model allows a transition to the A2 year and helps to maintain students’ focus and motivation. It was generally felt that the existing system offers breadth and flexibility and is important for indicating ability and aiding students’ decision-making for subject choices. Many participants favoured a modular structure and believed that this model suits students at all ability levels. A number of participants felt that the standalone AS proposed in England would have no value, would become redundant or would not be taken.

Participants noted a number of concerns regarding operational aspects of the AS/A2 system, namely:
- problems with resits;
- interruption of teaching as a result of the January exam series; and,
- too great an increase in the amount of content between AS and A2.

Recommendations for improvements to the current system were to limit the number of resit opportunities and to reconsider or remove the January exam series.

A minority of participants favoured a linear A level structure. Several participants were concerned about over-assessment of students and how examinations within the AS year contributed to this.

2.2.8 Literacy and Numeracy Development

Respondents were asked if they think that the current suite of A levels sufficiently encourages the development of literacy and numeracy. Table 7 details the number and proportion (%) of respondents who indicated each response for both literacy development and numeracy development.

Table 7. Number and proportion (%) of respondents indicating each questionnaire response for literacy and numeracy development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Does the current suite of qualifications for 16–19 year olds sufficiently encourage the development of:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Literacy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>290 (54.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>145 (27.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>95 (17.9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The majority of respondents feel that the current A levels sufficiently encourage the development of literacy and numeracy. Twenty-eight respondents commented that the development of literacy and numeracy is very much dependent on the subject chosen at A level. A small number of respondents (n=7) commented that numeracy is not often addressed at A level unless it is subject based. Seven respondents felt that learners should develop a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy in the early years of schooling. A further seven respondents commented that many A levels are content heavy and that teachers are under pressure to complete courses rather than develop students’ literacy and numeracy skills. A small number of respondents (n=6) were satisfied that most A levels require and encourage the development of literacy.

**Should students be required to study core subjects/skills alongside specialisms?**

**Workshop findings**

There was no consensus about whether it should be a requirement to study core skills/subjects. Those who opposed the idea argued that skills should be embedded within subjects and that studying skills alongside A levels would ‘take away from academic learning.’ Others commented that skills would need to be assessed and/or accredited in order for them to be valued by students; otherwise, it was argued, students would simply focus on their A levels and not engage in additional study. Those respondents who were in favour of studying core skills/subjects post-16 offered some suggestions as to what these subjects/skills should be and how they could be assessed. The various examples given are outlined below:

### Suggestions for Skills/Subjects
- Literacy/Numeracy
- Communication
- Working with Others/Teamwork
- ICT
- Problem-Solving
- Money Management
- Self-Management
- Social/Emotional Intelligence
- Employability
- Independent Learning

### Suggestions for Assessment of Skills
- ‘A Level Plus’ – similar to the Degree Plus programme at Queen’s University Belfast
- A system similar to the Certificate of Personal Effectiveness (CoPE).
2.2.9 Statutory Examinations at Age 16 in N. Ireland
Respondents were asked to indicate their opinion on whether or not N. Ireland should retain any external statutory qualifications at age 16.

The large majority of respondents (n=490, 92.1%) believe that it should. Some respondents commented that it is important that N. Ireland retain external statutory qualifications at age 16 to ensure that all learners have a focus and target to work towards (n=23). A number of respondents (n=19) commented that learners entering employment or training at 16 require examinations to formally recognise their achievements. A number of respondents (n=16) also stated that all learners should undertake external examinations at 16 but did not provide any supporting qualitative information. Respondents indicated that external statutory qualifications provide evidence of students’ educational progress (n=18) and can determine whether they continue to the next stage in their education (n=10). Respondents commented that statutory qualifications provide a benchmark of academic ability for employers (n=11), enable learners to choose between further study/education and employment (n=5), and provide school leavers with greater opportunities when seeking employment (n=5). Six respondents indicated that less able learners leaving education at 16 should have formal recognition of their education. Five respondents stressed that it is essential that N. Ireland retain external statutory qualifications at age 16 as this is the school leaving age.

Eleven respondents (2.1%) did not think an external qualification was necessary at age 16, and 31 (5.8%) didn’t know.

The need for high-stakes qualifications across a wide range of subjects at age 16

Workshop findings
The majority of participants felt that there was a need for high-stakes qualifications at 16; however, there was not a consensus. Many participants believed that high-stakes qualifications would be needed for as long as the school leaving age remained at 16 years old, but noted that an increasingly small proportion of students leave school at this age.

Participants in favour of such qualifications felt that they served a number of purposes, including:
• providing a marker of ability at age 16;
• ensuring currency and comparability with other regions;
• giving qualifications that are viewed as desirable by employers for students leaving school at 16; and
• providing motivation and inspiration to students.

There was also a belief held by some that high-stakes qualifications were needed to differentiate students for highly academic courses, such as medicine or dentistry.
Some participants felt that high-stakes qualifications excluded many learners from the system, and some believed that it would not be appropriate to introduce such qualifications to benefit some at the expense of others who could not achieve them. Some participants noted that students in other European countries are not formally tested at 16 and that GCSEs were used in a discriminatory way, not an enabling way. It was also believed by some that high-stakes qualifications were not necessary at 16, but that society may be in favour of them. Many participants felt that the need for high-stakes qualifications could be reviewed if the statutory school leaving age was increased.

The need for an external examination at 16

Workshop findings

There was no consensus on whether or not an external examination was needed at 16; however, the majority of participants were in favour of one.

Reasons offered in support of external assessment included the following points:

• Internal assessment, as an alternative, is subjective and open to variation.
• The Government does not trust teachers.
• External assessment provides a profile for students’ progression to further study or employment.
• It provides a national standardised measure of achievement.
• It maintains focus and motivation.
• It is important to parents as an indication of progress.
• It is the highest level of academic achievement for some students.
• It provides a fallback for students who do not do well at A level.

Other participants felt that external examinations at 16 contributed to over-assessment and that employers sought skills more than qualifications. Some participants questioned the relevance of examinations at 16 since the majority of students no longer leave school at this age. It was noted that, internationally, assessment at this age serves to strengthen students’ skills and provide guidance. Some participants called for consideration of alternatives for students not achieving within the current model.

A number of participants were undecided concerning the need for external assessment and believed that it depended on the alternatives or the chosen pathway of the individual pupil. Some participants felt that there needs to be some external element, if only the moderation of internal assessment.

2.2.10 Development of Qualifications: the Role of Employers and Universities

Respondents were asked to indicate their opinion on the role of employers and the role of universities in the development of qualifications for 16–19 year olds.
Specifically, respondents were asked if each of these groups should play a greater role in the development of A level qualifications. Table 8 details the number and proportion (%) of respondents who indicated each response for both employers and universities.

Table 8. Number and proportion (%) of respondents indicating each questionnaire response for the issue of employers and universities playing a greater role in the development of qualifications for 16–19 year olds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Should the following play a greater role in the development of qualifications for 16–19 year olds?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>318 (59.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>128 (24.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>86 (16.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Just under 60% (59.8%, n=318) of respondents believe that employers should play a greater role in the development of qualifications for 16–19 year olds. Respondents believed that they should play a vital role in the development of vocational qualifications (n=10) to match changing business needs. Respondents also felt that employers’ input is necessary to ensure that qualifications meet the needs of the future workforce (n=10). Five respondents felt that a collaborative approach involving educators and employers would prove beneficial. A number of respondents indicated that employers should be consulted but felt that this should be in an advisory capacity (n=6) or a limited role (n=5). Six teachers commented that education must be more than preparation for the workplace.

24.1% (n=128) of respondents felt that employers should not play a greater role in the development of qualifications for 16–19 year olds, with a number commenting that educators are best placed to develop these qualifications.

Almost 70% (68.4%, n=364) of respondents believe that universities should play a greater role in the development of qualifications for 16–19 year olds. The qualitative comments suggest that respondents would welcome a greater role for universities to ensure continuity and progression between the different levels of education (n=15). Six respondents believe that universities should have a role in determining the content and standard expected for first year intake. A further six respondents felt that the best approach would be to develop qualifications in conjunction with schools, colleges, universities and employers.

18.8% (n=100) did not believe that universities should play a greater role in the development of qualifications for 16–19 year olds. Such respondents felt that those teaching the qualifications should have ‘the final say’ (n=6).
Section 3: Results – Phase 2
This results section captures face-to-face discussions with individual stakeholder groups at workshops which took place between February and May 2013.

Research workshops, events and visits involved engagement with the following stakeholders:
- Higher education;
- Further education and training representatives;
- Area Learning Community representatives;
- Teachers’ unions;
- EOTAS representatives;
- Essential Skills teachers and tutors;
- English, mathematics and ICT teachers;
- Employers;
- Post-primary students; and
- College students.

Questions for these stakeholder groups investigated the main Review areas of GCSE and A level alongside additional areas such as skills development, progression, and different assessment models. Question focus varied depending on the community represented by the different groups. Results for each question are reported separately for different groups. This allows the differences between sectors and stakeholders to be evidenced.

3.1 GCSE Feedback
3.1.1 Purpose of Qualifications at 16

**Feedback from Further Education Representatives**
Further education representatives stated a number of purposes for qualifications at age 16, namely:
- for progression to:
  - further education;
  - higher education; or
  - employment;
- to test knowledge;
- as an indicator of ability;
- to benchmark students’ progress;
- to provide direction in life/aid decisions about future pathways; and
- to provide certification (because the school leaving age is 16).

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29 Post-primary and college students are reported separately to highlight any differences in the perceptions and views of those who are still in the school education system and those in college.
Feedback from Higher Education Representatives
Participants acknowledged that qualifications at age 16 serve a range of purposes including an indicator of ability, an exit point from education, and an indicator of potential pathways. Participants also commented that qualifications are used by employers and further and higher education providers as an indication of suitability for employment and readiness to undertake education courses. It was also mentioned that qualifications at age 16 are used by the Department of Education as performance measures for schools, and that parents consider this information when considering school choices.

Feedback from Post-Primary Students
Participants stated a large number and broad range of main purposes for qualifications at age 16. The most frequently stated purposes are:

- for progression to:
  - A level;
  - further education/another qualification;
  - higher education;
  - work placement/apprenticeship; or
  - employment;
- as preparation for future examinations; and
- as a measure of achievement/performance measure.

Feedback from College Students
Students stated a range of reasons for qualifications at age 16, namely:

- to provide a basic education;
- for progression to:
  - employment;
  - further study; or
  - university;
- to aid decisions regarding future pathways;
- because they had to be done;
- to identify strengths and weaknesses;
- to develop a broad range of skills; and
- to develop skills for life.

Certain participants noted that 16 is quite young to make decisions and that people develop at different ages. It was noted that further education colleges allow a person to return to education at a stage when they know better what route they wish to take.
Feedback from Employers
Participants felt that qualifications at 16 provided an opportunity for personal development and the development of skills, for example employability skills. They believed that these qualifications provided a basic education and aided decisions regarding future pathways. Participants noted that within qualifications at 16 employers principally look for English and mathematics, the range of subjects studied, and the grades achieved.

Feedback from Area Learning Communities and Teaching Unions
Participants stated a large number and broad range of main purposes for qualifications at age 16. The most frequently stated purposes are outlined below:

- for progression to:
  - A level;
  - work placement/apprenticeship; or
  - employment;
- used as performance measures; and
- verification of achievement.

Purpose of qualifications in English, mathematics and ICT at 16
Feedback from Core Subject Representatives
All of the groups at the skills event spoke of qualifications as a method of improving and becoming more competent in the relevant skills for each mentioned subject (for example written and verbal communication, ICT competency and concepts of numeracy) so that they can be used as a tool for progression, whatever the route of progression may be. The majority of the groups placed emphasis on skills to enable entry into the world of employment, with an SEN representative pointing out that qualifications in mathematics teach basic numeracy concepts so that ‘students can survive in the real world’. One group also placed major importance on ICT competency for progression in employment (and education). Another group highlighted the importance of mathematics as a ‘core’ subject, and one that supports learning in other GCSEs (for example science). The majority of the groups felt that qualifications should have currency and credibility both in the short term and in the long term, and their purpose is to maintain standards. The majority of groups also felt that qualifications are summative/informative for students and that they provide an opportunity for them to show what they can do. Finally, the majority of groups had concerns about GCSE equivalences not being accepted or valued and the implications of this for students. There were a number of subject-specific comments, summarised below.

English
One group commented that the purpose of qualifications in English was to develop skills such as writing skills, reading, conventions of writing, the ability to talk accurately and the ability to debate. Some respondents also commented that
Qualifications in English should develop the ability to synthesise information and the ability to learn about issues from the literature.

Mathematics
One group commented that mathematics is a core subject which supports learning in other qualifications such as science and economics. This group also felt that the purpose of GCSE mathematics was to facilitate progression to A Level mathematics and further study of mathematics (for example at university).

ICT
One group felt that the main purpose of GCSE ICT was to develop ‘life skills’. Respondents commented that regardless of the type of employment learners pursue, they will be expected to have basic ICT skills. Some respondents noted that while new ICT A levels are evolving to meet the needs of the economy, GCSEs are behind in this respect. It was felt that the current focus on communication technology is helpful because it is inherent in everything we do. However, it was believed that there is a need for a corresponding focus on computing technology/skills for those who may want to pursue further studies or a career in this area.

Qualifications in English, mathematics and ICT and progression from Key Stage 3

Feedback from Core Subject Representatives
A range of issues was highlighted by all of the groups, with no majority consensus on any single issue. One group focused heavily on a view that there is a lack of continuity in terms of the level of demand between Key Stages 3 and 4 – i.e. the participants felt that there is more rigour at KS4 and that a skills-based KS3 curriculum isn’t necessarily the best preparation for GCSE qualifications. Conversely, there was some indication within one group that Essential Skills qualifications are a more logical continuation from KS3 (and that there are major differences between GCSE content and Essential Skills content). The same group also considered the primary to post-primary transition during the discussion of this question and expressed the view that skills were being lost, especially ICT skills. One group added that there is a large increase in the standard expected and the amount of work between KS4 and education post-16. Participants called for clearer guidance from CCEA on the progression from KS3 to KS4.

A number of subject/skill-specific points were also raised. It was stated that there are differences between the new Communication assessment and the old one and said that there have been difficulties with Using Mathematics and that union action has affected teacher confidence in the assessment models. Two of the groups mentioned concerns with ICT; one group felt that the level of ICT provision across schools differs widely (in terms of the logistics of timetabling and equipment);
another group felt that more modern packages could be used and that current packages are quite antiquated - hence there was some consensus that modernisation must take place equally for schools.

It was also felt that KS3 levels are not a good indicator of ICT ability at GCSE. Students are not starting GCSE ICT with the appropriate skills because the subject is often being taught by non-specialists at KS3. One group commented that there is a greater emphasis on numeracy at KS3 and that KS3 mathematics is skills-focused whereas GCSE mathematics is more content-focused. It was felt that GCSE English did not reflect progression from KS3 for English, and concerns were raised that the creativity and media-rich experience of KS3 was lost at GCSE.

3.1.2 GCSE Qualifications: Meeting the Needs of All Learners

Feedback from Further Education Representatives

None of the participants believed that GCSEs meet the needs of all learners, although some noted that they felt GCSEs meet the needs of most learners. It was felt that not all learners are academic and that there is a need for a better vocational route and additional vocational GCSEs. Some participants called for consideration of alternative assessment methods for practical learners, and a number of participants also felt that GCSEs were too prescriptive and rigid. Participants commented that a grade C in GCSE was used as a benchmark by employers and universities, so the needs of students achieving lower than this were not being met. Some participants noted that grades D–G were viewed as a failure and emphasised that young people must not be labelled as such. One participant commented that, as a result of changes to tuition fees across the UK, N. Ireland universities required increasingly high grades for admission, since places were limited.

GCSEs in English, mathematics and ICT and their suitability for all learners

Feedback from Core Subject Representatives

There was a consensus both within and across the groups that GCSEs in English, mathematics and ICT do not suit all learners. All of the groups highlighted that there are vast individual differences between students: one group specified gender differences; another group highlighted developmental differences; and another group felt that there is a wide spectrum where the skills and attributes of students are concerned. The majority of the groups spoke of the importance of alternative pathways and appropriate qualifications for the less able learner to ensure their progression is recognised. One group suggested foundation papers or tiering, and a member of one group felt that Essential Skills qualifications offer progression and recognition. One group also felt that there should be flexibility in how students are assessed to ensure fair recognition for a broad range of learners within the system.

In relation to GCSE Mathematics, respondents commented that it is not suitable for
all learners due to the fact that its purpose is to facilitate progression to A level Mathematics, something that not all learners are capable of or interested in. Almost all of the participants in one group made the point that it can be potentially deflating for students if they fail to achieve grades A*–C, with another group highlighting that qualifications are driven by performance measures. Other points raised by a minority of participants when discussing this question included that Year 10 is the time to test and that students with English as a second language are disadvantaged by the system.

One group raised concerns that any non-GCSE pathway is regarded as 'lower class', which is not good for students' self-esteem. Another group commented that with such a broad suite of subjects at GCSE, there will always be subjects that students do not do well in.

One group also felt that greater value should be given to vocational routes. One respondent highlighted Germany as an example of a system where academic and vocational routes are equally valued but no attempt is made to compare the two and commented that something similar should be considered for Northern Ireland.

**Meeting the needs of employers**

**Feedback from Employers**

Employer representatives believed that the revised curriculum at Key Stage 3 did not work and that GCSEs were failing students who were not academically inclined. They did not feel that GCSEs were the most appropriate way to measure students' abilities since they were based solely on grades achieved and not progress made. They felt that students did not have the skills that employers sought and that development of these skills was lacking within GCSEs. They noted that GCSEs were used to filter applications.

**Appropriateness of the study of GCSEs by all 14–16 year olds**

**Feedback from Further Education Representatives**

Most participants agreed that it was not appropriate for GCSEs to be studied by all 14–16 year olds and that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach was not suitable. One participant believed that there should be one qualification for all learners, and some felt that everyone wanted a GCSE because of the status of the 'brand'. Another participant felt that schools which offered a mix of academic and vocational options were attempting to better meet the needs of all learners. It was suggested that there may be a need to educate employers on the value of other qualifications and GCSE grades D–G.

**Feedback from Post-Primary Students**

There was general agreement that GCSEs are not suitable for all 14–16 year olds to study. Students indicated strongly that less able or SEN learners should be
provided with the opportunity to achieve well in GCSEs but not feel pressured to
take qualifications that do not match their learning needs. Certain students
believed that there should be more flexibility in the methods of assessment for 14–
16 year olds to ensure that a range of learning styles is catered for.

Some students felt that there is a need to promote the development of practical
and vocational qualifications for post-16 learners. A small number believed that
increasing access to work-based learning was something that could be hugely
beneficial for a particular group of learners. Some suggested that the promotion
and support of this kind of initiative and engagement of employers would help
develop key employability skills in students.

**Feedback from College Students**
The majority of students thought that GCSEs were not suitable for all 14–16 year
olds, noting that different students had different levels of ability. It was noted that
some students cannot cope with the pressure of GCSEs and that they may not be
suitable for students with special educational needs. Some students also
commented that there was stigma around Foundation Tier, with Foundation Tier
students being judged to be inferior. Students felt that the N. Ireland schooling
system was ‘incredibly selective’, and some felt that streaming should be removed
to make the system more inclusive. Certain students acknowledged that it was
difficult to cater for all abilities within a mixed ability school.

All the students in one group agreed that GCSEs are suitable for all 14–16 year
olds, since there is sufficient choice to suit all preferences and abilities. They felt
that GCSEs represented progression from subjects studied at Key Stage 3. These
students also noted that everybody should have the opportunity to study GCSEs
because they are needed for employment. This group commented that there are
equivalent qualifications for those who do not want to study GCSEs, and that these
alternatives are valued. The students believed that alternative qualifications could
represent a more specific route to university courses, citing an example of a Higher
National Diploma in Animal Studies leading to a marine biology degree course.

**Feedback from Core Subject Representatives**
There was a 100% consensus that it is not appropriate for GCSEs to be studied by
all 14–16 year olds. A majority of participants felt that students should not be
restricted to GCSE qualifications. Alternatives are required that are recognised and
valued by employers, further education (FE), the Department of Education and
parents. This coincides with one group’s emphasis on the importance of knowing
the appropriate pathways that best suit the needs of the student.

A majority of participants felt that parents view GCSEs as the optimum qualification
(as they do not have enough knowledge of alternative qualifications). One group
felt that employers are now becoming more aware of the relevance and currency of Essential Skills qualifications; however, there is perhaps a need for more education about alternatives.

A minority of the respondents felt that all qualifications at 16 should be called the same name for reasons of parity. One group suggested maintaining tiering. Another group felt that high attainment in a Level 1 qualification is valued much more by the learner than grade D–G at GCSE, as it offers progression and recognition. A considerable number of participants felt that the perception of grades needs to change; attainment at D–G should be valued as a measure of success for certain students.

Need for examinations at 16

Feedback from Post-Primary Students

The majority of students interviewed believed that there is a need for examinations at age 16. It was agreed that 16 is an important decision-making point in a young person’s life. Some felt that GCSEs provide the stepping stones to help make decisions about which progression routes to take next. Some choose to remain at school and continue their studies at AS/A2 level in the hope of gaining a place at university. Others decide to leave school, take a job, start on a training placement or go to another institute of learning to pursue different courses.

Feedback from College Students

There was no consensus among students regarding examinations at age 16. A number of students acknowledged the benefit and value of examinations and felt that some were mature enough to deal with them. It was noted that, while examinations did not suit everybody, people needed to learn how to do them. A number of students felt that examinations provided objectivity and that teacher assessment could be subject to abuse. One student liked the idea of a combined approach, including teacher assessment and external examination.

Comments against examinations at 16 pointed to certain students feeling examinations were too pressured and that 16 was too young. It was noted by some that examinations should be taken no earlier than age 17, since this would allow an opportunity for students to mature. Some students felt that teacher reports should incorporate additional information relating to personal qualities and attributes, rather than solely information about a high stakes examination. It was also felt that continuous assessment might encourage students to work more consistently throughout the year. One student specified that they preferred the American system of a grade point average and teacher assessment, while another favoured controlled assessment because it tested immediately after topics had been learnt.
Feedback from Higher Education Representatives
The majority of attendees felt that there was a need for high-stakes qualifications and external examinations at 16. The majority of participants also felt that there are core skills that should be compulsory at 16. There was no consensus about whether skills should be assessed, or simply delivered/studied through GCSEs. Some participants noted that employers filter job applications according to the highest GCSE grades, while others commented that not all applications refer to GCSEs. One participant was in favour of a pass/fail system with the inclusion of core skills. Other participants noted interest in the transition year within the Irish system and felt that this might be a good option for schools in N. Ireland.

Competency-based model of assessment in English, mathematics and ICT
Feedback from Core Subject Representatives
One group advocated the use of a competency-based model of assessment in the above subjects; a reason provided was that there is candidate competition in graded qualifications. These participants felt that assessment needs to be ongoing, as competent performance fluctuates depending on many factors. One group proposed a system similar to the Levels of Progression but some participants commented that such a model would be more relevant to employers. Another group proposed a standalone assessment of Speaking and Listening in English. It was suggested that Speaking and Listening could be incorporated into teaching but achievement in this particular skill could be reported separately. Another group discussed the possibility of offering a GCSE in Numeracy but raised concerns in relation to the grading of such a qualification. Some participants commented that a pass/fail model would be more appropriate than a grading system for such a qualification.

One group indicated that they feel that every learner should be leaving compulsory education with a set competency in ICT. There was also a feeling that performance measures for schools do not serve the needs of the learner; the focus should be on the attainment of the pupil. There was a suggestion of using a value-added league table, rather than as it currently stands. The group felt that this would be a truer reflection of pupil progress. One member of this group gave the example of ‘Alps’– an independent value-added model for measuring performance.

3.1.3 Core Skills that Should Be Compulsory at 16
Feedback from Further Education and Training Representatives
All participants agreed that there was a need to develop competence in literacy and numeracy at age 16. Some participants commented that there was no comparison between another Level 2 literacy qualification and GCSE English, with the former being easier to achieve. Another participant suggested that this was a result of the assessment mechanisms used for each qualification. There was some discussion around the Welsh model and proposals for GCSEs in literacy and
Some participants were in favour of such core subjects but debated whether there would be any difference in content between GCSE English and GCSE Literacy. One participant suggested restricting the highest grade that a GCSE Literacy candidate could attain to grade C.

Many participants stated that ICT skills should be included, as well as careers education, to develop employability skills and give students guidance on available pathways for progression. Participants stressed that students should not be penalised for not being suited to GCSEs.

**Feedback from Employers**

Some participants felt that core mathematical skills and principles were required, while it was also noted that functional mathematics, or mathematics relevant to real life, was needed. Participants felt that there was a need to teach understanding of mathematics in context. Some participants believed that skills such as communication skills were lacking and that skills should be taught within subjects, for example presentation skills. They felt that more care was needed in terms of cross-curricular teaching, for example linked content between mathematics and physics.

**Core aspects which should be assessed within English, Mathematics and ICT**

**Feedback from Core Subject Representatives**

**English**

The majority of the groups spoke of issues with the spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPaG) measure. A substantial number of the respondents felt that it is redundant, as communication skills are assessed across all subjects. It is believed that the quality of written communication needs to be enforced within all subjects; it is not solely the responsibility of the English department. The majority of the groups felt that a sufficient level of literacy is essential and that practical or ‘real-life’ literacy skills must be included, for example writing a letter. It was also emphasised that these literacy skills should be relevant to employment, for example report writing. Written and spoken communication skills were emphasised by all of the groups. More specific examples were given by each of the groups, such as:

- robust spelling;
- punctuation and grammar;
- talking and listening;
- language and literature; and
- research and analytical skills.

One group pointed out from the beginning of the discussion that the level of skills much depends on the ability of the learner, and that this must be factored into the qualification. Finally, one group advocated greater use of ICT and exposure to a wide range of reading materials to help the development of literacy skills.
Mathematics

Again, from the outset of the discussion, one group felt that the level of skills much depends on the ability of the learner and that this must be factored into the qualification. Another group applied a similar opinion to numeracy as to communication with regards to it being the responsibility of the whole school and not solely the Mathematics department. One group added that a three-tier system was appropriate for the assessment of mathematics, as it allowed students to access the qualification at the level appropriate for them. The majority of the groups spoke of primary school level numeracy skills and how there needs to be continuity and progression across primary and post-primary levels with regards to the level and types of skills taught. Again, a substantial number of participants expressed a desire for ‘true-to-life’ numeracy skills to be included, such as personal money management. Another group discussed an award that was offered by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) which focused on the use of mathematics and financial capabilities. Some liked the idea of an alternative skills-based qualification for mathematics which would be equivalent to the GCSE but not designed to facilitate progression to A level mathematics.

ICT

All of the groups pointed out that ICT skills are relevant to, and required for, employment. One group specifically said that ICT should be a core subject and not treated as a cross-curricular skill. Some suggestions for relevant types of ICT skills included word processing, internet searching and Microsoft Office skills such as PowerPoint for presentations, programming, and systems analysis. One group also suggested that some of the theory could be removed to allow more of a focus on the practical elements. The majority of the groups felt that ICT is relevant to a number of progression routes, with one group specifically pointing out that there are a potential two types of ICT user – the general user and the student for whom ICT will become a career or the basis of an FE/HE course. This group advocated the implementation of a spectrum of ICT courses to cater for the motivations (and meet the needs) of different types of learners – one group gave the example of the European Computer Driving Licence plus an advanced option. Another group pointed out that unless you take an ICT qualification, ICT stops after KS3. One group advocated having flexibility within ICT qualifications, for example teaching the ‘usual’ core topics and then allowing for a choice from a number of options in a specialist area such as programming, web design or multimedia. Additionally, the specialist areas would be dependent on the skills of the teacher and their experience. Although not all the members of this group supported the idea of giving the choice to pupils regarding specialist study units, they did agree that a greater focus was needed on computing and that this should be taught and assessed by subject experts. It was felt also that such a subject focus would help equip those pupils who want to carry an ICT subject on to A level study.

General issues with technology were also pointed out: some respondents felt that
Skills development at 16

Feedback from Post-Primary Students
Students referred to a wide range of skills that they felt need to be developed by age 16. They spoke about the importance of organisational skills in being able to manage the demands required for GCSE. There was also discussion about the need for independent learning and being able to present and communicate (verbally and in writing) to different audiences. Certain participants stressed the importance of being competent in the core skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT. Other skills that were mentioned included:

- interpersonal;
- self-motivation;
- listening; and
- examination preparation.

There was general agreement that the skills developed at 16 are at a higher level than those obtained at age 14. Many perceived their learning at 16 as a shift more towards high-stakes examinations and higher-order thinking. The majority of students interviewed felt that these skills are being developed as they progress through their GCSE subjects.

Feedback from College Students
Students discussed a range of skills that they felt were required by age 16. They highlighted the need for competency in literacy, numeracy and ICT, as well as both written and spoken communication. Students noted the need to develop an aptitude for independent learning and the importance of organisational and planning skills. They also commented on the need for skills that were relevant to employment, including job interview skills. Other skills discussed were:

- social skills;
- time management;
- focus;
- dealing with pressure; and
- showing initiative.

One group specified that students had more skills at 16 than at age 14. Some students commented that school students were ‘drip fed’ and that teachers were driven primarily by performance measures and not by the wellbeing of students. One student called for the opportunity to learn beyond the scope of the syllabus.

There was mixed opinion amongst students as to whether skills should be taught...
and/or assessed within GCSE subjects or separately. Some students felt that it would be a better use of time to teach skills within GCSE subjects and that they should be part of learning. Others believed that skills should be taught separately, with one student commenting that this could be included as additional information on a CV. It was also noted that the development of literacy and numeracy was dependent on the subjects chosen at GCSE.

In terms of assessment, there was no consensus on the issue. Some students believed that assessing skills was important because they were sought by employers. Some also felt it would be fairer if students could gain marks through the assessment of skills, especially for those who performed less well in examination conditions. Other students believed that skills should not be assessed, with some noting that it was difficult to assess certain skills.

3.1.4 Perception of Attainment at GCSE Grades D–G

Feedback from Further Education and Training Representatives
All participants agreed that grades below C were deemed as failure, particularly by employers, and some participants commented on the pressure on schools to deliver grades A*–C. Participants felt that students valued high attainment at Level 1 more than GCSE grades D–G, with some suggesting that lower GCSE grades could instead be described in terms of the level achieved. One participant noted that Level 1 was primarily used for progression to Level 2 and rarely as a concluding qualification. Participants felt that there was not a good understanding of the National Qualifications Framework and commented that there was a need to re-educate everyone, especially employers, on the value of lower GCSE grades, alternative qualifications and equivalences. Some participants also felt that work needed to be done with employers to develop relevant qualifications.

Feedback from Employers
Employers stated that any grade below a C was viewed as a failure and that there was a lack of understanding of equivalences. They noted that larger companies might have a better understanding of the different levels on the National Qualifications Framework and equivalence as a result of regular recruitment. Participants also commented that a Level 1 IT qualification was accepted by some employers.

Feedback from Core Subject Representatives
There was a consensus that the perception of GCSE grades D–G needs to change and that there is too much emphasis on GCSE grades A*–C; one group highlighted that employers look for grades A*–C and the majority stressed that school benchmarking/league tables need to change. A teacher also added that attainment at grade D–G is not regarded as enough to allow progression in that subject post-16. The majority also felt that there are self-esteem issues surrounding less than a
grade A*–C at GCSE for students and that there needs to be something in place to provide all students with a sense of achievement. One group highlighted their views on the importance of choosing the appropriate pathway for students.

Additional points highlighted by a minority of respondents included that improvement in the performance of individuals (value added) is not taken into consideration and Essential Skills materials are created for the adult market. One group also referred to Essential Skills qualifications as an ‘insurance policy’.

**Feedback from Area Learning Communities and Teaching Unions**

Participants believed that it is important to have a system that recognises the achievements of all young people. They stated that grades below C are not seen to be particularly valuable by wider society. It was recommended that there should be appropriate ways of measuring the progress of students in such a way that has wider credibility in the education system. Participants felt that more could be done to promote vocational education and encourage more young people to see vocational qualifications as a viable option. This would allow young people to find out more information on how vocational qualifications can provide currency for, and progression towards, work and higher education.

**Alternatives for those not obtaining a grade C at GCSE**

**Feedback from Further Education and Training Representatives**

It was noted that some students not attaining GCSE grade C take Essential Skills qualifications. Participants agreed that there was a need to tackle public perception and educate everyone on the value of alternative qualifications. One participant felt that something needed to be developed for practical learners. Some participants suggested rethinking the GCSE grading system and describing qualifications in terms of their level on the National Qualifications Framework.

A number of participants supported the Welsh model for its proposed emphasis on skills as a core. They noted that training would be required to implement such a model in N. Ireland and assessment methods would need to reflect this type of qualification. Some participants were in favour of GCSEs in literacy and numeracy.

**Feedback from Employers**

Participants commented that students needed to be aware of their options beyond GCSEs, and that this was particularly important for grammar schools since the cohort leaving school at age 16 was especially low.

**Feedback from Core Subject Representatives**

The majority of the participants saw Essential Skills as an inclusive alternative to GCSE qualifications, successful in principle and a good method of offering recognition and progression to those students not achieving a grade C at GCSE. Despite the positive view of the premise of these qualifications, all of the groups felt
that they are not accepted or valued as a viable route (for example by DE or employers). A minority of participants expressed opinions on perceived negative aspects of Essential Skills and suggested alternatives, for example a possible need for an intermediate level between Level 1 and 2.

There was a general consensus that Essential Skills support progression pathways. One group felt that they allow progression to a vocational route and/or employment and pointed out that some universities also accept this qualification as an entry criterion. One group felt that Essential Skills are not a suitable progression pathway to GCSE (for example taking Essential Skills in Year 11 and GCSE in Year 12) – this was perceived to create confusion and cause logistical difficulties.

3.1.5 GCSE Options

Research participants were asked to discuss four options for qualifications at 14–16 and discussed which would best meet the needs of learners in N. Ireland. The options are listed below.

a) Retain GCSEs in line with the policy direction in England.
b) Retain GCSEs with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies and the N. Ireland economy.
c) Develop new qualifications for N. Ireland.
d) Remove the emphasis on high-stakes examinations at age 16 – for example externally assessed qualifications in core subjects only and school-based assessment in other subjects.

Feedback from Further Education and Training Representatives

None of the participants were in favour of following the policy direction in England, citing reasons of it narrowing choice, not being suitable for all students (particularly lower ability learners and students with special educational needs) and not wanting to be dictated to by England.

The vast majority of participants were in favour of retaining GCSEs and amending them to suit the needs of N. Ireland. They were keen to maintain what they felt was an established brand. Participants were largely in favour of modular qualifications, commenting that they are more accessible to a range of learners and that modularity helps to maintain students’ focus. Participants believed that linear qualifications placed too much pressure and stress on students.

There was some debate as to whether retaining modular exams would devalue GCSEs taken in N. Ireland, since England plans to take a linear approach. Participants concluded that GCSEs are primarily used for progression to further study within N. Ireland, so they would not be devalued by maintaining a modular structure. One participant highlighted that linear qualifications offered choice within exam papers and current modular exams do not, thus modular exams did not
necessarily mean easier.

A number of participants called for the development of vocational GCSEs and qualifications that develop entrepreneurship and employability. Some participants commented that the assessment mechanisms within GCSE were too rigid and needed to become more flexible. A number of participants reiterated that they would like the grading system to be amended so that qualifications were described in terms of levels.

The majority of participants were not in favour of a completely new qualification for N. Ireland. They believed it would restrict portability and take too long to embed and build a new brand. Many participants felt that the removal of high-stakes examinations was not appropriate while the school leaving age remained 16. Representatives from training organisations were in favour of considering this option and felt that assessment should be continuous throughout the year.

Additional comments from participants indicated that some had difficulty working out the equivalence of Scottish and Irish students’ qualifications. One participant noted concern that different systems in England, Wales and N. Ireland might limit students’ movement from one system to another. Most participants agreed that different routes are necessary for different students and vocational pathways should hold the same merit as academic pathways. Some participants noted that the level of difficulty increases considerably from GCSE to A level. Some participants reiterated that they liked the Welsh model for its inclusion of skills as a core.

**Feedback from Higher Education Representatives**

Some attendees felt that Option a), retaining GCSEs in line with the policy direction in England, might be a short-term solution for N. Ireland. Others commented that they liked the idea of assessing a core set of subjects, as is planned for England. Those who supported Option a) expressed concern that moving in a different direction from that of England could disadvantage students in N. Ireland. Some participants also called for all subjects to be made linear, but others felt that a mix of assessment methods would benefit a range of subjects and learners.

Participants stated that amending GCSE in accordance with local policies – Option b) – might disadvantage students and were concerned about the extent to which educational policies should be at the heart of such a qualification system. Nevertheless, there was a group consensus that Option b) was the safest option because it would allow for additional strengthening of an otherwise solid GCSE system. The proposal of adopting a new qualification system for N. Ireland – Option c) – was not favoured, as participants felt that current GCSEs and A levels are of a high international standard. Respondents also felt that N. Ireland is too small a region to consider adopting its own amended qualification system and that
this could create portability issues for students. They also felt that if GCSEs are not retained, there should always be a form of external assessment which is reliable. For example, the core subjects could be taught to all while maintaining a degree of flexibility to suit the needs of different students. Participants also thought that if GCSEs are completely removed – Option d) – then there must be an alternative system of external assessment that will ensure verification and validation of students’ results.

**Feedback from Employers**
Participants were in favour of an inclusive system to meet the needs of N. Ireland. They were generally in favour of Option b), with some participants showing interest in Option c) for the longer term. Some participants felt there was a need to retain some form of GCSE for those students choosing an academic pathway. They commented that employers and universities were more concerned with the outcome of qualifications than the structure, i.e. modular or linear was considered acceptable. It was noted that the N. Ireland economy was different from the English economy, with a strong emphasis on the public sector. Participants felt that, while qualifications at 16 provided a benchmark, there had to be other options available for young people.

**Feedback from EOTAS Representatives**
All participants agreed that Option a) was not suitable, commenting that it would be a ‘disaster’ for EOTAS students. Option b) was favoured by the majority of participants, and all participants felt that modular assessment should be retained. Concerns were raised in relation to whether Option b) would take regional differences into account. Concerns were also raised about the equivalency of Essential Skills and GCSEs, and it was suggested that a promotional campaign could be launched in relation to equivalences. With regards to Option c), it was felt that this may be a long-term solution for N. Ireland but that ‘it will never happen in our lifetime’. Participants commented that Option d) may suit some students at 16 and that we need to be responsive to the needs of young people.

**Feedback from Post-Primary Students**
The majority of students interviewed did not like Option a), with some believing that it would disadvantage certain types of learner. Such participants did not like what they felt was the rigid nature of the policy direction in England. Some felt that the policy places emphasis on memorisation and rote learning rather than understanding, and caters for only a particular learning style. The majority of students interviewed felt that the proposal would narrow young people’s options. The majority of students expressed disapproval that the ability to resit assessment units seems to be now under threat due to the English proposals. Such students
did not see anything wrong with second chances, particularly when a whole host of valid educational and personal reasons make unit resits not only desirable but fair, appropriate and potentially life changing. However, some students felt that the number of resit opportunities should be reduced. A small number of students felt that following policy direction in England may be necessary to ensure the currency and portability of the qualification.

The majority of students interviewed preferred Option b). Some students believed there should be a balance between examinations and internal assessment. Indeed, such students felt that different methods of assessment allow for the display of different types of intelligence/ability. Students pointed out a number of advantages of the modular system including those listed below.

- The assessment can be timed to match the point of learning within the course.
- Students can resit a unit rather than repeat the entire assessment.
- Modular feedback enables students to 'remedy weaknesses' before the final examination.
- Students are better motivated as they receive feedback on performance more frequently and earlier in the course.
- It is easier for students to stay on track with their studies and manage their time effectively.
- The assessment load is spread more evenly over two years.
- The pressure of an 'all-or-nothing' assessment is removed.
- Examination stress is reduced by permitting assessment over a longer period.

However, some students did acknowledge that assessment becomes dominant throughout the two years of study. Others also indicated that too many resit opportunities can put pressure on school resources and on students’ workload. Some students believed that modular specifications function more successfully in certain GCSE subjects.

**Feedback from College Students**

The majority of students favoured Option b), primarily on the basis of a preference for modular qualifications and wanting to maintain portability. There was little support for Option a), with many students disliking linear exams. Some students commented that 100% examination could cause panic and that it was difficult to remember information for two years. Students stressed that it would depend on what was accepted by universities, because it was important that qualifications were transferable to universities in England and have equal currency.

Students favoured modular qualifications and liked that N. Ireland offered choice between modular and linear. Some students commented that modules supported learning and progression, and helped with management of subject content. It was also noted that a modular structure provided motivation since students got a
performance marker during the course. Two groups discussed resits and felt that they allowed the opportunity to try again or to be re-assessed in Year 12 when they had developed further skills and knowledge. Some students also discussed controlled assessment and felt that it was restrictive and pressured. It was noted that coursework was a preferred alternative to controlled assessment.

Students generally felt that Option c) was too risky, that it may limit portability and that it would be easier if the different UK regions had the same system. They stressed the need for qualifications to lead to jobs, while some noted that they were happy with GCSEs.

**Feedback from Core Subject Representatives**

There was unequivocal opposition to Option a) within and across the groups. It was viewed as not suiting the needs of all learners and as restrictive, i.e. in direct conflict with the Entitlement Framework in N. Ireland. The only benefit highlighted in relation to this proposal was that it would guarantee portability and commonality for entrance to university.

Two groups were non-committal about supporting or opposing Option b). Two of the groups indicated some level of support for this proposal; one group felt that it is the most realistic short-term option, with a minority expressing concerns about the qualification being viewed as having less currency because of the changes in England. The majority of the participants indicated some degree of support for aspects of the Welsh model; they liked the idea of a skills-based approach, and one group added that they would like to see N. Ireland develop a broad and flexible approach to the qualifications system.

There was some degree of support for a new qualifications system, Option c), within and across the groups, but the majority also had reservations for a number of reasons. Two groups felt that N. Ireland may be too small (and pointed out that Scotland and Ireland are bigger), although they also highlighted that Wales is a smaller country and has adopted a new system. It was questioned whether or not Wales had the backing of universities with regards to their system. A minority of participants in one group were concerned that Welsh education policy decisions were based on a contentious ‘reaction’ to the English Education Minister. One group felt that this option is not viable in the short term but that it could be in the long term. A minority of participants felt that it is important to get employers involved when developing new qualifications.

There was little support for Option d) within and across the groups. A considerable number of participants had various concerns. The majority of the groups had concerns about the maintenance of standards and internal assessment; one group added that 16 is a major transition point in a student’s life and that external examination is necessary to progress. Another group commented that removing
external assessment would remove the 'motivating factor' for students. Other points brought up by the groups included that this option would require a cultural shift and that it would create extra workload for teachers.

**Feedback from Area Learning Communities and Teaching Unions**

The majority of participants were not in favour of Option a), primarily on the basis of believing that it was not suitable for all learners. Participants noted concern, in particular, for students who were less academic and those with special educational needs, and stressed that a one-size-fits-all approach was not appropriate. This option was also judged to be old-fashioned and elitist, with some participants believing it was driven by politics, not education. Some union respondents also raised concerns that focusing on core subjects could lead to a devaluation or redundancy of non-core subjects. Participants emphasised the need for any qualification to have currency and portability for students in N. Ireland.

There was no consensus on the suitability of Option b) among participants. Participants reiterated the need for any qualifications to have portability and currency, not only in a UK context but also on an international basis. One participant commented that skills were more transferable than academic ability. It was suggested that a marketing campaign would be needed to educate on the equivalence of qualifications within this proposal. Some participants felt that N. Ireland was too small to have its own system. Others encouraged the idea of creating a strong identity for N. Ireland and pointed to Scotland and the Republic of Ireland as small countries that have successfully implemented individual education systems. Participants noted that differing needs required different education and that a flexible system was necessary to meet the needs of all stakeholders. Some commented that options should be tailored to suit individual needs or pathways. Other participants called for vocational qualifications to be given more value, citing Germany as an example of a country that values vocational routes equally.

There was considerable discussion around quality indicators and performance measures, with participants' comments highlighting pressure on schools to 'teach to the test'. Participants noted that schools were reluctant to offer equivalent qualifications since the Education and Training Inspectorate focused on GCSE and A level. They also felt that parents’ perceptions were influenced by quality indicators and reports. Participants believed that all achievements should be valued, and that this would require a change in public perception in relation to grades. Some participants felt that any system that uses academic selection will lead to a devaluing of achievement. Concerns were also raised by the union representatives that the English Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, is devaluing vocational qualifications, and participants felt that there should be recognition that there is rigour in vocational qualifications.
Participants were generally not in favour of Option c). Many felt that N. Ireland is too small and that this proposal represented an enormous task and a long-term option. Some participants felt that for this proposal to be considered in the long term, we would need to look to international best practice. A number of participants commented that Key Stages 1 to 4 needed to be considered together, including the progression and development of skills. One participant noted that much of what was needed existed at Key Stage 2. Participants questioned the financial implications of Options b) and c), and whether they would lead to a reduction in the range of exam boards offering qualifications in N. Ireland. One group specifically questioned whether or not N. Ireland would have the resources to market new qualifications to ensure their recognition. Some participants felt that this option risked disadvantaging students through a lack of portability and limited options. It was emphasised that the system must be fit for purpose for all learners.

One group questioned if N. Ireland should be radical and develop a system to serve teachers and students within a regional context. Another group was not in favour of radical change, and felt lessons could be learnt from Scotland and the Republic of Ireland for making small changes. Alternatives to GCSEs were discussed, including the baccalaureate model and the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSEs). One participant noted that the baccalaureate model had been tried in a local school and withdrawn as a result of students’ options being limited. Some participants felt that all learners would be catered for if alternatives were offered and equivalences strengthened. One group called for new qualifications for N. Ireland, particularly in English and mathematics, to suit all abilities.

Participants were generally not in favour of Option d). Some felt that the school leaving age would need to be increased to 18 in line with this proposal, while others were concerned about the currency for pupils leaving school at 16 with only school-based assessment outcomes. One group believed that post-16 pupils should have qualifications in literacy and numeracy. Participants felt that N. Ireland was not ready for Option D, and believed it would require a considerable change in public attitude and would be the beginning of a ‘very long cultural journey’.

Some support for removing the emphasis on high-stakes examinations at 16 included comments on:

- the majority of pupils remaining in school or going on to college;
- allowing more teaching time;
- reducing issues around grading and the perception of grades below C;
- the need to formally assess only English and mathematics; and
- the BTEC model successfully utilising internal assessment to create rigour and maintain focus.

However, some union participants indicated that they were uncomfortable with the
focus on core subjects and highlighted the fact that the needs of the N. Ireland economy are not necessarily driven by the same core subjects as elsewhere.

There were discussions around performance measures and the emphasis on GCSE grades A*-C. Participants were concerned about the focus on GCSEs by employers and parents. It was suggested that grades could be described instead in terms of their level on the National Qualifications Framework. Pupils in non-selective schools were deemed to be at a disadvantage to their peers attending selective schools. Other participants felt that all pupils could attain a grade within the GCSE system. Some participants valued skills and felt that Michael Gove had undermined a skills-based curriculum. They felt that he had damaged the GCSE brand and left N. Ireland in a vulnerable position, with a challenge to have qualifications accepted as valid and reliable. Participants were generally concerned about the portability of qualifications for pupils in N. Ireland.

One group called for recognition of the achievements of learners with special educational needs through a new curriculum to address their needs. These participants also called for flexibility within the system: for example, in terms of when pupils start. One participant felt that there was an opportunity within the context of the Review to develop a better public understanding of qualifications, with a view to easing pressure on pupils.

### 3.2 A Level Feedback

#### 3.2.1 Purpose of Qualifications at 18

**Feedback from Further Education and Training Representatives**
Participants believed the main purpose of qualifications at age 18 was for progression to further study or university. Some participants indicated that this is changing as a result of the increasing cost of higher education and the lack of available jobs.

**Feedback from Higher Education Representatives**
Most of the participants thought the qualifications at this stage reflected the culmination of students’ post-primary education: a record of achievement that prepared them to enter higher education or increased their employability. Students were also seen as more mature and having a better idea of their chosen career path.

**Feedback from Employers**
Employers felt that qualifications at 18 were primarily used for progression to university or further education. They noted that A levels were irrelevant to employers once a degree had been undertaken. Participants felt that qualifications at 18 should develop lifelong learning skills and include core subjects such as
They commented that students should be given appropriate advice when making decisions about future pathways.

**Feedback from Post-Primary Students**
Participants stated a large number and broad range of main purposes for qualifications at age 18. The majority of student interviewees saw the main purpose of A levels as preparing students for particular degree courses or for the demands of higher education.

Interviewees who felt the role of higher education was to develop academic and learning skills tended to be more satisfied with the A level system. Some students believed the acquisition of A levels helps enhance employment prospects. Some believed that A levels give students the experience of studying subjects in greater depth, with more academic rigour than GCSEs, and demonstrate that students are committed and capable of working at the level required.

**Feedback from College Students**
Students gave a number of reasons for studying qualifications at age 18, namely:
- for progression to university;
- for progression to employment;
- to aid decisions regarding university courses;
- to specialise in one or more subjects; and
- to improve skills and knowledge.

Some students noted that it was more advantageous to have A levels and that they provide more opportunities. However, one student commented that A levels can contribute to ‘burn out’, which may deter students from going on to university.

**Feedback from Area Learning Communities and Teaching Unions**
One of the key messages from the feedback is that there is not enough clarity about the purposes of A levels. However, participants generally agreed that the primary purposes of A levels are to prepare students for further and higher education and to enable students to be selected according to ability and understanding. One participant commented that they act as a ‘vehicle on to the next level to provide access to a greater range of courses’. However, it was recognised that many students are choosing not to go to university because of the financial implications of increasing fees.

### 3.2.2 A Levels: Meeting the Needs of Learners

**Feedback from Further Education Representatives**
Participants felt that A levels do not meet the needs of all learners, particularly lower ability learners and students with special educational needs. One group commented that different pathways for different learners were needed. Participants
believed that A levels suited more academic students, and one group felt that they met the needs of the majority of students choosing the A level route.

One group of participants noted that the further education and vocational systems meet the needs of other learners well, and that students entering the further education system usually wanted to do more practical qualifications. One participant noted that vocational students should feel proud of choosing that route. A number of participants reiterated the need for compulsory careers education to support learners’ decision-making in terms of future pathways. One participant called for Level 3 qualifications in core subjects such as literacy, numeracy and ICT to help provide alternative routes to university and make learners more employable. Concern was noted about the comparability of A levels with other Level 3 qualifications, particularly if A levels were to become linear and harder to achieve. One participant felt that it would be unfair to move A levels out of the reach of students who would previously have been able to do them.

Feedback from Higher Education Representatives
Participants commented that the current system was not suitable for all learners. The major difficulty was considered to be that there was only one measurement of success: whether or not students attained an academic qualification. If they did not, this was perceived as a failure. Participants also felt that attempts to turn the current system into a ‘one-size-fits-all system’ would dilute academic content and not meet the needs of the vocational learner.

It was also felt that there should be an alternative system in place which could cater for students who are not so academic. However, it was stated that the current alternatives (including BTECs) are not theory-based and lack rigour, thus cannot be considered good alternatives. It was also mentioned that the current system was suitable only for those students who had a clearer idea of what they wanted to do; it was less appropriate for students who had a range of interests, for example science and creative or art-based subjects.

Participants also highlighted that students in general did not enjoy the learning process. They repeatedly talked about gaps in higher-order thinking and creative skills that students should have attained prior to entering university. It was felt that there should be more opportunities for teachers and learners to explore subjects in-depth and that independent learning should be encouraged at an earlier age.
Feedback from Post-Primary Students
The majority of students interviewed felt that A levels are appropriate for meeting their needs. However, one group of students called for less assessment and more time to cover, explore and enjoy subject content. Some of these students felt that they were only learning in bite-sized chunks and not learning enough about particular concepts and topic areas.

Feedback from College Students
Two of the four groups included GCSE students only, who did not comment on the appropriateness of current A levels. There was no consensus between the other groups on whether or not A levels met their needs. One group felt that A levels did meet their needs in terms of progression to university, but commented that there was a lot of pressure to learn a high volume of content in a short space of time. The other group believed that not everyone was capable of studying A levels and that there was a big jump between GCSEs and A levels. These students felt that alternatives should be offered including National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), access courses, trades and apprenticeships, and that people should be made aware of these options, particularly at school.

Feedback from Area Learning Communities and Teaching Unions
Participants generally agreed that A levels were not meeting the needs of all learners. In the discussion groups, participants described what they felt, for some subjects, were very prescribed and packed syllabuses which left little room for any creativity on the part of the teacher or learner. They felt that the number of assessments and resit opportunities exacerbates this problem. One participant commented that there has been ‘too much emphasis placed on assessment and not enough on the enrichment of teaching and learning’.

There was also a belief that more educational stakeholders need to recognise the value of vocational qualifications. It was discussed that parents continue to strongly influence their children’s qualification choices and some think that A level is the only viable progression route. Some participants believed that fixed perceptions of vocational qualifications prevent more young people from considering vocational options.

Others believed that there is too much emphasis on high achieving students and recommended that lesser able students’ accomplishments should be more formally recognised.

A levels: meeting the needs of universities
Feedback from Further Education and Training Representatives
There was no consensus between the groups on whether or not A levels met the needs of universities. One group felt that they did, whereas the other group
believed that schools did not adequately prepare students for university as a result of being driven predominantly by league tables. Some participants noted that students struggle to adapt to the different learning styles required at university.

**Feedback from Higher Education Representatives**

There were concerns that the way in which subjects were taught at A level did not encourage in-depth, independent thinking. Attendees felt that students were process-driven rather than having a true understanding: they valued the material which was going to be assessed – and it was expected that they would learn it well – yet they could not think beyond the subject, put knowledge into context or evaluate it critically.

Attendees thought that this could be due to the fact that there were too many assessments within short periods of time. Participants also felt that students were over-reliant on their tutors to do the work for them. A suggestion was made that there should be a change in how subjects are delivered in schools to encompass independent thinking and thinking around the subject. It was also mentioned that if A levels were to be changed across the board, then universities would have to amend their courses.

It was also pointed out that universities would start at the level students were at, but participants felt that students did not come with the necessary skills from school. Participants also perceived the first year at university to be a transitional year, during which students had to come up to the required standard and develop skills such as critical thinking.

**Feedback from Area Learning Communities and Teaching Unions**

Some participants indicated that topics taught within a subject at A level did not always coincide with the knowledge requirements of higher education. It was stated that this can lead to gaps in the knowledge of first year undergraduate students. For some, universities dictate what is offered at A level.

**A levels: meeting the needs of employers**

**Feedback from Further Education and Training Representatives**

Participants agreed that whether or not A levels met the needs of employers depended on the employer or field of work. Some participants noted that A levels provide evidence of a certain level of achievement. Certain participants believed that some employers want to teach employees specific skills for their organisation, while some felt that more transferable skills should be developed within A levels. A number of participants commented that employers see A levels as the gold standard, while others called for more value to be given to vocational qualifications. Careers advice was judged to be critical for 16–18 year olds.
**Feedback from Employers**

Employers said that they looked at subjects taken and the skills inherent within those subjects when considering job applications. They felt that the content of A levels needed to be reviewed and were not in favour of the existing ‘cramming of knowledge’. Participants also commented that universities were increasingly seeking grades A and B. Participants reiterated the need for core subjects and felt that students must be allowed to take additional mathematics study at GCSE in order to progress to A level mathematics or STEM subjects. Employers felt that work experience was a favourable means of enhancing a young person’s CV.

**Feedback from Area Learning Communities and Teaching Unions**

Participants believed that there has to be an education of employers over the value of equivalences. It was stated that they instead look at whether young people have got certain, specific qualifications like A levels, which they recognise and value.

It was stated that some of the equivalent qualifications address skill deficits (such as problem-solving, teamwork, creative thinking and so on) and it was hoped that more value would be placed on them.

### 3.2.3 Appropriateness of Current AS/A2 System

**Feedback from Further Education and Training Representatives**

All participants were in favour of the current system with AS as a transition to A2. Participants did not understand the rationale behind the decoupling of AS and A2, and some felt that students would not take a standalone AS as proposed in England. A number of participants felt that AS gives an indication of performance at the halfway point within A levels, and some believed that it was good for hardworking students.

There was some concern around comparability and parity of esteem between A levels in N. Ireland, England and Wales if the different regions had different systems. Some participants also queried what choice of examination boards there would be for schools: for example, would N. Ireland students be able to take qualifications with English boards?

**Feedback from Higher Education Representatives**

The model of the current modular system which allows resits was mainly viewed negatively. Some participants felt that opportunities to repeat examinations should be removed, and the majority agreed that there should be a limit on the number of resits a student could take. They also felt that the modular system affected teaching, with one participant commenting that ‘it fractures pedagogy’. Participants liked the fact that the current system allowed the AS grade to be an indicator of how students would perform at A level. They thought that this would give students flexibility in terms of their choice of A2 levels, letting them see their
strengths and weaknesses. The majority of respondents were against the decoupling of AS from A level.

**Feedback from Post-Primary Students**
The majority of students want AS to be kept as part of A level, believing that it acts as an important transition to A2. Certain participants also commented that it helps provide a predicted grade for A level. However, a small number of students were concerned that not following England’s policy may disadvantage N. Ireland students.

**Feedback from College Students**
There was a consensus among students that AS should be kept as the first year of A level. Students felt that the AS/A2 system worked well, that it was flexible and that it gave an indication of a student’s ability in a subject. They believed that a linear model did not serve learners well since it involved a lot of ‘cramming’ towards the end of the course, and that it led to a more pressured environment for students.

**Feedback from Area Learning Communities and Teaching Unions**
The majority of participants were in favour of retaining the current system of AS as a transition to A2. Participants did not agree with decoupling AS and A2, and some felt that universities would not accept a standalone AS as proposed in England. A number of participants felt that AS gave an indication of performance and liked the flexibility and accessibility of the current system. However, participants generally agreed that opportunities to repeat examinations should be removed, and that there should be a limit on the number of resits a student could take.

3.2.4 Breadth in the Current System Post-16

**Feedback from Further Education and Training Representatives**
The majority of participants believed that the current system was too narrow. One group suggested that core skills such as literacy and numeracy should be retained and developed post-16. Some favoured additional breadth at AS level, noting that this was the original intention of AS, with students then specialising during the A2 year. These participants commented that the narrowing at AS is a result of universities accepting only three good A level grades, so universities would need to support any move towards additional breadth. These participants also felt that there was room to reduce the content at both AS and A level since GCSE and AS level are too disparate, yet A levels were perceived as being as difficult as the first year of university.

**Feedback from Higher Education Representatives**
Mixed views about the number of A levels were expressed by higher education representatives. One respondent preferred to have five fixed A levels, arguing that additional subjects were a powerful selection tool. A couple of people favoured
having breadth over depth, while one participant felt that the number of subjects students completed would not matter to universities. One of the participants claimed that students from Republic of Ireland came equipped with more advanced literacy skills/creative writing skills so, maybe, they were better prepared as a whole group. Not all agreed; one respondent believed that RoI students did not study subjects to the same level, making it harder for them to cope with the demands of university.

It was also suggested that there should be a balance between breadth and depth without compromising specialist knowledge, yet it was recognised that the introduction of more subjects at A level may have major implications on the selection process. One respondent proposed that there could be greater breadth at AS level with a focus on specialist knowledge at A level, while another felt that literacy training would be a good idea because students came to university with poor writing skills. Participants felt that a pedagogical discussion about the possibility of introducing more subjects and a review of other countries’ qualification systems would be needed before any changes to the current system were made.

**Feedback from Employers**

Some participants felt that additional breadth might be beneficial in broadening students’ options, although some also noted that there would be logistical and timetabling considerations. Participants believed that students needed to develop communication skills and have more opportunities for life experiences. They felt that this could be supported through extra-curricular activities. The employers emphasised the need to maintain a flexible assessment system to eliminate any bias resulting from gender differences.

**Feedback from Post-Primary Students**

The majority of students felt that there is enough breadth in the current system post-16. They felt 3–4 A levels was more than enough and would not want to undertake any more. One student indicated that the breadth of study is covered at GCSE level. Such students indicated that they pick their subjects based on progression routes and subject enjoyment and felt that focusing on more subjects would be too broad. Students reiterated the view that they would like less assessment and more time to learn the content.

One group of students felt that career guidance at post-primary level is poor and would like more guidance regarding their future careers. It was also commented that better career guidance needs to be received pre-16. The group agreed that it would be helpful if universities talked to students while they are still at school.
Feedback from College Students
There was no consensus as to the appropriateness of the breadth in the current system post-16. Some students were in favour of the specialist nature of A levels and were concerned about losing the current depth. They believed that specialising helped students make decisions about what to study at university. It was noted that GCSEs offered breadth and that the system gradually narrowed towards specialist study. Another group commented that not all students were capable of studying more than three or four subjects.

Other students believed that limited breadth could disadvantage N. Ireland students and that parity was needed across countries in terms of the number of subjects studied. Students in support of additional breadth felt that it could allow someone to pursue different interests, while having something to fall back on. A group of students commented that they were only doing what employers and universities wanted, and that they were unsure if the level of skills already gained at GCSE was enough.

Feedback from Area Learning Communities and Teaching Unions
There was much discussion around the issue of breadth in the current system post-16. For some the problem of lack of breadth did indeed lie with a restricted range of subjects taken by individual A level students, leading to over-specialisation and a ‘narrow’ understanding of subjects not undertaken at A level. Such participants believed that increasing both the number and range of subjects taken would open up new opportunities for students. One participant called for a review of how other countries deliver their systems, which incorporate more breadth. However, some also expressed caution that to have more breadth would require a significant change in staffing and be more expensive.

3.2.5 Requiring the Study of Core Subjects/Skills alongside Subject Specialisms

Feedback from Further Education and Training Representatives
Most participants felt that core subjects/skills should be required, with some participants specifying literacy, numeracy, ICT and careers education. A training organisation representative felt that core skills should be developed at primary school and progressed throughout post-primary education.

A college representative suggested a need for further discussion about what constitutes ‘core’ skills. Another training organisation participant called for Level 2 qualifications in literacy and numeracy for learners not suited to A levels to take alongside Level 3 vocational qualifications. It was noted that there is great variation in what is offered by individual schools in terms of skills.
**Feedback from Higher Education Representatives**

Participants stated that the poor literacy skills shown by some students were seen as a potential weak point of the education system and those students who entered a high-stakes qualification route should be taught essential skills such as literacy and numeracy. Some suggested that students could feel let down by a system that does not allow for progression from GCSE. It was suggested by some of the respondents that GCSE English and Mathematics could be built on more effectively to ensure that more students gained greater competency in these areas. However, others thought that it would be better if literacy and numeracy skills were integrated into the subjects themselves to ensure continuity, because it was also feared that some students may be disadvantaged if they had high grades in science subjects and poor literacy skills.

It was also pointed out that universities would recognise additional skills but their emphasis would be more on academic achievements as a means of selection. Some participants felt that parents and students would not necessarily place great value on additional subjects unless they were formally assessed.

**Feedback from Employers**

Participants believed many skills/subjects should be studied alongside subject specialisms, including:

- independent learning skills;
- communication;
- flexibility;
- teamwork;
- problem-solving;
- ethics;
- citizenship;
- climate change;
- sustainability;
- N. Ireland politics;
- setting up a business;
- life skills, such as typing, using a till, finance and voting;
- comparative religion;
- social sciences; and
- STEM subjects.

Participants stated that universities are delivering refresher mathematics classes. They also emphasised the need for skills to be developed from primary level and the need for context around what is being taught.
Skills development at 18

Feedback from Post-Primary Students

Students stated that teachers expect more at A level and indicated that learning is more intense, and assignments and assessments are more detailed and complex. ‘Time management’ was a skill that was mentioned frequently; it was felt that this helps students manage course content. A small number of students said that they have to incorporate ‘extra-curricular activities’ to broaden their experience. They believed that this proves useful too when writing their personal statement for applying to university or developing their CV to apply for jobs.

Other skills that were mentioned included:

- independent learning;
- research and analytical skills;
- transferable skills;
- organisational skills;
- motivation;
- responsibility; and
- higher-order learning skills.

The majority of students believed that skills developed at GCSE have to be progressed and further developed for A level study.

Feedback from College Students

Students believed that they had developed a range of skills by age 18, including:

- independent learning and study skills;
- essay writing skills;
- self-discipline;
- common sense;
- the ability to look after themselves;
- dealing with pressure;
- money management skills;
- job seeking skills; and
- respect.

Some students noted that the skills were the same as those developed by 16 but more advanced. It was noted that further maturity at 18 may change a student’s outlook and that job-related skills were important. Students named communication, decision-making and job-seeking skills, for example developing a CV, as important skills to be developed at this age. They felt that the development of skills was closely related to the place of study, and that further education colleges were better than schools for encouraging independence and personal development. Students also felt that further education better prepared students for university than school-based learning. The majority of students felt that skills should be taught within subjects; however, there was no consensus on whether or not skills should be assessed. It was commented that the learning environment is very important for
the development of skills. One student believed that additional breadth within the system might aid the development of skills.

3.2.6 A Level Options

Research participants were asked to discuss four options for qualifications at 16–18 and discuss which would best meet the needs of learners in N. Ireland. The options are listed below.

a) For N. Ireland to offer A levels as designed for England and adopt developments when they emerge.
b) Retain A levels with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies and the needs of the N. Ireland economy.
c) Develop new 16–18 qualifications for N. Ireland that retain features of A level qualifications.
d) None of the proposals.

Feedback from Further Education and Training Representatives
Participants were not in favour of following the policy direction proposed in England. Instead, they were in favour of Option b), retaining the A level brand, recognising that there were some issues that needed to be addressed. Some participants liked the skills-based approach proposed in Wales but acknowledged that such a system would take time to develop. A number of participants also commented that a new qualification system for N. Ireland would take time to implement and embed. One participant called for more frequent reviews of qualifications to ensure that they are not ‘left for decades without evaluation’.

Feedback from Higher Education Representatives
All participants disapproved of the decoupling of AS from A2 level and there was some concern expressed about the current policy direction in England. Respondents felt the success of Option b) would depend on the collaborative work of examination boards, for example the grading of a range of differently structured exams or whether a grade ‘A’ would be equivalent across modular and linear specifications. They also felt that higher education would have to compare international students and take differences into account before a decision in favour of this option was made. It was also pointed out that such a system should have the confidence of the policymakers. Participants did not favour Option c). They argued that the current GCSE and A level qualifications were highly regarded internationally and felt there would be no point in introducing such a drastic change for a small region like N. Ireland. Portability was also cited as a potential drawback for this option.

Feedback from Employers
Employers were not in favour of Option a), although they did stress the importance of qualifications being portable and accepted by universities. The majority of participants were in favour of Option b), retaining the ‘brand’ name and making
amendments, with a longer-term interest in Option c). Employers agreed that the AS qualification should remain as it is within the current model or choice offered within schools. Some participants believed that the Advanced Extension Award (AEA) should be made available to all students.

Feedback from Area Learning Communities and Teaching Unions

Some groups discussed the proposals for GCE qualifications together as a continuum of change: retain A levels in line with policy direction in England; retain A levels and amend to reflect the Northern Ireland educational policies and economy; or develop new 16–18 qualifications for Northern Ireland that retain features of A level qualifications. Participants did not choose a preferred option and instead discussed different elements or implications of the three proposals.

All participants favoured the current AS/A2 structure, with two groups suggesting examination at the end of each year only, to address disruption caused by the January series. A number of participants noted concern about a ‘resit mentality’ that had developed as a result of the ability to repeat exams multiple times. They felt that this was detrimental and opened the system to abuse. One group noted that there should be agreement among the different regions on the future of AS qualifications. Some participants felt that constant assessment was getting in the way of pupils developing a love of learning.

One group called for qualifications to suit all learners, commenting that the current options were too academically weighted, and that there should be parity of esteem between vocational and academic routes. These participants felt that a combination of applied and general options aided decision-making about future pathways. One participant commented that perfecting a skill would be more beneficial to the economy than studying an A level.

It was noted that the N. Ireland skills focus in the revised curriculum, rather than the rote learning approach, means that we will be in a different place in ten years’ time. It was felt that the current system puts learners off wanting to learn and that there is a need for a ‘freer’ system rather than the ‘conveyor belt system’ currently. The Welsh Baccalaureate model was noted for allowing recognition for enrichment activities.

A number of participants reiterated the need for qualifications to be recognised and accepted by universities and to have rigour. One group was concerned that the university involvement proposed by England may not benefit young people, particularly those not going on to university. Some noted the dropout rate for N. Ireland learners going to university. Some participants also noted that the Inspectorate and the Minister for Education caused grades below C to be viewed as failure, and they felt that this influenced employers’ perceptions.
Section 4: Results – Phase 3

This section captures the research feedback from the third phase of the Review of GCSE and A level qualifications collected using an online questionnaire, available between 9 April 2013 and 31 May 2013.

Based on the research findings from the first questionnaire and the research workshops, a series of options was developed for the future of the qualifications system in N. Ireland. These options were included in an online questionnaire, along with some additional background information made available online to all stakeholders.

The questionnaire asked respondents to consider the background information and respond to each option proposed. This gave stakeholders the opportunity to consider all proposals in context before choosing one option. The questionnaire allowed respondents to choose short- to medium-term and long-term proposals.

The executive summary details the short and longer-term options preferred overall by respondents. The results in this section provide the responses to all proposals before showing respondents’ final choice. This research method was chosen as it allowed respondents to consider every aspect of the proposals, give their support or opposition to all proposals and reasons for their view, and then settle on one short- to medium-term and one long-term proposal option. Respondents were also given the option to oppose all proposals and suggest alternatives.

4.1 14–16 Options

4.1.1 Background

N. Ireland, England and Wales currently operate a common qualifications system in which the main qualifications offered to learners at 16 are GCSEs. GCSE qualifications are usually studied over two years, full-time, by 14–16 year olds at school. They cover Levels 1 and 2 on the National Qualifications Framework, with grades D–G equalling Level 1 and grades A*–C Level 2. The last 12 months have seen divergence in GCSE policy across England, Wales and N. Ireland, with proposals for further, more substantial, developments within each individual jurisdiction.

4.1.2 Option 1

GCSEs now available in England are linear (examinations must be taken at the end of the course) only, with linear and modular (examinations can be taken during the course and resat once) GCSE pathways available in N. Ireland and Wales. The
future of GCSEs in England is under review, with current indications as to changes including:

- GCSE content being based on the national curriculum for ages 14–16 in England;
- confirming linearity;
- removing tiering (examination papers targeted at different levels of demand);
- no or minimal use of internal (teacher-marked) assessment; and
- more extended writing in exams.

‘New GCSEs’ in English, mathematics, the sciences, history and geography are proposed for first teaching from 2015. A number of vocational qualifications previously taught in England will no longer attract funding in English schools.

Proposal 1: Retain GCSEs in line with the policy direction in England

Nearly 63% (62.3%, n=337) of respondents did not support this option. Such respondents indicated that this policy direction does not take into consideration different learning styles. Others felt that this policy would be detrimental to the educational wellbeing of SEN (n=12) and less able (n=4) students. Seven respondents believed that such a system will favour academic students. Some teachers were concerned about the lack of funding for vocational subjects (n=20), believing that this will discriminate against non-academic students. Eight respondents advised CCEA and the Department of Education to take a considered approach and act in the best interests of N. Ireland and, as one respondent stated, ‘not just follow England’. Seven respondents described the English policy as a backwards or retrograde action. Certain teachers spoke about the success of N. Ireland’s education system (n=6).

Some viewed modular examinations as a better system, as they allow learners to review their approach over two years rather than leaving it to a terminal examination (n=27). Others disagreed with the removal of tiering (n=18) and felt that the English proposal does not recognise the different abilities within the classroom (n=22), and found it too rigid and potentially disengaging for future learners (n=7). Some viewed the modular system as beneficial for students suffering with exam anxiety and felt that a return to a linear approach would cause undue stress (n=5).

Nearly 38% (37.7%, n=204) would like to retain GCSEs in line with the policy direction in England. Some such respondents (n=34) stressed the importance of aligning with this policy direction to ensure that the qualification has the same currency and portability as its English counterpart. Certain teachers (n=6) felt that a system of multiple resits was inappropriate, and that a good alternative would be for resit opportunities to be reduced. Others believed that linear qualifications provide greater rigour (n=8). Five teachers were in agreement with the proposals to
remove tiering. Linearity in GCSEs was also seen as allowing for more teaching and learning time for the student and teacher (n=6).

Certain teachers (n=31) also spoke of their dislike of internal assessment and spoke of the pressure either from parents or from management to ‘improve’ students’ performance in these elements, which were deemed to be ‘within our control’. However, one respondent felt a minimal use of internal assessment should be allowed in practical subjects such as sciences, art and design or technology. Other teachers felt that vocational qualifications are important to those who are more suited to a job in industry than continuing with further education.

4.1.3 Option 2

GCSE qualifications are currently offered on a three-country basis. Common rules (criteria) are set out for GCSEs at qualification level and subject level. This system does not facilitate regional differences in the 14–16 curriculum and specifically:

a) the revised curriculum; and
b) Entitlement Framework policy in N. Ireland.

(i) The statutory requirements of the N. Ireland 14–16 revised curriculum include the teaching of Learning for Life and Work; Physical Education; Religious Education; and Cross-Curricular Skills: Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT. They are met mostly through the delivery of qualifications being taken by students. ‘Other Skills’ – Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities are also outlined for development at ages 14–16.

(ii) The Entitlement Framework aims to provide a broad and balanced curriculum for learners, ensuring that they have access to a minimum number of courses at ages 14–16, one-third of which must be applied (courses where knowledge, understanding and skills can be developed through practical demonstration and/or in a context related to employability).

Proposal 2: Retain GCSEs with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies and the N. Ireland economy

Just under three-quarters of respondents (74.5%, n=403) would like to retain GCSEs with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies, and the N. Ireland economy. Those who supported this proposal were asked a series of further questions; the findings from these are outlined below.

The majority of respondents (75.7%, n=306) believed that subject content should be revised to reflect the needs of N. Ireland. Just over 83% (83.9%, n=339) felt that GCSEs should be aligned to the principles of the Entitlement Framework, where appropriate.
59.7% (n=241) of respondents believed that Cross-Curricular Skills should be included. These respondents were asked how they would be delivered. The majority recommended that these skills should be *delivered within* GCSEs (53.8%, n=129). 29.2% (n=70) felt they should be *assessed within* GCSEs and 17.1% (n=41) that they should be assessed *through standalone qualifications*.

63.1% (n=255) of respondents believed that Other Skills (Problem-Solving, Self-Management, Working with Others) and employability skills should be included in GCSE qualifications. These respondents were asked how this should be achieved. The majority recommended that these skills should be *delivered within* GCSEs (63.8%, n=162), 19.7% (n=50) felt they should be *assessed within* GCSEs, and 16.5% (n=42) that they should be *assessed through standalone qualifications*.

Just over a quarter of respondents (25.5%, n=138) did not support the proposal to retain GCSEs with amendments. Some of these respondents (n=38) believed that such a system would not have comparability or parity with English qualifications.

Respondents suggested the need for a standardised approach across the three-country regions (n=13). A smaller number of respondents (n=6) stressed the importance of N. Ireland students being able to compete in a global context and were not confident that such a proposal would equip them to do so. Certain respondents (n=14) did not support the Entitlement Framework policy, believing it to be unrealistic and too costly to implement. Some teachers (n=12) believed that there needs to be more of a focus on academic ability and examinations rather than the development of personal skills. Ten teachers commented on the N. Ireland Learning for Life and Work qualification, stating that they did not value it.

**Assessment**

Respondents were provided with three different options for assessment at GCSE. 65.8% (n=266) of respondents indicated that they would prefer a combination of modular and linear assessment. Qualitative comments reveal that a one-size assessment method does not allow for subject differences (n=19). Some teachers stressed the importance of recognising different learning styles (n=14) and ensuring that access of opportunity is available for all learners. Five respondents felt that some subjects (for example mathematics) benefit from a modular approach, especially for adult learners.

18.1% (n=73) said they would prefer modular assessment. 16.1% (n=65) indicated their preference for a linear approach to assessment. Very few clarifying comments were made to the question responses.

Just over half of the respondents (51.5%, n=208) called for limited internal assessment specific to the needs of the subject. It was suggested that some subjects are more suited to internal assessment than others and that internal
assessment should be subject specific (n=14). Others (n=10) believed that internal assessment is needed for practical/technical/skills-based subjects. However, some felt that internal assessment is difficult to control/open to manipulation (n=6). 26% (n=105) did not want any internal assessment. Such respondents believed that this method of assessment is open to abuse/manipulation (n=17). Others viewed internal assessment as artificial and of little educational value (n=10). Some respondents pointed to the heavy administration involved for teachers (n=6), and five respondents indicated that it takes up valuable teaching time. Six respondents believed that externally assessed examinations represent a fair and effective alternative.

22.5% (n=91) called for internal assessment (teacher-based) to be included in most subjects.

4.1.4 Option 3

Scotland and Republic of Ireland have individual qualifications systems. Wales is further developing the Welsh Baccalaureate – a qualification which consists of core components (skills, Wales-based, personal and social, and work-related education) alongside qualifications currently on offer, for example GCSEs, Awards and Diplomas. Internationally, qualifications systems can differ on a regional basis within countries. Many systems have limited external high-stakes assessment at age 16. Qualification design can take account of: the needs of the learner; suitable assessment methods; delivery of the qualification; the needs of the curriculum; and the inclusion and assessment of appropriate skills.

New qualifications at 14–16 designed specifically for N. Ireland could take account of these aspects in relation to our educational, economic and societal needs. We would continue working with other jurisdictions to ensure comparability using a National Qualifications Framework.

Proposal 3: Develop new 14–16 qualifications for N. Ireland

The majority of respondents (64.9%, n=351) were not supportive of new 14–16 qualifications being developed for N. Ireland. Such respondents explained that a standardised UK GCSE approach is more meaningful as it allows a greater comparison of results (n=28). Similarly, some respondents had concerns about equivalences with other UK qualifications (n=50) and that a new system could disadvantage students applying to English universities (n=20). Twelve respondents believed that there are enough qualifications on offer to suit all learner needs. GCSEs were perceived by some as a trusted and recognised qualification globally (n=26).

Some felt that N. Ireland is too small to have a separate qualification system (n=19), whilst others believed that new qualifications should not require students to
pursue a curriculum which would restrict them to N. Ireland (n=9). Some were satisfied that the current system works well (n=13) and pointed to the successful GCSE results in comparison to those of other regions (n=8). Eight respondents said the current system only needs minor changes, but they did not specify what these are. Certain teachers (n=15) were unhappy that there have been too many changes in the education system over recent years. Other teachers felt that this option would be very costly to implement (n=9).

35.1% (n=190) of respondents would like to see new 14–16 qualifications developed for N. Ireland. Those who supported this proposal were asked a series of further questions, which are outlined below.

Respondents were asked if new qualifications should reflect the needs of: N. Ireland only, a three-country, or an international model. 138 respondents (25.6%) believed that new qualifications should reflect an international model. 66 respondents (12.2%) would prefer new qualifications to reflect a three-country model. 58 respondents (10.7%) felt that new qualifications should reflect the needs of N. Ireland only.

The majority of respondents to this question (90.5%, n=172) believed that new qualifications should meet the needs of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. Only a small number of respondents (9.5%, n=18) did not feel that new qualifications should meet the needs of the Northern Ireland Curriculum.

86.8% (n=165) of respondents felt that the new qualifications offered should meet the principles of the Entitlement Framework.

A high percentage of respondents to this question (86.8%, n=164) felt that a core set of subjects/skills should be taken by all students. These are listed below:

- Mathematics (n=99); Numeracy (n=17);
- English (n=98); Literacy (n=18); Communication Skills (n=5);
- Science (n=63);
- ICT (n=43);
- Language(s) (n=40);
- Religion (n=17);
- History (n=15);
- Learning for Life and Work (n=10);
- Physical Education (n=8);
- Geography (n=8);
- A humanities subject (n=7);
- Art (n=5);
- Life Skills (n=4);
- Technology and Design (n=4);
- Problem-Solving (n=3); and
81.1% (n=154) believed that a core set of subjects/skills should be identified in which all students should be assessed. These are listed below:

- English (n=61); Literacy (n=23); Communication (n=10);
- Mathematics (n=60); Numeracy (n=26);
- Science (n=40);
- ICT (n=37);
- Language(s) (n=23);
- History (n=12);
- Religion (n=11);
- Geography (n=8);
- Learning for Life and Work (n=6);
- Problem-Solving (n=5);
- Technology and Design (n=4);
- Physical Education (n=4); and
- Working with Others (n=3).

Respondents were asked whether the number of subjects externally assessed at age 16 should be reduced. The majority (66.7%, n=126) thought that it should not.

Respondents were also asked if external assessments should be limited to core subjects. Just over 85% (85.3%, n=162) thought that they should not.

Just over 14% (14.7%, n=28) of respondents felt that external assessments should be limited to core subjects. The subjects listed included:

- English (n=7);
- Mathematics (n=7);
- Science (n=8);
- Language(s) (n=5);
- ICT (n=4); and
- History (n=3).

56.8% (n=108) of respondents felt that new qualifications should have a clear distinction between achievement at Levels 1 and 2. Very few qualifying comments were given to this question and therefore individual responses have been included. Such respondents believed that this allows students (n=2), teachers (n=1), employers (n=1) and parents (n=1) to understand progression. One teacher indicated that more work is required to inform employer understanding about Level 1 qualifications. One respondent felt that this will require consistent moderation to maintain standards. One teacher believed that this would give better opportunities for less able learners to show their achievements. A further respondent advised that a grading system within the levels is vital if the qualification is to be relevant to further education and employers.
A small number of respondents expressed their concerns about Level 1 and 2 qualifications. Three respondents made the comment that not all Level 1 and Level 2 qualifications are directly comparable. Two respondents were concerned that Level 1 qualifications will become devalued and not accepted by stakeholders. One respondent believed that the qualifications framework needs to be reviewed to ensure that qualifications are clearly and adequately represented and that information is shared with employers and industry.

A small percentage (13.7%, n=26) believed that new qualifications should not have a clear distinction between achievement at Levels 1 and 2; 29.5% (n=56) of respondents were unsure.

Respondents were asked if new qualifications should offer achievement which overlaps between Levels 1 and 2. 40% (n=76) of respondents felt that they should.

25.8% (n=49) of respondents did not believe that new qualifications should offer achievement which overlaps between Levels 1 and 2; 34.2% (n=65) of respondents were unsure.

The majority of respondents asked (73.2%, n=139) felt that Cross-Curricular Skills (Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT) should be included in a new qualifications offer; 26.8% (n=51) did not. Those who felt that they should be included were asked how this should be achieved. The majority (50%, n=69) would prefer them as skills delivered within subject qualifications. 26.8% (n=37) would like them as skills assessed within subject qualifications. 23.2% (n=32) felt that they should be as skills assessed through standalone qualifications.

The majority of respondents (70%, n=133) believed that other skills (Problem-Solving, Self-Management, Working with Others) and employability skills should be included. These respondents were then asked how they should be included, and the majority (60.6%, n=80) proposed they should be delivered within subject qualifications. 21.2% (n=28) felt they should be assessed within subject qualifications. 18.2% (n=24) recommended that they should be assessed through standalone qualifications.

**Assessment**

Respondents who supported the proposal to develop new 14–16 qualifications for N. Ireland were asked what form assessments should take within a new qualifications system. The majority (70.5%, n=134) called for a combination of modular and linear assessment to suit individual subjects. Such respondents believed that this would suit different learning styles (n=6). One teacher felt that a modular approach has to be retained for vocational qualifications.
18.4% (n=35) of respondents indicated their preference for a modular assessment structure. 11.1% (n=21) said they would prefer a linear assessment structure.

Respondents were then asked for their views on internal assessment for 14–16 year old students. Just over half of the respondents (51.1%, n=97) called for limited internal assessment specific to the needs of the subject.

30.5% (n=58) of respondents called for internal assessment (teacher-based) to be included in most subjects. Two respondents indicated that teachers have first-hand knowledge of students and are best suited to carry out assessment.

18.4% (n=35) of respondents did not see a need for any internal assessment.

**4.1.5 Option 4**

GCSEs were introduced in 1986 to facilitate learners of all abilities. They were designed to assess learning at 16 and to be a ‘passport’ to employment. Most learners in N. Ireland now progress to training and further study post-16, either within the same school or with another post-16 provider. Many other countries facilitate a similar transition through school-based assessment and the production of a statement of achievement or school report.

Proposal 4: Remove the emphasis on high-stakes examinations at age 16 – for example externally assessed qualifications in core subjects only and school-based assessment in other subjects.

The majority of respondents to the online review questionnaire (84.1%, n=455) did not support this proposal. Some teachers cited practical issues in the classroom and believed that such an approach would be inconsistent, subjective and open to manipulation (n=62). Similarly, 15 respondents commented that external assessment is the best method for ensuring validity. Others felt that it would be difficult to standardise non-assessed subjects across schools (n=15). Teachers also believed that it would be very stressful assessing all the work and pointed to a huge increase in workload for delivering non-core subjects (n=9). Teachers felt that this would put a lot of pressure on schools (n=6), especially with regards to delivering core subjects. Five respondents were of the opinion that school-based assessment is not an effective discriminator of achievement.

Certain respondents believed that examinations ensure effective standardisation across schools and consistency across the three-country system (n=30). Others felt that the current examination system allows students to make informed decisions about their next step (n=21) and acts as a benchmark (n=17), and that GCSEs are globally recognised qualifications (n=13). Respondents had concerns over equivalencies with other regions (n=7) and the portability and currency of a
new qualification (n=7). Seven respondents stated that external examinations are required to maintain rigour. Others believed that if students have no external examinations to work towards, then the standard of work (n=10) will drop. Sixteen teachers spoke of the importance of having examination experience at this age to prepare for further study or employment.

Thirteen teachers spoke of the importance of having subject choice which is not just in the core subjects. Such respondents believed that this proposal would put less importance on other subjects that do not fall into this category. Six respondents were not convinced that this proposal would provide adequate preparation for A level.

Sixteen respondents believed that there should be formal examination at 16 for those leaving school to enable progression to employment or vocational pathways. Six respondents called for vocational qualifications to be strengthened and given more recognition.

Respondents believed that students would disengage and lose motivation (n=14) if high-stakes examinations were removed at age 16. Similarly, some teachers indicated that examinations act as a motivating factor for students and give them a goal to work towards (n=29). A smaller number of respondents were not convinced that school-based assessments would be deemed acceptable by employers (n=9) or universities (n=5). Sixteen respondents believed that this proposal would create excessive administration for schools. Three respondents viewed this proposal as diluting the aspirations of the Entitlement Framework.

However, 15.9% (n=86) would like to remove the emphasis on high-stakes examinations at age 16. Such respondents were asked a series of further questions.

The respondents were asked whether external assessments should be limited to core subjects. The majority (57%, n=49) did not think external assessment should be limited to core subjects. The remainder (43%, n=37) felt that external assessment should be limited to core subjects; these subjects are listed below:

- Mathematics (n=9); Numeracy (n=2);
- English (n=9); Literacy (n=3);
- Science(s) (n=6); and
- ICT (n=4).

The majority of respondents (72.1%, n=62) believed that a core set of subjects should be identified to be taken by all students. These are listed below:

- Mathematics (n=31); Numeracy (n=3);
- English (n=27); Literacy (n=3);
- Science(s) (n=21);
• ICT (n=13);
• Language(s) (n=12);
• History (n=6);
• English Language (n=4);
• English Literature (n=4);
• Geography (n=4);
• Learning for Life and Work (n=4);
• Physical Education (n=3);
• Communication (n=3);
• Religious Education (n=3);
• Employability (n=2); and
• Citizenship (n=2).

In addition to the question on whether students should take core subjects, those that supported this proposal were asked if there are core subjects in which all students should be assessed. 70.9% (n=61) felt that there were. The subjects identified are listed below:

• Mathematics (n=27); Numeracy (n=4);
• English (n=23); Literacy (n=4);
• Science(s) (n=15);
• ICT (n=10);
• Language(s) (n=5);
• History (n=4);
• English Language (n=4);
• Learning for Life and Work (n=4);
• English Literature (n=2);
• Religious Education (n=2);
• Citizenship (n=2); and
• Geography (n=2).

Respondents were asked if school-based assessment should be used for progression at age 16. The majority (61.6%, n=53) felt that it should be used for some subjects. One such respondent recommended that vocational subjects should contain a mixture of school-based and external assessment.

23.3% (n=20) indicated that school-based assessment should be used for progression at age 16 for all subjects. One respondent indicated that moderation would need to be robust to ensure parity across centres.

15.1% (n=13) believed that school-based assessment should not be used for progression at age 16.
Respondents were asked if externally assessed qualifications should have a clear distinction between achievement at Level 1 and Level 2. Just over half of the respondents (54.1%, n=46) believed that they should.

40% (n=34) were unsure whether externally assessed qualifications should have a clear distinction between achievement at Level 1 and 2. One teacher was unconvinced about whether the distinction is meaningful.

A small number of respondents (5.9%, n=5) felt that externally assessed qualifications should not have a clear distinction between achievement at Level 1 and Level 2.

Respondents were asked if externally assessed qualifications should offer achievement which overlaps between Levels 1 and 2. The majority of respondents (45.9%, n=39) were unsure.

30.6% (n=26) believed that externally assessed qualifications should offer achievement which overlaps between Levels 1 and 2. One such respondent commented that all qualifications that meet the requirements should be equal. A further respondent indicated that there needs to be flexibility within qualifications to recognise the strengths and interests of all students. One teacher believed that this will avoid ‘writing off’ many young people at the age of only 14. 23.5% (n=20) of respondents did not think that externally assessed qualifications should offer achievement which overlaps between Levels 1 and 2.

Respondents were asked if Cross-Curricular Skills (Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT) should be the externally assessed qualifications. Just over half of the respondents (53.5%, n=46) did not believe that Cross-Curricular Skills should be the externally assessed qualifications; 46.5% (n=40) did support this suggestion.

The majority of respondents (68.6%, n=59) believed that Other Skills such as Problem-Solving, Self-Management, Working with Others and employability skills should be included in qualifications. These respondents were asked how they should be included. 60.3% (n=35) felt that they should be included as skills delivered within all subjects. 22.4% of respondents (n=13) believed that they should be assessed through standalone qualifications. 17.2% (n=10) of respondents indicated their preference for them to be included as skills in externally assessed subjects.

31.4% (n=27) of respondents did not think that these Other Skills should be included.
Assessment
65.9% (n=56) of respondents who supported this proposal felt that externally assessed subjects should be assessed via a combination of modular and linear assessment. Teachers believed that a combination would suit certain subjects (n=5).

23.5% (n=20) indicated that externally assessed subjects should be assessed via modular assessment. 10.6% (n=9) of respondents believed that externally assessed subjects should be assessed via linear assessment.

4.2 Preferred Option for 14–16 Qualifications
At the end of the 14–16 section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to select their preferred option for 14–16 qualifications in N. Ireland in the short to medium term and in the longer term. Listed below are the responses for each option.

4.2.1 Proposal 1: Retain GCSEs in Line with the Policy Direction in England
Short to medium term
27.5% (n=149) of respondents would like to retain GCSEs in line with policy direction in England in the short to medium term. Some (n=7) believed that it would be disadvantaging students who want to go to university in England if we did not follow this policy. Other respondents indicated that this is necessary to maintain standards (n=14) and five commented that an alternative qualification would lack any real currency. Ten respondents agreed with discontinuing controlled assessment.

Longer term
Just over one-quarter (26.1%, n=141) of respondents would like to retain GCSEs in line with policy direction in England in the longer term. Certain respondents were in favour of maintaining standards in line with England (n=6).

4.2.2 Proposal 2: Retain GCSEs with Amendments to Reflect the Needs of N. Ireland Educational Policies and the N. Ireland Economy
Short to medium term
The majority of respondents (61.7%, n=334) preferred the option of retaining GCSEs with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies and the N. Ireland economy.

Longer term
The majority of respondents (47.6%, n=257) preferred the option of retaining GCSEs with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies,
and the N. Ireland economy. Certain teachers indicated that any changes made should suit regional needs (n=6).

4.2.3 Proposal 3: Develop New 14–16 Qualifications for N. Ireland

**Short to medium term**
4.8% (n=26) of respondents favoured the option of developing new 14–16 qualifications for N. Ireland that retain features of GCSE qualifications.

**Longer term**
17.2% (n=93) of respondents favoured the option of developing new 14–16 qualifications for N. Ireland that retain features of GCSE qualifications.

4.2.4 Proposal 4: Remove the Emphasis on High-stakes Examinations at Age 16 – for Example Externally Assessed Qualifications in Core Subjects Only and School-Based Assessment in Other Subjects

**Short to medium term**
A small number of respondents (2.4%, n=13) would like to remove the emphasis on high-stakes examinations at age 16. One respondent believed it would provide an opportunity for learners to achieve a broader base of qualifications.

**Longer term**
A small number of respondents (5.6%, n=30) would like to remove the emphasis on high-stakes examinations at age 16.

4.2.5 None of the Proposals

**Short to medium term**
The remaining respondents (3.5%, n=19) indicated that they did not support any of the proposals outlined.

**Longer term**
The remaining respondents (3.5%, n=19) indicated that they did not support any of the proposals outlined.

4.3 16–18 Options

4.3.1 Background
N. Ireland, England and Wales currently operate a common qualifications system in which the main qualifications offered to learners at age 18 are A levels. A levels are mostly studied full-time by 16–18 year olds and are usually studied over two
years. Currently AS units are taken at the end of the first year of study of the overall qualification, followed by A2 units at the end of the second year. Attainment across all AS and A2 units gives the overall A level grade. Students can repeat individual units once. The AS level can be taken as a qualification in its own right: it is worth half of an A level. Recent months have seen proposals for substantial developments within each individual jurisdiction, which may result in policy divergence on A levels.

4.3.2 Option 1

The Coalition Government in England is in the process of reviewing A levels for use in England. The AS qualification in England is to be a standalone, one-year, linear qualification not linked to A level. A level will be a two-year linear qualification. Wales has recommended keeping AS as part of A level. The Department of Education has consulted on this issue in N. Ireland. Officials in England are also considering how universities collectively can be involved in the design and development of A levels, initially for some subjects with first teaching from September 2015. Subjects will require university involvement in their development to be approved for offer at A level. A number of vocationally related qualifications previously taught in England will no longer attract funding in English schools.

Proposal 1: Retain A levels in line with policy direction in England

The majority of respondents (64.7%, n=350) did not support following the policy direction for A levels in England. Many of the qualitative comments were critical of the move to decouple the AS from the A2, with many viewing the current model as an effective bridge between two different strands of learning (n=64). Respondents (n=18) also outlined their opposition to the reduction in funding for vocationally related qualifications. Other respondents felt that the linear structure does not cater for a range of learning styles (n=14) and indicated that the modular system is a more accurate assessment of students' abilities and skills (n=5). A further five respondents called for the removal of January modules. Eight respondents were critical of Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, and believed that his policy is politically driven. Five respondents labelled the linear structure as 'outdated' and 'draconian'. Six respondents called for CCEA to carry out further consultation to ensure that an informed decision is made.

35.3% (n=191) of respondents would like to retain A levels in line with policy direction in England. Such respondents (n=26) stressed the importance of retaining A levels in line with policy direction in England to ensure comparability and portability and to avoid disadvantaging N. Ireland students applying to UK universities. Other respondents felt that the policy direction in England will provide rigour (n=7), and a small number of respondents (n=5) stressed the importance of
strengthening alternative qualification options for 16 year olds who choose not to take A levels.

4.3.3 Option 2

A levels are currently offered on a three-country basis. Common rules (criteria) are set out for A levels at qualification level and subject level. This system does not facilitate regional differences. The Entitlement Framework policy in N. Ireland aims to provide a broad and balanced curriculum for learners post-16, ensuring that they have access to a minimum number of courses, one-third of which must be applied (where knowledge, understanding and skills can be developed through practical demonstration and/or in a context related to employability). Learners in N. Ireland follow a 14–16 statutory curriculum which includes subjects and skills which may be considered necessary to meet their needs post-16.

Proposal 2: Retain A levels with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies and the needs of the N. Ireland economy

29.3% (n=158) of respondents would not like to retain A levels with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies and the needs of the N. Ireland economy. Certain respondents said that they would prefer to follow policy direction in England to maintain currency and ensure that qualifications are portable (n=32) whilst others had concerns about equivalences with other regions (n=23). Certain respondents (n=13) felt that it would be too narrow and limiting to have a qualification that reflects the needs of N. Ireland alone. Nine respondents believed that a linear structure offers a more robust and rigorous qualification. Five respondents were critical of the Entitlement Framework. Five respondents would like to see a system that offers more breadth, and some pointed to both the Scottish and Republic of Ireland models.

70.7% (n=382) of respondents would like to retain A levels with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies, and the needs of the N. Ireland economy. These respondents were asked a series of additional questions.

The majority (81.5%, n=312) believed that AS qualifications should be retained as part of the full A level.

A smaller number of respondents indicated that AS qualifications should be standalone qualifications only (11.5%, n=44) or removed completely (7%, n=27).

Assessment

Respondents were asked what form assessment should take. Just over half of the respondents (54.3%, n=208) would prefer a combination of modular and linear assessment to suit individual subjects. A small number of respondents said they
would welcome the flexibility of being able to choose for individual subjects (n=4) and recognised that subjects are diverse in nature (n=7).

28.7% (n=110) of respondents felt that assessment should be modular. Ten respondents felt that there should only be modules available in May/June each year and that there should be no January examinations. Certain respondents preferred the unitised method of assessment, believing it to provide a more consistent approach (n=5).

17% (n=65) of respondents believed that assessment should be linear.

55.9% (n=214) of respondents recommended limited internal assessment specific to the needs of the subject. However, five respondents indicated that maintaining professional integrity is an important aspect of internal assessment. Eight respondents believed that assessment should be specific to subject needs. Just over one-quarter of respondents (25.6%, n=98) did not believe there should be any internal assessment. Such respondents indicated that internal assessment can be open to abuse (n=6). A smaller number of respondents (18.5%, n=71) would like internal assessment (teacher-based) included in most subjects.

**Skills**
The majority of respondents (69.2%, n=265) believed that qualifications for 16–18 year olds should include Communication skills.

59.3% (n=227) of respondents felt that qualifications for 16–18 year olds should include Using Mathematics skills.

62.1% (n=238) of respondents felt that qualifications for 16–18 year olds should include ICT skills.

Respondents were also asked whether 16–18 qualifications should include other skills. This drew a mixed response, with just over half (50.9%, n=195) believing that other skills should not be included.

49.1% (n=188) felt that 16–18 qualifications should include other skills. These included:

- Literacy (n=7);
- Communication (n=7);
- Problem-Solving (n=6);
- Employability Skills (n=6);
- Working with Others (n=5);
- ICT (n=4);
- Life Skills (n=4);
- Research (n=3);
• Critical Thinking (n=3);
• Written Communication (n=3);
• Practical Skills based on subject (such as Science) (n=3); Practical Skills (n=2);
• Numeracy (n=3); Mathematics (n=2);
• Financial Management (n=3);
• Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities (n=3);
• Independent Learning (n=2);
• Careers Advice (n=2); and
• Presentation Skills (n=2).

Five respondents made the comment that different skills will develop naturally depending on the nature of the subject.

These respondents were then asked how these skills should be included at ages 16–18. The majority of respondents (55.9%, n=160) said they should be taught within A levels.

24.5% (n=70) of respondents would like them taught and assessed through standalone qualifications. A smaller number of respondents (19.6%, n=56) felt that other skills should be assessed within A levels.

Respondents were asked if skills development should be required to complement the A level subject offer, for example a post-16 general qualification in Skills. 53% (n=203) of respondents felt that skills development should be required to complement the A level subject offer, whilst 47% (n=180) did not.

4.3.4 Option 3

Scotland and Republic of Ireland have individual qualifications. Wales is further developing the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma, which consists of core components (skills, Wales-based, personal and social, and work-related education) alongside qualifications currently on offer, for example A levels, AS levels and Diplomas. Internationally, qualifications systems can differ on a regional basis within countries. Many post-16 systems have a greater breadth of subjects studied (ranging from five to 13 subjects), as well as requiring the study of some compulsory subjects. A level qualifications support progression to university courses, along with other Level 3 courses offered in England, Wales, N. Ireland and elsewhere. Qualification design can take account of: the needs of the learner; suitable assessment methods; delivery of the qualification; and the inclusion and assessment of appropriate skills.

New qualifications at 16–18 designed specifically for N. Ireland could take account of these aspects in relation to our educational, economic and societal needs. We
would continue working with other jurisdictions to ensure comparability using a National Qualifications Framework.

**Proposal 3: Develop new 16–18 qualifications for N. Ireland that retain features of A level qualifications**

The majority of respondents (63.6%, n=344) did not support the proposals for new qualifications developed for N. Ireland that retain features of A level qualifications. Such respondents explained that they prefer a standardised approach aligned with England to ensure parity with other regions (n=38) and currency and portability (n=11). Certain teachers believed A levels to be a robust and globally recognised qualification that they would want to retain (n=35). Similarly, nine respondents felt that a N. Ireland qualification would not have the same currency or portability.

Fourteen respondents explained that N. Ireland is too small to have separate qualifications. It was felt that a N. Ireland only qualification would pose problems of standards for university admissions (n=8). A smaller number of respondents believed that it would prove too costly (n=6) to develop new qualifications for N. Ireland.

Eleven respondents made the general comment that a new qualification is not necessary. Other respondents (n=20) felt that the current system just needs a few minor modifications, but they did not specify what these would be. Certain respondents (n=7) complained that there has been too much change in the education sector in recent years and called for a period of stability.

36.4% (n=197) of respondents indicated that they would like new qualifications developed for N. Ireland that retain features of A level qualifications. These respondents were asked a series of additional questions, which are outlined below.

Respondents were asked if students should study more subjects than they currently do at ages 16–18, in less depth. Responses were split on this question, with a slight majority (54.3%, n=107) not favouring this option. 45.7% (n=90) believed that students should study more subjects than they currently do at ages 16–18, in less depth.

Respondents were then asked if students should study a small number of subjects (for example three) in depth at ages 16–18. Just over 54% (n=54.8%, n=108) of respondents agreed with this approach; 45.2% (n=89) did not.

The majority of respondents (73.1%, n=144) did not believe that the study of some subjects should be compulsory at post-16.

A smaller number (26.9%, n=53) did believe that some subjects should be compulsory, and these are listed below:

- Mathematics (n=26); Numeracy (n=5);
• English (n=20); Literacy (n=4);
• ICT (n=10);
• Language(s) (n=6);
• Communication (n=6);
• Mathematics for Life/Social Mathematics Qualification (n=3);
• Science (n=3);
• Life Skills (n=2); and
• Financial Capability (n=2).

Just over 70% (70.6%, n=139) of respondents felt that there should be a one-year, AS-type qualification as part of a full-time 16–18 subject qualification.

Respondents were then asked if there should be one-year standalone subject qualifications. Respondents were split on this, with 50.3% (n=99) agreeing that there should. 64.5% of respondents (n=127) indicated that there should be two-year standalone subject qualifications.

The next question asked if qualifications should be introduced at 16–18 that can be taken over one or two years, at different levels, depending on learner needs (such as Higher and Advanced Higher in Scotland). 77.7% (n=153) favoured such an approach.

**Assessment**
The next section asked what form assessment should take. The majority of respondents (65%, n=128) would prefer a combination of modular and linear assessment to suit individual subjects.

21.8% (n=43) of respondents favoured a modular assessment approach. A smaller number of respondents (13.2%, n=26) believed assessment should be linear.

57.4% (n=113) of respondents recommended limited internal assessment specific to the needs of the subject. 19.3% (n=38) of respondents did not believe that there should be any internal assessment.

23.4% (n=46) of respondents felt that internal assessment (teacher-based) should be included in most subjects.

**Skills**
The majority of respondents (74.6%, n=147) believed that qualifications for 16–18 year olds should include Communication skills.

65% (n=128) of respondents felt that qualifications for 16–18 year olds should include Using Mathematics skills.
Just over 71% (71.4%, n=140) of respondents felt that qualifications for 16–18 year olds should include ICT skills.

Respondents were also asked whether 16–18 qualifications should include other skills. 58.4% (n=115) believed that other skills should be included. Comments included:

- Literacy (n=6);
- Numeracy (n=5);
- Employability (n=4);
- Teamwork (n=4);
- Organisational Skills (n=2);
- Presentation Skills (n=2);
- Problem-Solving (n=2);
- Entrepreneurship (n=2);
- Personal Skills (n=2);
- Communication (n=2);
- Scientific Skills (n=2);
- Meeting Deadlines (n=2);
- ICT (n=2);
- Thinking Skills (n=2);
- Language(s) (n=2);
- Critical Thinking (n=2); and
- Employability Skills (n=2).

These respondents were then asked how these skills should be included at ages 16–18. 61.2% (n=93) said they should be taught within subjects. Nearly one-quarter (24.3%, n=37) of respondents would like them taught and assessed through standalone qualifications. A smaller number of respondents (14.5%, n=22) felt that other skills should be assessed within subjects.

The next question asked if skills development should be required as part of the 16–18 qualifications offer – e.g. post-16 general qualifications in mathematics, English and ICT. The majority of respondents (59.4%, n=117) believed that skills development should be required as part of the 16–18 qualifications offer.

### 4.4 Preferred Option for 16–18 Qualifications

At the end of the consultation questionnaire, respondents were asked to select their preferred option for 16–18 qualifications in N. Ireland in the short to medium and the longer term. Listed below are the responses for each option.

#### 4.4.1 Proposal 1: Retain A levels in line with policy direction in England
Short to medium term
27.4% (n=148) of respondents outlined this as their preferred option for 16–18 qualifications in N. Ireland in the short to medium term. Such respondents (n=10) commented that it is important to have consistency to ensure parity with the English system.

Longer term
Just over one-quarter of respondents (25.1%, n=136) indicated that they would like to retain A levels in line with policy direction in England.

4.4.2 Proposal 2: Retain A levels with Amendments to Reflect the Needs of N. Ireland Educational Policies and the Needs of the N. Ireland Economy

Short to medium term
The majority of respondents (61.7%, n=334) preferred the option of retaining A levels with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies and the N. Ireland economy.

Longer term
Just under half of the respondents (48.2%, n=261) preferred the option of retaining A levels with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies, and the N. Ireland economy.

4.4.3 Proposal 3: Develop New 16–18 Qualifications for N. Ireland that Retain Features of A level Qualifications

Short to medium term
A small number of respondents (5.7%, n=31) favoured the option of developing new 16–18 qualifications for N. Ireland that retain features of A level qualifications.

Longer term
21.4% (n=116) of respondents favoured the option of developing new 16–18 qualifications for N. Ireland that retain features of A level qualifications.

4.4.4 None of the Proposals

Short to medium term
The remaining respondents (5.2%, n=28) indicated that they did not support any of the proposals outlined.

Longer term
A small number of respondents (5.2%, n=28) indicated that they did not support any of the proposals outlined.
Section 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

Feedback to the GCSE and A level qualification Review suggests that stakeholders are content to maintain GCSE and A level qualifications if they are adapted to meet the needs of N. Ireland education policy and the economy.

The majority of respondents to the consultation saw GCSEs as providing progression to A level, further and higher education, work placement and employment. A further view expressed throughout the Review was that GCSEs provide preparation for life after school, act as a performance measure and provide an indication of young people’s strengths and weaknesses. Despite the majority view that GCSEs can prepare students for the future, a number of respondents suggested that the GCSE qualification does not adequately prepare students for A level study or for work and is not suitable for all learners. Many believed that GCSEs need to support literacy and numeracy development and provide additional skills such as problem-solving, creative thinking and analytical skills.

34.1% of respondents to the first questionnaire did not believe that current GCSE qualifications meet the needs of students, and over a quarter felt that they do not meet the needs of teachers, employers or further and higher education. This strongly suggests that GCSEs need revised in order to meet the needs of stakeholders. It is clear that despite the majority of respondents preferring to retain GCSEs, the qualification suite should be revised to ensure that it is able to provide appropriate skills for students’ progression to further study or work and enables students to show their achievements. Research respondents suggested that by aligning the skills from the Northern Ireland curriculum with Key Stage 4 and by including additional skills, GCSEs will be more relevant for stakeholders and will provide all students with a valuable and celebrated qualification.

The research participants were more satisfied with the current A level qualification, with the majority opting for retaining A levels, again with amendments that reflect the needs of N. Ireland education policies and the N. Ireland economy. The majority of respondents believed the A level qualification to be robust, demanding, and most felt that it has appropriate breadth and depth to allow students to perform to the best of their abilities. A further commendation was that the A level qualification is portable, relevant and respected worldwide, thus affording maximum progression opportunities for students. However, the research has shown that over 25% of respondents to the initial questionnaire do not believe that A level qualifications meet the needs of students, employers and further and higher education. Much of the criticism related to A level qualification structure, resit opportunities, content of specific subjects and the lack of additional skills needed for further study and employment.
A large proportion of the research participants do not believe that current A levels reflect the achievement of all learners. Issues were raised related to grading concerns between subjects and the overall qualification structure. Respondents to the consultation preferred to keep the option of combined linear and modular choice at A level and the vast majority backed the AS/A2 qualification structure, stressing that this was an appropriate method of showing and monitoring progression.

This option has been supported by a recent ministerial announcement that also addressed resit concerns. Following a separate Department of Education consultation the Education Minister, John O'Dowd, announced on 20 May that: ‘I have decided to retain the current AS/A2 modular structure but there will be no January resits opportunity for new A level students from September 2013.’

The findings to the GCSE and A level consultation show that whilst stakeholders have reservations about changes to qualifications in England, a large number are concerned that moving from a three-country qualification system to a N. Ireland system may create comparability and portability issues and could therefore disadvantage students. These concerns may be exacerbated following the announcement from the English Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove: that there is such a gap between the English reforms in GCSE and the system in Wales and N. Ireland that there may have to be a split in the three-country approach. If the recommendation is to maintain GCSE and A level qualifications in N. Ireland, it is important that schools, parents and students are reassured that this will provide comparability with England.

The research report has provided a large quantity of evidence that enables recommendations for important changes to be made in the future. The research was representative of the teaching and education communities. However, despite the offer of multiple opportunities for employer engagement, this group was underrepresented in the research. More information from employers would help establish a greater understanding of their needs and this would enhance qualification provision.

Details on assessment methods, additional skills, the structure of qualifications, and examination opportunities have been provided by stakeholders along with their choices for future qualifications in N. Ireland. The research also identified areas for further review, specifically alternative pathways for students, vocational qualifications and qualification routes for students for whom GCSE and A level qualifications are not appropriate.

The research has highlighted a number of issues. Recommendations from the findings are in the main body of the ‘Review of GCSE and A Level Qualifications Final Report: June 2013’. The findings suggest that additional, focused research is
required to allow for further clarity on some of the issues identified in this report and to ensure that all qualifications are apposite at subject level. It is therefore recommended that further research in the following areas is undertaken to support the main recommendations:

- A subject-specific structure: including tiering, weighting of controlled assessment, modularity and linearity.
- Viable alternatives for those students not obtaining a C at GCSE.
- Continued engagement to ensure that changes to GCSE and A level qualifications are appropriate and meet the needs of stakeholders.
Appendix B: Expert Group Report

The Expert Group came together for six meetings between January and June 2013 and comprised the following membership.

Dr Norman Apsley (Chair) Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Science Park
Mr Rory Galway Manager, Equal Opportunities & Technical Training, Bombardier Aerospace
Ms Michelle Hatfield Director, Corporate Responsibility and Human Resources, George Best Belfast City Airport
Ms Tracy Meharg Executive Director, Business Solutions, Invest Northern Ireland
Dr Joanne Stuart Director, Attrus Ltd
Dr Janet Brown Chief Executive, Scottish Qualifications Authority
Dr Anne Looney Chief Executive, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
Professor Ellen Douglas-Cowie Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Queen’s University
Professor Denise McAlister Pro-Vice-Chancellor, University of Ulster
Mr David Beck Managing Inspector, Education and Training Inspectorate
Mr David Cunningham Principal, Kilkeel High School
Mr Ronnie Hassard Principal, Ballymena Academy
Ms Imelda Jordan Principal, St. Colm’s College
Mr David Lambon Principal, St. Malachy’s College
Ms Janet Warwick Senior Teacher, Ceara Special School
Dr Brian Doran Director, Southern Regional College
Mr Justin Edwards Deputy Director, Belfast Metropolitan College

Issues considered by the Expert Group reflected and informed those discussed with other stakeholders at consultation events and briefings. An overview summary of the group’s findings and the issues discussed is presented below. Findings are also represented within the group’s SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analyses on the potential options at GCSE and A level, consulted upon in the Review’s second online questionnaire. The group’s discussions guided the
evolution of the Qualifications Issues Paper in Appendix D. Presentations to the group from the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) participants also informed the development of the case studies on the Scottish and Republic of Ireland qualifications systems in Appendix E.

**Themes presented from Expert Group discussions:**
1. Strengths of the current GCSE and A level qualifications.
2. Changes needed to the current qualifications.
3. Linearity and modularity.
4. The purpose of qualifications at ages 16 and 18.
5. Accountability measures.
6. Qualification outcomes.
7. Learning to learn.
8. Meeting the needs of learners.
9. Vocational qualifications.
11. Options for N. Ireland.
13. Republic of Ireland qualifications.
15. Scottish qualifications.
16. Lessons from the qualifications system in Scotland.
17. SWOT analysis on options for N. Ireland.
18. Conclusions.

1. **Strengths of the current GCSE and A level qualifications**

It was noted that the current qualifications have brand value. If A levels are replaced, then this value will be lost and it will take time to build confidence in something new. The importance of brand value in terms of portability was highlighted. Conversely, it was pointed out by one group member that the current brands are already under threat, despite the perceived high value. Another member fed into the portability issue by highlighting that N. Ireland qualifications also need to be accepted in the Republic of Ireland.

University involvement in qualifications’ revision and with subject associations was felt to be a positive. It allows university educationalists to bring individual subject knowledge and experience to the process and to update those who haven’t had exposure regarding what is going on in schools. This can inform Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) regarding the level of knowledge learners will bring to university.

It was noted that the current system works well for those it suits and who do well: it allows them to move within the system and provides currency. Subject demarcation
was felt to be good. Whatever qualification is available in N. Ireland must allow young people to compete for university places in England. However, the fact that England was changing was also noted.

One group member predicted a potential increase in the number of employer assessments if there was no GCSE benchmark to utilise; employers would need to be educated on what the standards mean.

There was a view that the current GCSE and A level qualifications are ‘broadly’ fit for purpose and that N. Ireland shouldn’t ‘throw the good things out’. However, assessment was seen as problematic as it is narrowing the curriculum due to ‘teaching to the test’. It was felt by employers that students are not capable of making links outside of the subject, i.e. application of knowledge and transferable skills. Overall it was agreed that A levels were more ‘fit for purpose’ than GCSEs. If qualifications differ from those in England it was noted that there must be some way to benchmark.

2. Changes needed to the current qualifications

The requirement for alignment of choices with the needs of the economy was discussed. Some group members felt that young people’s choices are being closed off too early. Others felt that there was too much choice at ages 14 to 16 and that there are a core set of skills young people should be developing at that stage. Attainment in line with TIMSS and PIRLS was discussed while, conversely, qualifications’ outcomes are showing a tail of underachievement currently in N. Ireland. The general lack of employability skills was noted. The difficulty learners have with making links and thinking creatively was felt to be an area that needs review, particularly in terms of facilitating progression to university. It was noted that there is no focus on ‘learning to learn’.

There is an impression that qualifications in schools are assessment driven. The view was expressed that skills are drilled out of learners by the time they get to university due to the focus on assessment in schools. The impact of assessment on teaching and learning was felt to be detrimental in terms of narrowing the curriculum. At GCSE it was noted that controlled assessment drives everything in schools. The teacher input into internal assessment was also highlighted as a concern. It was believed that current learner expectations are that they will be ‘told what they have to do’. Students are not getting the chance to develop a love for their studies. It was felt that ‘schools are more than qualifications’; there is perhaps scope for a broader education and room for personal development within the school setting.

It was felt that whilst individually some qualifications are constructed well and are fit for purpose, a more holistic look is needed at how we assess knowledge,
understanding and skills. One teacher noted that qualifications are not the full person and that some good exam candidates are not necessarily independent, creative thinkers. There was general consensus that the qualifications do not meet the needs of all learners.

3. Linearity and modularity

One member of the group felt that the way in which a subject is delivered (modular or linear) should be dependent on the subject itself. There was some consensus within the group that subject delivery should have a degree of flexibility. The group also highlighted that there are developmental differences between boys and girls and that the system should be able to cater for such differences. It was also pointed out that a subject can potentially be delivered in a modular fashion but assessed at the end of the course (i.e. linear assessment). Some felt that there is a risk of linear qualifications being viewed as more robust than modular qualifications. Other group members contested this by pointing out that there is no evidence to suggest that learners who take a modular qualification ‘do any better’ than those who take linear nor that modular delivery is ‘easier’.

Other group members felt that it is the perception of the delivery method that is the problem rather than the reality of the outcomes, and that modularity did not necessarily lead to compartmentalisation. However, some group members felt that if you teach in ‘bits’ and assess in ‘bits’ then this can have a negative impact on teaching time. It was also felt that too much assessment may lead to discontentment with subjects – the ‘love’ of the subject is lost. One of the group members, speaking from a parental perspective, felt that a young student does not have time to engage with a subject and that the teacher will move on regardless (due to pressure to teach to the test/accountability measures).

Additionally, the group felt that the qualification provision in England is aiming to be perceived as more rigorous, hence the change to linear qualifications. This is in line with the above comments as, although a linear system is not necessarily more robust, it does perhaps result in a perception of improved rigour. It was felt that a linear model does not facilitate all and that assessment should be mapped to the needs of subject content rather than assessment driving the subject content.

A few group members felt strongly that resits are creating a certain ‘pattern’ of behaviour amongst learners and that this is being reflected in their work ethic when they go to university. They felt that resits are contributing to the wrong type of attitude towards study, for example ‘why bother now when I can just do it again?’ The consensus was that opportunities for resits should be limited to one per exam/unit.
4. The purpose of qualifications at ages 16 and 18

The overarching theme was that qualifications should help learners grow and progress. Teaching should facilitate the most effective learning for the individual and the system should find a way to assess that. The system should support and develop the skills, knowledge and confidence of the young person, but it was also agreed that qualifications are expected to be all things to many different groups of people.

It was felt that qualifications attest to achievement, give young people something to aspire to, provide a foundation for the next stage of learning and give a passport for progression. The need for consistency was emphasised, across subjects and across years. It was agreed that qualifications should help young people to grow; that they are an end goal, but also that the system should support the development of the young person. It was noted that qualifications are thought of as an end point rather than a springboard for the next stage of learning and that this focus has affected the quality of education.

The group mentioned that five A*–C grades at GCSE (including English and mathematics) are currently a benchmark for employers. An employer stated that they would be interested in understanding the subject and not just the number of grades, but it was felt that there was a lack of employer knowledge as to subject content. One employer described the curriculum as a ‘black hole’. New qualifications have also been introduced and it was felt that most employers have ‘no idea what they are’. It was noted by some members that there is a need for one qualification that is understood by parents and employers. It was agreed that qualifications are used as a baseline: that employers have to draw a line in the rank order of applicants, and that using grade outcomes facilitates this. It was believed that qualifications are a proxy for skills and knowledge and provide a baseline of likely capabilities. Employers take the effectiveness of qualifications on trust but they noted that there are other skills that they look for. It was agreed that there is a tension between the skills desired by industry and the purpose of, and assessment methodologies in, qualifications. The skills of ‘application’, working in groups, and dealing with unfamiliar situations were highlighted as being challenging to assess in examinations.

It was agreed that GCSE is used as a filtering process for return to school/college for post-compulsory education. One member of the group felt that the selection agenda in N. Ireland is probably the biggest hindrance to any real progress in the education system (there was some group consensus on this). At primary level, selection also comes into play; therefore, teaching and assessment of the revised curriculum are affected by this. Some members of the group stated that the focus should be on teaching and learning.
It was questioned whether or not the assessment system can be changed without looking at the accountability framework at the same time. The group discussed whether the focus on assessment should be on results and feeding into league tables as it currently is. It was stressed that there should be a shift to ‘assessment for learning’ rather than ‘assessment of learning’: that there should be a balance of learning outcomes coming from formative assessment. This was relayed with the view that the learning experience cannot change without changing the assessment; it was felt that a redesign of qualifications can drive improvements in teaching practice.

5. Accountability measures

The group pointed out that GCSE outcomes are used to measure a school’s performance. The use of this measure for target setting and Department of Education accountability measures in N. Ireland was debated and felt to not fully reflect the efforts of candidates and schools. The consideration in Scotland of the use of a positive destination for the learner was explained. It was noted that qualifications should be just one in a ‘basket of measures’ which takes into account the distance travelled by the learner. The group mentioned that there is no ‘value added’ aspect mapped into the accountability matrix in N. Ireland and that this should be accounted for somehow. It was questioned what message this system gives to learners who do not achieve five A* to C grades at GCSE. It was asked what the purpose of GCSEs is if all cannot get recognition for their achievements in the qualification.

Concerns were held over the ‘worth’ of Essential Skills (ES) qualifications compared to that of GCSE. One group member queried FE colleges’ acceptance of Essential Skills as an equivalent to GCSE and was particularly concerned about the progression of pupils. Further to the previous point, a group member emphasised that whilst an ES qualification is accepted as an FE entrance criterion, these qualifications are still being devalued by the measurement issue.

It was felt that ‘what is measured is valued’; therefore, if GCSE is the ‘winner’ in terms of performance measures, then this will impact on what every school will choose to offer their pupils. It was acknowledged that accountability measures, whilst needing review, were outside the scope of the terms of reference of this Review. It was counter-acknowledged that accountability measures have an impact on whatever system is in place. In N. Ireland, the group felt that GCSEs are valued (for example by parents) because they are measured.

The group felt that for N. Ireland to change assessment and accountability, cultural and systematic issues need to be resolved (such as the system of selective and non-selective schools). High-end achievement exists with a ‘long tail’ of underachievement, and any system that divides the cohort at age 11/12 will have this structural consequence. A less divided system has less of a tail but to the cost of very
high achievement. It was felt that accountability is driving the outcomes in N. Ireland, but not the desired outcomes. The group accepted that the A*–C benchmark is currently the only way of measuring how successful the education system is, so it is used despite the group not necessarily agreeing with the method.

6. Qualification outcomes

Further to the points above, the group spoke about the need for robust outcomes. A number of members felt that outcomes must match what is expected of each individual learner (i.e. what the learner is capable of realistically achieving). At the same time, there must also be consistency and integrity in the standards across different academic years. It was stressed that one purpose of assessment is to facilitate learning. It is up to stakeholders to find a suitable way of assessing this learning. However, it was questioned whether or not such outcomes will be valued in the ‘esteem hierarchy’. It was felt that for all learners, achievement at the lower levels was not valued – a candidate may have the ability and the application but the assessment tool used often judges them on their ability to write this down.

One group member felt that skills, knowledge and confidence are successfully addressed in universities via appropriate assessment and outcome measures, but that this was not the case for those learners at the lower end of the spectrum/younger learners in general (for example in school settings). It was queried why there were only two levels in the GCSE qualification (Levels 1 and 2) when it was expected to meet the needs of all learners. The five levels of Nationals in Scotland were discussed in terms of their ability to allow all to pass a qualification but at the right level for their ability. Candidates are rewarded for what they can do. The linking of qualifications to age profile was also discussed and whether it is right that all should be moved on at the same time.

7. Learning to learn

Mathematics was provided as an example of a core subject that is fundamental to the economy. It was felt that it is especially important that this subject is comprehensively taught to enable students to apply their knowledge in everyday, working life settings. A principal and an FE representative also felt that qualifications are not just about teaching to allow for further education; learning for life and work is also important. The issue of ‘beyond a qualification’ was discussed in a number of the Expert Group meetings: a general theme of ‘learning to learn’ emerged, and it was felt that this is an important issue which needs addressed within the current education system.

It was questioned whether the Northern Ireland Curriculum was revised to address these issues. Teaching professionals in the group provided some positive comments with regards to the revised curriculum in addressing these issues but felt, however, that this does not ‘follow through’ to GCSE. A principal felt that GCSEs do
not reflect the learner in terms of their additional qualities beyond answering questions on a paper. It was noted that there is a need to address the middle achievers. It was highlighted that there is a tension over Grade C at GCSE; there will always be someone one mark below this grade, hence they miss the ‘benchmark’ despite having similar ability to the C candidate. Additionally, the group pointed out that if you are expecting ‘all to be above average’ then this will inevitably fail; there will always be those below average within a rank-ordered system. It was felt that there is a need to look more holistically at how N. Ireland assesses knowledge, understanding and skills.

The group members discussed the potential of a ‘record of achievement’ as a means of assessment and accreditation. One member felt that such a record could be a passport of skills. It could also be a measure for judging schools as there still has to be an element of accountability. Additionally, such a measure would account for ‘distance travelled’, i.e. value added. Another group member pointed out that if something like this was to be used then it also needs to be understood. Furthermore, the group members discussed a qualification as a ‘product’. It also needs to be documented what has been done to progress to the qualification outcome (i.e. what was done to add value?).

It was also noted that qualifications should not be thought of as an ‘end point’—rather, they should be viewed as a springboard for the next stage of learning. One group member added that the Review should attempt to reshape the quality of education for learners rather than focusing on the end point. The same member reiterated that schools should not be measured on qualifications alone.

8. Meeting the needs of learners

Emphasis was placed on the fact that most learners do not leave education at 16 any more, and it was felt that this point is fundamental to the current Review. The group agreed that there is now a larger cohort with differing ability levels. This needs to be addressed and the diverse learner needs catered for in the qualifications system. It was questioned why some learners go to FE colleges to complete A level qualifications; it was suggested that the purpose of FE provision should be to promote economic growth rather than an institute to deliver academic qualifications to large numbers of learners.

The group felt that not all qualifications can allow for progression to all routes and that an individual qualification cannot be designed in such a way. It is therefore important to inform learners about progression routes relating to different qualifications. The group agreed that when you introduce more flexibility and/or choice into the education system, the need for comprehensive careers advice is greater.
The group also pointed out that universities use qualifications as a filtering mechanism and that with a high number of entrants, such a mechanism is necessary. However, it was felt that A levels are ‘not for everyone’ and that everyone needs to be catered for. Additionally, it was pointed out that there is a high percentage of young people in N. Ireland with no qualifications, i.e. a long tail of underachievement. It was felt that this perhaps reflects disengagement with education, reinforcing the need for qualifications for all. One group member felt that A levels are fit for purpose in terms of being academic qualifications preparing for higher education; however, the same member felt that GCSEs are not fit for purpose and that they do not meet the needs of all learners.

It was highlighted that the achievements of less able learners are not recognised in N. Ireland; for example, a D in GCSE Mathematics could be a huge achievement, depending on the individual learner. Another group member emphasised the potential detrimental mental health effects of not recognising achievement and not valuing all qualifications equally. Learners are leaving the system ‘feeling like a failure’. The group also spoke about those pupils with special educational needs stating there must be more learner focus for individuals who experience atypical levels of difficulty.

Furthermore, the needs of more able learners were discussed by the group; it was felt that a core of subjects builds opportunity for high-end achievers and that qualifications must also cater for high-end achievers. Different learning styles were also discussed. It was agreed there is a need for flexibility in assessment systems and qualifications offered in order to accommodate the understanding in the education system of the different way students learn now. It was also noted that teaching was not just about preparing learners for university, but also for life and work.

9. Vocational qualifications

The qualification system should offer flexibility, but it was felt the Entitlement Framework (EF) was not doing what it should be doing due to ‘vocational’ GCSEs and A levels being introduced. One group member felt vocational qualifications had been ‘stuck on top’ of academic qualifications and that, whilst there is a need for rigorous vocational qualifications, making them academic in nature was not appropriate. It was agreed that vocational qualifications should be valued due to their being driven by the needs of employers and therefore preparing learners for employment and developing the skills needed for work. The ability for learners to see how they are doing as they progress through such qualifications was also valued. Vocational qualifications should provide assessment which allows skills to be developed.
The importance of brand names was discussed, and the negative perception of anything not called GCSE or A level. It was noted that other countries successfully have equally valued vocational and academic pathways for their learners but that such parity does not exist here as yet. It was felt that if it was shown that a vocational qualification route met learner needs, this would be valued over the academic route. One group member stated that highly academic students need access to vocational learning due to the skills this route develops. It was felt that parents need to be involved and need to hear employers saying that they value the other qualifications, to give confidence to the system.

The findings of the Welsh review were discussed, with the focus on how the Baccalaureate facilitates parity across different qualification types. It was noted that the current EF definition of ‘applied’ qualifications here is too broad and needs to be reviewed.

10. Breadth versus depth

The breadth of subjects studied post-16 internationally was discussed. Some group members expressed that they would like to see more breadth in the system here post-16, for example four or five A levels. The group pointed out that a smaller number of subjects inevitably allows for a greater depth and more specialist study. One group member highlighted that when the breadth is increased, a pupil does not get opportunity for in-depth study in a subject that they may be passionate about and that there is limited opportunity for independent study.

The disparity between the breadth of subjects at A level and the equivalent stage in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) (Level 4/5) was noted. In RoI, learners typically study eight subjects at this stage, whereas in N. Ireland it is common to study three subjects. It was questioned if N. Ireland and RoI are studying subjects on a completely different level. A group member highlighted a comparative study carried out by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) which found the Chemistry Leaving Certificate (LC) to be worth approximately two-thirds of an A level Chemistry, with English LC slightly closer to being the equivalent of an A level English. NCCA pointed out that differences in depth will naturally emerge if there are a different number of subjects being studied, as exemplified by the UCAS study.

It was further stated that previous consultations regarding the LC system have shown little support for a reduced number of subjects in the RoI at Level 4/5. Employers appear to like the breadth. Additionally, employers value that certain subjects, such as mathematics, have been studied to an advanced level. Studying English and a language is also seen as beneficial, as conveyed by Irish employers in previous RoI qualification reviews. The group felt that the development of English and mathematical skills was important, but some felt these should be well developed by age 16 and then supported within delivery of subjects post-16. Others
felt that the narrow offer at A level meant that for some learners (depending on their subject choices) development of these skills stopped.

It was suggested that university entrance criteria can encourage students to take a broader range of subjects. High tariff courses in Scotland, such as medicine, require two sciences, mathematics and two other Highers (A level equivalent): academic pupils tend to be channelled this way even if they are not particularly scientific.

It was noted that GCSE and A level qualifications generally assess a narrow range of skills and that this could be strengthened to develop independent research, creative thinking, problem-solving and self-management skills.

11. Options for N. Ireland

The group spoke about a smooth and progressive framework from Key Stage 1 to post-16 qualification provision. It was felt by some teaching professionals in the group that there is a degree of disparity between Key Stages and the transfer from one stage to another is not always as smooth as it should be.

The issue of a progressive framework was highlighted within the context of the potential options for future qualification provision. Some group members felt that there is a certain freedom in having your own system (Option 4). They pointed out that broader qualifications system reviews elsewhere have been able to focus on education from ages 11–18 (or even from primary level). In N. Ireland, however, it was felt that reviewing GCSEs and A levels only meant the focus was limited to the qualifications fitting with whatever is already in place for learners before and after ages 14–18.

One group member pointed out that, in terms of comparison with England, qualifications in N. Ireland are serving the top end of the cohort well. If N. Ireland changed to an independent system, it was questioned how N. Ireland could be benchmarked against England. Furthermore, it was acknowledged that N. Ireland is a small country and that a new qualifications system would be ‘difficult to sell’. It was agreed that there must be some way to benchmark qualifications in N. Ireland.

Other implications of change include the impact on those N. Ireland pupils who are hoping to attend a university in England. A principal within the group stressed that, whatever the outcome of the Review, N. Ireland must allow their young people to compete for university places in England. Additionally, funding and fees will impact upon what is accepted by universities. Another member highlighted that a redesign of the qualifications system could potentially drive the teaching and education in the right direction.
The group discussed the consequences, in terms of change, of adopting Option 1 for 14–16 qualification provision, i.e. ‘retain GCSEs in line with the policy direction in England’; it was pointed out that Option 1 will initiate more change in the N. Ireland system than Option 2, i.e. ‘retain GCSEs with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies and the N. Ireland economy’, despite the fact that Option 2 contains the word ‘amendment’.

The group also spoke about the options for future qualification provision in N. Ireland within the context of the Entitlement Framework. It was felt that Option 1 is in direct conflict with the EF as it would restrict choice. On the other hand, it was also pointed out that the English policy of ‘core subjects’ could create a ‘core’ foundation of subjects upon which to build.

The group also spoke of issues surrounding reducing the number of qualification titles available at GCSE. It was pointed out that the potential policy direction in England regarding a reduction in titles was introducing early narrowing of opportunities. It was felt that, as it stands, N. Ireland learners have a broad choice but that areas are still ‘cut off’ at this stage. Hence, any reduction in choice was viewed as to the detriment of the needs of the learner and would further restrict a currently narrow system. Furthermore, it was felt that there is a need for the alignment of subject and course choices with the needs of the economy. There is currently an issue in N. Ireland with rising unemployment rates. It was felt that there is a need for skills provision in education. The provision of these skills is relevant to both academic and vocational choices. ICT literacy and computer science were identified by the group as important areas of the curriculum in terms of meeting the needs of the economy.

Options for N. Ireland were discussed further through the development of the SWOT analyses in section 17.

12. Change

Cultural issues are present in all systems and one must take into account where the system is starting from. It was felt that these issues make reform difficult. Some group members stated that the system in N. Ireland would be unable to support changes (such as those in RoI), as it stands, with the accountability and cultural issues here. Members agreed that it was difficult to see options for change without considering them within the systems already existing in N. Ireland. Another group member added that there are two departments defining policy for 14–19 year olds and that this also creates challenges when it comes to initiating/adopting change.

The issue of teacher training in any changes to the system was raised. The time it takes to train teachers could take away from classroom time. This potentially creates the paradoxical effect of hampering what is already good by trying to
improve it. It is, therefore, important to use evidence to support any changes to ensure they are worthwhile.

It was noted that the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) identified countries without high-stakes external examinations as the ‘high flyers’.

13. Republic of Ireland qualifications

Background
The Chief Executive of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) presented on the current qualifications system in the Republic of Ireland (RoI). This section summarises the content of the presentation and subsequent group discussion. Further information on the RoI system is available in Appendix E ‘Review of Other Systems’. A number of discussion points, which ensued from the presentation, are also documented (‘lessons from the qualifications system in the Republic of Ireland’).

NCCA noted that the current framework is only becoming embedded now. The Leaving Certificate is spread across Levels 4 and 5 of attainment in the Irish Qualifications Framework. The Junior Cycle, Level 3 (age 15), represents the end of compulsory education – leaving age 16.

RoI has a state awarding authority. The system size is smaller than in England. State education was made free for all in 1968 – European models were used at that time to look at what should be introduced.

The previous focus in RoI had been on input. Currently there is more focus on learner experience. The rationale behind this came from the findings of two studies:

1. An ESRI longitudinal study found that students were less engaged in education when they left post-primary school than when they started that phase. Some found the pace too slow (in streamed groups). Additionally, it was found that what happens in second year sets the direction of whether students will remain engaged or not; there was a trade-off between enjoyment and learning for exams.
2. A PISA study found that RoI students were appearing high on the list of those with unfinished items in PISA tests. They did not have the resilience to keep going when questions became difficult.

Leaving Certificate Cycle
RoI Level 4/5. Students will use six subjects to generate points for their university application, and most study eight subjects. A UCAS comparative study, using Chemistry and English subjects, indicated that the Chemistry Leaving Certificate was worth approximately two-thirds of an A level; English was a bit closer to the equivalent of the A level. Differences will naturally emerge as N. Ireland students
study a smaller number of subjects post-16. There is a focus in RoI on final Leaving Certificate total scores rather than individual subject attainment. Irish is compulsory but all do English, mathematics and a language to ensure that they can matriculate for university. An incentive of +25 points was added to the maximum Leaving Certificate points of 600 to encourage the taking of higher mathematics. Learners taking higher mathematics have a maximum Leaving Certificate point score of 625.

Consultations regarding the Leaving Certificate system have shown little support for a reduced number of subjects in RoI (no place for it in the system or support from employer cohort). RoI employers like the breadth available. In addition to supporting advanced undergraduate students in the relevant subject, they think that everyone studying English, mathematics, and a language to an advanced level is seen as beneficial.

The advantages of breadth were discussed. Six subjects count towards matriculation (six best marks), and most students go for eight. Students tend to use the others as 'backup', for example Ordinary level Irish ‘because they have to do it’. However, there are no resits in the system; it is about how you perform on the day, hence the ‘backup’ subjects are taken seriously. Eight subjects are also reasonable from a school management perspective. The wide range of subjects and ‘backup’ also accommodates a situation when a student isn’t doing as well as they thought they would in particular subjects at that level.

The disadvantages of breadth were felt to be that there isn’t opportunity for in-depth study in a subject. There are limited opportunities for independent study, with no internal assessment, for example there are two 3.5 hour papers in English. The high number of external exams puts huge pressure on students. There are also gender issues of linear assessment, with boys tending not to be as good in exams as girls are at this stage of development. Special circumstances also become difficult, for example with the high number of exams there is the potential to miss one and have to do the entire series again the next year (the outcome will depend on the circumstances and the school principal – approximations can be made based on previous exams where applicable).

The Leaving Certificate is used for transfer and progression. Some system changes are currently being considered, including changes to the grading system to have broader grade bands, and work to make examination papers less predictable.

**Junior Certificate Cycle**

Junior Certificate, Level 3, was also 100% examined. However, NCCA noted that the Junior Certificate was now felt to be inappropriate to, and, undermining of, the learning that it was trying to measure. The purpose that it served has also gone – over 90% of the Irish cohort remains in school, until the end of upper secondary, for the Leaving Certificate. There is not a progression route to further education. This
may have to be looked at down the line. Schools in RoI tend to be of a similar size to those in N. Ireland. Schools can radically differ in size throughout the region which affects what qualifications they can offer. Large schools can support small schools via online teaching of specialist subjects.

Junior Certificate recommendations from a consultation beginning in 2009 were:
(i) include fewer subjects (settled on ten, previously up to 14); and
(ii) introduce some school-based assessment measures.

With a long-standing system of 100% external assessment, suggestions of internal measures were met with ill feeling from teachers. This was a huge cultural shift, and there was a lack of experience of this kind of assessment. It was highlighted that teachers were worried about being held directly accountable for outcomes and that they could perhaps face ‘backlash’ from parents. Teachers are in direct contact with the parents of learners; this is not the case for an examination and awarding body. ‘Delving into the unknown’ was a worry for RoI teachers, and there was an issue with increased working hours and added pressure. It was suggested that there was a likelihood that school-based assessment would be filtered out if any degree of national examination remained in the system. The solution was to go 100% internal assessment and phase out examinations. Those who leave school after this cycle will now get statements of achievement. This is not a national certificate. Schools will issue their own certificates, which will confirm that secondary education has been completed and Level 3 qualification framework requirements fulfilled.

The internal assessment at Level 3 is to allow teachers to concentrate on quality learner feedback and get away from ‘teaching to the test’. Tests remain but the high stakes are taken away. NCCA took advice from providers of other internally assessed systems internationally. Tests and tasks are designed by NCCA with moderation across subjects (subject specifications also issued by NCCA). A bank of tasks can be used for the 40% assessment throughout the year, with an end-of-year task worth 60%. It was felt important to look at the output rather than the input to discuss about the quality of students’ work, as this should lead to better quality learning and assessment.

NCCA will offer schools standardised tests in English, mathematics and science (electronically marked). These are already in place in primary schools for literacy and numeracy and focus on monitoring and checking learner progress. The focus is on parental reporting rather than feeding into a national qualification, i.e. marking the work (not the child) against agreed standards.

Resources are limited but money has been ring-fenced for teacher training and professional development. Principals are used to external exams. Internal assessment brings about more responsibility in terms of the moderation process,
school management and so on. There are also wider issues for RoI teachers such as pay cuts or more time at work (amongst the potential impacts of this change).

Consultation on the size of the School Certificate looked at eight subjects. Teachers did not like this as there was a fear of, for example, history being ‘squeezed out’. The idea of ten subjects was viewed as better, i.e. ten subjects presented on the School Certificate (nine plus two short courses, or eight plus four short courses). The individual subjects are still pivotal in that they remain the focus of how teachers are trained.

Short courses (100 hours) can be school-designed (via an NCCA template). This evoked initial negative feedback from teachers, but there have been subsequent positive outcomes in terms of developing industry links, such as bio pharmaceuticals, tourism and coding. There are also partnerships developing with universities for course design. This puts a subject into context and may stimulate interest in a subject that wouldn’t otherwise have emerged. A framework exists to accredit short courses at school level. Schools must publish courses, examples of work, and examples of levels (standards for each level). This places a high degree of trust in schools which could be seen as a risk.

14. Lessons from the qualifications system in the Republic of Ireland

There are fundamental differences between N. Ireland and RoI: namely, pupils leaving at age 16 in N. Ireland can go to FE colleges whereas in RoI there is no FE system, hence the purposes of qualifications at ages 14–16 in RoI may be different.

The purpose of Level 4/5 education in RoI is for transfer and progression to university, and this stage is assessed by (predominantly) external assessment as a result. Level 3 (the equivalent of GCSE, the Junior Certificate) was previously assessed by 100% external assessment, but this is now changing as the purpose of the Junior Certificate has now changed, with the high percentage of the Irish cohort choosing to remain in school until the end of upper secondary school – Level 4/5. Statements of Achievement are the method of meeting the needs of those pupils who leave after Level 3 in RoI.

The group noted that a high number of external examinations (due to the increased breadth) potentially place a vast amount of pressure on pupils; this point was accepted as generally true in the experience of NCCA.

NCCA explained that internal assessment at Level 3 in RoI intends to create a concentration on quality feedback, rather than ‘teaching to the test’. A test setting can still be used as an assessment method, but the stakes have been removed to allow a different focus to teaching. The NCCA is learning from other internally
assessed systems, such as Queensland, Australia, in order to try to create a system with better quality learning and assessment.

It was highlighted that previous systems that tried to introduce school-based assessment eventually filtered it out. It did not tend to work if any degree of national assessment remained. The solution was to go 100% internal assessment and execute a process of phasing out external assessment. As part of the phasing out of external assessment, NCCA will be offering schools standardised tests in English, mathematics, and science at Level 3 (automated marking). These are currently in place in primary schools, for literacy and numeracy, as a measure for checking progress in core subjects.

NCCA elaborated on the internal assessment techniques that RoI will be utilising. The tests and tasks are designed by the NCCA, with moderation across subjects. It was questioned how RoI will ensure that the internally assessed system is delivering. There was a concern that there may initially be a potential difficulty in standardisation as some schools may report in a realistic fashion but others may be ‘hopeful’. NCCA responded to this by saying that some degree of standardisation still exists with the national tests in numeracy, literacy and science (mentioned previously).

It was acknowledged that there are funding issues surrounding internal assessment; however, RoI has ring-fenced funding for training for this purpose. There is a programme in place for employers on how to read the School Certificate. There is also a digital portfolio for every pupil to show what they can do. Additionally, the marketing of changes is important for stakeholders; RoI have used a marketing campaign that highlights ‘innovation and identity’.

The greater power being given to schools was outlined: for example, permission to design their own short courses which meet the needs of their pupils in the context of their local economy. NCCA explained that the kind of industry involvement outlined in the example above previously emerged at age 16/17, but now it is happening at age 12/13, and it is perhaps more effective at this stage.

It was pointed out that cross-party support is necessary for educational reform to happen. It was noted that party members in RoI eventually bought in to the idea of ‘shaking up the system’. Broad public support is also necessary. It was highlighted that consulting with teachers is crucial in order for them to be supportive of changes.

Accountability in RoI has always been ‘light touch’– accountability is narrative and reports are published by the inspectorate. There are no government league tables and accountability is now local. NCCA highlighted a report carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) which states
that improvement and development must come first and accountability second – accountability ‘drives the learning out’.

The group spoke of ‘below a Grade C being viewed as a fail’ and questioned what happens to the pupils who do not reach a minimum standard at Level 3. NCCA explained that the Junior Certificate has never been a threshold qualification, hence progression occurs regardless. There is a six-point reporting scale plus ‘not achieved’ – this is applicable to those who did not engage with schooling. All effort is acknowledged. Even though there are no high-stakes examinations, work, or lack of, is still shown to have consequences. Another example of this is that RoI pupils have to keep to deadlines (mirroring the workplace). Pupils will not be ‘chased’ for work. The idea is to learn this discipline at an earlier age.

15. Scottish qualifications

Background
The Head of Policy at the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) gave a presentation on the current and previous systems in place for 14–18 years olds in Scotland. A summary is documented below. The presentation also informed the development of the content on the Scottish system in Appendix E. A number of discussion points, which emerged from the presentation, are also documented (‘lessons from the qualifications system in Scotland’).

Qualifications – General
There are 12 levels on the SCQF (Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework). The levels aim to cover a wide ability range, from severe learning difficulties up to postgraduate/PhD Level. SQA aims to support a range of pathways for progression which facilitate a variety of destinations and encourage lifelong learning. Past reviews have seen an increased strengthening of different pathways and the valuing of different pathways for different learners. There is still some work to be done but this is the end goal. SQA works in conjunction with other organisations to promote the idea that qualifications are all within one framework and that they can therefore all lead you to the same place via a variety of different routes. This is viewed as important in the Scottish system.

Assessment – General
SQA aims to ensure that qualifications are fit for purpose and reliably assessed. They:

- work on qualifications development;
- validate qualifications;
- ensure that assessment is correct; and
- ensure that assessment support is available for schools.
With an independent system there is no need to ensure comparability across Awarding Organisations, but the comparability across subjects year on year is reviewed. There are ongoing efforts to ensure that the assessment regime is practical and can be effectively delivered by centres. Assessment must also validly and reliably assess the right set of skills and knowledge. One of the aims of the ‘Assessment for learning programme’ is ensuring that assessment does not distort learning.

National Qualifications
These are general qualifications within schools comprising 160 notional class-based learning hours and worth 24 SCQF points. Credit is also awarded for learning that is done independent of school (pupils are expected to independently do a number of hours at home). Nationals are unit-based, generally three units per course, with an overall course assessment. Units are internally assessed by a teacher on pass/fail basis. Units are competence based and learners must show competence in all requirements to get a course award on their certificate. The units aim to ensure breadth. The course assessment draws upon learning from across the units, for example synoptic assessment, integration/application of skills, and requirement for greater depth. It can be an exam, assignment, project, practical activity or performance, depending on the nature of the subject. For more practical subjects, it makes more sense for the teacher to assess it and for SQA to quality assure it. Recent reviews are pushing to have less of an exam element and more internal/practical assessment. The course assessment is graded A–D* (below D = no award). SQA also pointed out that the new Scottish qualifications are only graded (A–D) at Levels 5, 6 and 7 (legacy Intermediate 2/Credit Standard Grade, Highers and Advanced Highers respectively), which means that only the levels that are used for progression to further study are graded. In Scotland, grades A to C are traditionally seen as a pass but grade D is also officially a pass.

New qualifications
Standard Grades are being replaced with National Qualifications. Previously there was a framework for age 5–14 with levels A–F, with A being the lowest, then standard Grades 1–7 (one is highest, with additional FGC – foundation, general and credit), then national courses, graded A–D. This created employer confusion. Now there is one framework that is easier to understand. The Curriculum for Excellence in 2004 aimed to transform learning aged 3–18 and create more choice and flexibility to meet learner needs. At ages 3–15 there is a set of broad curriculum outcomes. Qualifications from 15–18 then aim to follow on from this to promote a seamless progression from ages 3–18.

In 2005/2006 a consultation on qualifications was undertaken. The outcomes indicated that above all else there was a need to make sure progression was smooth, with no gaps and no repetition of learning. It was also noted that there was a need for more flexibility of learning and assessment to suit individual learners.
Qualifications were viewed as being too content heavy and being knowledge based rather than equipping learners for the world of work or further study. There was a need to assess more skills: subject skills, higher-order skills, and generic skills. This was not a ‘throwing out’ of knowledge: rather it was about the balance of subject skills and understanding needed, and this varies across subjects.

**Curriculum for Excellence and assessment**

Breadth, depth and application were identified as key areas of development in qualifications. These aspects were used to build upon the existing National Qualifications and develop new courses. Skills and knowledge were redefined in subjects. Assessment was needed to support learning and motivate and challenge learners. More open and flexible assessment was developed to try to ensure more room for the professional judgement of teachers. This does make it more difficult to ensure standards are set and maintained. Guidance must be clear, with lots of support and lots of professional discussion.

The changes meant work had to be done to deal with teacher workload. A national assessment resource of example tasks was developed to support the changes. The assessment resource was developed in such a way that, over time, it would provide a basis for teachers to develop their own assessments as the qualifications embed. Previous developments have suggested that even if not intended to become mandatory, such resources can almost become so. This is an example of the challenge faced in qualifications change.

Table 1. Comparison of Qualifications across Scotland & rest of the UK at Levels 1 to 3 on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Scotland</th>
<th>Rest of UK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Standard Grade Intermediate 1 SVQs Level 1 National 4</td>
<td>GCSEs Grades D–G BTEC Introductory Diplomas and Certificates OCR Nationals Key Skills Level 1 NVQs Level 1 Skills for Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Intermediate 2 SVQs Level 2 National 5</td>
<td>GCSEs Grades A–C BTEC First Diplomas and Certificates OCR Nationals Key Skills Level 2 NVQs Level 2 Skills for Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Higher Advanced Higher SVQs Level 3</td>
<td>A Levels Advanced Extension Awards GCE in Applied Subjects International Baccalaureate Key Skills Level 3 NVQs Level 3 BTEC Diplomas, Certificates and Awards BTEC Nationals OCR Nationals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
New courses: assessment and maintaining standards

It will be important to manage the transition to the new qualifications. SQA are aware of the weaknesses of qualification review in other countries and the mistakes of the past in Scotland. Work will have to be done to guarantee that the new qualifications will have the same standards. Teaching should have improved, so if standards stay the same as in the legacy qualifications then outcomes may improve. This is always a challenge in terms of the media perception, where improved outcomes in qualifications will be seen as ‘dumbing down’.

Looking ahead the proposal is to consider having 4th, 5th and 6th year (N. Ireland Years 12, 13 and 14) as one large cycle with flexible pathways and assessment at the end. There have traditionally been eight subjects in 4th year and then a narrowing occurs in 5th year; hence, this would be a considerable structural change for Scotland.

16. Lessons from the qualifications system in Scotland

Sixteen is the statutory leaving age for Scotland, but the vast majority of the Scottish cohort stay on for post-statutory education.

SQA explained that there are no mandatory qualifications at Level 4/5 (GCSE), but within the new curriculum young people have an entitlement to have their numeracy and literacy skills developed at all levels. Literacy and numeracy are taught but not (necessarily) explicitly tested. Schools tend to channel their learners to do both English and mathematics, in order to develop these skills, but now (with the changes) there will be more flexibility as to how schools can fulfil this.

The group asked SQA if their pass/fail model of assessment is applicable up to Level 4 (GCSE grades D–G). SQA explained that everything up to Level 4 is teacher-assessed, pass/fail models of assessment. It was felt that teachers are more content marking pass/fail models of assessment indicating what students can do, rather than rank ordering candidates across a mark range. Parts of the qualifications at Levels 5, 6 and 7 also have pass/fail aspects. Higher diplomas and professional qualifications all have internal assessment which is quality assured by SQA.

Phasing in change

In 2002 there was a national debate on qualifications online which indicated there were too many qualifications in the middle levels and that this was causing confusion. In 2004 Curriculum for Excellence began research and consultation. A government consultation on the legacy qualifications was carried out in 2008. Work began in 2009, with the final documentation available for review in 2013 and implementation in August 2013. Between 2004 and 2007 a lot of international research was carried out looking at the design of qualifications elsewhere. It was felt
that around a ten year cycle was needed to allow all aspects of the change to become fully embedded.

SQA also highlighted a planned phasing out of their involvement in marking school-based assessment. Within the new qualifications, at Level 5, 6, and 7, all the qualifications with the exception of Mathematics and Latin have some coursework-type assessment as well as examination: most of the coursework assessment within the first few years will be marked by SQA. Projects and/or portfolios will be submitted to SQA with the aim of increasing teacher assessment over time (some practical subjects already have this). SQA emphasised that the process is evolutionary.

It was highlighted that there are currently collaborative efforts with universities in Scotland. HEIs have been asked to think about how they will compare standards and how they will value qualifications completed over one year compared to two. SQA has also exerted substantial efforts in explaining the levels, exemplifying standards, and so on, so that schools have a good understanding of what the standard is.

**Anxiety over, and resistance to, change**

SQA noted that there has been notable anxiety amongst schools in Scotland over the possible introduction of increased flexibility and different pathways. Anxiety has also been expressed by parents, for example comparing their children who are currently going through the system, but at different stages – how will learners be compared if they have done different things/a different number of qualifications?

SQA pointed out some of the issues that were raised during previous consultations with teachers and some of the current feelings regarding internal assessment:

- In 1999 units were assessed using pass/fail (minimum competence level): teachers were initially uncomfortable with this but now they are more content.
- Teachers are not yet comfortable being the people who assign grades.
- It is difficult to switch roles from being the developer to being the person who polices.
- There are teacher concerns about pressures, for example from parents, who are ‘right next to you’ (this issue was also brought up by RoI teachers, as highlighted by NCCA).

In the context of an education review, SQA stated that universities are well represented in high-level strategic groups that advise government on direction of travel in the education system. SQA also set up strategic stakeholder groups for new qualifications (to include university representation). Subject specialist groups also exist, which provide feedback to expert groups/stakeholder representatives. Informal methods of engagement are also used, for example draft documents made available for consultation. The importance of broad representation was emphasised and the need for constant communication about why decisions have been made.
Differences of opinion in subjects often arise between constituencies, for example one representative may favour literature in English teaching and another may advocate practical skills (for example letter writing). SQA felt that this further emphasises the need for a broad and balanced approach.

SQA indicated that quality assurance procedures are in place to ensure the publishing of correct and comprehensive information for purposes of feedback to other representatives. Again, it was highlighted that it is difficult to gain consensus amongst subject groups. SQA stated that there are plans for more events to talk through the detail of what has been done in Scotland, why it has been done, and what kind of learner the universities can expect.

**Learner progression**
The group asked SQA if, in theory, learners could choose their national course based on level of ability, for example a National Level 3 in Mathematics and a National Level 5 in Geography. SQA stated that levels could be mixed and a group member stated that valuing pathways for different ability ranges is a problem in N. Ireland.

An employer representative asked SQA if there is a link between a Higher subject and the same subject for Advanced Higher (broadly analogous to AS and A2). SQA stated that there is a similar structure for progression, but it will tend to differ at Advanced Higher level due to the increased independent learning and advanced/specialist skills involved. Subjects are designed in a hierarchical structure so that learners can progress up through the levels. Most titles are available at different levels so that progression occurs but some cannot be carried on to Higher level, just as some only come in at Higher level (for example, there are three different variations of Advanced Higher Mathematics). SQA has tried to ensure that a lower level qualification adequately prepares a learner for the progression route described above.

A school representative asked SQA if centres in Scotland tend to do other qualifications apart from those offered by SQA. SQA stated that the uptake is mainly Scottish qualifications but that local authority schools can offer other qualifications if they so wish (although uptake is low). It was also stated that there has been some uptake for GCSEs, A levels, and the International Baccalaureate (in Scotland’s independent education sector). Across the vocational suite of qualifications, there are a number of awarding bodies and dominance tends to depend on the sector in question.

Advice was sought on achieving comparability for Scottish pupils applying to non-Scottish UK universities, and non-Scottish pupils applying to Scottish universities. SQA highlighted that a very small proportion of the Scottish cohort go to other universities – this is likely due to funding and the historical trend of staying close to
The SCQF is benchmarked with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and with other qualifications for wider travel. It was also highlighted that, grade for grade, the Scottish Advanced Higher qualification gains more UCAS tariff points than A levels. It is felt that universities look favourably upon Advanced Higher qualifications due to the independent learning aspect. For those coming to Scotland from the rest of the UK, the same requirements are in place: around three A levels in various subjects/at various grades, depending on the course. It was noted that Scottish universities are offering advanced standing for those learners who take Advanced Highers; however, this is difficult as the Advanced Higher is not a full-year course and a learner needs a suite of these qualifications to fit with the university course they are applying for, in order to gain full advanced standing.

The group queried if, in terms of a vocational pathway post-16, it is possible to take the same qualifications in a school as in colleges. SQA stated that this is possible, especially with the introduction of ‘skills for work’ courses as part of the Curriculum for Excellence in 2004. These courses have (roughly) the same design and same level (3-6) as vocational college courses: they encompass a broader preparation for employment so that schools can offer them, rather than being directly occupational. Some local authorities have schools with a dedicated resource and expertise for vocational courses/Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) (for example hairdressing, catering, engineering), although this is not a common practice. Around 2004, many school–college partnerships were established but since 2007 funding has reduced.

Perception of the value of vocational versus academic courses
It was accepted that the above is always a problem in any system but when the new qualifications were introduced in 1999, SQA was promoting the idea that all qualifications are on the same framework and can lead in the same direction eventually (this is not necessarily a straight path up the levels as learners can gain entry via a variety of routes). For example, Higher National Qualifications are highly valued for progression to employment but SQA are now seeing an increasing number of learners using these qualifications to progress to university. Recent developments have also meant an endeavour to ensure that these broadly vocational qualifications also equip learners for further study.

SQA felt that core skills are well established in colleges and within apprenticeships but that skills are not as valued in school settings. The question of how such skills can be valued by everybody was raised. SQA stated that, in the new qualifications, they have tried to embed the skills rather than ‘hardwire’ them into assessment. The issue of valuing skills has been driven through suggested teaching and learning methods: not using the qualification to drive the change, but rather using the mechanism of teaching and learning. The group pointed out that the N. Ireland Review references the importance of core skills and how they should be taught and assessed.
Cross-subject comparability
The group asked about the potential risk of some subjects being perceived as more difficult than others because they are more knowledge-based, for example science subjects. The SCQF has a set of detailed descriptors for each level and, during their development, qualifications are benchmarked against these so that they are all (broadly) within the same level of demand. It is felt by SQA that perceptions differ between constituencies. University entrance criteria are also thought to influence perceptions, for example high tariff courses such as medicine require two science subjects, mathematics and two other Highers. The chair of the group also asked if a ‘Higher’ Scottish qualification in different subjects means the same thing intellectually (for example physical education compared to physics); again, there are level descriptors in place to account for cross-subject differences. SQA elaborated by adding that the descriptors have different ‘domains’ (for example a domain about cognitive demands): in assigning a level you do not have to meet absolutely everything in each of the domains.

SQA discussed a previous review, when new Higher subjects were introduced (for example physical education, administration or media studies). The new subjects veered to the academic/cognitive side of their subject in order to prove that they were valuable for progression to higher education. The amount of knowledge and assessment that was required to be put into the qualification was essentially unrealistic for the learner, the level and the size of the qualification. SQA emphasised that this is an issue that they had to work at, as there was substantial debate over whether subjects should be classified as Higher. Presently, SQA feels that this is not an issue anymore – a Higher is accepted as a Higher. It was also noted, however, that this does not mean that any combination of Highers will guarantee a given progression route.

SQA stated that they are constantly engaging around issues of level of demand and perception, and so on. The organisation has a full-time higher education liaison representative, who engages with HEIs about aforementioned issues. It was also added that sometimes it is an accumulation of particular subjects that is less valued (for example three or four less knowledge-based subjects). There are also cultural differences between jurisdictions in terms of what is valued, for example SQA pointed out that Higher Music is a common (and highly valued) qualification in Scotland. This is due to large numbers of Scottish learners receiving music tuition at home; Higher Music also counts towards entry to high tariff courses such as medicine.
Careers advice within the education system
It was asked if there is anything in place to help learners and parents make well-informed choices with regards to qualifications and subjects. SQA stated that they are responsible for informing learners about qualifications. Partner organisations also have responsibilities, for example Skills Development Scotland has careers officers (in schools) who advise about pathways. There are also databases built by other organisations that show the qualification combinations for various pathways – these are in wide use by career guidance teachers in schools.

ICT technology in education
SQA explained that they have a partnership with a university that provides online learning support for SQA qualifications – particularly in Advanced Highers and the sciences. A large number of schools use this system, especially small and rural schools. SQA noted that some small, isolated schools offer more qualifications than some of the larger, urban schools as they have explored ways to do it, such as via partnerships and different online packages (GLOW: Education Scotland – online gateway to discussions and resources). There has also been an exploration of alternative delivery methods in the vocational market via employer engagement and delivery in schools, which you would not necessarily observe in more urban areas.
17. **SWOT Analyses: Options for future qualification provision in N. Ireland**

### GCSE Option 1: Retain GCSEs in line with the policy direction in England

Expert group note...Follow policy direction in England currently not considered a viable option: however, if it was thought NI would have a voice to influence the system it would be reconsidered.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Portability/Comparability</td>
<td>• Signing up to an unknown currently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Economies of scale</td>
<td>• Lack of influence on system – no voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Open market for AOs</td>
<td>• Not appropriate for all learners – aimed at a particular group of achievers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Brand strength</td>
<td>• Limits choice for young people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Less questioning of assessment as all externally marked</td>
<td>• Narrowing of subject options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Avoids difficult decisions (schools/employers)</td>
<td>• Where do vocational qualifications sit? Devalues alternative quals/skills – focus on ‘academic’ (curriculum and funding issues)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Straightforward benchmark</td>
<td>• Contradicts NI KS3 curriculum approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Low risk</td>
<td>• What is the rationale for the changes in England?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increased perception of rigour (extended writing/linearity)</td>
<td>• Does not take account of other quals systems that we could learn from</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Opportunities

- EF offers too much choice, want a strong core – realignment
- Science focus on the agenda
- Build the right base for our highest achieving
- Mobility for young people – simpler system
- Streamlining learning – sharing of best practice

### Threats

- Nature of economies diverge
- Narrows diversity of the curriculum
- AO market will provide for biggest interest – minority subjects not catered for
- Creativity skills threatened?
- Diversity of learning styles threatened – one assessment method only
- Unclear as to how/whether this will be implemented – impact of ‘core’ GCSEs being revised first
A level Option 1: Retain A levels in line with the policy direction in England

Expert group note...Follow policy direction in England currently not considered a viable option however if it was thought NI would have a voice to influence the system it would be reconsidered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Portability/Comparability for HE entry – noted as the main strength</td>
<td>• Lack of influence on system – no voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Economies of scale</td>
<td>• Not appropriate for all learners – aimed at a particular group of achievers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Open market for AOs</td>
<td>• Limits choice for young people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Brand strength</td>
<td>• Narrowing of A level subject options?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Avoids difficult decisions (universities/schools/employers)</td>
<td>• Narrowing of career options by focusing on 3/4 subject choices at 16 [note re importance of career guidance]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Straightforward benchmark</td>
<td>• Where do vocational qualifications sit? Devalues alternative quals/skills – focus on ‘academic’ (curriculum and funding issues)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Low risk</td>
<td>• Does not take account of other quals systems that we could learn from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increased perception of rigour (extended writing/linearity)</td>
<td>• Operational context for schools different here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Less questioning of assessment as all externally marked</td>
<td>• Uncoupled AS might reduce the breadth being taken – standalone not as popular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reduces assessment/no modular exams at end of lower 6th/more time for teaching</td>
<td>• Quite significant change for schools here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• University support for quals</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Opportunities</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Linearity may allow for more enrichment (enrichment very valued by employers)</td>
<td>• Focus on some subjects for initial review – what about the others – currency of non-revised A levels?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• EF too much choice, want a strong core – realignment</td>
<td>• Nature of economies diverge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Build the right base for our highest achieving</td>
<td>• Narrows diversity of the curriculum</td>
</tr>
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<td>• Mobility for young people – simpler system</td>
<td>• AO market will provide for biggest interest – minority subjects not catered for</td>
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<td>• Streamlining learning – sharing of best practice</td>
<td>• Creativity skills threatened?</td>
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<td>• Diversity of learning styles threatened – one assessment method only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Unclear as to how/whether this will be implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Russell Group and key university stakeholders do not agree with Gove proposals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
GCSE Option 2: Retain GCSEs with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies, and the N. Ireland economy

*Keep brand name GCSE but with NI specific differences which could be related to any of the following: subject content, different assessment delivery (linear/modular, internal/external), availability of subject titles, tiering, grading*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Allows us to build on what is already in place for NI candidates, for example revised curriculum, EF</td>
<td>• Brand damage by Gove announcements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Retain the brand but can adapt to our particular context</td>
<td>• 'eGCSE'[^30] could be seen as the elite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Have a recognised brand name</td>
<td>• Modularity not best for all subjects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Brand still allows portability for our students</td>
<td>• If changes taken too far from others within the brand, it damages the portability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Relatively easy to implement</td>
<td>• GCSEs alone will not facilitate all candidates in 14–16 education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Allows us to provide for different types of students now staying on in education</td>
<td>• If only one awarding body, economies of scale will be lost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Less impact on students in terms of extent of change</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Less costly option to implement</td>
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</table>

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<tr>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Threats</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Brand can be adapted to our particular context</td>
<td>• Could we lose the brand?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Allows for modular or linear learning where it is most appropriate</td>
<td>• Do Gove statements in England make it harder to make minor tweaks within the brand and retain currency?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Greater alignment for economic purposes – more of the top candidates staying in NI?</td>
<td>• Could this be subject to short-termism – a new education Minister here could change his/her mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Allows development of local subject qualifications, for example Moving Image Arts</td>
<td>• Perception of modularity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Allows for long-term strategy here that will not be subject to SoS changes in England</td>
<td>• English university acceptance of an non-England GCSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• More opportunity for local business to get engaged with qualification development</td>
<td>• English AOs may not implement NI specific changes – will it close qualifications market here?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Could allow us to use ICT more effectively in our qualifications</td>
<td>• In a smaller jurisdiction, subject interest groups can have a disproportionate impact</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[^30]: i.e. whatever action is taken in England to differentiate their GCSEs from those in N. Ireland and Wales, should they differ.
### A level Option 2: Retain A levels with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies, and the N. Ireland economy

*Keep brand name A level but with NI specific differences which could be related to any of the following: subject content, different assessment delivery (linear/modular, internal/external), availability of subject titles*

#### Strengths
- Allows us to build on what is already in place for NI candidates, for example EF
- Retain the brand but can adapt to our particular context
- Have a recognised brand name
- Brand still allows portability for our students
- Relatively easy to implement
- Allows us to provide for different types of students now staying on in education
- Less impact on students in terms of extent of change
- Less costly option in short term

#### Weaknesses
- Brand damage by Gove proposals
- ‘eAlevel’\(^{31}\) could be seen as the elite – currency issue
- Modularity not best for all subjects
- If changes taken too far from others within the brand it damages the portability
- A levels alone will not facilitate all candidates staying on in post-16 education now
- Does modular A level system encourage poor learning patterns/compartamentalisation?
- If only one awarding body, economies of scale will be lost

#### Opportunities
- Brand can be adapted to our particular context
- Allows for modular or linear learning where it is most appropriate
- Greater alignment for economic purposes – more of the top candidates staying in NI?
- Allows development of local subject qualifications, for example Moving Image Arts
- Allows for long-term strategy here that will not be subject to SoS changes in England
- More opportunity for local business to get engaged with qualification development
- Could allow us to use ICT more effectively in our qualifications

#### Threats
- Perception of modularity
- Could we lose the brand?
- Do Gove statements in England make it harder to make minor tweaks within the brand and retain currency?
- Could this be subject to short-termism – new education Minister here could change direction
- English university acceptance of a non-England A level
- Narrowing curriculum to three or four subjects narrows career choice (need for good career education)
- English AOs may not implement NI specific changes – will it limit the market here?
- In a smaller jurisdiction, subject interest groups can have a disproportionate impact

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\(^{31}\) i.e. whatever action is taken in England to differentiate their A levels from those in N. Ireland and Wales, should they differ.
GCSE Option 3: Develop new 14–16 qualifications for N. Ireland

New qualifications for NI but not a new qualifications system entirely. What is our vision as to what the ideal 14–16 qualifications system for here should look like, look at non-GCSE systems to see where we could align with an established qualification system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Allows for alignment with global economic opportunities</td>
<td>• No brand recognition without alignment with another system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Can design qualification system to meet needs of NI</td>
<td>• Perception of regional, insular ‘small’ qualification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Allows for qualification system that meets curriculum coming through and also HE and FE opportunities</td>
<td>• Presumes we need a qualification system at 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Would look very different from system in England – removes direct comparison</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Allows skills to be integrated into the curriculum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Could be a much broader system at 16 – holistic approach to young people rather than focus on what they know</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Devise a system that rewards rather than rejects</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Could address inequalities in current qualifications and assessment system</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Not the same need for ‘external’ currency at 16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Allows for long-term strategy here that will not be subject to changes in England</td>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Might encourage NI candidates to look further afield for opportunities</td>
<td>• High cost – economic reality of implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Streamline the current system, address inefficiencies – deal with the issue of so many qualifications currently, and the constant change</td>
<td>• Lack of portability – assuming qualifications needed for ‘internal’ progression within the system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Alignment to a recognised international system</td>
<td>• Long-term implementation – needs to be done properly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Alignment with economic requirements</td>
<td>• Lack of culture of change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Could remove ‘judgement’ of students at 16</td>
<td>• Significant change for schools and candidates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Breadth of subject choice</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Would allow us to decide on what the purpose of our qualification system should be</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Revise purpose of qualification system – quals could reflect teaching and learning, progression provided for in a different way</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Allows learning from other qualification systems</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Would allow us to meet the needs of all our learners</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Would allow FE to be an alternative route for economic growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Could allow for different type of teaching and learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Could reduce assessment burden</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
A level Option 3: Develop new 16–18 qualifications for N. Ireland that retain features of A level qualifications

New qualifications for NI but not a new qualifications system entirely. What is our vision as to what the ideal 16–18 qualifications system for here should look like, look at non-A level systems to see where we could align with an established qualification system

<table>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>• Allows skills to be integrated into the curriculum</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Could be a broader system 16–18</td>
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<td>• Devise a system that rewards rather than rejects</td>
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<td>• Could address inequalities in current qualifications and assessment system</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Allows for long-term strategy here that will not be subject to changes made in England</td>
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<td>• High cost – economic reality of implementation</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Streamline the current system, address inefficiencies – deal with the issue of so many qualifications currently, and the constant change</td>
<td>• Lack of portability – assuming purpose of qualification is to facilitate selection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Alignment to a recognised international system</td>
<td>• Long-term implementation – needs to be done properly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Alignment with economic requirements</td>
<td>• Lack of culture of change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Greater breadth of subject choice</td>
<td>• Significant change for schools and candidates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Would allow us to decide on what the purpose of our qualification system should be</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Allows learning from other qualifications systems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Revise purpose of qualification system – qualifications could reflect teaching and learning, selection for progression provided in a different way</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Would allow us to meet the needs of all our learners</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Would allow FE to be an alternative route for economic growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Could allow for a different type of teaching and learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Could reduce assessment burden</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### GCSE Option 4: Remove the emphasis on high-stakes examinations at age 16

*Remove external high-stakes assessment at 16, use teacher-based assessment model as many other countries, most with a statutory leaving age of 15/16. Current use here of candidate outcomes at 16 for purposes other than progression puts pressure on teacher-based assessment (school and teacher measurement, giving a mark which contributes to candidate’s grade rank order, and so on.) If these purposes were removed, teachers are those best placed to assess candidate ability.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Assessment for learning</td>
<td>• Could put more pressure on schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Can design system to meet needs of NI</td>
<td>• Less consistency in outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• System would follow KS3 curriculum – skills integrated</td>
<td>• Could not work within current performance system and reporting system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Could drive a change to our school system</td>
<td>• No gateways around the core subjects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Holistic approach to young people rather than focus on what they know for exams</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Remove ‘judgement’ of students at 16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A system that rewards rather than rejects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Could meet the needs of all learners</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Remove inequalities in current qualifications/assessment system</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Most stay in system, ‘external’ currency not needed at 16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Better match between teaching, learning and assessment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Could refocus the purpose of our education system away from exam outcomes on to enjoyment of learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Allows for long-term educational strategy</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Threats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Why do candidates need rank ordered in subjects at 16, opportunity to realign focus on competence in subjects</td>
<td>• Doesn’t give an external benchmark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Could be based on competence pass/fail models – teachers better at marking this model</td>
<td>• Would it be moving too far from rest of UK?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Could improve standards – different focus of learning (not ‘teaching to the test’)</td>
<td>• Could reduce standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students motivated by learning rather than assessment</td>
<td>• How will students be motivated if they are not working to exams?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Streamline current system, address inefficiencies – deal with issue of so many qualifications, and constant change</td>
<td>• Subjectivity of teacher-based assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Aligns with economic requirements and global opportunities</td>
<td>• Very significant change for schools and candidates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Breadth of system at 16</td>
<td>• Long-term implementation – needs to be done properly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Revise purpose of education system – school-based assessment as a natural end to teaching and learning</td>
<td>• Lack of culture of change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Allows FE to be an alternative route for economic growth</td>
<td>• Cost of implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Could reduce assessment burden</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Allows learning from international best practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Aligns more with Scotland and RoI (RoI – removal of high-stakes exams at junior cert, Scotland – teacher-based assessment of competency (pass/fail) up to National 4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Cross-school based checks and balances</td>
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</table>
18. Conclusions

Expert group conclusions have been formed on the basis of reflection on issues from their discussions, examination of the evidence gathered from stakeholders in phases one and two and consideration of other qualification models.

In the short term it was felt that, for both GCSE and A level, Option 2 is appropriate: retain qualifications with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies and the N. Ireland economy. This is the most appropriate in the time frame, allowing us to build upon what is already in place in N. Ireland, meeting the needs of our context and retaining the brand recognition. It was also felt to be the least disruptive option for schools here.

It was felt that following policy in England was not an option as N. Ireland would have no voice in this system. It was also unclear as to the educational basis for the changes and it was felt that they were contrary to educational policies in N. Ireland focusing on breadth and inclusion in education.

It was noted that the adoption of Option 2 needed to be monitored and evaluated closely over the coming months, in line with what changes may be made in England and following discussions on the use of the qualification brand names.

It was felt that work should begin on the longer-term vision for learning, assessment and qualifications here. In looking at where N. Ireland would want to be in ten years, we should learn from experiences, qualifications and systems elsewhere. At 14–16 the long-term vision could be a combination of Options 3 (develop new qualifications for N. Ireland) and 4 (remove high-stakes examinations at 16) depending on what was ascertained from elsewhere. The importance of learning from good practice was agreed, as was the alignment with systems recognised internationally as best practice.

In making any changes it was reiterated that the comparability of the qualifications taken here is paramount. Work should be done to ensure that this continues to be the case. Work should also be undertaken to promote the value of qualifications taken here, both GCSEs and A levels and vocational qualifications.
Appendix C: Stakeholder Engagement

Following the findings from the first online questionnaire, and alongside the work of the Expert Group, the Review engaged with a wide range of stakeholders through a series of face-to-face events, including research consultation workshops, meetings and briefings. The schedule of events is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Face-to-face stakeholder engagement scheduled February to May 2013.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Stakeholder Consultation Workshop or Briefing Meeting</th>
<th>Location</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28 February</td>
<td>Public Workshop (Afternoon and Evening Sessions)</td>
<td>Armagh, Co. Armagh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 March</td>
<td>Public Workshop (Afternoon Session)</td>
<td>Omagh, Co. Tyrone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 March</td>
<td>Public Workshop (Afternoon and Evening Sessions)</td>
<td>Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 March</td>
<td>Public Workshop (Afternoon and Evening Sessions)</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 March</td>
<td>Public Workshop (Afternoon and Evening Sessions)</td>
<td>Cookstown, Co. Antrim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 March</td>
<td>Newtownabbey Area Learning Community Briefing</td>
<td>Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 March</td>
<td>National Council for Curriculum and Assessment presentation to Expert Group</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 March</td>
<td>School-based learner Workshops (Morning and afternoon Sessions)</td>
<td>Derry, Co. Londonderry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 April</td>
<td>ETI Briefing</td>
<td>Bangor, Co. Down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 April</td>
<td>Ballymena Area Learning Community Workshop</td>
<td>Ballymena, Co. Antrim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 April</td>
<td>Sector Skills Council Briefing</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 April</td>
<td>Employer Workshop (Morning and Afternoon Sessions)</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
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<tr>
<td>17 April</td>
<td>Further Education and Training Organisations Workshop</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
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<tr>
<td>17 April</td>
<td>EOTAS (Education Other Than At School) Workshop</td>
<td>Newtownabbey Co. Antrim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 April</td>
<td>Higher Education Workshop</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 April</td>
<td>Further Education-based learner Workshop</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 April</td>
<td>English Teachers’ Workshop</td>
<td>Belfast, Co Antrim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 April</td>
<td>Craigavon Area Learning Community Briefing</td>
<td>Lurgan, Co. Armagh</td>
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<tr>
<td>23 April</td>
<td>Awarding Body Forum Briefing</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Armagh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 April</td>
<td>Armagh Area Learning Community Workshop</td>
<td>Armagh, Co. Armagh</td>
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<tr>
<td>23 April</td>
<td>Mathematics Teachers’ Workshop</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Stakeholder Consultation Workshop or Briefing Meeting</td>
<td>Location</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 April</td>
<td>Newry and Mourne Area Learning Community Briefing</td>
<td>Newry, Co. Down</td>
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<tr>
<td>24 April</td>
<td>School-based learner Workshop</td>
<td>Dromore, Co. Down</td>
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<tr>
<td>24 April</td>
<td>Banbridge Area Learning Community Briefing</td>
<td>Banbridge, Co. Down</td>
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<tr>
<td>25 April</td>
<td>Essential Skills Teachers’ Workshop</td>
<td>Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim</td>
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<tr>
<td>30 April</td>
<td>School-based learner Workshop</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 May</td>
<td>Qualifications Reform Symposium in conjunction with QUB School of Education</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 May</td>
<td>Employer Workshop (Morning and Afternoon sessions)</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 May</td>
<td>Ballynahinch Area Learning Community Workshop</td>
<td>Ballynahinch, Co. Down</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 May</td>
<td>Castlereagh Area Learning Community Workshop</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 May</td>
<td>Employer Workshop (Morning and Afternoon Sessions)</td>
<td>Omagh, Co. Tyrone</td>
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<tr>
<td>13 May</td>
<td>Teacher Unions Workshop</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
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<tr>
<td>15 May</td>
<td>North Belfast Area Learning Community Briefing</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
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<tr>
<td>15 May</td>
<td>DEL and Cookstown Chamber of Commerce Business Breakfast</td>
<td>Cookstown, Co. Tyrone</td>
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<tr>
<td>15 May</td>
<td>Association of Science Education Briefing</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
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<tr>
<td>16 May</td>
<td>ICT Teachers’ Workshop</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
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<tr>
<td>17 May</td>
<td>NI Independent Retail Trade Association Briefing</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 May</td>
<td>Scottish Qualifications Authority presentation to Expert Group</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
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<tr>
<td>23 May</td>
<td>Federation of Small Businesses Briefing</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
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<tr>
<td>28 May</td>
<td>Employer Workshop (Morning and Afternoon Sessions)</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
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<tr>
<td>28 May</td>
<td>Career Service Meeting – North Down</td>
<td>Newtownards, Co. Down</td>
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<tr>
<td>29 May</td>
<td>Careers Service Meeting – Richmond Chambers</td>
<td>Derry, Co. Londonderry</td>
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<tr>
<td>29 May</td>
<td>Foyle Learning Community Chair Briefing</td>
<td>Claudy, Co. Londonderry</td>
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<tr>
<td>29 May</td>
<td>Derg Mourne Learning Community Chair Briefing</td>
<td>Castlederg, Co. Tyrone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All attendees were encouraged to bring all aspects of their experiences of qualifications to the discussions in order to get as wide a representation as possible. Attendees took the opportunity to speak from a variety of different stakeholder perspectives at the events, representing personal as well as organisational views. School attendees, for example, often took the opportunity to speak as employers, parents or subject specialists as well as speaking on behalf of their institution. This facilitated a wide range of issues being discussed with differing perspectives being considered.

Stakeholders were encouraged to participate in a range of face-to-face events. Invitations to the consultation research workshops were sent to all stakeholders and the events were promoted on the website and were available to be booked online. Subsequent invitations were extended to individual stakeholder groups for bespoke research events to allow a focused discussion of GCSEs and A levels. All Area Learning Communities were contacted and offered a briefing or research event that best suited their availability. All schools (104) offering CCEA Essential Skills were invited to attend an event discussing skills qualifications and the needs of a variety of learners. Fifty-three schools were contacted to attend consultation events discussing progression from KS3 to KS4 in English, mathematics and ICT. Schools and other stakeholders also had the opportunity to send representatives to the Qualifications Reform Symposium organised in conjunction with Queen’s University School of Education.

The Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) facilitated a meeting with the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and the invitation of further education, higher education and training organisations to bespoke research workshops to gather opinions from these groups. DEL also helped with promotion to employers regarding attendance at bespoke employer events and participation in the online survey. Support from the Northern Ireland Science Park, Invest Northern Ireland, the CBI, the Institute of Directors and Omagh Chamber of Commerce in promoting employer engagement was also much welcomed by the Review.

Table 2 shows the schools and organisations represented by attendees at the respective events.
Table 2: Representation at stakeholder engagement events February to May 2013.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Consultation Workshop or Briefing</th>
<th>Stakeholders represented</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28 February</td>
<td>Public Workshop (Afternoon and Evening Sessions)</td>
<td>• Belfast High School</td>
<td>Armagh, Co. Armagh</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Dromore High School</td>
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<td>• Lurgan College</td>
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<td>• Our Lady's Grammar School, Newry</td>
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<td>• Portadown College</td>
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<td>• St Patrick's High School, Keady</td>
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<td>• St Paul's High School, Bessbrook</td>
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<td>• The Royal School, Dungannon</td>
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<td>• St Colman's College, Newry</td>
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<td>• St Mary's High School, Newry</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 March</td>
<td>Public Workshop (Afternoon Session)</td>
<td>• Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta</td>
<td>Omagh, Co. Tyrone</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• NASUWT</td>
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<td>• St Fanchea’s College, Enniskillen</td>
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<tr>
<td>7 March</td>
<td>Public Workshop (Afternoon and Evening Sessions)</td>
<td>• Antrim Grammar School</td>
<td>Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim</td>
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<td>• Ballyclare High School</td>
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<td>• Belfast Metropolitan College</td>
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<td>• Belfast Royal Academy</td>
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<td>• CCEA</td>
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<td>• Glengormley High School</td>
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<td>• Grosvenor Grammar School, Belfast</td>
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<td>• Lagan College, Belfast</td>
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<td>• Larne Grammar School</td>
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<td>• National Union of Students</td>
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<td>• NEELB</td>
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<td>• Priory Integrated College, Holywood</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• The Wallace High School, Lisburn</td>
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<td>• Ulster Teachers’ Union</td>
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<td>• NUS</td>
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<tr>
<td>11 March</td>
<td>Public Workshop (Afternoon and Evening Sessions)</td>
<td>• Association of School and College Leaders</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
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<td>• ASM Chartered Accountants</td>
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<td>• CCEA</td>
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<td>• De La Salle College, Belfast</td>
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<td>• Department for Employment and Learning</td>
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<td>• Fleming Fulton School, Belfast</td>
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<td>• Fort Hill College, Lisburn</td>
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<td>• Institute of Physics</td>
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<td>• Lagan College, Belfast</td>
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<td>• Malone College, Belfast</td>
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<td>• Methodist College, Belfast</td>
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<td>• Parents</td>
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<td>• NASUWT</td>
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<td>• National Deaf Childrens' Society</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• New-Bridge Integrated College, Loughbrickland</td>
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<td>• OCR</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Our Lady &amp; St Patrick’s College, Knock</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Queen’s University, Belfast</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Consultation Workshop or Briefing</td>
<td>Stakeholders represented</td>
<td>Location</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|            | Public Workshop (Afternoon and Evening Sessions) | • Banbridge Academy  
• Holy Trinity College, Cookstown  
• Integrated College Dungannon  
• Loreto Grammar School, Omagh  
• Movilla High School, Newtownards  
• NASUWT  
• National Association of Head Teachers  
• New-Bridge Integrated College, Loughbrickland  
• Open University  
• Our Lady of Lourdes High School, Ballymoney  
• Pearson Education  
• Rainey Endowed School, Magherafelt  
• Sacred Heart College, Omagh  
• Slemish College, Ballymena  
• Sperrin Integrated College, Magherafelt  
• St Ciaran's College, Ballygawley  
• St Colm's High School, Draperstown  
• St Columb's College, Londonderry  
• St Patrick's College, Ballymena  
• St Patrick's College, Dungannon  
• St Patrick's College, Maghera  
• The Royal School, Dungannon  
• Thornhill College, Londonderry  
• University of Ulster | Cookstown, Co. Tyrone |
| 13 March   | Newtownabbey Area Learning Community Briefing | • Jordanstown School  
• Hazelwood Integrated College, Newtownabbey  
• Northern Regional College, | Belfast, Co. Antrim |
|            |                                    |                                                                                           |                               |
|            |                                    | • Saintfield High School  
• South Eastern Regional College (Bangor)  
• St Killian's College, Ballymena  
• St Louis Grammar School, Kilkeel  
• Sullivan Upper School, Holywood  
• The Wallace High School, Lisburn  
• Association of Science Education  
• Association of Teachers and Lecturers  
• Cross and Passion College, Ballycastle  
• Glengormley High School  
• Hazelwood Integrated College, Newtownabbey  
• Nendrum College, Comber  
• Newtownbreda High School  
• Our Lady's Grammar School, Newry  
• St Columbanus' College, Bangor  
• St Dominic's Grammar School, Belfast  
• St Mary's Junior High School, Lurgan  
• St Patrick's High School, Keady  
• Strathern School, Belfast  
• Ulster Teachers' Union |                               |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Consultation Workshop or Briefing</th>
<th>Stakeholders represented</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Newtownabbey • Glengormley High School • Newtownabbey Community High School • Monkstown High School • Rosstulla School, Newtownabbey • Thornfield House School, Newtownabbey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 March</td>
<td>National Council for Curriculum and Assessment presentation to Expert Group</td>
<td>• Grammar sector • Secondary sector • Special educational needs sector • Further education sector • Education and Training Inspectorate • Higher education sector • Employers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 March</td>
<td>School based learner Workshop</td>
<td>• St Columb’s College, Londonderry • St Cecilia’s College, Londonderry</td>
<td>Derry, Co Londonderry</td>
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<td>9 April</td>
<td>ETI Briefing</td>
<td>• Education and Training Inspectorate</td>
<td>Bangor, Co. Down</td>
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<td>9 April</td>
<td>Ballymena Area Learning Community Workshop</td>
<td>• Ballymena Academy • Castle Tower School, Ballymena • Slemish College, Ballymena • Ballee Community High • Cullybackey High School • St Louis Grammar School, Ballymena • Cambridge House Grammar School, Ballymena • Dunclug College, Ballymena • St Patrick’s College, Ballymena • Northern Regional College, Ballymena</td>
<td>Ballymena, Co. Antrim</td>
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<td>15 April</td>
<td>Sector Skills Council Briefing</td>
<td>• EU Skills • People 1st • Summit Skills • Lantra • Improve Ltd • Semta • Institute of Motor Industry • Cogent • Creative and Cultural Skills • Learning and Skills Improvement Service • SkillsActive • CITB-Construction Skills NI • Skills for Care and Development • Skills for Logistics • e-skills UK</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
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<td>17 April</td>
<td>Further Education And Training Organisations Workshop</td>
<td>• Southern Regional College • South West Regional College • Northern Regional College • North West Regional College • Bryson Future Skills • Wade Training</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
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<td>17 April</td>
<td>Education Other than at School (EOTAS) Workshop</td>
<td>• Rutledge Group</td>
<td>Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim</td>
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<td>18 April</td>
<td>Higher Education Workshop</td>
<td>• Stranmillis University College</td>
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<td>19 April</td>
<td>Further Education based learner Workshop</td>
<td>• Learners</td>
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<td>22 April</td>
<td>English Teachers’ Workshop</td>
<td>• St Dominic's Grammar School, Belfast</td>
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<td>22 April</td>
<td>Craigavon Area Learning Community Briefing</td>
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<td>24 April</td>
<td>Newry and Mourne Area Learning Community Briefing</td>
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<td>25 April</td>
<td>Essential Skills Teachers’ Workshop</td>
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<td>• Belfast Royal Academy</td>
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<td>Qualifications Reform Symposium in conjunction with QUB School of Education</td>
<td>• Antrim Grammar School</td>
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<td>Employer Workshop</td>
<td>• Institute of Directors</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
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| 9 May      | Ballynahinch Area Learning Community Workshop | • Saintfield High School  
• St Colman’s High School, Ballynahinch  
• St Colmcille’s High School, Crossgar  
• Assumption Grammar School, Ballynahinch  
• The High School, Ballynahinch  
• South Eastern Regional College | Ballynahinch, Co. Down                   |
| 10 May     | Castlereagh Area Learning         | • Longstone School, Dundonald  
• Our Lady and St Patrick’s College, Knock                                                  | Belfast, Co. Antrim       |
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<td>Teaching Unions Workshop</td>
<td>• ATL&lt;br&gt;• INTO&lt;br&gt;• NAHT&lt;br&gt;• UTU&lt;br&gt;• NASUWT</td>
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<td>15 May</td>
<td>North Belfast Area Learning Community Briefing</td>
<td>• Belfast Model School for Girls&lt;br&gt;• Belfast Royal Academy&lt;br&gt;• Cedar Lodge School, Belfast&lt;br&gt;• Hazelwood Integrated College, Newtownabbey&lt;br&gt;• St. Malachy’s College, Belfast&lt;br&gt;• St. Patrick’s College, Belfast&lt;br&gt;• Little Flower Girls’ School, Belfast&lt;br&gt;• Our Lady of Mercy Girls’ School, Belfast</td>
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<td>15 May</td>
<td>DEL &amp; Cookstown Chamber of Commerce Business Breakfast</td>
<td>• Employer Engagement and promotion of online questionnaire</td>
<td>Cookstown, Co. Tyrone</td>
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<td>Association of Science Education Briefing</td>
<td>• Bloomfield Collegiate School, Belfast&lt;br&gt;• St Mary’s Grammar School, Belfast&lt;br&gt;• Glenlola Collegiate School, Bangor&lt;br&gt;• Down High School, Downpatrick&lt;br&gt;• Institute of Physics&lt;br&gt;• Royal Society of Chemistry&lt;br&gt;• Association of Science Education</td>
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<td>16 May</td>
<td>ICT Teachers’ Workshop</td>
<td>• Glengormley High School&lt;br&gt;• Ballyclare High School&lt;br&gt;• St Paul’s High School, Bessbrook&lt;br&gt;• St Colman’s College, Newry&lt;br&gt;• Lumen Christi College, Derry&lt;br&gt;• Omagh CBS Grammar School&lt;br&gt;• De La Salle High School, Downpatrick&lt;br&gt;• Lisnaskea High School&lt;br&gt;• St Patrick’s Academy, Lisburn</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
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<td>17 May</td>
<td>NIIRTA Briefing</td>
<td>• NI Independent Retail Trade Association</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
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<td>20 May</td>
<td>Scottish Qualifications Authority presentation to Expert Group</td>
<td>• Grammar sector&lt;br&gt;• Secondary sector&lt;br&gt;• Special educational needs sector&lt;br&gt;• Further education sector&lt;br&gt;• Education and Training Inspectorate&lt;br&gt;• Higher education sector&lt;br&gt;• Employers</td>
<td>Belfast, Co. Antrim</td>
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<td>23 May</td>
<td>FSB Briefing</td>
<td>• Federation of Small Businesses</td>
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| 28 May  | Careers Service Briefing               | • Newtownards Careers Officers  
• Bangor Careers Officers  
• Ballynahinch Careers Officers                                                     | Newtownards Co. Down     |
| 29 May  | Careers Service Briefing               | • Richmond Chambers Careers Officers                                                      | Derry, Co. Londonderry   |
| 29 May  | Foyle Area Learning Community Briefing | • Learning Community Chair and Principal of St Patrick and St Brigid’s College            | Claudy, Co. Londonderry  |
| 29 May  | Derg Mourne Area Learning Community Briefing | • Learning Community Chair and Principal of Castlederg High School                        | Castlederg, Co. Tyrone   |

Figures 1 and 2 show the geographical spread represented by participants in the various stakeholder engagement events. Both maps were created using Microsoft Bing.

Figure 1: Stakeholder representation across N. Ireland
The Review benefited from the expertise of the SQA and NCCA through their representation on the Expert Group. Stakeholders also had the opportunity at the Qualifications Reform Symposium to hear speakers from England, Wales, Scotland, the Republic of Ireland and N. Ireland talk about qualifications reform.

Figure 2: Stakeholder representation across the UK and Ireland
Appendix D: Qualifications Issues Paper

(Appendices available in online version of document at www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/accreditation/GCSE_GCE_review/)

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Introduction

The commission to CCEA to review GCSE\textsuperscript{32} and A level\textsuperscript{33} qualifications required CCEA to advise on the appropriateness of these qualifications and make recommendations for the qualification system in the future.

In arriving at recommendations there was a need to consider proposals against the terms of reference of the Review. These considerations included the following:

- the balance between the needs of learners and the local economy, which links to some degree with the relationship between education policy in N. Ireland and ‘national’ developments;
- how a system can stretch learners, particularly the high achievers, while at the same time being inclusive of all learners;
- building on the strengths and addressing any identified weakness in the current system;
- the aims and objectives of the revised curriculum and the testing of skills as well as knowledge; and
- a qualifications system that can stand up to comparison with qualifications (of a similar nature) offered nationally and internationally.

Leading from these points recommendations were developed for an improved GCSE and A level system, or a replacement qualifications system, which will:

- provide learners with a ‘passport’ to work or undertake further study here and elsewhere;
- be understood by all the key stakeholders;
- provide clear lines of progression and development;
- be inclusive and allow for discrimination of achievement for all learners; and
- be robust in how it assesses achievement.

The purpose of this issues paper was to inform questions for discussion at stakeholder events and as a focus during meetings of the Expert Group and bespoke stakeholder events. The paper was based on the considerations identified in the terms of reference for the Review. It was developed to provide background information, to introduce qualifications issues and to inform discussions and stakeholder engagement during the Review during the Review. It was not intended to indicate particular opinions nor the direction of travel for recommendations; these were developed based on the evidence provided through consultations, engagement with stakeholders and consideration of the issues.

The Accreditation team worked with Research and Statistics to ensure that findings from the online consultation and other research activities, along with feedback from

\textsuperscript{32} General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) qualifications are usually studied full-time by 14–16 year olds at school. Further information is provided in Appendix I.

\textsuperscript{33} General Certificate of Education AS (Advanced Subsidiary) and GCE A (Advanced) level qualifications are taken by 16–18 year olds. Further information is provided in Appendix 2.
the Expert Group and other stakeholders, informed the continuing development of
the issues paper throughout the Review process.

1 \hspace{1em} \textbf{The Purpose of Qualifications}

Qualifications fulfil a range of purposes, which can vary depending on the
qualification type\textsuperscript{34} and qualification assessment mechanisms. Purposes currently
being expected of GCSEs and A levels include:
\begin{itemize}
\item a) providing recognition, i.e. rewarding learners for their attainment;
\item b) ensuring standards, i.e. that a particular grade ensures specific attainment
   has been achieved by all learners;
\item c) allowing for selection within the cohort, i.e. the rank ordering of learners within
   a qualification to allow selection of the higher performing candidates for
   further study/employment;
\item d) measuring the education system, i.e. the use of the output of learners in
   qualifications to measure school performance or improvement; and/or
\item e) a combination of some or all of these.
\end{itemize}

1.1 \hspace{1em} \textbf{Assessment}

1.1.1 \hspace{1em} \textbf{Assessment at age 16 – GCSEs}

The GCSE was primarily designed as an assessment of learning at 16. GCSEs
contain a combination of external assessment (examination paper) and internal
(teacher-marked) assessment. GCSEs are available in over 60 subjects, and
around 5,225,000 entries across England, Wales and N. Ireland were made in 2012.
Further information on GCSEs is available in Appendix I\textsuperscript{35}.

GCSEs provide a basis for progression to Level\textsuperscript{36} qualifications, particularly A
levels. The attainment of a GCSE qualification provides a statement of accumulated
learning and is a ‘passport’ to further learning, either within the same school or with
another post-16 provider. They also provide a ‘passport’ to employment. However,
in both instances, as they are a compensatory model for assessment (see section
1.2.3.2) they do not provide a guarantee of competency across all the requirements
of a subject. Instead, they indicate the position of a candidate in the rank order of all
candidates taking the qualification.

Assessment at 16 can be of cumulative learning over the five years from entry into
the post-primary school or of learning that is based on a course taken after two
years of study at Key Stage (KS) 4 (ages 14–16). If the purpose of assessment at

\textsuperscript{34} There are currently 17 types of qualifications on the Register of Accredited Qualifications, including GCSE and GCE A level.
\textsuperscript{35} For a full list see \url{www2.ofqual.gov.uk/for-awarding-organisations/96-articles/615-qualification-types-}
\textsuperscript{36} Appendices to this paper have not been included in this submission but are available in the online version of the document
at \url{www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/accreditation/GCSE_GCE_review/}
\textsuperscript{36} There are eight levels in addition to three entry levels (pre Level 1) on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). GCSE
grades D–G is Level 1 with grades A*–C at Level 2. A levels are Level 3. Details on the levels and how the NQF relates to
other frameworks can be found at \url{www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/accreditation/guidance/across_boundaries.asp}
16 is the culmination of five years of learning, there should only be a narrow range of GCSE courses aligned with the KS3 and KS4 revised curriculum Areas of Learning (see Appendix V\textsuperscript{37}). However, if it is the latter two-year course, there is the potential to widen the range of courses available to 14–16 year olds, and this would be in line with the Entitlement Framework (EF) policy in N. Ireland\textsuperscript{38}.

GCSEs now serve further purposes. Attainment is reported by schools to the Department of Education. This information is used by the Department to develop targets and strategies for improving standards in education in N. Ireland. It is also used by the local media to create a ‘league table’ type list of N. Ireland schools. The use of qualification outcomes for this purpose puts pressure on schools and teachers, especially in subjects where a high percentage of assessment is teacher marked. Attainment in GCSE Mathematics and English is seen as particularly key for all these purposes. The targets of increased attainment in A* to C grades could be seen to be in tension with the comparable outcomes principles of awarding GCSEs (see section 1.2.3.1).

1.1.2 Assessment at age 18 – A levels

A levels are available in over 45 subjects, and around 860,000 entries were made in 2012 in England, Wales and N. Ireland. A levels are studied over a two-year period with modular assessment delivery. They provide the post-16 academic route taken by approximately 45% of the students in England, Wales and N. Ireland (E/W/NI), with a larger percentage in N. Ireland individually.

Currently AS units can be taken at the end of the first year of study of the overall qualification, with A2 units being taken at the end of the second year. Students can repeat individual units. Aggregated attainment across units gives the overall A level grade. The AS level can be taken as a qualification in its own right: it is worth half an A level. A levels are graded A* (achieved by approx. 7% of learners) to E.

A levels fulfil similar purposes to GCSEs. They:

• assess and certify the knowledge, understanding and skills achieved by the learner;
• provide recognition of achievement that can be understood and valued by key stakeholders;
• rank order the cohort for the purposes of selection for progression to further and higher education or employment; and
• reward candidates’ achievement.

\textsuperscript{37} Appendices are not included in this report but are available in the online version of document at www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/accreditation/GCSE_GCE_review/

\textsuperscript{38} The EF guarantees all pupils access to a minimum number of courses at KS4 and post-16, of which at least one third must be general and one third applied. Further information can be found at www.deni.gov.uk/index/curriculum-and-learning-new/curriculum-and-assessment-2/entitlement-framework.htm
A particular issue for A levels is that progression from school to continued education is always to a new institution and can be across jurisdictions. Universities will make offers based on A level grades, and high demand courses will require the achievement of high grades – often in specified subjects. This could be seen to have introduced a hierarchy in the current A level system.

1.1.3 International assessment at age 18

Ofqual carried out an international comparison of pre-university level assessment in May 2012. The aim was to benchmark A levels in mathematics, chemistry, English and history against the main senior secondary assessment of these subjects in a range of education systems from Europe, North America, East Asia and Australasia, as well as some qualifications offered internationally.

As the comparison concentrated on individual subjects and not the whole curriculum on offer in other countries, A level subjects started with an advantage when judging comparative demand. The smaller number of subjects typically taken at A level allows each to be the central focus of a student’s study. Elsewhere, courses normally comprise much broader offerings, ranging from five to 13 (Denmark). These are often a core of compulsory subjects supplemented with a number of subject specialisms, which may naturally limit the breadth and depth of study achievable in each individual subject.

E/W/NI are unusual in having a single education system for over 50 million people. France has a single education system too; however, many other countries have systems for populations of four to seven million – these include national, state, provincial and territorial education systems. Some of the larger national systems combine local control of decision-making. In most of the education systems there is a central organisation which administers the assessment, although this is not necessarily under government control.

In E/W/NI a high percentage of young people complete secondary education, with almost half gaining A levels at the end of their studies. High completion rates are also seen in Denmark, Finland, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the Republic of Ireland and the Republic of Korea. The A level system is one of the few assessments for which there are no compulsory subjects. In most systems with more than two compulsory subjects, for example Finland and France, mathematics is compulsory.

A series of themes emerged through the research, which included:

- Breadth versus depth – many systems have a baccalaureate or diploma-style assessment system including study of a number of subject areas that are not required as part of A levels.

39 International Comparisons in Senior Secondary Assessment http://www2.ofqual.gov.uk/downloads/category/96-international-comparability
• Independent study – the inclusion of independent research, projects and extended essays.
• Mathematics – the number of different mathematics assessments at a variety of levels available to students in many education systems was in contrast to A Level Mathematics.
• Focus of the study of English – A levels were found to be different from the study of English in other education systems, as they have an exclusive focus on reading and interpreting traditional forms of text. In other systems there is a broad range of views on what could be considered a text (from a photograph, to a film, to Chaucer).
• School-based assessment – in some systems there is more teacher- and school-based assessment with the potential to stretch students, with oral examinations as part of the system.
• Multiple-choice questions – these can be used to test large amounts of knowledge and assess skills that can be difficult to test by other means. They are common in other systems at senior secondary level but are not common in A level.

1.2 The three-country (England, Wales and N. Ireland) qualifications system

We currently operate a three-country qualifications and regulatory system. The different aspects of this are discussed in the following sections.

1.2.1 Criteria development

A level and GCSE qualifications are re-accredited at regular intervals of five to six years. At the time of re-accreditation, opportunities are taken to review and refresh:

• content and ensure alignment with ‘national’ curriculum requirements (GCSE only); and
• assessment arrangements, including the balance across Assessment Objectives and between internal and external assessment.

To date the development of accreditation criteria and the process of accreditation have been joint undertakings, with CCEA (Regulator) working with regulatory colleagues in England (Ofqual) and in Wales (Welsh Government). The criteria enable the Awarding Organisations (AOs) to develop subject specifications and associated specimen assessment materials that are subsequently accredited by the Regulators.

For A levels and GCSEs there are currently two levels of criteria:

• qualification (setting out the common requirements across all subjects); and
• subject specific (setting out the detailed knowledge/understanding, skills and internal/external assessment requirements at subject level).
With the criteria in place the Regulators are able to ensure that the level of demand and standards of A level/GCSE specifications are comparable across countries and across awarding bodies.

1.2.2 Comparability
There are other ways in which the Regulators monitor AOs to ensure standards are maintained. They carry out comparability studies, where candidates’ exam scripts across all the AOs are compared at judgemental grade boundaries to ensure that a similar standard of work is required to get, for example, a grade A in a subject. They monitor AO meetings where grade boundaries are being set, and they monitor AO grade outcomes in line with AO predictions.

1.2.3 Awarding issues for consideration
1.2.3.1 Comparable outcomes
AOs seek to ensure comparability of standards year-on-year in each subject in order to be fair to past, current and future candidates. Comparable outcomes means that roughly the same proportion of students will achieve each grade as in the previous year, if everything else remains the same. Comparable outcomes are expected when:

- the cohort for the subject is similar, in terms of ability, to that of previous years;
- the syllabus and the exams and other assessments are fit for purpose;
- the purpose, requirements and nature of the qualification are the same;
- there has been no substantial improvement (or drop) in teaching and learning at a national level; and
- previous grade standards were appropriate.

The comparable outcomes approach should lead to similar outcomes, year-on-year. However, small differences can emerge from year to year due to changes in the cohort.

1.2.3.2 Qualification standards
AOs are tasked with ensuring standards are maintained at qualification level. Outcomes on individual units will be aggregated to achieve the qualification grade. A candidate getting a C grade in a qualification may not have exhibited grade C level work in all of their assessments, but the aggregation across all assessments awards them a C at qualification level. Likewise, a candidate getting a grade D may have work of a grade C standard in one or more of their assessments, but the aggregation of attainment across all assessments places them as a D at qualification level. GCSEs and A levels are compensatory models of assessment, which means that poor attainment in one skill or knowledge area can be compensated for by very good performance in another.
1.2.3.3 Awarding

When awarding modular qualifications, the same process is followed for GCSE and A level awards across all subjects. Awarding is based on setting appropriate overall subject level outcomes for qualifications, taking into account appropriate performance and unit level outcomes.

Initial judgements will be made on notional unit grade boundaries, i.e. what mark in an individual assessment constitutes, for example a C grade. Grade boundaries are different for different units within qualifications and are different across exam series. This reflects the fact that different exams have different questions and therefore can be at differing levels of demand. This ensures fairness to candidates who are judged to have sat a paper that is more or less demanding than candidates in the previous series. Outcomes on individual units will be aggregated to achieve the qualification grade. A grade is a qualification level outcome only.

Awarding of unitised GCSEs requires careful consideration by examiners. At A level, AS and A2 units differ in terms of demand; however, GCSEs require that the standard set for a unit is the full GCSE standard, irrespective of when that unit is assessed during the two-year period.

The processes that AOs are to follow in the awarding of qualifications, is set out in the ‘GCSE, GCE, Principal Learning and Project Code of Practice’ Section 640.

1.2.3.4 Use of predictions

AOs use both qualitative and quantitative information when setting qualification grade boundaries. Prediction data is used to indicate expected outcomes at whole qualification level and is part of a wider package of information used to support the judgements made by senior examiners. An analysis is carried out as to a prediction for the outcomes of the current cohort in the qualification as a whole in comparison to previous cohorts. Each AO’s qualification estimate is based on the most valid data that covers the largest percentage of their cohort as a whole. At A level, candidates’ prior GCSE attainment is used. At GCSE, one of two types of prediction is used: KS241 attainment data or ‘common centre’ data.

KS2 data (assessment age 11) is used as the prior attainment measure in England as it is the most statistically reliable information available when predicting the expected achievement of the cohort of 16 year olds taking their GCSEs. The relationship between GCSE performance in years x-1 and x-2 and that cohorts’ corresponding attainment at KS2 allows them to produce a model of the relationship that they could use to predict outcomes in year x.

40 www.ofqual.gov.uk/downloads/category/93-codes-of-practice
41 Foundation and Key Stages 1–4 provide for the statutory curriculum at pre-school (Foundation), KS1 for Years 1–3, KS2 for Years 4–7, KS3 for secondary Years 8–10 and KS4 for secondary Years 11–12. Further information can be found at www.nicurriculum.org.uk
KS2 tests are not taken in Wales and N. Ireland; therefore, common centres are used for GCSE awarding in these regions. A common centre is a centre that has entered students for a subject in the two previous examination years. The assumption is that centres’ results are likely to be similar to those of previous years, and that across the cohort as a whole, comparing results for the common centres gives an indication of whether standards between years are comparable. Common centre data is available for all UK centres and all GCSE AOs, allowing previous GCSE performance to be identified regardless of whether a centre has changed AO. Common centre data is available at school level, rather than at individual candidate level.

Prediction data has no impact on the individual achievement of a student in the rank order of an individual assessment, nor in the qualification as a whole.

1.3 Three-country divergence

Under previous arrangements, jurisdictional differences were handled by country-specific references within the criteria, for example the need to take account of different ‘national’ curriculum requirements at GCSE. With A levels there have to date been fewer challenges, given that there are no statutory curriculum requirements beyond KS4. Changes in the nature and scope of regulation in England, and in particular policy announcements over the last 12 months, have introduced change to the nature and operation of the GCSE and A level qualifications system, with proposals for further, more radical, developments. In light of changes under way in England the qualifications Regulators now engage in parallel decision-making, which means that similar issues are considered but different decisions may be taken.

1.3.1 England

The government in England is in the process of reviewing GCSEs and A levels for use in England, following recommendations from the 2010 ‘Schools White paper – The Importance of Teaching’\(^{42}\). The direction of travel in England for GCSEs and A levels is one of:

- reverting from modular (mid-course) to linear (end-of-course) assessment;
- reductions in resit opportunities;
- a narrowing of choice of qualification titles; and
- A levels being designed in the first instance for progression to university, including the proposal that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should be involved in A level development and design.

Recently there has been further divergence in policies across England, Wales and N. Ireland. Linear-only GCSEs are now required in England, with linear and

modular\textsuperscript{43} GCSE pathways available in N. Ireland and Wales. In England and N. Ireland, GCSEs in English Literature, Geography, History and Religious Studies from summer 2013 also have a requirement for a 5% weighting for spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPaG). The Welsh Government did not make this a requirement but has not prohibited AOs from including it in the specifications being taken by candidates in Wales.

Recent announcements in England on future reforms of GCSEs include:

• confirming linearity;
• removing tiering;
• minimum use of internal assessment;
• more extended writing; and
• a change to the grading structure.

‘New GCSEs’ in ‘the core academic subjects of English, English Literature, mathematics, the sciences, history and geography’ should be ready for teaching in 2015. See Appendix II for further information on qualifications proposals under consideration in England.

At A level, the AS qualification in England is to be a standalone, one-year qualification not linked to A level, which will be a two-year, linear qualification. Changes to the content of A levels in the ‘core academic subjects’ as listed above for GCSE, as well as in A level Psychology, Art and Design, Sociology, Business Studies, Economics and Computing, are to be implemented for first teaching in September 2015. Wales has recommended retaining AS as part of A level. The Department has consulted on this issue in N. Ireland with the Minister announcing, in May 2013, the retention of modular A levels, with the removal of the January assessment. He also announced the retention of AS level as part of the overall A level qualification.

1.3.2 Wales
The Welsh Government has just completed a fundamental ‘Review of the qualifications for 14 to 19-year-olds in Wales’. Recommendations from the review regarding implementation have been considered by the Welsh Education Minister, with work now underway. See Appendix III for details of the review recommendations. In summer 2012, following the publication of the GCSE grades, the Welsh Education Minister asked for a re-grading for the Welsh candidates studying GCSE English Language with WJEC. This involved changing the grade boundaries for the one-third of the WJEC cohort who were Welsh candidates. This is an area of divergence across the three-country maintenance of standards.

\textsuperscript{43} 40\% of the assessment within a unitised specification must be taken at the end of the two-year course of study. In addition, the current GCSE criteria allow only one resit of each unit of assessment.
1.4 Progression pathways

As stated, one of the primary purposes of taking GCSEs and A levels is to provide learners with a rank ordered attainment of graded qualifications that can be used to access further and higher education, training, or, for a small number, employment. Generally numbers or combinations of GCSE subjects are specified for access to post-16 study, specifically English and mathematics which are commonly required.

GCSEs and A levels will continue to have currency throughout lifelong learning and employment. Other qualifications will be used in conjunction with GCSEs and A levels or stand alone to support access to a variety of progression pathways:

- Progression to post-16 at school – commonly five GCSEs at grade C or above will be required to access post-16 provision, which means A levels or other Level 3 qualifications, although some schools will specify a higher number of GCSEs. Schools will often require at least grade B in GCSE subjects selected by pupils for A level study.

- Progression to further and higher education – FHE offer a range of Level 2 and 3 programmes requiring GCSEs (or equivalent) as entry requirements. Commonly four or five GCSEs at grade C or above will be required to access Level 3 programmes, and two GCSEs at grade G or above to access Level 2 programmes. Entry requirements to FHE programmes (Level 4 and above) will often specify two A level passes in addition to five GCSEs including English and mathematics.

- Progression to training – access to training programmes at Levels 1 to 3 will often depend on the achievement of vocational qualifications. GCSEs will provide access to higher levels on these programmes. A learner with fewer than four or five GCSEs at grade C or above will often be given access to Level 1 or 2, or a learner with five GCSEs at grade C or above (sometimes requiring English and mathematics) may access Level 3, including apprenticeships.

- Progression to university-based higher education – A levels are the most popularly used qualifications for entrance to university. Potential differences in A level provision in N. Ireland due to proposed changes to A levels in England will have implications for learners from N. Ireland when considering access to universities in England.

- Progression to employment – a small number of learners will seek access to employment at age 16, with employers specifying a number of GCSEs at grade C and above for recruitment and selection purposes – usually five. GCSEs also have currency for those seeking access to employment at a later stage.

Whilst GCSEs are awarded at grades A* to G, usually only grade C and above are recognised for access to post-16 provision. English and mathematics continue to be the focus for specific GCSEs (or equivalents) used to support progression.
pathways, either for post-16 further education and training, access to university, or employment. Proposed changes to 14–16 qualifications across England and Wales will have an impact on the currency of grades for GCSEs achieved in N. Ireland. Likewise, any changes in GCSE or alternative 14–16 qualifications in N. Ireland will have implications for post-16 progression.

1.5 Portability of qualifications

As noted above, GCSEs and A levels are a key determinant of progression to further study and employment. Most GCSEs and A levels are currently taken in England. If there are different assessment arrangements in England from those in Wales and N. Ireland, a perception could develop that the qualifications taken by the majority of learners in England are different from those available to learners in N. Ireland (and in Wales). It is important that any policy differences do not impact on the portability of the qualification for learners moving across jurisdictions. Due to the limited number of third level places in N. Ireland, grade requirements for courses are often higher than in other UK jurisdictions, resulting in a significant number of learners studying outside N. Ireland. Portability for N. Ireland learners at 18 is an issue that will need to be managed by CCEA Regulator, whether this involves variations of the same qualifications in E/W/NI, or, as it currently is in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, with an entirely different qualification system.

Learners in Scotland can study National Qualifications (NQs). These are governed by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), which acts as both an Awarding Organisation and an accreditation body. In the Republic of Ireland state certificate examinations are offered to learners, and responsibility for the operation of these rests with the State Examinations Commission (SEC). As only one body offers qualifications in the Republic of Ireland, there is no formal regulator.

Whilst the qualifications in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland differ from GCSEs and A levels in terms of size, breadth of study and age taken, portability of qualifications across the different systems, which is the ability to use these qualifications for progression outside Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, is accommodated through collaboration on National Qualifications Frameworks (see Appendix VI.)

2 Curriculum

The curriculum in N. Ireland is structured in a similar way throughout KS1–4, to allow for mapping of the learning throughout educational experiences for a learner attending a primary school and a post-primary school.
2.1 The Revised Curriculum

The Revised Curriculum became statutory for all in 2009 and is structured under:

- Areas of Learning;
- Cross-Curricular Skills: Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT; and
- Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities/Other Skills.

For each Area of Learning there is a statutory minimum content, which changes across the Key Stages. All of the aspects of the curriculum need to be assessed and reported on (see Appendix V). All teachers are required to provide opportunities for learners to acquire and develop Cross-Curricular Skills and Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities alongside subject knowledge.

Teachers in Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 will assess and report on Communication and Using Mathematics from 2013 and Using ICT from 2014. In addition, there is an emphasis on Assessment for Learning\(^4\), including peer and self-assessment. In KS4, statutory requirements are generally met through the 14–16 qualifications offer in schools. The terms of reference for the Review state that a qualifications system for N. Ireland should be the pinnacle of the statutory assessment scheme in N. Ireland.

2.2 Progression from KS3 (11–13) to KS4 (14–16)

The statutory curriculum for KS3 emphasises the teaching and learning of skills as well as knowledge. This continues into KS4, with a reduction in the number of wider/other skills. Qualifications, mostly GCSEs, become the main focus for structuring teaching and learning at KS4 and tend to be content and assessment driven. Areas of Learning at KS3 allow for flexibility for teachers to create their own programmes of learning. Schools can plan KS3 teaching and learning for year and smaller groups around the requirements for the learner(s) progressing from primary education to post-primary.

Guidance is available for teachers for the implementation of the revised curriculum at KS3. In KS4 delivering the revised curriculum will mostly be through the qualifications being taken by students. The KS4 revised curriculum also requires the teaching of Learning for Life and Work, Physical Education, Religious Education and Cross-Curricular Skills (see Section 3).

Guidance for the delivery of KS4 qualifications can be within specifications, with the addition of subject training, support and web-based resources. In KS4 teachers will

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\(^4\) Assessment for Learning encourages teachers to adapt the theory and principles of formative assessment to suit their own teaching context, further information can be found at [www.nicurriculum.org.uk/docs/assessment_for_learning/AfL_A%20Practical%20Guide.pdf](http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/docs/assessment_for_learning/AfL_A%20Practical%20Guide.pdf)
concentrate on the delivery of the content of the qualifications, which can result in repetition of learning from the KS3 curriculum.

2.3 The design and delivery of qualifications taken at 16 and 18

Qualification design can take into account:
- the needs of the learner and preferred assessment methods;
- effective delivery of the qualification;
- promoting formative assessment\(^\text{45}\) methodologies;
- meeting the needs of the statutory curriculum;
- taking opportunities for the inclusion and assessment of other skills; and
- ensuring that development is taken forward by current and informed practitioners.

3 Skills development within 14–18 education

The Northern Ireland Curriculum places an emphasis on the development of skills. Employers see the achievement of at least Level 2 in literacy (Communication) and numeracy (Using Mathematics) as essential for employability, in addition to wider employability skills such as analytical, creative, entrepreneurial and independent learning skills.

3.1 Skills in the Northern Ireland Curriculum

Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT are the statutory Cross-Curricular Skills. Schools are required to assess and report annually on each learner’s progression with reference to the Levels of Progression. These cover KS 1–3 and set out, in the form of ‘can do’ statements, a continuum of skills that learners should develop to build the communication, mathematical and ICT skills needed to function effectively in life and in the world of work. Assessment is teacher-based. Assessment of the three skills is statutory until age 16 in schools. Most schools meet their KS4 statutory requirements through GCSE English, Mathematics and ICT.

Other Skills (Problem-Solving, Working with Others and Self-Management) are also required at KS4. These skills are required to be delivered through the Areas of Learning and are reported on, usually through learners’ annual reports. Again the statutory requirements will generally be delivered through the qualification offer in school, although the inclusion of the wider skills is not required in qualifications offered in N. Ireland.

\(^{45}\) Formative assessment is about assessment for learning throughout a course, as opposed to summative, where assessment is of learning at a particular point.
3.2 Current skills qualifications

In N. Ireland, Essential Skills qualifications ranging from Entry Level 1 to Level 2 are undertaken in further education and training. Departmental policy in N. Ireland is for learners in school to undertake GCSEs unless there are exceptional circumstances, when learners can undertake Essential Skills.

The current skills qualifications offered in England are Functional Skills (FS) from Entry Level 1 to Level 2. Assessment is externally set and externally marked. In Wales, ES Wales are offered from Entry Level 1 to Level 4. Assessment is by portfolio only and is marked internally.

CCEA was commissioned by the Department in 2010 to evaluate the suitability of the current skills qualifications offer for schools in Northern Ireland. Skills qualifications are being reviewed to see if they meet the requirements for learners in N. Ireland at Level 2. In taking this work forward, any qualifications proposed for the 14–16 year old age group will take into account the development of the Cross-Curricular Skills and build on the Levels of Progression.

Key Skills qualifications are available at Entry Level 1 to Level 5 for:
- Working with Others;
- Improving Own Learning and Performance; and
- Problem-Solving.

These qualifications are all internally assessed and are taken by a small number of learners in N. Ireland schools, mostly at Entry Level to Level 2 for 14–16 year olds. Other internally assessed qualifications are offered by AOs to address all or parts of these skills, such as the Level 3 Certificate of Personal Effectiveness (CoPE) qualification taken mostly at 16–18. These qualifications can help support progression to post-16 and higher education, training and employment.

Skills qualifications are currently offered to a limited number of learners in schools as an alternative to GCSEs in English and Mathematics, facilitating access for these learners to achieve a qualification in communication and mathematics at Level 2.

3.3 GCSE English and Mathematics

14–16 year old learners normally undertake a programme of GCSE study that enables them to progress to further study, training or employment. The achievement of a Level 2 qualification in communication and mathematics/numeracy for the majority of 16 year olds will come through GCSE English and Mathematics. 59.5%\(^{46}\) of those taking GCSE English and Mathematics achieve grade C or above in both\(^ {47}\). This will allow them to access post-16 study, employment or training that requires...
these qualifications for entry. It is unlikely however that GCSE study can be a basis for all young people to achieve Level 2 in Communication and Mathematics.

3.4 Meeting the needs of employers

Employers commonly use GCSEs and A levels to recruit and select potential employees, usually requiring a number of qualifications or specifying the subjects – particularly GCSEs in English and Mathematics. Although employers use qualifications for recruitment and selection, it has been discussed that wider skills alongside qualifications are preferable for good employees.

3.4.1 Employer requirements

A CCEA project on employer requirements in 1996 found that N. Ireland employers were more interested in school leavers having employability skills than qualifications. Some of these skills include communication, teamwork, showing initiative and flexibility, and interpersonal and organisational skills. More recent research has recorded that there is a greater emphasis on soft skills (for example interpersonal skills, communication skills, willingness to learn, appearance, behaviours and confidence) as core characteristics employers look for. However, employers use and need qualifications for recruitment and selection.

National Occupational Standards (NOS) are designed by employer groups to meet the needs of industry. Qualifications referenced to NOS can be taken/achieved by learners in vocational education and training contexts, or at school. Employers require an easily recognisable qualification that can provide them with an indicator of an applicant's attainment in literacy and numeracy, as well as their wider skills and capabilities.

The CBI Education and Skills survey 2012 noted that for those in the 14–19 age group, employers believe schools and colleges should be prioritising development of employability skills, including self-management, business and customer awareness, and attitude to work. They also want to see more done to strengthen literacy and numeracy skills. While all types of qualifications are seen as aiding development of particular employability skills, no one type is seen as delivering on all the essential areas. Nearly three-quarters of businesses say that they value foreign language skills.

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49 www.cbi.org.uk/media/1514978/cbi_education_and_skills_survey_2012.pdf
4 Inclusivity

The aim of the GCSE and A level Review is to ensure that we have a world-class suite of qualifications capable of testing and rewarding the learning and attainment of learners at the end of compulsory schooling and at the end of sixth form. The Review focuses on the work of the Department to date on the needs, aptitudes and aspirations of all learners, including those with special educational needs (SEN).

4.1 Meeting the needs of young people

Almost all pupils in N. Ireland embark on a programme of study at 14–16 that will lead to qualifications. Currently around 95% of learners progress to further study and training: 60% of these to post-16 school provision, and the remainder to further education and training. The EF and other educational policies and initiatives work towards ensuring that pupils will be provided with a breadth of options for the qualifications they take at 16 and 18; GCSEs and A levels remain the most popular qualifications taken at both stages. GCSEs have been designed to be inclusive for all learners, including lower ability and high-end achievers, on a grading system from A* to G. A levels are taken by the majority of learners in post-16 schools, in addition to a range of other qualifications. All qualifications provide recognition for learning for use in any selection process for further study and/or employment, or for individual self-esteem/achievement.

4.1.1 What learners need to support progression

Whilst grades below a C are considered a pass at GCSE, many gatekeepers to learning and employment require grade C and above for progression post-16. This raises questions about the value, and the impact on potential progression, for learners achieving grades D and below. This is especially true for GCSE English and Mathematics.

A levels are the main qualifications taken at post-16 in N. Ireland schools and will mostly be used by learners to gain entry to university courses. University admissions use A level grades as the main indicator of an applicant’s rank order of suitability for a course. A levels are graded A–E, with the recent addition of an A* for the highest achievers. Some highly sought-after university courses will have their own entrance test to be used in combination with A level grades. Learners in N. Ireland applying to third level education need to hold qualifications that will be accepted by universities. This is especially pertinent for learners applying to universities in England and Wales, where changes to A levels could result in different values being placed upon A level qualifications from England, Wales and N. Ireland respectively.

50 69.2% from Year 12 (in 2011/12) stayed on in school to Year 13 (in 2012/13), DE.
4.1.2 Learners’ individual needs

Learners need qualifications that allow them to select areas of interest/relevance, within the parameters of a broad and balanced curriculum. Motivation for participation in qualifications offered at KS4 and beyond can reflect personal or family interest in areas of study or support particular progression pathways. Learners need a system that supports them to achieve and provides a realistic assessment experience that reflects skills used in their everyday life. A qualification mix at KS4 and beyond can provide assessment that supports a range of learning styles and a breadth of interests. The range of current qualifications offered can meet different learner needs.

GCSEs and A levels provide a graded outcome that recognises learners’ achievements, based on their rank order in assessments. Assessments are generally a mix of examination and internal assessment. Graded qualifications can motivate learners to achieve highly, relative to their peers. A graded qualification system also allows for easy interpretation of learner performance for parents, employers and for progression in education.

The increase in the uptake of vocational qualifications in schools has proven that the nature of assessment of these qualifications, their content focus and achievements are a motivating factor for a range of learners. These qualifications have shown that the different content focus and assessment design can allow for greater engagement for some learners than what is facilitated by GCSE and A levels. Other qualifications use a competence-based model of assessment. This means that competence must be shown in all aspects of the assessment to achieve a pass. Current competence-based qualifications taken by learners in N. Ireland include Essential Skills and Key Skills.

4.2 Requirements for learners with Special Educational Needs

Each jurisdiction aims to put in place a qualification system that meets the needs of all its learners. Within this wide umbrella is the learner with special educational needs. All schools in N. Ireland are involved in the provision of special education and the majority of learners with special educational needs will be catered for in mainstream schools. Depending on their level of learning needs – mild, moderate, severe, profound – learners may be taught in a learning support centre (LSC) within a mainstream school or a special school. The majority of learning and achievement that takes place within special schools and LSCs is at Level 1 and Entry levels 1, 2 and 3. Qualifications, if achieved, are small in size and mainly include only portfolio-type assessment. In most special schools and LSCs, learning is recognised through completion of non-accredited/regulated courses such as AO ‘own brand’ courses or by centre-devised certificates of achievement. The uptake of GCSE and A level is very low and in most cases non-existent.
4.2.1 What qualifications are suitable for SEN learners?
Meeting the EF policy requirements, in terms of the size and level of the qualification and breadth of offer, is particularly challenging for the SEN sector. CCEA Accreditation has been working with teachers in the SEN sector to look at how the benefits of the EF can be fully realised and how the achievements of SEN learners can be better recognised, through greater use of accredited qualifications, to support clear progression pathways. We have previously stated that, whatever the qualification or type of learner, recognition must be offered for learning for progression purposes, entry to employment and for individual self-esteem. This is especially important for SEN learners.

Schools have been encouraged to use accredited qualifications particularly in relation to the statutory curriculum at KS4: the areas of literacy/numeracy, personal and social development and a vocationally related element. They have been encouraged to consider Qualification and Credit Framework (QCF) qualifications, which carry certain flexibility in terms of choice of size, levels, combination of units and assessment routes that GCSE and A level qualifications do not offer. QCF qualifications lend themselves very well to the learning needs of SEN learners. Whilst learners in mainstream schools generally aim to advance to higher levels of qualifications during their school education, for SEN learners horizontal progression is sometimes more suitable and achievable.

4.3 Learner progression and flexibility of assessment
The nature of GCSE and A level allows for some assessment to take place throughout a two-year course, but final recognition of achievement does not take place until the full course is completed at the end of the two years. Under this system it is assumed that all learners generally progress at the same rate. For some learners, including SEN, the rate of progression tends to be slower and can be fragmented. Therefore, what might take one learner two years to achieve might take another learner three or four years. Some types of learners could benefit from being given a longer time to reach the point where they are ready for assessment. Likewise, some could benefit from a qualification that allows for banking of achievement throughout the course, which will be recognised even if the course is not completed and can be built upon at a later stage in the learner’s education.

Some learners progress more quickly, for example those on an Accelerated Learning Programme, and could access qualifications earlier than at the end of two years. There are currently non-GCSE/A level qualifications that facilitate learners being assessed when ready.

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51 An Accelerated Learning Programme is an educational system which allows academically able or gifted learners to progress more rapidly through school.
4.4 Other qualifications taken by 14–16 and 16–18 learners in N. Ireland

The Review of GCSE and A levels will focus on the best options for retaining, adapting or replacing the qualifications taken at age 16 and 18 in Northern Ireland. 31% of the qualifications taken at KS4 are other than traditional GCSEs and 20% of those taken at GCE are other than traditional A levels\(^{52}\), so it is relevant to consider the place of other qualifications alongside GCSEs and A levels in this Review.

Qualification systems investigated through international practice and within Scotland and Republic of Ireland successfully offer vocational programmes and qualifications for learners alongside academic programmes. It is important to consider qualifications other than GCSEs and A levels currently undertaken by learners in N. Ireland and the benefits they provide for learners. The benefits of these types of qualifications and similar qualifications internationally will be considered when formulating potential recommendations as to the future of GCSEs and A levels.

4.4.1 Other qualifications currently used in N. Ireland 14–18 school education

GCSEs and A levels are known as General Qualifications on the Register of Regulated Qualifications for E/W/NI. There are a range of other qualifications types in use, mainly QCF, NQF and Other General. These other types tend to be vocationally focused, offering flexibility of choice of qualification size, level, units, assessment methods and availability of assessment.

The EF policy encourages a breadth of qualification offer in schools in N. Ireland. The purpose of the EF is to provide access to a guaranteed minimum number of qualifications, at least one-third of which are ‘applied’\(^{53}\) qualifications. Some of these include GCSE subjects titled as applied, as well as subjects such as Music, PE and Home Economics. Other qualifications, such as Occupational Studies (OS) and QCF qualifications, count towards this provision. The EF Audit records the courses being offered in N. Ireland schools. It shows that alongside GCSEs and A levels a range of vocational qualifications are being offered at Levels 1, 2 and 3\(^{54}\). Smaller qualifications that do not qualify for the EF are taken by 14–18 pupils in schools as enrichment and are increasingly being used to recognise the achievement of learners with SEN.

4.4.2 What do ‘other’ qualifications provide?

Other qualifications can be used to support inclusivity for the full range of learners. Other qualifications are taken by learners where needs are not met by GCSEs and A levels in terms of qualification focus, assessment methods and desired progression pathways. Some learners can be less engaged with more academic

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\(^{52}\) 76,904 qualifications other than GCSE are taken at KS4 alongside 163,983 GCSE Single Awards and 7,559 GCSE Double Awards. 19,619 qualifications other than A levels are taken at post-16 alongside 31,341 A levels and 44,189 AS levels. (SOURCE: RM Data Solutions, 2010/11). This includes Applied GCSEs and A levels.

\(^{53}\) An applied course is one in which subject knowledge, understanding and skills are developed in relation to a work context – www.deni.gov.uk/2005_18-entitlement_framework-initial_guidance.pdf

\(^{54}\) www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/docs/regulation/guidance/cross_boundaries_leaflet.pdf
qualifications at 14–18. The provision of these other types of qualifications is key to ensuring that these pupils' abilities can be fostered and achievements can be recognised, have currency for progression purposes and be recorded for the Department targets. These other qualifications currently contribute towards the Department’s targets within the five GCSEs at grade C or above. Pupils use these qualifications to support their progression pathways into a range of post-16 learning contexts, for example:

- Level 2 Awards/Certificates/Diplomas/Extended Diplomas are used in conjunction with GCSEs/other qualifications or standalone for progression to post-16 provision, including A levels and other applied/vocational qualifications.
- OS qualifications support progression to post-16 programmes at Levels 2 and 3 in combination with GCSEs and other vocational/applied qualifications.
- Level 3 other (non A level) qualifications can be used for progression to HE.
- Essential Skills in Communication and Application of Number can be used to support progression to higher education in N. Ireland and across the UK.

In some schools (mainly selective) GCSE/A levels are the main qualification type taken. Other qualifications are central in meeting the needs of young people in other 14–18 school contexts. A variety of evaluations carried out for other qualifications used in 14–18 contexts show very high levels of motivation for pupils taking the qualifications, and high satisfaction rates for teachers/lecturers delivering the qualifications and for school managers. These qualifications are providing valuable alternatives to GCSE/A levels for a range of learners. This encourages engagement at school/further education college and results in achievement of GCSE/A level equivalent qualifications used to support progression pathways and for schools reporting achievements.

5 Areas for consideration

In summary, a range of issues were considered during the Review to assess whether the current qualifications are fit for purpose for N. Ireland or whether changes are needed. These are outlined below.

Purposes

1. What are the main purposes of qualifications at age 16 and age 18?
   - Does the purpose of a qualification differ at age 16 and age 18?
   - Should these qualifications:
     a) provide recognition;
     b) ensure standards;

c) allow for selection within the cohort;
d) measure the education system; or
e) a combination of all of these?
- Are all four purposes achievable in one qualification model or within one qualification system?
- Are some of these purposes more important than others?
- Are there other purposes for qualifications in N. Ireland that need to be considered?

2. Do the qualifications policies being considered in England and Wales fit the purpose of qualifications for N. Ireland?
   • Do the diverging policies allow us to work within a three-country system?

GCSEs

3. Do GCSEs meet the needs of all learners?
   • Is it appropriate for GCSEs to be studied by such a wide range of the 16 year old cohort?
   • When most learners now stay on in education or training until age 18, is there a need for high-stakes qualifications across a wide range of subjects at 16?
   • Should the purpose of a qualification at 16 be to check progress along the 14–18 educational road?
   • Are we doing the right thing by entering nearly all 14–16 year olds with the knowledge that around a third of them will achieve below a grade C?
   • Is attainment at GCSE grade D to G seen as less valuable than high attainment in a Level 1 qualification?

4. Should GCSE qualifications continue to be designed to meet the needs of all 16 year olds?
   • Is there an appropriate breadth and balance in the KS4 qualification offer?
   • Should there be a range of qualifications to meet the different purposes that GCSEs currently fulfil?

5. Could a range of core GCSE qualifications be defined that would cover an ‘entitlement’ for all young people at 16, within the broader 14–18 education programme?
   • Can the statutory requirements provide a starting point for a core of knowledge and skills that could be built into qualifications?
   • Should 14–16 qualifications provision be made up of a mix of GCSEs and other Level 1 and Level 2 (vocational/applied) qualifications, supported by Entry Level qualifications?

6. EF policy requires schools to offer learners a breadth of qualifications. How will the future of some of these qualifications be impacted upon by GCSE policy in England?

7. How has the GCSE brand been impacted upon by recent events and the expansion of titles offered?
8. What impact will GCSE developments in England, including ensuring focus on their National Curriculum, have on the future development of GCSEs in N. Ireland?

Post-16

9. Would distinct qualifications, building on a mathematical core for all but emphasising the different specialisms for those intending to progress in mathematics-related fields at university, better serve all students?
   • Is there a need for post-16 mathematics to have further lower-level options in addition to AS?

10. Would a broader approach to the study of English prepare students better for studying in a higher education setting?

11. Do you consider that the current system, centred on GCSE and A level qualifications where achievement must be awarded/assessment must take place after two years, allows for full participation and recognition for all learners?

A level

12. Would additional breadth be better than the depth of the current A level system?
   • Should it be necessary to study ‘core’ skills alongside specialisms?

13. Assessment:
   • Would the inclusion of independent research, projects and extended essays bring additional depth to A level subject expertise?
   • Should there be more teacher- and school-based assessment with the potential to stretch students, especially where oral examinations are part of the system?
   • Do AS levels cause the teaching and learning to be too content driven?
   • Should we revisit multiple-choice questions in A level assessments?
   • Would learners benefit from having the opportunity to set the pace of their own learning and when they take assessment?

14. Design:
   • Who should be involved in the design of A level qualifications?
   • Is there a role for employers in A level design? If so, what would this be?
   • Can it be assumed that there is the commitment across HE for the role envisaged for them in A level development work? If there is the commitment, is there the capacity?
   • What is the impact on the Entitlement Framework should HEIs not engage in the development of some A level subjects?
   • What are the issues for A levels in N. Ireland should significant HEI engagement and endorsement be required for an individual AO’s A level to be accredited?
Progression

15. How do we ensure qualifications taken here have a currency that enables learners to progress in employment and study across country boundaries?

16. What are the alternatives to GCSEs in English and Mathematics for progression?

17. Would learners benefit from the opportunity for horizontal progression (building on breadth at, for example, Level 1) as well as vertical progression?

18. How do we ensure horizontal progression is equally recognised?

Skills

19. How could we consider allowing for the statutory requirement to deliver and assess cross-curricular and other skills in these qualifications?

20. What skills do employers feel need to be developed within 14–18 education?

21. Do skills need to be developed further within 16–18 education?
   • If so, what skills should be developed further?
   • Elsewhere it is believed that Level 3 in core skills is a preferred baseline for employees; should this be considered here?

22. Should wider skills be included in KS4 and post-16 qualifications?
   • If so, how could this be achieved?
   • Can wider skills be appropriately assessed in a qualification that rank-orders individual attainment?

23. Is there a group of young people that could benefit from focusing on Communication and Using Mathematics through skills qualifications?
Appendix E: Review of Other Qualification Systems

Introduction

The Terms of Reference for the ‘Review of Qualifications’\textsuperscript{56} stipulates that the work of the Review of GCSEs and A levels for N. Ireland should reflect on and consider international best practice to ensure that any recommendations allow for international portability and comparability of N. Ireland qualifications.

The experiences of the Scottish and Republic of Ireland examination systems were also to be considered. Discussions by the Expert Group on lessons from both these jurisdictions are included in Appendix B and case studies of both jurisdictions are included in this section (Scotland – Section 1; Republic of Ireland – Section 2).

A review of a number of international qualifications models was undertaken and a full report produced outlining these international qualifications systems. This appendix summarises a range of systems and offers learning from these models that could assist reflection on potential pathways for N. Ireland.

1. Scotland

1.1. Context

The Scottish Education system has operated independently from the remainder of the UK since the 1900s, introducing their O-Grade Qualifications in 1962. The Scottish Higher, which had been the main school leaving qualification in Scotland since 1888, was revised at that time. From the mid-1970s, the key aims of the curriculum in Scotland were for all pupils to develop:

- knowledge/understanding of self and social and physical environment;
- cognitive, personal and psychomotor skills;
- affective development in a wide range of attitudes; and
- preparation for adult life and social competence.

These aims have recently been updated through the Scottish Government’s Curriculum for Excellence programme, which defines the purposes of the curriculum as to ensure that all young people should become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors to society and work.

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) provides all of the main qualifications at the secondary and further education levels. SQA is both the national accreditation body and awarding body in Scotland. This dual role approach means that they both develop and accredit qualifications that are offered across Scotland. The

development of qualifications takes place within the remit of an awarding body and includes the assessment and awarding of qualifications taken across Scotland, as well as in approved centres in the UK and internationally. SQA Accreditation, meanwhile, acts separately to authorise all vocational qualifications delivered in Scotland.

1.2. Qualifications in Scotland

Scottish qualification reform in the 1960s introduced Ordinary Grades taken in S4 (age 16), Higher Grades taken in year S5, and the Certificate of Sixth Year Studies taken in S6. These developments were followed by the introduction of the Standard Grade from 1984 forwards for S4 – the Ordinary Grade was phased out as replacement Standard Grades were introduced. In 1999–2000, Higher and CSYS were replaced by new Highers for S5 and Advanced Highers for S6 under the ‘Higher Still’ development programme, which also saw the introduction of new Access and Intermediate qualifications to sit alongside Standard Grade. From 2013–2014, the New National Qualifications coming out of ‘Curriculum for Excellence’ will run, using internal assessment at Levels 1–4 in the SCQF and a mixture of internal and external assessment at Levels 5–7 in the SCQF. Delivery of what is called the ‘Senior Phase’ within Curriculum for Excellence will also see different delivery patterns of qualifications, with the distinctions between S4, 5 and 6 being broken down and the introduction of more flexible pathways through the qualifications levels. The Scottish education system has traditionally emphasised breadth across a range of subjects, and it is intended that this will be retained within a Curriculum for Excellence, where breadth is one of seven principles of curriculum design.

From 2012/2013, pupils will begin to study for qualifications in S4 (age 16) instead of S3. Pupils will no longer have to choose subjects at the end of S2. In S3, they will continue to study a full range of subjects, only specialising when they reach S4. Schools and colleges will have the flexibility to deliver one- or two-year programmes of learning designed to meet their learners’ needs. The new National Qualifications at National 4, National 5 and Higher qualifications are being designed to facilitate bi-level learning where possible, and schools may choose how best to operate this (and across which levels). This approach is to allow learners to delay decisions about the level at which they will be presented, as well as to encourage them to aim for the highest level of achievement.

These new qualifications will require knowledge and understanding, as well as skills and the specifications will be more flexible and open. They will have fewer, broader outcomes that encourage holistic assessment, and will rely on assessors to exercise professional judgement instead of having to satisfy lists of criteria. National 4 qualifications are made up of 3 internally assessed units and an internal added value unit. National 5 qualifications are made up of three internally assessed units and external added value unit submitted to SQA. (Advanced Highers will be
available for 2016). The introduction of these new qualifications sits alongside the current suite of qualifications.

1.3. Standard Grades (SG)

Similar to GCSEs, pupils aged between 14 and 16 years (in years S3 and S4) study for Standard Grade examination in up to eight subjects. Pupils can study a wide range of subjects but English, Mathematics and a Science subject are compulsory. Standards take two years to complete and are awarded at grades 1–7, of which grade 1 is the highest. Passing at grades 5 and 6 is known as a pass at Foundation level, at grades 3 and 4 is known as General Level while passing at grades 1 and 2 is known as Credit level. Once these qualifications have been achieved, you can move on to take National Units and Courses – depending upon what was achieved at Standard Grade, these can be at Access, Intermediate or Higher level. From 2013/2014, Standard Grade will be replaced by National 3, 4 and 5 qualifications. At National 3, these will be based on 120 hours of class study time; at National 4 and 5, these will be based on 160 hours of class study time.

1.4. Access 3, Intermediate 1 and 2 (Acc3, Int 1 & 2)

Intermediate 1 and 2 were designed to be offered to S5 and S6 learners as progression from Standard Grade, but have increasingly been offered in S3/4 as alternative qualifications to Standard Grades. They are offered by schools and further education colleges. At Access 3, these are usually made up of three National Units. At Intermediate 1 and 2, in most cases, these comprise three National Units and an external assessment. Most National Units are designed to take 40 hours of teaching time to complete; each is a qualification in its own right or can be built towards National Courses, such as Access 3, Intermediate 1 and 2, Highers and Advanced Highers. Unit assessments are set and marked by teachers. Required material to be covered is given in the outcomes and all outcomes have to be assessed. Teaching staff can draw on materials from the National Assessment Bank to assist them with this work and ensure that national standards are applied to all unit assessments; while use of this bank is not mandatory, most assessors use the materials within it and do not set their own assessments. Students are awarded the unit when they have passed all of the outcomes satisfactorily. If they don't pass first time, students can do extra work and be re-assessed. Pupils need to pass all unit assessments in order to be awarded a National Course. They also have to undertake an external assessment, where their work is assessed by external examiners. Course assessment is set nationally by SQA. The exact type of assessment will vary depending on the subject, but it will usually include a written examination paper, sometimes accompanied by project work, or practical performances. Course assessments are graded A, B, C or D.

From 2013/2014, Intermediate 1 will be replaced by National 4 and Intermediate 2 will be replaced by National 5. Both will be based on 160 hours of class study.
These qualifications will be less prescriptive and there will be more personalisation and choice. For example, there will be ‘added value assessments’, many of which will be projects; so in History, students will be able to take an aspect of the course that interests them and study it in more depth. At National 5, more coursework will contribute to the final grade so exams should be shorter. At the moment, half of Intermediate Courses have some coursework aspect, but almost all of the new National 5 Courses include an aspect of coursework.

1.5. Skills for Work
Skills for Work Courses are vocational qualifications taken at S3 and S4 offering opportunities for learners to acquire these critical generic employability skills through a variety of practical experiences that are linked to a particular vocational area such as construction, hairdressing, hospitality and so on. They are intended to provide progression pathways to further education, training and employment, promoting experiential learning and evaluation in appropriate learning environments.

1.6. Highers
Also comprising three National Units and an external assessment at a Higher level, these qualifications are normally taken at the end of the fifth year of secondary education, at the age of 17 (Year S5). These are the qualifications most often required for entry to higher education in Scotland. Students normally take five subjects (although these may be a mixture of Intermediate and Higher levels), although they can take up to six subjects. University offers often focus on three, four or five Higher passes at grades A to C for a degree course and two to three passes for an HNC or HND. There are no compulsory subjects at this level. A revised format for this qualification will be introduced in 2014/2015 based on 160 hours of class study to ensure that they reflect the values, purposes and principles of the Curriculum for Excellence and provide good progression from National 4 and National 5.

As with the Intermediate qualifications, pupils need to pass all unit assessments in addition to passing an external assessment in order to be awarded a Higher qualification. Again, introduction of the new Highers will see the introduction of coursework to a greater range of courses.

1.7. Advanced Highers
These qualifications are awarded at grades A to D and are normally taken at the end of the sixth year of secondary education, at the age of 18. They may include material that is covered in some higher education courses. If a student chooses to go to university outside of Scotland, they are likely to be asked for Advanced Highers in up to three subjects. This is to ensure they are at the same level of knowledge as those students who have been studying AS and A levels for two
years. Once again, these comprise three National Units and an external assessment.

A revised format for this qualification will be introduced in 2015/2016 based on 160 hours of class study\textsuperscript{57} to ensure that they reflect the values, purposes and principles of Curriculum for Excellence and provide good progression from the new Highers.

Figure 1: Summary of the current and new National Qualifications in relation to GCSEs and A levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCQF Level</th>
<th>Current Qualifications</th>
<th>New National Qualifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>Advanced Higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Honours Degree</td>
<td>National 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Ordinary Degree</td>
<td>National 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Higher National Diploma</td>
<td>National 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Advanced Higher</td>
<td>National 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>National 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>SG Credit/Int2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>SG General/Int1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Access 3/SG Foundation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Access 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Access 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 1.8. Scottish Baccalaureate

In S5 and S6, students may take a Scottish Baccalaureate. There are four types of Baccalaureate in Scotland:

- science;
- languages;
- expressive arts; and
- social science.

Each Baccalaureate is made up of National Courses at Higher and Advanced Higher level, plus an Interdisciplinary Project. The project allows students to utilise

\textsuperscript{57} While Advanced Highers are designed around the same amount of class study time as Highers, at this level it is assumed that learners will spend an additional 160 hours of individual study time.
their skills and knowledge in an applied context and sits at an Advanced Higher level. Scottish Baccalaureates are awarded at Pass and Distinction.

These National Qualifications are one of the three main groups of qualifications offered by SQA in Scotland, along with Higher National Qualifications usually taken at college and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs). National Qualifications are available in 75 subject areas, including English, mathematics, languages and science and also a wide range of 'applied' type subjects including Travel and Tourism, Childcare and Media – New National Qualifications are currently under development. Figure 1 on the previous page shows the current and new qualifications and where GCSEs and A levels sit in relation to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and to each other.

Scottish students who leave school at 17 or 18 with Intermediate 2s, Highers, Advanced Highers or a Scottish Baccalaureate can then progress to academic higher education, vocational higher education or employment.

1.9. Skills Provision

The purposes and principles of Curriculum for Excellence include the teaching and learning of the skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work. These fall into five main areas:

- Literacy
- Numeracy
- Health and wellbeing
- Employability, enterprise and citizenship
- Thinking skills

Recognition can be given for the development of these skills through the achievement of qualifications on the Scottish Qualifications and Credit Framework. Scottish National Qualifications from 2014 will provide accreditation for the skills acquired in learning in the senior phase. As well as development of the skills for learning, life and work, SQA will continue to offer automatic certification of Core Skills in selected National Qualifications (the Core Skills are Communication, Numeracy, ICT, Problem-Solving and Working with Others).

1.10. Differences and Similarities between Scotland and N. Ireland

At post-primary school, Scotland assesses students based on their own bespoke qualifications which have traditionally assessed breadth of knowledge across a wide variety of subjects as opposed to a depth of knowledge over a smaller range of subjects, as occurs in N. Ireland. The Standard Grade and Intermediate 1 and 2 are taken at the same age as GCSEs; however, Highers are taken at 17 years of age and mean that students who wish to go to university in Scotland may be eligible to apply for entry the following year. For those students who wish to go to university outside of Scotland, Advanced Highers are usually required and these are sat at the
age of 18, at the same stage as A levels in N. Ireland. Scotland also offers a Baccalaureate qualification as discussed in paragraph 1.8. This is made up mainly of Highers and Advanced Highers and can be taken alongside those qualifications.

There are also similarities and differences between the two awarding bodies. While SQA is said to have a dual role approach, CCEA has a triple role approach. Both CCEA and SQA are controlled and regulated by their respective departments of Education; both function as an awarding body and both have a regulatory role in monitoring and maintaining the standards of qualifications within their respective regions. The main difference exists in the advisory function. While CCEA operates in an advisory capacity in addition to the awarding body and regulatory roles, the Scottish system has an independent Advisory Council that reports to both the Scottish Government and SQA, as well as a number of other committees, which ensure strong governance and self-regulation.

1.11. Lessons from the Scottish System

Scotland’s relatively long history of being independent from the three-country assessment framework has resulted in its qualifications having international currency and portability. Any independent assessment framework developed for Northern Ireland must be recognised as portable in other jurisdictions in a similar way.

SQA has been proactive in producing teacher guidance and information on all aspects of the introduction of the new National Qualifications, including clear comparisons with existing qualifications on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.

Literacy and numeracy will be delivered in Scotland through the new Scottish National Qualifications in English and Mathematics. Set units within the qualifications develop the literacy and numeracy skills and these units can be individually certificated.

New National Qualifications have been developed to facilitate bi-level learning – either across SCQF Levels 4 and 5, or SCQF Levels 5 and 6. This allows a delay in deciding on the level learners will best be presented for until the end of the programme of study, and also encourages the learner to continue to develop to their highest potential.
2. The Republic of Ireland (RoI)

2.1. Context

The Minister for Education and Skills has ultimate responsibility for all aspects of state examinations. The National Council for the Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) advises the Minister and the Department on matters relating to the curriculum for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools. The NCCA generates the programmes and syllabi and advises the Minister on curriculum content for examination subjects as well as other matters pertaining to examinations.

Responsibility for the operation of the state examinations in RoI rests with the State Examinations Commission (SEC). It implements the Minister's/Department's decisions and regulations regarding examinations. Officials from the Department for Education and Skills (DES) will consult with their counterparts in the SEC before taking any decisions based on advice from the NCCA.

The key business activity of the SEC is the development, assessment, accreditation and certification of the second level examinations and of certain trade and professional qualifications. The SEC is a non-departmental public body under the aegis of the DES. The Commission is responsible for the operation of all aspects of the following:

- the established Leaving Certificate;
- the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme;
- the Leaving Certificate Applied; and
- the Junior Certificate Examinations including written, oral, aural and practical components and assessed course work in some subjects.

Until recently, other bodies working in this area in Ireland included:

- the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), which oversaw the development of the national framework of qualifications in Ireland;
- the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), which was the national awarding body for further education and training in Ireland; and
- the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the qualifications awarding body for third level educational and training institutions outside the university sector.

These have all been merged into a single authority, Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI.

There is no formal qualifications regulator for the school sector in RoI. There is no choice when it comes to the main school-based public examinations such as the Leaving Cert and, accordingly, there is no need for the sort of regulatory role that must be in place to ensure continuing confidence in any market-oriented
examinations system. However there are a large number of England/Wales/NI accredited qualifications operating outside the school sector in RoI and Ofqual ‘regulates’ these through a Memorandum of Understanding.

2.2 Qualifications in the Republic of Ireland

Post-primary education consists of a three-year junior cycle followed by a two or three-year senior cycle. A State examination, the Junior Certificate, is taken after the three year junior cycle. In the senior cycle there is an optional one-year Transition Year after which the learner can take one of three Leaving Certificate programmes of two years duration: the Leaving Certificate (established), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied. A majority of learners complete the Leaving Certificate (established) programme.

2.3 Junior Cycle

The Junior Certificate examination is held at the end of the Junior Cycle in post-primary schools and caters for students in the 13 to 15 year old age group, at Level 3 on the national framework. Students normally sit the examinations at the age of 14 or 15, after three years of post-primary education. Students are no longer leaving school at this stage – more than 90% of cohort is now remaining in school to the end of upper secondary. In 2011 NCCA recommended scaling back the qualification and the Minister announced the phasing out of the qualification in October 2011.

A new ‘schools’ certificate’ has been developed to replace the Junior Certificate starting in 2014, and to be completed by 2020, with use of internal assessment and reduction of the number of subjects as the main features. The direction of change has been developed in response to a 2010 discussion paper ‘Innovation and Identity – Ideas for a New Junior Cycle’. The principles of the new junior cycle are built on providing greater flexibility and autonomy for schools. It focuses on the programme, as well as the assessment, the development of key skills and access to a more varied curriculum. The reform is intended to remove the high-stakes nature of the Junior Cycle and it is being trialled in 48 schools. Curriculum components include: subjects, short courses, Priority Learning Units for students with special educational needs and other learning experiences. As well as literacy and numeracy, six key skills are embedded across the components:

• Staying Well
• Managing Myself
• Communicating
• Being Creative
• Managing Information and Thinking
• Working with Others.

NCCA will develop 8–10 short courses and schools can develop their own, with opportunity for industry and higher education involvement. Examples of short
courses include Bio-pharmacy, Artistic Performance and a Personal Project: Caring for Animals. Students can take eight to ten subjects/components combining, for example, seven subjects and two short courses or six subjects and four short courses or other combinations.

The main features of the assessment framework for the Junior Cycle include: a move towards a more schools-based combination of formative and summative assessment, with increased and continual feedback to students, and assessment based on clear outcomes-based specifications and expectations for learners. A school-focused moderation process is being developed along with continued professional development to support the Junior Cycle assessment. English, Irish and mathematics state examinations will be retained until 2020 representing 60% of the marks with the remaining 40% coming from assessment marked by schools. Short courses are to be entirely marked by schools.

Those who leave schools after this cycle will be awarded statements of achievements issued by the school they attended. This will recognise that secondary education has been completed and that the Level 3 framework requirements have been fulfilled. This can be attached to a CV and/or used as narrative.

2.4 Senior Cycle

The Senior Cycle caters for students in the 15 to 18 year old age group. The majority of candidates who sit the examinations are recognised students in post-primary schools, are 17 or 18 years of age and have completed five or six years of post-primary education. In excess of 80% of this group undertakes the exam. The Leaving Certificate is the terminal examination of post-primary education. It takes a minimum of two years preparation, but an optional Transitional Year means that for most students it takes place three years after the Junior Certificate assessment. These years are referred to collectively as ‘The Senior Cycle.’

There are three types of Leaving Certificate available.

- **The Leaving Certificate (Established)**
  This programme offers students a broad and balanced education while allowing for some specialisation. The certificate is used for the purposes of selection into further education, employment, training and higher education. The examination is the terminal examination of post-primary education. It is held at the end of the Senior Cycle in post-primary schools. Over 30 subjects are available for study at two levels: ordinary or higher. Foundation Level is available for Leaving Certificate Irish and mathematics.
• **The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP)**
  This is a senior cycle programme designed to give a strong vocational dimension to the Leaving Certificate (established). The vocational focus of the LCVP is achieved by arranging Leaving Certificate subjects into vocational subject groupings and through the provision of two additional courses of study in work preparation and enterprise, known as the Link Modules. Candidates taking the LCVP have a unique opportunity to develop their interpersonal, vocational and technological skills. These skills are equally relevant to the needs of those preparing for further education, seeking employment or planning to start their own business.

• **The Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (LCA)**
  This a distinct, self-contained two-year programme aimed at preparing students for adult and working life. It is designed for students who do not wish to proceed directly to third level education or for those whose needs, aspirations and aptitudes are not adequately catered for by the other two Leaving Certificate programmes or who choose not to opt for those programmes.

A candidate who answers in Irish at the written examination in the various subjects may be given bonus marks in addition to the marks gained in the subject.

Candidature for the leaving certificate examinations is not limited to post-primary school students. A candidate following an approved course of study outside the State or who is attending an approved course of study organised under the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme, Adult Literacy and Community Education Schemes, the Department of Social and Family Affairs second-level scheme for the unemployed or an analogous scheme, may be admitted to the examinations.

R0L Level 4/5 students will use six (usually best out of eight) subjects for university application. The focus for selection will be on scores, rather than the subjects. The only compulsory subject for Leaving Certificate is Irish. However, as almost all higher education institutions require English and mathematics for matriculation purposes, the vast majority of students take these subjects. Some institutions require another language for matriculation, so a language is also usually studied. Higher mathematics now attracts additional points for university entrance purposes to incentivise candidates to study the subject at higher rather than ordinary level.

Employers and others do not support the move to a smaller number of subjects, preferring breadth. Advanced undergraduate students consider studying English, Mathematics and a language to an advanced level beneficial. There are some recognised disadvantages with breadth of subjects in the senior cycle, including: limited opportunity for independent study and less opportunity for in-depth study to suit individual interests, and no internal assessment.
A range of external assessments are used that best suit the subject, for example English is assessed using two 3 ½ hour external examinations, and visiting examiners are used for Art. There are no resit opportunities. A UCAS comparative study showed that a Chemistry Leaving Certificate was worth approximately 2/3 of an A level, but that English was closer to comparative with an A level in English.

It was considered that the identity of the qualification as the end of secondary education was submerged by its progression/selection function. Therefore, in 2011 work was initiated by NCCA and HEA on improving the transition experience. This resulted in the development of a 14 point grading system and work towards a broader range of undergraduate entry routes.

These qualifications currently sit within the qualifications framework for Ireland, illustrated below. It should be noted that the education and training system currently in place in RoI will be subject to reform in the coming months. The diagram represents the new framework in place in RoI; within this, the (previous) Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate cycles are embedded for point of reference/comparison with the current framework.

Figure 2. National Framework of Qualifications in relation to Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate Cycles
2.5 Differences and similarities between RoI and N. Ireland

Compulsory education starts at six years of age in RoI compared to five years of age in N. Ireland. Assessment at the primary level also differs, with statutory external assessment occurring in primary school for Years 4–7, covering Key Stage 2 in N. Ireland, while teacher assessment is used in RoI. Pupils sit the Junior Certificate in RoI a year earlier than the broadly equivalent GCSEs that pupils sit in N. Ireland. Whilst the current Junior Certificate is very similar to GCSEs, a recent review has increased the number of subjects pupils are expected to take from seven to a minimum of eight plus a combination of short courses, and has removed much of the formal examination process, moving towards more of a teacher/school-based assessment system at this stage. However, the Junior Certificate is not a terminal examination, as pupils are required to remain in formal training and/or education until 16 years of age, which is different from GCSEs which can indicate the end of formal education for many pupils in N. Ireland should they wish.

The Leaving Certificate, a qualification broadly equivalent to A levels, takes the form of three different qualifications, allowing choice to suit both ability level and future aspirations of learners. This is different to A levels in N. Ireland, which are most suited to those pupils who wish to progress to university, with less academically motivated pupils directed towards the more vocational qualifications more readily accessed through further education colleges. The Leaving Certificate is a broader qualification, encompassing a minimum of five subjects and more often including six or more subjects as opposed to the three or sometimes four subjects that are studied at AS and A level.

The SEC is in charge of public exams while the NCCA advise on the curriculum. In N. Ireland, CCEA functions in both of these capacities.

3. International Curricular and Qualifications Models

The research undertaken examined curricular and assessment models in four international countries:

- Finland;
- Japan – long regarded as exemplifying good practice;
- the Province of Ontario (Canada), which has rapidly emerged in the past decade as a leading model for improvement in educational standards; and
- South Africa, which was selected for study given its recent emergence from a long and complex period of reform.

Further supplementary studies of the Flemish system, the Dutch system and the State model in Massachusetts (United States of America) have also helped to inform our findings. Table Three is offered by way of a summary of the main findings.
of this section. Table Four compares the qualification structures in N. Ireland, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland.

Given the importance placed on the core subjects of mathematics and English in the Terms of Reference, specific examinations of literacy and numeracy curricula in the Province of Alberta (Canada), the State of Victoria (Australia) and New Zealand have also been developed to help assist and inform thinking based on international concepts and models.

Summary Findings

3.1 Curricular and Skills Provision

The breadth of compulsory subjects or subject areas taught during statutory education\textsuperscript{58} ranges from eight in South Africa through to 18 in Finland. Of this range of subjects or subject areas studied, the national mother tongue, mathematics, physical education and the social sciences are mandatory across all models during statutory education. The Finnish, Japanese and Massachusetts provisions allow for limited subject choice for learners during their first stage of secondary education, while there is no flexibility for learners within the South African, Ontarian, Dutch and Flemish systems which have a stipulated, fixed curricular framework.

While a learner’s freedom to select subjects during post-statutory education is encouraged to allow for increasing learner specialisation, all countries examined retained a variety of key subject areas during this period of upper secondary education. There is significant divergence between the numbers of compulsory subject areas in post-statutory education across the majority of countries. However, continued compulsory study of the national mother tongue and mathematics (or mathematical literacy) is common to all of the systems studied.

The extensive mandatory core in the Finnish, Japanese and Ontarian systems is made available through a system of ‘courses’ rather than specific ‘subjects’. Learners undertake study of specific courses within a subject area rather than undertaking a broad subject study. This offers greater flexibility around the delivery of and provision for a broader mandatory curricular provision for learners, while still offering choice and opportunity for individual specialisation at upper second level. This approach can provide a framework to continue with the teaching and learning of specified subject areas through post-statutory education in a more discrete fashion, as opposed to taking whole-course study.

Different approaches were noted to address skills provision. Identified in both the South African and Ontarian models are learning skills that are fostered through

\textsuperscript{58} In the main, the countries examined in this report have statutory education provision until either age15 (in the case of Japan and South Africa) or 16. The exceptions are the Netherlands and Flanders which have full-time statutory education until age 16, but stipulate that learners must remain in either part-time or full-time training or education until the age of 18.
teaching and learning. The South African ‘National Curriculum Statement’\(^59\) emphasises the development of specific skills both for learner holistic development and for the fostering of social and cultural cohesion. In the Ontarian system, provision is made for the specific inclusion of skills development for learning and work in the curricular frameworks and also for the assessment and reporting of these skills on an annual basis. They are not, however, included in academic results and do not impact on progression between grades.

The Japanese curriculum places predominant significance on educational intelligence, rather than outlining specific skills development. While the government has made significant progress in providing a more holistic approach to education through reform programs since 2006\(^60\), there remains a focus on developing awareness and knowledge of principles and concepts. It is believed that if these ‘basic fundamentals’ are developed concretely through the school curriculum, the foundations are laid in which skills can continue to be developed when in the working environment.

Progression to upper second level in both the Dutch and Flemish systems streams learners across four specialised subject combinations which best reflect Dutch and Flemish industrial needs. Within these areas, in which some subjects are common to all, related skills are identified in preparation for the world of work. As such, while skills are developed through a common curriculum, specific industry-related skills are nurtured depending on the schooling stream selected.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compulsory Subjects per Country/Province (Statutory Education)</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>Japan</th>
<th>South Africa</th>
<th>Ontario (Canada)</th>
<th>The Netherlands</th>
<th>Flanders (Belgium)</th>
<th>Massachusetts (United States of America)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother Tongue and Literature</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>Home Language</td>
<td>English Language</td>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Arithmetic</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History and Social Studies (Grade 5 onwards)</td>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>Social Sciences (Intermediate Phase onwards)</td>
<td>Social Studies (History and Geography in Grades 7 and 8)</td>
<td>People and Society</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>History and Social Sciences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Language(s) (Grade 3 onwards)</td>
<td>Foreign Languages (Junior High School onwards)</td>
<td>First Additional Language</td>
<td>French as a Second Language</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>Foreign Language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts, Crafts and Physical Education</td>
<td>Drawing and Crafts</td>
<td>Arts and Culture (Senior Phase onwards)</td>
<td>The Arts</td>
<td>Arts and Culture</td>
<td>Education in the Arts</td>
<td>Arts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Studies</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Natural Sciences (Intermediate Phase onwards)</td>
<td>Science and Technology</td>
<td>Man and Science</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Science and Technology/Engineering</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religion and Ethics</td>
<td>Home Economics (Grade 7 onwards)</td>
<td>Home Economics</td>
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<td>Religion and Ethics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education and Vocational Guidance (Grade 7 onwards)</td>
<td>Life Studies</td>
<td>Life Skills</td>
<td>Moral Education and Integrated Studies</td>
<td>Life Orientation (Senior Phase onwards)</td>
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</tbody>
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### Table Two: List of Compulsory Subjects per Country/Province during Post-Statutory Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compulsory Subjects per Country/Province (Post-Statutory Education)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Finland</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Tongue and Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Languages</td>
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<tr>
<td>Environmental and Natural Sciences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health Education</td>
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<td>Arts and Physical Education</td>
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<td>Social Studies</td>
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<td>Psychology</td>
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<tr>
<td>History</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religion or Ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational and Vocational Guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual Arts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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3.2 Assessment and Qualifications Structure

Across the curricular and qualification models reviewed, the use of high-stakes examinations at the end of statutory education is limited.

The State of Massachusetts is the only education model examined that included high-stakes examinations at the conclusion of statutory education. In Grade 10, learners are expected to take State-devised standardised exams, known as the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System\textsuperscript{61} (MCAS) in English, Arts and mathematics. The content of these standardised examinations correspond to the subject frameworks devised by the Massachusetts Department for Education. The results of these examinations determine eligibility to continue to High School Diploma studies. Additional subjects studied, however, are assessed internally through teacher-devised methods.

In Japan, progression from statutory to post-statutory education is determined by a High School Entrance Test, set by either a local government authority or a Private High School. While the content of these examinations is aligned with the Japanese National Course of Study\textsuperscript{62}, the examination does not naturally flow from the curriculum as an assessment tool. It is a method for progression used by High Schools, for learners who wish to transfer to upper secondary education, rather than a method of recording achievement. Given its importance for learner progression, it could be considered as a high-stakes examination that is however unusually located outside of the scope of the curricular or governmental authority, and as such is not regulated by them.

Responsibility for assessment at the conclusion of statutory education, in the main, rests with schools and teachers. Curriculum assessment is provided through internal teacher-based assessment, using a variety of methods ranging from coursework project assignments to terminal examinations. Two of the qualifications systems offer specific qualifications at the conclusion of statutory education: the Basic Certificate of Education in Finland and the General Education and Training Certificate in South Africa. Both these qualifications are placed on their respective national qualification frameworks and successful completion of these qualifications provides the main pathway for progression into upper secondary education. Progression into upper secondary education in Ontario, the Netherlands and Flanders is based on teacher assessment at the end of statutory education.

Within the Finnish, Japanese, Flemish and Ontarian qualifications structure, there are no high-stakes examinations at the conclusion of post-statutory study. The qualification awarded to learners is a general qualification acknowledging achievement in and completion of second level studies. In Finland, Japan, Flanders

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\textsuperscript{61} The MCAS standardised tests are used annually from grades 3–10 to determine state-wide standards in English, and mathematics, with Science and Technology/Engineering tests included alongside English and mathematics in grades 5 and 8.

and Ontario, the summative leaving qualifications: the Upper General Secondary Education Certificate, the High School Leaving Certificate, the Diploma of Secondary Education and the Ontario Secondary School Diploma respectively are awarded on the basis of teacher-based assessment through a variety of methods ranging from continuous assessment to teacher-devised terminal examinations.

In terms of qualification provision during post-statutory education, South Africa, the Netherlands and the State of Massachusetts are the only systems to use high-stakes nationalised (or state-wide) externally set, moderated and standardised examinations, as the method for curriculum-based assessment, at the end of upper second level.

Assessment for the National Senior Certificate in South Africa is by terminal external examination, which accounts for 75% of the learner’s final mark with the remaining 25% awarded through school-based assessment. Of the systems studied, this is the only one that offers qualifications on a subject-by-subject basis.

In the Netherlands, the High School Leaving Certificate is assessed using an externally set, quality assured and marked national examination in combination with a school-based assessment component (made up of an exam or teacher-based continuous assessment depending on the course studied).

In Massachusetts, successful awarding of the Massachusetts High School Diploma is subject to passing the High School MCAS in Biology, Chemistry, Introductory Physics or Science and Technology/Engineering. As in Grade 10, the remaining subjects undertaken are assessed internally using teacher-devised methods.

### 3.3 Third Level Progression Pathways

The provision for the qualifications offered at the conclusion of post-statutory education to support progression to third level differed across each of the countries/provinces examined.

The South African National Senior Certificate is used to determine progression and entry into third level education. In much the same way, the Dutch Leaving Certificate, based similarly on externally set high-stakes examinations, is used as the progression route into third level education. The results of the Ontario Secondary School Diploma and the Flemish Diploma of Secondary Education, albeit not based on high-stakes external assessment, are also used to determine the learner’s pathway to the range of third level learning opportunities.

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63 Upon entry into second level education, learners must select one of four available streams, two of which can be considered as ‘academic streams’. These are the Pre-University Stream and the General Upper Secondary Stream. While the Pre-University stream retains learners until the age of 18, the General Upper stream is only taught up to the age of 17. Upon the conclusion of study for both and respective assessments, the learner is awarded the Leaving Certificate. However, entry into university requires the Leaving Certificate to have been obtained as part of Pre-University study. Provision is made for learners in the General Upper Secondary stream, upon graduation, to join the final year of pre-university study to complete the remaining components and ensure eligibility for third level entry.
The Finnish Upper General Secondary Education Certificate, while a recognised qualification on the Finnish National Qualifications Framework, cannot be used for progression to third level education. Learners who wish to undertake third level study must take the Finnish Matriculation Examination. This is a nationalised examination, testing the knowledge and skills required by the upper secondary curriculum, established by a regulated independent body used for all university admissions. It is sat, however, in learners’ upper secondary schools.

The Japanese High School Leaving Certificate does not offer progression into higher education. In order to progress to third level study, learners, depending on their university of choice, must take either the National Center Test for University Admission for public university admission and/or an unregulated individual entrance examination for any private university. Learners may take multiple unregulated entrance exams, depending on their university entry choices. There is no stipulation that the content of these exams should come from the national course of study.

For learners seeking to enter into third level education in the State of Massachusetts (as well as the United States as a whole), the High School Diploma is insufficient. Rather learners must sit specific SAT/ACT standardised tests; the results of which, in conjunction with University specific requirements, are used for third level entry.

### 3.4 Literacy and Numeracy Provision in Alberta (Canada), Victoria (Australia) and New Zealand

Included in the curricular provision for these systems is a central focus on the importance of knowledge and skills development for the purposes of equipping learners with the appropriate tools to apply learning outside of a school-based context. This provides a foundation to meet societal and work based needs. Literacy and numeracy development are mandatory throughout statutory education.

The frameworks for literacy and numeracy provision across the three jurisdictions differ. In Alberta both literacy and numeracy are addressed overtly through a two track system. In the first instance, skills are developed through a knowledge-based course of study which aims to enable learners to understand the core components of English and mathematics during statutory education. The second phase of skills provision builds on this through Knowledge and Employability courses in English and mathematics during post-compulsory education, in conjunction with knowledge-based study of English and mathematics. These Knowledge and Employability courses aim to assist learners with the transition from school to employment, or further study, by practically applying subject knowledge to specific ‘real life’ or work based situations. Literacy and numeracy curricular provision in Victoria and New Zealand is subtly integrated through the core curricular frameworks for English and mathematics. Each of the subject frameworks prioritises the development of

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64 During statutory education, provision for English and mathematics is provided through the core curriculum only. It is in post-statutory education that skills-based study is developed.
essential learning skills, and general capabilities in both literacy and numeracy, through the delivery of the core curriculum.

PISA results for Canada and Australia have consistently recorded comparable and significantly high international standards and levels of achievement for learners in reading and mathematics. However, Alberta and Victoria demonstrate very different approaches to how literacy and numeracy are delivered through their respective curricula. The Albertan system has developed a programme of study that outlines specific learning outcomes for learners with associated activities. These activities should demonstrate the expected outcomes. Within this model teachers are afforded greater flexibility in terms of teaching methodologies and approaches to how literacy and numeracy can be developed throughout the curriculum. Conversely, in Victoria there is a prescribed curriculum, focusing on what is to be included in terms of the development of literacy and numeracy as opposed to the specific outcomes expected in both. The curriculum is organised around the development of knowledge and understanding in English and mathematics, as well as enhancing proficiency in both literacy and numeracy. Corresponding interdisciplinary learning in areas such as communication skills, creativity, and evaluative skills are also concurrently developed.

Both Alberta and Victoria have provision for English study during post-statutory education. The Victoria Education Certificate and the Alberta High School Diploma require learners to take both a course and an examination in English as part of the mandatory core of subjects studied during upper second level. Interestingly, Alberta includes mathematics as part of its post-statutory curriculum while Victoria does not make any such provision. However, there is no insistence in either Alberta or Victoria that an externally assessed examination should be taken in mathematics. There is no requirement made in the New Zealand post-compulsory curriculum for either English or mathematics. Rather, the national framework for New Zealand considers that appropriate levels of knowledge have been attained by 16 and learners should have the opportunity to make informed personal subject choices.

In Alberta and Victoria there is no provision for high-stakes externally set examinations at the end of statutory education. Recording of attainment and progress for learners is assessed through internal teacher-based assessments. Additionally however, both Albertan and Victorian provincial education authorities use standardised testing periodically to assess progress. The Alberta Achievement Tests are sat provincially in Grades 3, 6 and 9 in both English and mathematics and in Grade 12 with mandatory assessment of English. In Victoria the National Assessment Program in Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is taken by learners during Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. The results of any standardised tests are not included as

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65 PISA is the Program for International Student Assessment. Sat in all OECD countries and a number of partnership countries, PISA tests the performance of 15 year olds in reading, mathematics and science on a 3 year cycle. Results from 2000, 2006 and 2009 are available at: http://www.oecd.org/pisa/
part of a learners’ school assessment, with the exception of the Alberta Diploma Exam in English during Grade 12, but are rather used to monitor progress and assist with individual learning and encourage improvement.

The New Zealand National Qualifications Framework requires that externally set high-stakes examinations are taken at the end of statutory education in both English and mathematics. A combination of moderated internal assessment and a range of subject-specific external assessment methods are used. Upon successful completion of all the requirements, the learner receives a National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) in both subjects.

3.5 Cultural Mandate

Common to all curricular and qualifications models studied is their specific relevance to and connectivity with the society and community they serve. Woven into the fabric of the society and bound by their cultural norms, each qualification model is developed and tailored to suit specific national educational, societal and economic needs. It is clear there is no one model or solution that can be applied wholesale. Each of the models studied references and reflects the society in which it operates, striving to meet the needs both of all learners and the wider community as a whole.
Table Three: International Curricular and Qualifications Systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Statutory School Leaving Age</th>
<th>Qualifications at 15/16 (end of statutory education)</th>
<th>Qualifications at 18 (end of post-statutory education)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Content Breadth</td>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>High-Stakes Exams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18 compulsory elements through courses studied</td>
<td>Internal assessment using teacher based continuous and terminal assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17 compulsory subject areas through courses studied</td>
<td>Internal assessment using a range of methods – usually teacher-devised testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8 compulsory subject areas</td>
<td>Internal assessment: 40% – School Based Assessment 60% – Internal Terminal Exams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontario (Canada)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9 compulsory subject areas</td>
<td>Internal teacher assessment using a range of methods</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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66 In none of the international education systems represented on this table is the statutory school leaving age over 16. As such, education until ages 15/16 is considered, for the purposes of this table, statutory.
### Table Three continued: International Curricular and Qualifications Systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Statutory School Leaving Age</th>
<th>Qualifications at 15/16 (end of statutory education)</th>
<th>Qualifications at 18 (end of post-statutory education)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Content Breadth</td>
<td>Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>18 (Part-Time from 16)</td>
<td>8 compulsory subjects</td>
<td>Internal teacher assessment using a range of methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium (Flemish Community)</td>
<td>18 (Part-Time from 16)</td>
<td>10 compulsory subjects</td>
<td>Internal teacher assessment using a range of methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts (Unites States of America)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8 compulsory subjects, plus a range of optional subjects available</td>
<td>State wide provincially devised assessments in English and Mathematics, with internal assessment for other subjects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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67 In the Netherlands full-time statutory education is up to the age of 16. Between 16 and 18 all learners must be engaged in some form (if only part-time) of training or education.
Table Four: Curricular and Qualifications Systems in N. Ireland, Scotland and Republic of Ireland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Statutory School Leaving Age</th>
<th>Qualifications at 15/16 (end of statutory education)</th>
<th>Qualifications at 18 (end of post-statutory education)</th>
<th>Progression to Third Level</th>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Content Breadth</td>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>High-Stakes Exams</td>
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<tr>
<td>N. Ireland</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9 subject areas</td>
<td>Combination</td>
<td>Letter grading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>are studied – not all these are formally examined</td>
<td>internal controlled assessment and external examination</td>
<td>with corresponding percentage marks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>There is some flexibility with subject choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>No compulsory subjects</td>
<td>Combination of internal controlled assessment and external examination</td>
<td>National 1−4 uses Pass/Fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No compulsory subjects</td>
<td>(Only at National 5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>There is some flexibility with subject choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republic of Ireland</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3 compulsory subject areas</td>
<td>Combination of internal controlled assessment and external examination</td>
<td>Numerical grading with corresponding percentage marks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>There is some flexibility with subject choice</td>
<td>(Only in compulsory subjects – only until 2020)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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Appendix F: Free Responses to Consultation

This appendix represents all free responses received as part of the Review of GCSE and A Levels Qualifications. The content of each response is verbatim. Variations to original submission formatting may have occurred due to insertion into this report.

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Review of GCSE and ‘A’ level qualifications in Northern Ireland
ATL’S RESPONSE TO CCEA’S CONSULTATION
Consultation on the Review of GCSE and ‘A’ level qualifications in Northern Ireland

Submission from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers

ATL, the Education Union

ATL, the education union, is an independent, registered trade union and professional association, representing approximately 160,000 teachers, head teachers, lecturers and support staff in schools, and further education colleges in the United Kingdom. AMIE is the trade union and professional association for leaders and managers in colleges and schools, and is a distinct section of ATL. We recognise the link between education policy and members’ conditions of service.

ATL exists to help members, as their careers develop, through first rate research, advice, information and legal advice. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate locally and nationally.

ATL is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and Education International (EI). ATL is not affiliated to any political party and seeks to work constructively with all the main political parties.

ATL general policy

ATL believes that teachers as professionals must be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgment, at the level of the individual pupil and in articulating the role of education in increasing social justice. Within light regional parameters, development of the education system should take place at a local level: the curriculum should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders; assessment should be carried out through local professional networks. Schools and colleges are increasingly encouraged to work collaboratively to offer excellent teaching and learning, and to support pupils’ well-being, across a local area. Accountability mechanisms should be developed so that there is a proper balance of accountability to government and the local community, which supports collaboration rather than competition.

Notwithstanding this short consultation, there needs to be proper debate around the need for, and purpose of, a qualification at 16.

Rigorous qualifications are important to ATL and though there are many question marks over whether, and how much, educational standards have changed in recent decades, maintaining a high quality education system year-on-year is a live challenge. However, given the raising of the participation age, the real debate in education circles is not about having test-only core subject qualifications, but about whether a qualification is indeed needed prior to the age of 18. So, a fundamental question to ask and answer is what exactly is the purpose of a qualification at age 16 in the twenty-first century?
Such a debate is prioritised above reform by stakeholders across the spectrum. In their recent report, *First steps: a new approach for our schools*, the CBI argue that:

“It is at 18 not 16 that we should be thinking in terms of externally marked, high value qualifications. There is a risk that the mistakes of the past – both teaching to the test by schools and micro-management of the school system through the means of exams and de facto league tables – may be repeated in a rushed approach. For this reason, we favour pausing to ask a more fundamental question about the role of examinations before 18, namely what their purpose is.”

**ATL Focus Groups** In considering a response, ATL commissioned several focus groups to consider the options set out in the Consultation Questionaire. The following arose:

- strong support for the skills focused Northern Ireland curriculum;
- notwithstanding support for the Northern Ireland curriculum, there were concerns, in the current climate, that a small region such as Northern Ireland could support an ‘end-to-end’ examinations ‘eco-system’ – with CCEA responsible for a full suite of examinations. Would Yorkshire, for instance, have the capacity to support its own qualifications system? There was some concern that this option would result in ‘empire building’ at CCEA;
- it was not considered that the Northern Ireland economy was especially different to other regions of the UK (North East, North West, Wales, Scotland, Midlands etc) and that the rhetoric of a high skills “knowledge based economy” fell short of the reality that a substantial segments of the economy were run ion a ‘low skilled equilibrium’. In short, the requirements of the Northern Ireland economy are little different to all other regions of the UK, other than London or the South East;
- the was a disconnect between the high number of graduates produced (45%+) and the relatively low level (15-18%) of jobs requiring graduates skills, and that the Northern Ireland “skill gap” with European comparators was at “Level 3” (Technical, Intermediate/associate professional skills) rather than at graduate level;
- Modular courses tend to promote skills such as teamwork, problem solving, communications, information handling, working with others;
- Coursework and Projects represented a significant source of workload. In many cases, though varying from subject to subject, projects were artificial and ‘contrived’ and not true to ‘real life’;
- Controlled Assessment was considered a significant source of workload;
- School based Assessment was considered as being open to cheating and ‘gaming the system’;
- A context of High stakes accountability encourages pressures which lead to ‘working the system’ and ‘cutting corners’ to achieve best school results;
- A context of high stakes accountability encourages unintended consequences of ‘teaching to the test’ and gaming the system;
- As a consequence of high-stakes accountability, results driven education and perceived micro-management of coursework, a significant minority saw a superficial attraction in the one-off, linear exam option. Viewed from the perspective of teacher workload, this option was considered the ‘best’.
Exams and Fairness

Test-taking is a unique skill and not necessarily one which will be useful in employment. Application of knowledge and skills are just as important as recall, and the government must hold them in higher esteem and ensure that qualifications are testing what teachers, pupils, parents and employers would expect. A group of ATL members explain:

“We continually hear from visiting speakers at school presentation evenings how essential it is to have ‘problem solvers’ in their organisations … aren’t most exams just memory tests? We don’t need people with good memories we need researchers and problem solvers.” 68

In respect of the linear examinations option, the proposed mode of assessment is also unfair to specific pupil groups. The appropriateness of 100% terminal examination and subsequent lack of variety in forms of assessment relies on students being equally ‘good on the day’. However, this mode of assessment can considerably disadvantage those whose strengths are not in formal examination (and it increases the need to spend disproportionate time teaching test-taking), those learners for whom English is an additional language, and also under some circumstances girls (during periods), people with hay fever, young carers and observant Muslims during Ramadan. The government should be particularly concerned about the demotivational effect single tier exams are likely to have on low achievers who might spend over 2 hours in an exam hall watching other pupils taking tests.

Burgess and Greaves outline the ‘prominent discussion on … the “problem of over-testing” (Brooks & Tough, 2006). It is argued that pupils are subjected to too many written tests, and that some should be replaced by teacher assessments. Along with the work of (Gibbons & Chevalier, 2008), the results here suggest that this might be severely detrimental to the recorded achievements of children from poor families, and for children from some ethnic minorities.

One size does not fit all! Teachers report from experience that some subjects better suit accumulative learning, some sectional learning, others can be taught equally well either way. Practical considerations, such as administering controlled assessment, are more complex and time-consuming for some subjects (for example, modern foreign languages) than others. It is clear that one-size fits all approaches are inappropriate. We know that pupils with difficult lives (looked after children, or those with a chronic illness or disability, for example) are given a better chance at fulfilling their promise when missed teaching does not undermine two years of linear study and learning can be picked up again quickly. Whilst we recognise that modular teaching and assessment and arrangements for coursework and controlled (ref) assessment have not been perfect, we do not believe appropriate consideration has been given to allowing schools and pupils some flexibility in how qualifications are delivered and assessed. These sorts of decisions should be based on very solid evidence

Accountability

ATL is dismayed that Northern Ireland education system, and the teaching profession is subjected to fragmented, ideologically driven reform from the English libertarian right. The CCEA consultation paper, however, is silent on the accountability system,

68 ATL members Focus Group, Dunsilly Hotel, 1st May 2013
specifically the perception of a changed and more invasive form of Inspection through ETI and in relation to headline Programme for Government targets narrowly focused on 5 GCSE’s (Grades A*-C). As such, we are being asked to comment on the suitability of qualifications while fearing the continuation of inappropriate uses for the data.

Qualifications and accountability systems do not have a simple relationship. Good qualifications are not ideally suited as the sole basis for accountability measurement and that in making qualifications a secure basis for accountability, ‘the classroom experience is likely to be more limited’. This is an important reason why education reform should not be guided by real expertise. Without reform of the accountability system, it is not clear why the problems that existing qualifications have in presenting schools with perverse incentives will be solved by the range of proposals suggested in the Consultation Questionaire.

It is essential that government considers the scale of reform for schools. The context makes teachers and school leaders’ jobs more difficult and, coupled with politicians’ desire to raise the standard in exams, there is a possibility that results could go down for many. This should not lead to increased threat of ETI inspections, heaping greater pressure on teachers that will damage their pupils’ learning.

The role of awarding bodies

ATL does not have the same confidence as politicians in the unfettered marketisation of children’s education. In the examination system our greatest concerns are the escalation of entrance fees and the for-profit practices of awarding bodies and some of their employees.

The transparency of awarding body operations and their profits is patchy and a weakness in what must be a publicly accountable system. The teaching profession is deeply concerned by conflicts of interest within major exam boards and the ensuing profiteering focused around publishing text books (and offering bespoke coaching classes). ATL believes that money designated for children’s education should be spent in ways that most benefit learning and we propose that the examination system should be run on a not-for-profit basis under the profession’s input and guidance.

It is for that reason that ATL believes that CCEA should retain a key brokering role. Whilst some of our members have concerns that Northern Ireland lacks the capacity to offer a complete Northern Ireland suite of qualifications, and others are concerned at the prospect of ‘empire building’ CCEA, there remains an important role for CCEA in ‘taming the examination market’.

ATL believe that CCEA should monitor and investigate the impact of exam boards’ range of other activities; force clarity and transparency in awarding organisation structures and financial records; report more regularly and consistently upon the income aside from exam fees and the full expenditure of awarding organisations – this might include a recommendation on ways of controlling expenditure to reduce unnecessary increases in fees e.g. a limit on marketing spends (in a similar way to election spending limits); and take responsibility for proportional fee control, developing a sustainable, ethical and affordable national framework of examination fees.

We believe that the Department of Education should work with CCEA to ensure the right type of regulation of the examinations system is strengthened, and government must also take into account the broader educational picture. The pressures of a high
stakes accountability atmosphere when coupled with the overly-commercial behaviour of awarding bodies lead to perverse but perfectly rational decision-making by teachers which threatens to undermine the quality of education offered to young people.

What is important to young people and the schools and colleges they attend is that there is an adequate yet sensible number of qualifications offering a suitable range of choice in subject, learning style, skills developed, assessment methods and so on.

**CONCLUSION**

**ATL policy**

- ATL believes that there should be no Northern Ireland wide testing system prior to the terminal stage of compulsory schooling. Teacher assessment is key to that final assessment.
- There may still be a need for Northern Ireland wide tests in key skills, which can be offered through a bank of tests on a when-ready basis, but only at the level of functional competence.
- In terms of meeting the needs of national monitoring of educational standards, ATL proposes a system of regional cohort sampling.

((ATL, Assessing to Learn, 2008).

As the age of participation is raised from 16 to 18, the ‘terminal stage’ is raised. ATL is not alone in questioning whether we need a ‘school leaving’ type exam at 16. In May this year, the Director General of the CBI said:

“There is something about this GCSE funnel that produces a prescribed form of learning which seems to be teaching for the test, which frustrates teachers because it stops them delivering that inspirational classroom experience and you see young people being switched off.”

Some business leaders have questioned whether the over-riding focus on exams at 16 was getting in the way of preparing for more important qualifications at 18.

(http://www.cbi.org.uk/media-centre/news-articles/2012/05/gcses-not-up-to-the-job-bosses-say/)

The logical development of ATL’s policy is that there should be no Northern Ireland wide external testing, for all pupils, at 16. Instead, the focus should be on qualifications at 18.

Currently, exams at 16 allow pupils to demonstrate (in theory at least) competence across a broad range of curriculum subjects, before choosing to specialise in a narrower selection of academic or vocational/work-based qualifications. Our position on 14-19 curriculum and assessment, implies a coherent 14-19 curriculum with flexibility to pursue learning in different institutions with different forms of assessment. It also implies a broad curriculum to 19, with the potential but not a requirement to specialise.

This could include functional skills elements, to be tested when ready. It could also include some forms of national cohort sampling to ensure consistency of standards over time, across subject areas/assessment methods and between schools. With a broad range of available assessment methods there would need to be mechanisms to ensure fairness.

In response to the CCEA options for reforming GCSE and A level examinations in Northern Ireland ATL would respond as follows
ATL views on the Options

With reference to GCSE Examinations:

Option 1 – Retain GCSEs in line with the policy direction in England.

ATL would not support this proposal. In Northern Ireland we have gone through considerable curricular and assessment changes in recent years following on the development and bedding in of the Northern Ireland curriculum. Linearity lack of vocational qualifications, absence of teacher involvement and tiering of examination papers would not sit easily with ATL for the reasons stated above.

Option 2 – Retain GCSEs with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies, and the N. Ireland economy

ATL would support this proposal in the short term. GCSEs should be aligned to the principles of the Entitlement Framework and Cross Curricular Skills should be included and assessed within GCSEs and to include problem-solving, self-management and Working with others must also be included. Limited internal assessment specific to the needs of the subject should be delivered and assessed within GCSEs. But in the medium term our views would welcome greater school based assessment so long as it is developed as a coherent whole following on the changes in curricular developments.

Option 3 – Develop new 14 – 16 qualifications for N. Ireland

Option 4 – Remove high stakes examinations at age 16.

ATL would welcome this proposal in the short to medium term as it must take account of the needs of the learner, the needs of the curriculum and incorporates an assessment system to include appropriate skills that has been developed in conjunction with curriculum developments. We stress that our qualifications must ensure comparability by using a National Qualifications Framework. The high stakes nature of examinations at age 16 should be removed by having externally assessed qualifications in core subjects only and school based assessment in other subjects. Of course we need to emphasise that school based assessment must be resourced by high quality professional development for all teachers. The new qualifications should include assessment within subject qualifications of both hard and soft skills.

16  – 18 Qualifications

Proposal 1 Retain A Levels in line with policy direction in England

NO

Proposal 2 Retain A Levels with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies and the needs of the N. Ireland economy

Yes, in the short to medium term. These exams should include AS as part of A Level with maybe a new weighting of 40/60. However AS should also stand alone as a qualification. Modularity to be retained but resit opportunities limited to one resit. Skills, both hard and soft skills should be included in 16-18 qualifications and be taught and assessed through stand
alone qualifications so long as ‘skills assessment’ is included in high quality professional development for teachers.

Proposal 3 Develop new 16-18 qualifications for N. Ireland that retain features of A Level qualifications

In the medium term we would welcome new 16 – 18 qualifications that are developed after extensive research into qualifications systems from around the world that will equip our young people with the know-how and skills for progression into further education, employment and life-long fulfilment. Furthermore, they must retain external assessment as well as internal assessment provided the system has introduced a high quality continuous professional development for all teachers.
31 May 2013

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Review of GCSE and A level Qualifications

The Federation of Small Businesses is Northern Ireland’s largest business organisation with over 7,000 members from across all sectors of industry, and over 200,000 members throughout the UK.

We lobby decision-makers to create a better business environment and we welcome this opportunity to input to the Review of GCSE and A level Qualifications.

We trust that you will find our comments helpful and that they will be taken into consideration. The FSB is willing for this submission to be placed in the public domain. We would appreciate being kept apprised of further developments.

Yours faithfully

Wilfred Mitchell OBE
Northern Ireland Policy Chairman
FSB NI
response to the Review of GCSE and A
level Qualifications in Northern Ireland.

May 2013
FSB Response to the Review of GCSE and A Level Qualifications in Northern Ireland

Introduction

With more than 7000 members from across every sector of enterprise and industry, the Federation of Small Businesses is Northern Ireland's largest representative business organisation. The FSB’s aim is to promote and protect the interests of all those who own or manage their own businesses, and to create a better business environment for the typical Northern Ireland business.

Small businesses account for 98% of the private sector business environment and employ almost half a million people across Northern Ireland, contributing 60% of all private sector turnover.

The FSB welcomes the review of GCSEs and A Level qualifications in Northern Ireland as our members have indicated that they are not satisfied with the skills that many school leavers currently have.

The NI education system is regarded as one of the best in the world, consistently producing high results and excellent students. However, it is also has some of the lowest results, producing a significant proportion of students with few or no qualifications. This review needs both to ensure that our high standards are maintained and enhanced, and to address the under-achievement in the current education system.

The first thing the education system needs to do is to prepare all our young people for adulthood and the world of work. To achieve this, the majority of school leavers should have the basic competency in numeracy and literacy required to function in our society and to get a job.

Secondly, the system must recognise that many young people do not respond well to a purely academic curriculum. This group needs more practical and tangible learning supported by evidence showing how the knowledge is relevant to their lives.

To achieve this, good quality vocational courses should be offered that teach transferable skills and career education with the vocational courses having parity of esteem with the more academic ones.

Employers recognise and value vocational skills, but employers also need help to understand that those with ‘academic’ qualifications may wish to and are competent to undertake vocational careers, and that the level of their qualifications attests to their abilities and skills as much as their knowledge.

Thirdly, the education system in Northern Ireland and wider needs to be well-understood by employers. The concepts of comparability and equivalences are vital. Northern Ireland employers are familiar with the existence of different educational qualifications held by prospective employees from Scotland and from the Republic of Ireland, but if there is going to be further divergence in both the names and nature of qualifications taken at ages 16 and 18, it is vital that employers understand the
comparability of the different systems. It is very likely that a better understanding and awareness of the National Qualifications Framework is needed.

In relation to the main issues raised during the consultation, the FSB would have the following comments:

**Do the current GCSEs and A levels meet business needs?**

While the FSB does not have educational expertise, as end users of the education system small businesses have a keen interest in its success. Recent statistics – below - demonstrate that many are not confident in the skills of young people. A survey of members in June 2012\(^69\) found that:

- Fifty nine per cent said that school leavers literacy skills are poor or very poor
- Fifty five per cent said that school leavers numeracy skills are poor or very poor
- Fifty seven per cent said that school leavers attitude to work/self-management skills are poor or very poor
- Fifty six per cent said that school leavers communication skills are poor or very poor
- Seventy seven per cent of employers commented that school leavers’ business awareness was either poor or very poor
- Sixty nine per cent of members want a greater emphasis on employability skills in schools

The statistics from\(^70\) demonstrate that many employers have a very low confidence in the employability skills of young people, including both college and university leavers.

**Confidence in employing young people**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>University leavers</th>
<th>College leavers</th>
<th>School leavers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very confident</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite confident</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very confident</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all confident</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^69\) FSB ‘Voice of Small Business’ Survey Panel (June 2012)
\(^70\) FSB ‘Voice of Small Business’ Survey Panel (June 2012)
### Competency of school leavers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Very poor</th>
<th>Unsure/not applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>IT skills</strong></td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Team working</strong></td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive attitude/…</strong></td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Numeracy skills</strong></td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy skills</strong></td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>People skills</strong></td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Business awareness</strong></td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both of these graphs demonstrate that small businesses believe that schools, colleges and universities are failing to teach young people the employability skills that employers say they need.

**Are there core skills that should be studied/developed by all and if so what are these?**

**Numeracy and literacy, and ICT**

Today employers require all employees to be numerate, literate, IT savvy and capable of working as part of a team. For our economy to be successful we need to increase the educational attainment of all young people so that businesses have the talent and skills necessary to innovate and grow their businesses.

Furthermore, key employability skills such as effective communication, people skills, a good attitude to work and knowledge of the workplace and the ability to problem solve need to be embedded into qualifications. It is not that small businesses need to see these elements specifically in the qualification rather than they need to be assured that they will have been taught.

However, companies of all sizes complain that even young people with good qualifications, including graduates, often have poor basic functional skills. Companies want to be confident that all young people have a high level of competence in functional skills and, in addition, that the higher level qualifications that they have represent real academic and vocational education achievement that can be used as guides to career potential. While students can attain high grades in GCSE English Language and Mathematics, this does not necessarily indicate their competence in use of English and Literature or numeracy. We are aware of some members, for example, who have recruited young people with GCSE mathematics at C grade or higher but who cannot handle the day to day arithmetic of business.
The FSB would be like to see the introduction of functional skills competency tests to ensure that the basic skills required for adulthood are achieved by all. This should create a greater level of confidence amongst employers that all school leavers have the basic skills to take an entry level job.

We believe that employers would welcome a certificate / qualification in numeracy, literacy and appropriate and current IT skills, and also one in employability skills. Such a certificate need not constitute a separate examination or qualification, but could be teacher assessed, and would show that the student had achieved the functional skills standard necessary for the 21st century. A ‘Pass/Fail’ mark would be appropriate rather than a grading system.

**Employability Skills**

**How are qualifications other than GCSEs and A levels valued/viewed?**

Not all young people flourish on purely theoretical courses. Many need to relate the information in a more practical and tangible form and others need to relate what they are learning to the needs of adult life. For this reason there is a need for high quality vocational education courses that teach transferable skills for the workplace alongside more academic programmes. All schools should offer a range of quality vocational courses.

When employers were asked what would help make them more confident about young people, their answer was clear.

**Measures to prepare young people for work**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Place greater emphasis on developing employability skills</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve basic literacy/numeracy skills</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide better careers guidance</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase availability/range of work experience</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase awareness of SME jobs and career opportunities</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide more entrepreneurship/business education</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many members focus upon developing and instilling a greater work ethic in young people. Some focus upon their poor perceptions of the current education system.

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71 FSB ‘Voice of Small Business’ Survey Panel (June 2012)
We feel that it is vital that all subjects have employability skills embedded in them. Employers tell us that many young people lack skills such as communication skills and that these need to be taught well in schools. We don’t want a separate employability skills qualification; these skills should be developed as an integral part of the curriculum.

Any changes to the system must ensure that there is time for young people to undertake work experience and have good quality careers advice. To prepare them for the world of work, young people should be exposed to businesses throughout school life and be given time to undertake work-related learning. Work experience and careers guidance is key in these respects, and must be varied and inspiring. Young people should be provided with opportunities to see how businesses are run and the potential for starting one of their own.

Running an effective careers and work-related education programme will require the support of businesses. We believe there should be more liaison between schools and businesses. Students should have some direct experience of work-life before they leave school.

**How is attainment at GCSE grade D viewed? Likewise achievement in a Level 1 qualification (e.g. Level 1 certificate or award)?**

We believe that most businesses focus on qualifications at Grade C and above as indications of achievement in a subject, and that many are not familiar, or confident, with the Level 1 – 8 qualification system. It is likely that many are not aware that a Grade D is the equivalent of a Level 1 award or that a C or above is a Level 2 qualification. There would also be a lack of confidence in comparing GCSE and A Level qualifications with vocational qualifications at the same level.

We suggest that there should be an easily accessible resource setting out the equivalences and differences between qualifications, which should be online but also available in hard copy, and that its existence and availability should be promoted, particularly amongst small and micro businesses.

**Do you need grade outcomes in all qualifications or would pass/fail models suit your needs?**

As stated above, in respect of the essential or basic skills of numeracy literacy and IT skills discussed above, the FSB would support the development of a functional skills competency test that all school leavers are expected to pass before leaving school and entering the world of work. A similar certificate in employability skills would also be welcome.

**Whether you think there is enough breadth in the A level system post-16?**

With the increase in higher apprenticeships, and the fall in numbers of young people going into university, the importance of A-levels to employers will only increase. Employers use A-levels not only as a way to benchmark young people on academic achievements but also on their wider ‘employability’ skills.
Specifically, small businesses need young people to be more work ready and therefore a greater level of employability skills should be embedded into all A-levels. They should include work-related learning and work experience where possible, project work to improve self-management, problem-solving, communication skills, team work, and help to improve the attitude of young people towards the world of work.

The current system of students taking a small number of subjects at A Level is particularly important to students who wish to specialise and who have a particular career path in mind. It is recognised by employers as indicating that subjects have been studied in depth. It also demonstrates, in all subjects or career aspirations, the student’s ability to study at a particular level.

However, we believe there should also be a continued focus on numeracy, literacy and employability skills, perhaps with those students continuing to A Level in school or college being reassessed or assessed at a higher level in those basic and employability skills discussed above with a further pass/fail certificate.
Response to CCEA proposals for reforming GCSE and A Level examinations in Northern Ireland

We start out with the aim of making the important measurable, and end up making only the measurable important...There is a growing acceptance that employment in the twenty-first century will require a flexible workforce, able to learn new skills and to adapt quickly to new demands. These kinds of skills are precisely those aspects of the curriculum which are currently receiving less emphasis in the drive to improve results on tests, which measure only those things that are easy to measure in timed, written tests – what Stephen Ball has called ‘the curriculum [and examinations]of the dead’.

(Wiliam, 2001: 7)

Summary of GTCNI recommendations

Ball (1994: 23) highlighted how policies often contradict and inhibit one another or lack internal consistency, as is the case between curriculum and assessment policies in Northern Ireland. Simply put, ‘what is incorporated into a core curriculum should be clearly reflected in examination and assessment approaches’ (Van den Akker, 2010: 185). Gale (2002) characterised policies as ‘temporary policy settlements’ that are likely to ‘contain crises or other settlements “in waiting”’ (Gale, 2002: 386). The ‘crisis in waiting’ in Northern Ireland over the past 5 years had been the need for assessment and examinations to reflect and encourage the full range of skills at the centre of the Revised NICurriculum.

GTCNI recommends the following options in the following order:

- In the short term only (1-2 years) Retain GCSEs with amendments, to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies, and the N. Ireland economy.

- In the medium term (2-4 years) Remove the emphasis on high stakes examinations at age 16, for example externally assessed qualifications in core subjects only and school-based assessment in other subjects.

- In the medium term (2-5 years) Develop school-based assessment in other subjects

- In the medium term (2-4 years) develop new qualifications for N.Ireland to be taken at the appropriate age (17-18) which reflect the 21st century needs of young people for further education, employment and life-fulfilment.
1: Introduction

Northern Ireland, perhaps more than any other region of the United Kingdom, tends to focus heavily on test and exam results as a measure of success. This is perhaps partly explained by its selective education system and a culture that encourages teaching towards ‘the test’ from an early age. It is reinforced by parental pressure and the intense media scrutiny that accompanies the publication of Transfer Test, GCSE and GCE exam results.

The narrowness of the educational focus is accentuated by school performance indicators that emphasise exam success as the most significant measure. A top-down accountability culture that puts pressure on school managers to measure the success of their institutions in terms of public examination performance inevitably results in similar pressures being passed down to heads of departments and classroom teachers. As a result, exam preparation assumes disproportionate amounts of teaching time and distorts the nature of the classroom experience which should really be about stimulating a love of learning.

In the 2012 summer edition of GTCNI’s ‘termtalk’, Dr Paul Nolan questioned the ‘enduring myth’ of Northern Ireland as the best education system in the world. He pointed out that Northern Ireland’s scores in the OECD PISA surveys were significantly below the best performing countries. He drew attention to the greater inequality of performance that is to be found in Northern Ireland schools when compared with England and to the role that removing the effects of social inequality has played in Finland’s success. He showed that Northern Ireland’s record of high achievement at the top grades at GCSE and A level when compared with England was at odds with its PISA performance which showed no significant difference from its English counterparts.

An additional piece of evidence throwing doubt on Northern Ireland’s claimed superiority at GCE Level came in the form of an NFER report commissioned by the qualifications regulators and published in April 2011. This examined the relationship between A level results and prior attainment at GCSE. The analysis contained in this report showed that GCE qualifications awarded by CCEA, Northern Ireland’s awarding body, were commonly found to have significantly higher levels of attainment than would be expected from prior attainment data. The higher grade outcomes in for CCEA candidates were a function of the different method used to award grades rather than an objective measure of educational performance.

The wisdom of a reliance on public examination results as the only, or even the best, indicator of the performance of an education system is further questioned by Neil Stringer’s research into the setting and maintaining of GCSE and GCE grading standards published in 2011. He showed that the year-on-year increase in grade outcomes in GCSE and GCE examinations in England, Wales and Northern Ireland between 2002 and 2009 could be attributed to the weak criterion referencing method used to award grades rather than to any improvement in educational provision or performance.
2: The need for transformative examination reform to meet 21st C needs

In many quarters, this preoccupation with exam grades is increasingly being questioned. The CBI Director General, John Cridland writing in his foreword to the First Steps report recognised the need to define ‘a new performance standard based on the whole person we want to develop a rigorous and demanding accountability regime that assesses schools’ performance on a wider basis than the narrow measure of exams’. He argued that teachers should be liberated to allow them to teach creative lessons which inspire enquiry and understanding, and cater for all abilities. Though schools should undoubtedly endeavour to produce the high levels of literacy and numeracy that underpin access to the rest of the curriculum and the world of work, they should also seek to develop young people with wider capabilities such as a talent for creativity and problem-solving, an ability to think for themselves and to form and express opinions, a capacity to present a coherent argument and an ability to understand moral and ethical issues. All of these skills are at the centre of the Northern Ireland Curriculum for 4-14 year olds but receive insufficient focus in assessment and examination frameworks.

GCSE and GCE qualifications are essentially competitive examination systems designed to provide a mechanism for selecting some candidates rather than others for jobs or courses of further study. They also serve to demonstrate a certain level of competence in a particular field of study. They do not work well as mechanisms for either the measurement of the performance of the education system or for the development of 21st century skills, because they were not designed for either purpose. The former purpose is much better served by independent surveys such as the OECD’s PISA study which makes use of appropriate sampling techniques and can be pre-tested to ensure comparability over time. The latter requires a radical re-design of examining to allow authentic performance in key skills to be observed and evaluated.

2.1 21st Century needs

Concerns are increasingly being expressed about preparing young people for what has become known as the 'knowledge era' (Gilbert, 2005) reflecting the exponential growth, ease of access to, and speed of flow, of all kinds of knowledge via the world-wide web and social media. This knowledge revolution has had a profound impact on the potential for generating and sharing new knowledge between networked communities (Hipkins, Reid and Bull, 2010). A recent analysis (Hausmann et al., 2011) suggests that ‘a country's collective knowledge can account for the enormous income differences between the nations of the world better than any other factor’. Based on an empirical analysis, the authors claim that:

_The amount of knowledge embedded in a society depends on the diversity of knowledge across individuals and on their ability to combine this knowledge, and make use of it, through complex webs of interaction…. Complex economies are those that can weave vast quantities of relevant knowledge together, across large networks of people, to generate a diverse mix of knowledge-intensive products. The only way societies can expand their knowledge base is by facilitating the interaction of individuals in increasingly complex webs of organizations and markets._

(Hausmann et al., 2011: 18)
The ability to access, store, manipulate, analyse, create and share information virtually and instantaneously represents ‘a profound philosophical shift in the conditions of knowing’ and learning. Rather than something which can be prescribed in advance learning is now much more open-ended, iterative, ‘emergent and adaptive’, with risk and uncertainty acknowledged and welcomed. The change is characterised as a shift to networked ways of knowing (Hipkins et al., 2010). The combined effect suggests the need for a profound shift in conceptions of learning and knowledge ‘rigour’ that moves away from memorisation of traditional knowledge towards more creative conceptualisations associated with research, information management and knowledge construction and creativity across traditional subject boundaries, and more complex, forms of assessment that are not readily achieved through traditional examinations.

We need a system of accountability that is more nuanced and intelligent and avoids a simplistic reliance on examination results alone. However, some form of examination and end of school selection process is inevitable. In re-thinking what form that selection process should take, we need to

- recognise the wider range of educational objectives that schools should be trying to achieve in producing rounded individuals confident and well-equipped to face the challenges of a rapidly-changing world
- bring curriculum and pedagogy closer to a networked era of knowledge, without losing the authority of the disciplines
- see learning as emergent and adaptive rather than fully specifiable in advance
- encourage young people to develop robust personalised skills and capabilities for learning and knowing if they are to cope, now and in the future, with the complex knowledge era we have created.
- takes account of, responds to and make space for
  - the sheer volume of new knowledge
  - highly networked, instantaneous flows of information around the globe through networks of technologies that afford simultaneously different ways of accessing different networks of knowledge
  - 21stC needs for information management and creative problem-solving skills flowing from the ‘knowledge era’.
  - the growing body of scholarship that describes learning as emergent and adaptive rather than fully specifiable in advance
  - The dynamic interrelationships between tacit and experiential knowing
  - personal responses to learning and
  - the encouragement and development of 21stC learning skills of enquiry, processes of knowledge-building and objective critique. *(These are the thinking skills and personal capabilities of information management, problem-solving, decision-making, creativity, autonomous and collaborative learning that are central to the Revised Curriculum 4-14 but which have not been carried over sufficiently strongly into assessment and examinations).*
2.2 OECD recommendations

The very recently published OECD Review of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Synergies for Better Learning - An International perspective on evaluation and assessment (April 2013) recommends that countries should:

- **Align evaluation and assessment with educational goals**
  
  Evaluation and assessment should serve and advance educational goals and student learning objectives. This involves aspects such as the alignment with the principles embedded in educational goals, designing fit-for-purpose evaluations and assessments, and ensuring a clear understanding of educational goals by school agents.

- **Focus on improving classroom practices**
  
  The point of evaluation and assessment is to improve classroom practice and student learning. With this in mind, all types of evaluation and assessment should have educational value and should have practical benefits for those who participate in them, especially students and teachers.

- **Avoid distortions**
  
  Because of their role in providing accountability, evaluation and assessment systems can distort how and what students are taught. For example, if teachers are judged largely on results from standardised student tests, they may “teach to the test”, focusing solely on skills that are tested and giving less attention to students’ wider developmental and educational needs. It is important to minimise these unwanted side-effects by, for example, using a broader range of approaches to evaluate the performance of schools and teachers.

- **Put students at the centre**
  
  Because the fundamental purpose of evaluation and assessment is to improve student learning, students should be placed at the centre. They should be fully engaged with their learning and empowered to assess their own progress (which is also a key skill for lifelong learning). It is important, too, to monitor broader learning outcomes, including the development of critical thinking, social competencies, engagement with learning and overall well-being. These are not amenable to easy measurement, which is also true of the wide range of factors that shape student learning outcomes. Thus, performance measures should be broad, not narrow, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data as well as high-quality analysis.

- **Build capacity at all levels**
  
  Creating an effective evaluation and assessment framework requires capacity development at all levels of the education system. For example, teachers may need training in the use of formative assessment, school officials may need to upgrade their skills in managing data, and principals – who often focus mainly on administrative tasks – may need to reinforce their pedagogical leadership skills. In addition, a centralised effort may be needed to develop a knowledge base, tools and guidelines to assist evaluation and assessment activities.

- **Manage local needs**
  
  Evaluation and assessment frameworks need to find the right balance between consistently implementing central education goals and adapting to the particular needs of regions, districts and schools. This can involve setting down national parameters, but allowing flexible approaches within these to meet local needs.

- **Design successfully and build consensus**
  
  To be designed successfully, evaluation and assessment frameworks should draw on informed policy diagnosis and best practice, which may require the use of pilots and
experimentation. To be implemented successfully, a substantial effort should be made to build consensus among all stakeholders, who are more likely to accept change if they understand its rationale and potential usefulness.

3. Practical considerations

In building consensus we may need to address fears that the new agenda is an abandonment of ‘rigour’ by re-consider traditional assumptions about the nature of knowledge and concept of knowledge ‘rigour’ which have set too much stake on

- top-down curriculum assessment and examination specifications and pre-digested, prescriptions
- learning as content orientated, establishing matters of fact, as opposed to ‘matters of concern’ and debate
- the erroneous perception that examinations are rigorous, objective and ‘scientific as opposed to fragile and subjective with margins of error

In the process we will need to clarify:

- The relationship between new skills and competencies and traditional subject ‘content’ (which has not been properly understood or promoted)
- How theses are planned for and ‘taught’
- How they are assessed / examined in innovative and authentic ways
- The diverse range of knowledge and understandings involved
- Models that already exist around the world
- The resources and time needed to develop such qualifications
- The kind of professional development needed

Political considerations (extracts from Gallagher C, 2012)

Assessment policy analysis

The challenge is in not only building new conceptions of knowledge rigour, as envisaged in the Revised NIC, which teachers and schools are willing to embrace, and awarding these conceptions status through assessments and examinations. A bigger challenge may be in convincing politicians and the public of the merits of different forms of assessment.

The study found that factors such as global economic competitiveness, narrow concerns about literacy and numeracy proficiency and achievement in international comparative league tables, continue to strongly influence the focus and direction of assessment policy not just in Northern Ireland, but across the wider UK and internationally. The study also found that concerns about the wide spread of attainment and the long tail of underperformance, (which the OECD associates with selective systems), also impacts strongly on the framing of curriculum support policies.

While on the one hand curriculum reform is characterised as a reaction against centralising tendencies and favours divergent policies, the pressures for comparative performance data, and a belief in the link between educational performance and economic progress, operates towards greater assessment convergence (Bieber &
Martens, 2011). The internationally harmonising influence on assessment, notwithstanding, some systems – particularly the Nordic systems – continue to resist pressures to assess more frequently, while ‘Confucian-influenced’ systems in Asia place greater emphasis on effort and cumulative learning (DfE, 2011: 45).

Elsewhere, critics consider that in the ascendancy of a ‘performance model’ of curriculum we are witnessing ‘the scientific [objectives-driven] model of curriculum writ large, underpinned by technicist and managerial models of schooling and a distancing from curricular debate’ (Scott, 2008: 18). According to this view, the language of education is now predominantly framed as a type of ‘mythic economic instrumentalism’ (Stronach, 2010: 1). This takes the form of a ‘spectacularised hyper-narrative’ obsessed with measuring performance, based on globalised indicators, and preoccupied by universalised discourses about effectiveness, efficiency, quality and standards… allowing politicians the world over to talk nonsense about educational outcomes, while all singing from the main hymn sheet’ (Stronach, 2010: 1–2).

These pressures are illustrated in Northern Ireland in the divisive debate over academic selection, the increased emphasis on target setting, benchmarking and level-related reporting against narrow measures, and new arrangements for statutory assessment, a proposed programme of external moderation. The study surveyed longitudinal evidence relating to literacy and numeracy performance (Tymms, 2007) together with critiques of levels of progression and their application (Willam, 2001; DfE, 2011) which suggest that the mechanisms used for, and the data produced by, narrow assessments are deeply flawed and may impact negatively on children’s learning (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; DfE, 2011). Within this scenario, the rhetoric about preparing young people for a knowledge economy is set against the reality of traditional, narrow assessment and the failure to recognise that the skills which the Revised NIC promotes are mirrored in the key international measure of educational performance, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The challenges in affecting change require a cultural paradigm shift in relation to assessment literacy (particularly in a system dominated by academic selection) away from a culture of valuing what we assess towards a culture of assessing what is of value in the 21st century.

The study speculated that the failure as yet to align assessment policy with the intentions of the Revised NIC may have been compounded by two factors: firstly, the timing of policy development, which coincided with the Department of Education being reprimanding by the Audit Office and a Parliamentary Select Committee in 2006 for shortcomings in the management of its £40 million literacy and numeracy strategy; and secondly, the technical failure to design an integrated progression framework that was acceptable politically, and also manageable for schools. The intended alignment of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and the aspiration to promote ‘new literacies’ central to a knowledge economy through an explicit focus on the development of thinking skills and personal capabilities, has not achieved the prominence that it merits. Recent advice from the Expert Panel on a new National Curriculum for England (2011) highlighted the damaging effects of a performance culture, which dominates the UK and is, perhaps, even more deeply rooted in Northern Ireland. The advice provides a glimmer of hope of a shift in mindsets regarding narrow measurement, and the development of better mechanisms for
judging progression. It remains to be seen whether or not this advice impacts on assessment policy in England, and in time, ‘drifts’ towards Northern Ireland. While new examination structure are important, nevertheless, they alone are not a sufficient, condition for transforming curriculum and learning. Given the power of the competitive academic curriculum, if the sorts of changes envisaged are to have real traction, we need to be ready to address practical and political considerations such as:

- the politics of education and personal and public concerns of education
- the dominant discourses about academic selection and academic success that have served to maintain the traditional agenda.
- the wider political contexts that frame teacher practice.
- teachers’ own deep assumptions about knowledge and the need for teacher development
- Issues of equity for the twenty-first century—class and cultural capital,
- a social justice and democratic purpose

In theory one would think that the dominance of the knowledge economy paradigm should concentrate attention on new flexible learning pedagogies and new means of assessment. In reality, the dominance of the international assessment paradigm has tended to concentrate political attention on narrow curriculum agendas, traditional pedagogy and narrow assessment with a particular focus on literacy, numeracy and science.

Ironically, the challenges and uncertainties of a globalising world are causing policymakers to resort to old practices and solutions, re-imagining a mythical golden age of education derived from:

- the neo-liberal ideology which sees education as having a dominantly market—driven, economic purpose and the tendency to reassert the traditional academic/vocational divide.

- the re-emergence of neo-conservative ideology in the form of a call for a return to the western canon and opposition to such developments as cross-disciplinary and integrated learning, which had been a response by progressive educators to the challenges of educating for ‘new times’.

This amalgam of neo-liberal and neo-conservative thought has played out in various ways in different education systems around the world mostly commonly in: high stakes traditional testing and league tables; a narrowing of the curriculum — a renewed emphasis on the (old) basics, a dismissal of progressive curriculum ideas: and concepts as ‘dumbing down’ the curriculum.

Meanwhile:

*learning science – an interdisciplinary field that includes cognitive science, educational psychology, information science, and neuroscience – suggests that the best learning occurs when basic skills are taught in combination with complex thinking skills. Decades of research reveals that there is, in fact, no reason to separate the acquisition of learning core content and basic skills like reading and computation from more advanced analytical and thinking skills, even in the earliest grades. New assessments...illustrate that the skills that really matter for the 21st century – the ability to think creatively and to evaluate and analyze information – can be measured accurately and in a
common and comparable way. These emergent models also demonstrate the potential to measure these complex thinking skills at the same time that we measure a student's mastery of core content or basic skills and knowledge. There is, then, no need for more tests to measure advanced skills.

(Silva, 2008: I)

A recent survey of seventeen countries (OECD, 2009) found that:

...most countries or regions cover 21st century skills and competencies in their regulations, guidelines or recommendations for compulsory education. However, there are few specific definitions of these skills and competencies at national or regional level and virtually no clear formative or summative assessment policies for these skills. The only evaluation regarding their teaching is often left to external inspectors as part of their whole school audits.

(Ananiadou & Claro, 2009: 4)

So, while politicians want schools to respond to the needs of the knowledge economy, in reality the dominance of the international assessment paradigm tends to focus greater political attention on narrow curriculum agendas and traditional pedagogy. The challenge worldwide is to build a deeper professional, public and political understanding of learning and assessment literacy, that moves away from a narrow focus on traditional knowledge towards more creative conceptualisations associated with research and information management and links across traditional subject boundaries, but ‘without losing the authority of the disciplines’ (Hipkins, et.al., 2010).

Equally, if not more challenging, is the realisation that this type of learning requires different, and potentially more complex, forms of assessment that are not readily achieved through traditional examinations.

The rhetoric of education thus illustrates the political struggle between those who see education for its narrow instrumental outcomes and those who see its potential for enriched, motivational learning and the promotion of higher order thinking for 21st century demands. The cliché that sums up the dilemma is that, we ‘value what we assess rather than assess what we value’.

It is notable that the one educational indicator listed by Hausmann et al., (2011) as important was the less traditional, non-curriculum-based ‘Programme for International Student Assessment’ (PISA), developed by the OECD. Some observers see PISA as a ‘soft power in education’ (Bieber & Martens, 2011). A recent OECD report (2011) highlights how already high-performing countries like Japan and Korea have also taken action ‘to ensure that skills that are considered important become valued in the education system’ (OECD, 2011: 19). The outcomes of these changes in assessment policy are believed to be already bearing fruit a decade later (ibid.).
In a traditional education system like Japan, the challenge of convincing parents and the general public that assessment of this type is beneficial is likely to be more difficult than in the UK. The Japanese willingness to do this signals the reality that one of the best ways to achieve systemic change is through formal assessment, because ‘what gets tested [or statutorily assessed] is what gets learnt, and how it is tested [often] determines how it is learnt’ (Barber and Mourshed, 2007: 36).

Across OECD countries, there appears to be broad agreement that the skills which PISA tests are those which systems need to nurture. Preparatory literature indicates that complex problem-solving will be a central feature of PISA 2012, with challenges set in demanding authentic, concrete contexts rather than in short abstract tasks (OECD, 2010a: 45). These are exactly the skills and contexts which the Revised NIC promotes.

The study recommends that in order to complete the paradigm shift from education as transmission and instrumentalism to education as critical empowerment and transformation, assessment policies should align with curriculum intentions and encourage the development of 21st century skills and life-long learning. In order to assist this approach to assessment, examining and progression need to take greater account of the ‘new literacies’ such as critical thinking and problem-solving. ‘Simplex’ exemplifications of multi-dimensional progression are also needed that illustrate the inter-related ability to manage information and to contextualise and deploy relevant knowledge and understanding in solving higher order thinking challenges and to communicate this in an appropriate format and style as suits the task. A prototype example (Figure 8.9) was developed as part of the action research.

The study further recommends that monitoring standards over time should operate outside an accountability framework. Monitoring systems relying on ‘light sampling’ of a percentage of schools, for example 10% each year, would provide stable, robust and independent information for the purposes of accountability and policy formation. There are a number of manageable examples of this type of assessment around the world, most notably in Australia (McCurry, 2005).
The depth required to implement a curriculum and examinations based on these ideas far exceeds the kind of standardised learning approaches that are synonymous with a neo-liberal policy regime. There has also been a tendency to ignore or downplay ways in which curriculum and examinations maintain and reproduce inequality through:

- the content of the curriculum and examinations, which has tended to reflect and reproduce the cultural capital of those with power in our society
- the structures of the curriculum, such as subject organisation, which tend to create hierarchies of knowledge that are invariably class-based

Lack of attention to key issues of class and cultural capital may simply reproduce the status quo.

One possibility is to appropriate the language and concepts of the neo-liberal/neo-conservative agenda and invest them with new meaning (Apple 2004) by interpolating into the new agenda terms such as standards, quality, excellence and rigour, which are liberally sprinkled through the dominant curriculum discourses. These are rarely defined yet they are simply assumed to be innate properties of the traditional curriculum – a position that can no longer go uncontested.

References: (to be completed)


APPENDIX 1: Areas for consideration re: Review of GCSE and A levels Qualifications:

A range of issues need to be considered during the review, to assess whether the current qualifications are fit for purpose for N Ireland or whether changes are needed. These are outlined below.

**Purposes**
1. What are the main purposes of qualification at age 16 and at 18?
   - Does the purpose of a qualification differ at age 16 to 18?
   - Should these qualifications:
     a) provide recognition;
     b) ensure standards;
     c) allow for selection within the cohort;
     d) measure the education system; or
     e) a combination of all of these?

   - Are all four purposes achievable in one qualification model or within one qualification system?
   - Are some of these purposes more important than others?
   - Are there other purposes of a qualification for N Ireland that need to be considered?

2. Do the qualifications policies being considered in England and Wales fit the purpose of qualifications for N Ireland?
   - Do the diverging policies allow us to work within a three country system?

**GCSEs**
3. Do GCSEs meet the needs of all learners?
   - Is it appropriate for GCSEs to be studied by such a wide range of the 16 year old cohort?
   - When most learners now stay on in education or training until aged 19 is there a need for high stakes qualifications across a wide range of subjects at 16?
   - Should the purpose of a qualification at 16 be to check progress along the 14-19 educational road?
   - Are we doing the ‘right’ thing by entering nearly all 14-16 year olds with the knowledge that around a third of them will achieve below a Grade C?
   - Is attainment at GCSE grade D to G seen as less valuable than high attainment in a level 1 qualification?

4. Should GCSE qualifications continue to be designed to meet the needs of all 16 year olds?
   - Is there an appropriate breadth and balance in the KS4 qualification offer?
   - Should there be a range of qualifications to meet the different purposes GCSEs currently fulfil?

5. Could a range of core GCSE qualifications be defined that would cover an ‘entitlement’ for all young people at 16, within the broader 14-19 education programme?
   - Can the statutory requirements provide a starting point for a core of knowledge and skills that could be built into qualifications?
   - Should 14-16 qualifications provision be made up of a mix of GCSEs and other Level 1 and level 2 (vocational/applied) qualifications, supported by Entry level qualifications?

6. EF policy has required schools to offer learners a larger range of qualifications. How will the future of some of these qualifications be impacted upon by GCSE policy in England?
7. How has the GCSE brand been impacted upon by recent events and the expansion of titles offered?
8. What impact will GCSE developments in England, including ensuring focus on their National Curriculum, have on the future development of GCSEs in N Ireland?

**Post 16**
9. Would distinct qualifications, building on a mathematical core for all but emphasising the different specialisms for those intending to progress in mathematics related fields at university, better serve all students?
   - Is there a need for post-16 Mathematics to have further lower-level options in addition to AS?
10. Would a broader approach to the study of English prepare students better for studying in a higher education setting?
11. Do you consider whether the current system centred on GCSE and A level qualifications where achievement must be awarded/assessment must take place after 2 years allows for full participation and recognition for all learners?

**A level**
12. Would additional breadth of offer outweigh the strengths of additional depth of the current A level system?
   - Should ‘core’ skills be required to be studied alongside specialisms?
13. **Assessment:**
   - Would the inclusion of independent research, projects and extended essays bring additional depth to A level subject expertise?
   - Should there be more teacher- and school-based assessment with the potential to stretch students, especially where oral examinations are part of the system?
   - Do AS levels cause the teaching and learning to be too content driven?
   - Should we revisit multiple-choice questions in A level assessments?
   - Would learners benefit from having the opportunity to set the pace of their own learning and when they take assessment?

14. **Design:**
   - Who should be involved in the design of A level qualifications?
   - Is there a role for employers in A level design? If so, what would this be?
   - Can it be assumed that there is the commitment across HE for the role envisaged for them in A level development work? If there is the commitment, is there the capacity?
   - What is the impact on the Entitlement Framework should HEIs not engage in the development of some A level subjects?
   - What are the issues for A levels in N Ireland should significant HEI engagement and endorsement be required for an individual AO’s A level to be accredited?

**Progression**
15. How do we ensure qualifications taken here have a currency which enables learners to progress in employment and study across country boundaries?
16. What are the alternatives to GCSEs in English and Mathematics for progression?
17. Would learners benefit from the opportunity for horizontal progression (building on breadth at e.g. level 1) as well as vertical progression?
18. How do we ensure horizontal progression is equally recognised?

**Skills**
19. How could we consider allowing for the statutory requirement to deliver and assess cross-curricular and other skills in these qualifications?
20. What skills do employers feel need to be developed within 14-19 education?
21. Do skills need to be developed further within 16-19 Education?
   • If so, what skills should be developed further?
   • In advanced industrial societies it is believed that Level 3 in core skills is a preferred
     baseline for employees, should this be considered for N Ireland system?

22. Should wider skills be included in KS4 and post-16 qualifications?
   • If so, how could this be achieved?
   • Can wider skills be appropriately assessed in a qualification which rank-orders
     individual attainment?

23. Is there a group of young people that could benefit from focusing on Communication and
    Using Mathematics through skills qualifications?
INTO Submission to the CCEA Review of Qualifications
May 2013

The Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO) is the largest teaching union in Ireland and presently represents around 7,000 teachers in all educational sectors in Northern Ireland. INTO has already responded to the consultation on proposed short term changes to A levels and now welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the overall review of qualifications here.

14-16 Qualifications
INTO has already made it clear and continues to hold the view that the Organisation rejects completely the option to follow the policy direction which has been adopted in England.

As stated in the Organisation’s previous submission on potential short term changes to A levels, INTO strongly believes in principle that schools and students should have a choice of modular or linear courses, which would offer the best chance of attainment for a broader range of pupils. A return to linear-only examinations would inevitably lead to further narrowing of the curriculum and even more of teaching to the test.

INTO would lend conditional support to the option of retaining GCSEs, with amendments to reflect the needs of Northern Ireland educational policies and the Northern Ireland economy.

INTO would agree that subject content would need, where appropriate, to be revised, to reflect the needs of Northern Ireland but would not go as far as to agree that GCSEs should be aligned to the principles of the Entitlement Framework.

INTO does not subscribe to the view that assessment of Cross Curricular Skills should be included in any modified GCSEs here. The Organisation believes that there has been, and continues to be, an over-emphasis on the ‘cross-curricularity’ of these skills. INTO’s view is that each subject should be assessed on the skills and knowledge inherent to the subject, without the need to refer to explicit skills, developed elsewhere. There exists a natural exchange of core skills such as use of ICT, managing information, numeracy, communication etc across subject areas and it is implicit in success at GCSE that pupils can manage these skills.
On the question of the inclusion of Other skills, INTO holds the same views as those expressed in the previous paragraph.

On the question of modular/linear assessment or a combination of both, the INTO view has not changed. Flexibility is the key. Research has shown that modular examinations are no ‘easier’ than linear ones and are no less rigorous. The same applies to the question of internal assessment versus external assessment. There are subjects which naturally lend themselves to an emphasis on either internal or external assessment. It is also important that schools have the flexibility to opt for a method of assessment which is best suited to the needs of its pupils.

INTO believes that it is possible for Northern Ireland to develop its own set of qualifications at both GCSE and A level. It is essential to note however, the point that INTO made in its submission on the proposed short term changes to A levels, that;

INTO is strongly of the view that comparability of examination results here with those England and Wales is vital. Pupils from the North must have equality of accessibility to universities across these islands. It is equally vital that comparability with the Republic of Ireland is established and maintained. There have already been issues with BTEC qualifications being acceptable for university entrance in England, but not in Dublin. INTO would want to see full portability of qualifications within and across the islands.

INTO believes that any new qualifications here should reflect the needs of our pupils, within a local and a global context.

INTO does not subscribe to the view that a core set of subjects/skills, which would have to be undertaken by all pupils, should be identified. The Organisation believes that the individual needs and aptitudes of students should be catered for. The vision of education as no more than an economic driver seems to underpin the idea of ‘core’ subjects. Whilst Education is indeed partly an economic driver, there has been a drive of late to persuade people to take up STEM subjects, with a view to building a workforce with those particular skills. As a society, we need to be more imaginative and build an economy around the skills sets we already have or that our pupils are inclined towards. The Arts have the potential to be economically productive but are being squeezed (they represent 10% of UK GDP and employ 2.5 Million people). Pupils, in the first instance, need to be treated as individuals and their personal ambitions must be catered for.

INTO does not believe that the number of subjects assessed at age 16 should be reduced nor that external assessment should be limited to core subjects.

INTO does not feel that there is a need to establish clear distinction between achievement at Level 1 and Level 2, as the Organisation believes that such distinction will occur naturally. INTO does subscribe to the view that there should be overlap, so that L1 students, who develop later or show more promise than expected, can be given recognition for their achievement.
INTO’s views on Cross-Curricular Skills, Other Skills, modularity/linearity and internal/external assessment have already been outlined above.

Keeping in mind the Organisation’s views as outlined above, INTO would support the proposal to remove the emphasis on high stakes examinations at age 16.

16-18 Qualifications

INTO’s views on the proposed short term changes to A levels, as contained within the Organisation’s submission to the consultation thereon, reflect very much its views on the options proposed in the review of 16-18 qualifications. The Organisation’s views on linearity/modularity remain as expressed.

INTO rejects completely the proposal to follow the policy adopted in England.

INTO is strongly of the view that AS levels should be retained as they currently stand. As stated in the earlier consultation, INTO believes that AS levels enable students to measure their success and to gauge future potential. AS levels were introduced to foster broader learning and have been successful in doing so. They are of particular benefit to students who mature at a slightly later date.

INTO does not see anything to be gained by, and would need to see the justification for, changing the balance of assessment to 40:60.

INTO’s views on retaining A levels, with amendments to reflect the needs of pupils and the economy in Northern Ireland, together with its views on developing new 16-18 qualifications are the same as the Organisation holds for GCSEs, outlined above. In addition, INTO would reiterate its core policy that qualifications attained here must be comparable with those gained elsewhere and portable for access to universities, across these islands.

Gerry Murphy
Northern Secretary
NAHT (NI) RESPONSE TO CCEA REVIEW OF QUALIFICATIONS

31st May 2013

Please specify the category which best represents your answers. Trades Union

If you are responding as a group, please indicate the make-up of this group.

National Association of Head Teachers. Represents school leaders across all sectors in NI

Option 1 GCSEs now available in England are linear only (examinations must be taken at the end of the course), with linear and modular (examinations can be taken during the course and re-sat once)

Should NI Retain GCSEs in line with the policy direction in England

No

The proposals as presented for England will not meet the needs of all learners. Removing modularisation and tiering will prevent many young people from accessing the qualifications.

Option 2 GCSE qualifications are currently offered on a three-country basis. Common rules (criteria) are set out for GCSEs at qualification level and subject level. This system does not facilitate regional differences in 14-16 curriculum and specifically.

Should NI retain GCSEs with amendments to reflect the needs of NI

Yes

Should subject content be revised to reflect the needs of N. Ireland?

Yes

Should GCSEs be aligned to the principles of the Entitlement Framework, where appropriate?

Yes

Should Cross Curricular Skills be included?

Yes. As skills delivered within GCSEs

Should other skills (Problem-solving, Self-management, Working with others) and employability skills be included?

Yes. As skills delivered within GCSEs

Assessment should be:

A combination of modular and linear assessment to suit individual subjects

There should be flexibility to meet the needs of diverse learning styles

Should there be internal assessment

Yes, limited internal assessment specific to the needs of the subject

Current arrangements for controlled assessments are distorting the wider curriculum and using a disproportionate amount of teaching/learning time. A balance needs to be struck between assessment and learning time.

Option 3 Scotland and the South of Ireland have individual qualifications systems. Wales are further developing the Welsh Baccalaureate. Should NI develop new 14-16 qualifications?

NI education is a small pool and the finance needed to create a whole suite of new 14-16 qualifications would be a waste of scarce resources. The original basis for GCSEs still exists i.e. a single standard set of criteria referenced examinations to suit all pupils. NAHT (NI) supports the continuation of this concept.

Option 4 GCSEs were introduced in 1986 to facilitate learners of all ability. They were designed to assess learning at 16 and to be a ‘passport’ to employment. Should NI remove the emphasis on high stakes examinations at age 16?
No. 16 is an appropriate age for young people to encounter externally assessed qualifications. They are motivating and enable pupils to show what they can do and achieve.

Finally, please select your preferred option for 14-16 qualifications in N. Ireland. a) In the short to medium term:
Proposal 2: Retain GCSEs with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies, and the N. Ireland economic situation
Only a few subjects do require contextualisation e.g. History but there is no need to make adjustments just for the sake of them and to justify CCEA's existence. Science in NI is no different to science in England and requires no modification

b) In the longer term:
Proposal 2: Retain GCSEs with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies, and the N. Ireland economy.

A levels

Option 1 The Coalition government in England is in the process of reviewing A levels for use in England. The AS qualification in England is to be a standalone, one-year, linear qualification not linked to A level.
Should NI retain GCSEs in line with the policy direction in England?
No. NAHT (NI) does not support the proposal to make AS a standalone qualification. The implications for pupils are significant- decisions made at the start of sixth form become concrete whereas currently pupils can make final decisions on A2s at the start of upper sixth.
This also has a resource implication. Currently AS and first year of A level are the same curriculum. In the proposal it is likely that the curriculum for a standalone qualification would differ from the first year of a linear two year qualification. This would require two separate classes. Many schools could not afford to make this provision.

Option 2A Retain A levels with amendments to reflect the NI educational policies and economy.
Yes

Assessment should be:
Combination of modular and linear assessment to suit individual subjects
Assessment methods should allow for different learning styles and meet the needs of all pupils.
Should there be internal assessment
Yes. Limited internal assessment specific to the needs of the subject
Where internal assessment is appropriate to a subject it should be included. A careful balance between the demands teaching time and assessment time demands should be created.

[Communication skills] Should qualifications 16-18 include?
Yes

[Using Mathematics skills] Should qualifications 16-18 include?
Yes

[ICT skills] Should qualifications 16-18 include?
Yes

Should qualifications 16-18 include other skills?
Yes

Should qualifications 16-18 include other skills?
Yes with a proviso- 16-18 year olds should have opportunity for sport, physical activity and cultural pursuits. The award of qualifications for these additions would incentivise their uptake by young people.

If yes, how should skills be included at ages 16-18?
Taught and assessed through standalone qualifications

Should skills development be required to complement the A level subject offer - e.g. post-16 general qualifications in Skills?
Yes

Option 3 Scotland and the South of Ireland have individual qualifications systems. Wales are further developing the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma. Should NI develop new 16-18 qualifications?
No. The relatively small size of the NI student population does not merit an entirely separate NI 16-18 qualification. Such a proposal would also end the current "open qualifications market" that has served our students well.

Finally, please select your preferred option for 16-18 qualifications in N. Ireland.) In the short to medium term:
Proposal 2: Retain A levels with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies, and the needs of the economy.
The twin issues of comparability and portability are of major importance. Any system must retain these as a foundation.

b) In the longer term:
Proposal 2: Retain A levels with amendments to the needs of N. Ireland educational policies, and the needs of the N. Ireland economy

If you would like to provide any further comments please use the space below.
NAHT (NI) supports a system of qualifications that meets the needs of all learners from the most academic to learners with special educational needs. GCSEs and GCEs have proved a successful brand for many learners and need only minor improvements to make them relevant to all learners. The current politically inspired moves within the English system should be resisted by our DE. However the development of a separate suite of qualifications for NI would be a waste of resources, the NI student population is not large enough to merit an entirely unique system. It is likely that many schools would choose to ignore it and in our "open Qualifications market" choose, albeit reluctantly, to follow the English approach in an attempt to ensure the best opportunities for their students. The key issues of comparability and portability are paramount in any new/ revised system.

Aidan Dolan
Director of Education
NAHT(NI)
02890776633
1. The NASUWT welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) review of General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and General Certificate of Education (GCE) qualifications.

2. The NASUWT is the largest teachers’ union in Northern Ireland.

COMMENTS

3. The NASUWT believes that the implementation of effective policy and practice in relation to the qualifications framework in Northern Ireland is critical to ensuring that it supports teachers and school leaders in securing high quality, relevant and engaging educational experiences for all learners. In light of the role played by qualifications in the formal accreditation of learning and thereby in determining the range and nature of the education, training and employment opportunities available to young people, it is essential that the qualifications system operates on a coherent, credible, efficient and equitable basis.

4. Given its extensive and longstanding engagement in the development of qualifications policy across all the education administrations in the UK, and informed by the direct experience of its members involved in teaching learners in the 14 to 19 sector, the NASUWT has identified a range of key principles upon which the development of policy in this area in Northern Ireland should be based. The NASUWT is clear that qualifications policy must:
• recognise the critical role played by the school and college workforce and workforce unions in securing high quality provision through meaningful and genuine participation in the development of policy;
• be based on effective collaboration between providers, sustained through the full engagement of local authorities, rather than on competition and marketisation, thereby securing an equitable and collegial partnership between all providers;
• take into effective account the negative impact on the school and college workforce and learners of excessive workload and organisational bureaucracy;
• ensure that qualification design reflects rather than dictates the content of the curriculum;
• tackle the causes of learner disaffection and disengagement from education;
• secure parity of esteem between vocational and academic learning pathways;
• involve effective employer contributions through support and funding for work-based education and training; and
• be supported by appropriate levels of public investment.

5. The NASUWT, therefore, welcomes the fact that the core aims and values for the qualifications system in Northern Ireland articulated by CCEA and DENI reflect many of these important principles and the Union is therefore encouraged by the generally positive stance on the development of policy in this area that the Department for Education (DENI) and CCEA have sought to adopt.

6. However, CCEA recognises, quite correctly, that it has been commissioned by DENI to set the broad direction of travel of qualifications policy in Northern Ireland in a context within which established arrangements for key aspects of the frameworks in place elsewhere in the UK, particularly in England, are likely to alter significantly in future. Given the significant degree of commonality between the qualifications frameworks in place in Wales, England and Northern Ireland, this important consideration invites reflection on the potential impact of reforms in other jurisdictions on the qualifications system in Northern Ireland and the most appropriate policy response of CCEA and DENI in such circumstances.
7. In this context, it is important to recognise that, to date, the significant majority of general and vocational qualifications offered to learners in the 14 to 19 sector in Northern Ireland have also formed the basis for the qualifications offers made to learners in England and Wales. The NASUWT is clear that these arrangements have secured important advantages for teachers, school leaders, learners and other key stakeholders, including higher education institutions and employers, across all three administrations.

8. In particular, they have ensured that the principal qualifications offered to learners in Northern Ireland have been transportable between jurisdictions, thereby ensuring that learners are able to take up offers of further and higher education or employment outside Northern Ireland and for which entry requirements are established on the basis of qualifications that these learners already possess. From a school and college workforce perspective, the existence of this commonality of qualifications frameworks secures beneficial mobility of the teacher and school leader workforce across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, allowing schools and colleges in Northern Ireland to recruit from a wider range of professional staff with direct knowledge and experience of the qualifications used in their settings than might otherwise be the case.

9. However, the NASUWT recognises that, notwithstanding the benefits of this high degree of commonality, it is important that the qualifications system in Northern Ireland is fit for purpose and helps to secure in practice the aims and objectives identified as critical for the system in Northern Ireland established by CCEA and DENI. In this regard, the NASUWT acknowledges the serious concerns expressed by the Northern Ireland Minister of Education to the Department for Education (DfE) in Westminster about the direction of qualifications in policy in England and the lack of consultation about the potential impact of this policy on the qualifications system in Northern Ireland. The NASUWT is clear that it is unacceptable for the DfE to take forward reforms to qualifications policy in England that, in the context of a largely unified qualifications system, are likely, if unchecked, to impose arrangements on the education system in Northern Ireland that DENI and CCEA do not regard as appropriate.

10. In relation to the qualifications policy priorities established by the Westminster Government in England, the Union has continued to emphasise a range of key concerns,

particularly in relation to the development of an increasingly higher-stakes school and college accountability regime, within which the performance data derived from the outcomes of qualifications are subject to even greater scrutiny, with profound consequences for providers identified as ‘failing’ in this respect and an increased focus in this regime on academic rather than vocational qualifications.

11. The NASUWT has also made clear its profound reservations about the move towards an increasingly qualifications-led curriculum in England and the acceptance by policy makers of the wholly unsubstantiated assertion that the educational standards associated with the award of principal general qualifications have declined over time as a rationale for significant and potentially damaging reforms to the qualification system.

12. The Union has set out its views in detail on the Westminster Government’s proposals for reforms to Key Stage 4 qualifications and a copy of its submission to the DfE is appended to this document.

13. In view of these unacceptable circumstances in England, while it is important that the response of CCEA and DENI to the potential impact in Northern Ireland of the Westminster Government’s reforms to qualifications policy continues to be robust, it should also involve every possible effort being made to ensure that the benefits of the high degree of commonality between the qualification systems in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the UK continue to be secured in future.

14. The NASUWT is therefore concerned that the basis upon which the review has been established appears to be guided by the view that the most effective way in which CCEA and DENI might address its concerns in this respect is to seek to begin a process that will detach the qualifications system in Northern Ireland from that in place in England and Wales. The scope of the review, in which views are sought on a wide range of issues relating to the nature and function of general qualifications in Northern Ireland, serve to lend weight to these concerns.

15. In light of the importance of the commonality of the qualifications framework, the NASUWT believes that the constitution of the review on this basis is inappropriate. Instead, CCEA and DENI should continue, as a legitimate statutory participant in the
process of qualifications policy development and implementation in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, to insist that no further reforms to the qualifications system in England should be progressed if the result of their implementation would be to impose unacceptable changes on the system in Northern Ireland in terms of the nature, content, administration and availability of general and vocational qualifications.

16. The NASUWT would welcome the opportunity to work with the CCEA to develop its strategy to help support the engagement of DENI with its Westminster counterpart on these critical issues and to secure an approach to the qualifications system in Northern Ireland that continues to secure the benefits of commonality and that reflects the aims and values that DENI, CCEA and the NASUWT have identified as fundamental to the development and implementation of effective policy in this area.

For further information on the Union’s response contact Karen Sims:

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1
Pearson Response to the CCEA Consultation on GCSE & GCE Qualifications

Summary
The decision to reform GCSEs and A levels is an opportunity to recast the education system to better meet the challenges of the modern world. This means developing qualifications which meet or exceed the standards of the world’s best education systems and ensure that the benefits brought by success in education are open to all young people, whatever their background.

In so doing there is a bigger opportunity to introduce more fundamental change to the whole system. There have been repeated attempts to drive change simply through introducing new qualifications. New qualifications will deliver benefits, but if system change is introduced as well, the potential is for these new qualifications to be part of an improved system which delivers vastly more for our young people.

We know that the Secretary of State for Education recently wrote to the Regulators for Northern Ireland and Wales suggesting that “the time is right for us to acknowledge that three-country regulation of GCSEs and A levels is no longer an objective towards which we should be working”. However, we think that a loss of alignment between GCSEs and A levels in the three countries could be potentially damaging to learners. We, therefore, hope that the general structures of GCSEs and A levels will continue to be consistent across the three countries, albeit allowing for some contextualisation in some subjects, where appropriate, to meet the needs of and improve the relevance for learners in each country.

All young people have a right to access qualifications that have international recognition and enable them to compete globally. This is the ambition set out for reforms in England and thus linking to reforms here would be a good proxy for that goal. Given the level of movement between Northern Ireland and England for employment and higher education (51% of Northern Ireland students applied to English universities last year) it may be disadvantageous for Northern Ireland learners if the qualifications that they take do not have alignment with English qualifications.

About Pearson
Pearson aspires to be the world’s leading learning company. We provide assessment, resources and educational technologies and support on system wide reform to schools, business and governments globally, including delivering International GCSEs, A levels and BTEC qualifications across 94 countries. Pearson is committed to contributing to an education system that is:
• Demanding in its standards, set against international expectations
• Rigorous in assessments
• Inclusive, ensuring no young person has their ambition capped
• Empowering, developing the skills and cultural literacy required for progression to ambitious next steps.

These principles are the foundations of any world class education system, and these reforms can embed them more deeply in the fabric of our education system.

Pearson has convened a Panel of experts in teaching, learning and assessment from around the world, chaired by Sir Michael Barber, to determine these principles drawing on international experience and evidence base. They will now help us to put them into practice in the design of new qualifications.

1. Taking the opportunity of reform
Our changing world
It is vital that the teaching and learning offered to our schoolchildren responds to the world as it changes, adapting to meet the demands that will be placed upon our young people when they leave education and enter the world of work. The education system is also fundamental to building a just and ambitious society.
In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, we have a good record of evaluating and transforming our education system in response to change. For example, the development of the GCSE was born out of the acknowledgement that restricting access to academic education was no longer an adequate response to the economic and social context of the late 20th century. A two-tier O level and CSE system prepared too many young people only for a diminishing number of opportunities in unskilled or low-skilled occupations. It failed to reflect the aspirations of a growing middle class, changes in the UK’s industrial and manufacturing base, and the needs of business and industry for school-leavers with different skills. Most importantly, it acted as a cap on aspiration and access for those turned away from O levels at age 14, or even earlier. As a country, we agreed that this could no longer be accepted.

**A step change in standards and expectations**

Once again we face a situation where our qualifications system has fallen out of step with the demands of our society and the needs of our economy. Since the advent of the GCSE, we have seen remarkable changes in the way we live, work, trade, consume, teach and learn. Income, life expectancy, educational demand and aspiration have been transformed the world over, and our young people face a larger and more competitive labour market than ever before.

Youth unemployment figures and our performance in international education benchmarking tests demonstrate that the current standard will not provide our young people with the tools they deserve to meet this challenge.

It is in this context that we address the question of reform of 14-19 qualifications. To meet these challenges head on requires a step change in what we expect of our young people at ages 16 and 19, and the support and motivation we give them to achieve it. The Government has set out in England a goal for a rigorous, credible system which sets high expectations for all. We fully support the intention to ‘raise the bar’. It can no longer be acceptable for the flagship qualifications to fail to provide assurances of the literacy and numeracy of those young people passing them. Nor can it be acceptable for less than 60% to be reaching the standard of a “good” pass in GCSEs in mathematics and English. We therefore hope that CCEA will adopt the approach which we have embraced in our developments.

**Getting ahead: our future competitiveness**

It is essential that we take the opportunity through current reforms to ensure that our schoolchildren are being challenged to reach the curriculum standards of their peers in other countries. We must guarantee access to that core knowledge.

Yet there is a greater opportunity as we review Key Stages 4 and 5 to take a global leadership position and empower our young people with the skills and cultural literacy they need truly to excel in relation to international peers. The most successful education systems are now responding to concerns from employers and grappling with the challenge of building capabilities in leadership, team working, initiative, creativity and resilience alongside a culture of academic rigour. PISA too will introduce a new assessment in collaborative problem solving in the 2015.

We cannot afford to choose between ‘context and application’ and ‘knowledge and facts’. Too great a focus on application and context risks leaving young people without the building blocks of knowledge they need to progress and compete. Equally, we must keep pace with the advances being made in countries which already excel in the teaching of knowledge as they turn their attention to teaching and more systematically testing cognitive, interpersonal and intrapersonal skill. This includes planning for inevitable growth in the use of technology in education, and grasping the opportunities this presents for innovation and greater rigour in assessment. If our current reforms are to
provide solutions which endure into the future, they must address both elements.

2. Designing world class qualifications

Agreeing the purpose of qualifications

Pearson has worked with international experts in education to define a framework for the development of new qualifications which address the context above and assure progression to a fulfilling and worthwhile next step over the long term. Our new GCSEs and A level qualifications should uphold internationally benchmarked standards to which all young people passing through our education system are encouraged to aspire and the excellence of which stakeholders understand.

The qualifications therefore must be demanding, rigorous, inclusive, and empowering. They should:

• Specify demanding content to develop higher order knowledge and thinking skills, and set appropriate assessment tasks which are internationally benchmarked and attest to the acquisition and application of the specified knowledge and skills.

• Make a rigorous assessment of students against standards which are well understood and demanded by end users internationally, and ensure that the integrity of this standard is maintained. This includes providing assurances that holders of the qualification are literate and numerate.

By making explicit links in GCSEs to international benchmarks in mathematics, science and English, as Germany has done, we can understand our progress against our peers. This is vital, because it is on this global stage that our young people will be required to perform.

• Support inclusion by ensuring the curriculum journey towards a new standard is embedded in the prior learning of students taking the new exam, and that the route to reaching the standard is flexible to recognise different abilities – but the standard is never compromised.

Whilst maintaining rigour, we must also avoid capping aspiration, whether through the design of the specification, the form of assessment, the incentives of the accountability system or the structure of teaching in a school.

• Empower young people to access the culture, skills development and capabilities necessary for progression to ambitious next steps.

3. Implications for design

Tiering

At GCSE, tiering risks being a cap on aspiration and for that reason undermines inclusion. Some learners may be denied access to higher grades, others may not be stretched with more demanding content. In England, the impact of tiering is intensified by the accountability system, which misaligns the incentive for schools and the highest ambitions for students.

We do not think that tiering in its current form remains fit for the purpose, given the consistently high demands placed on all individuals entering the labour market in a 21st Century knowledge economy. Students should not be given differing expectations on the minimum standard they are prepared for, nor the maximum they can reach.

However, in order to meet requirements for access and differentiation, students might be offered differing routes to it. In some subjects the range of content and possible demand is very great, and we support exploring other options to enable differentiation. For example we have been impressed by the different “streams” of secondary education in Singapore, which ensure equal access to the full curriculum for all students, but adjust the pace at which it is approached.

Implementing a model such as this would mean the option of a longer (or shorter) trajectory to achievement in the reformed Key Stage 4, which would need to be accompanied by the right adaptations to school performance measures, which currently reward achievement only at or before age 16.
Standards
All ‘pass’ grades in the new qualifications at KS4 should represent a core standard which is needed to support progression to the next stage of learning or, in the case of English and Mathematics, a level of numeracy or literacy needed for further learning and eventual employment.

It is vital that we develop ambitious, benchmarked standards at both GCSE and A level that we can be confident in should pass rates increase - that is, we want to be sure that increases in pass rates represent genuine improvement, not “grade inflation”. To achieve this requires a greater use of psychometrics than is currently the case.

This is preferable to reverting to a norm referenced approach which would cap achievement and would not enable ongoing tracking against international standards. In order to continue to raise standards over the longer term and avoid “inertia”, we think it important to recalibrate periodically the benchmarks we set, referencing international improvements.

Formative assessment testing could be used to help support identification of need for further support or grant access to accelerated routes for able pupils.

Assessment
It is vital that the standard of assessment is well understood, relevant and rigorous – all assessments used must meet these criteria. The role of the externally set and marked written examination is crucial to this. However there are many other useful means of assessing students which may have greater validity in testing some curriculum areas. These may be externally assessed or school based.

Capabilities needed for higher academic study and to support employability may not be well served solely by an examination-based methodology. For example, in the progression to university dissertation may require longer term work on a project, practical skills in lab work may need to be developed and tested for certain apprenticeships, and oral work in modern foreign languages or English may need to be tested over a period of time, rather than in one sitting.

External marking methodologies should be used wherever possible. In some instances this may be logistically too complex or costly to pursue and here high levels of moderation and quality assurance must be very robust.

In the future the use of technology should enable content which is currently internally assessed could be assessed externally, albeit over time and with investment. There is a powerful case for moving in that direction through investment and innovation from awarding organisations, and this is happening in North America.

Assessments of broader skills like leadership, collaboration and resilience are important but should be viewed as additive rather than instead of assessments of core knowledge – that is, achievement in these skills should not be compensatory for failure to achieve on other assessment methodologies in the award of grades. However, these may be more appropriately developed and assessed through the incorporation of high quality vocational qualifications into the Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 curricula.
Review of GCSE and GCE Qualifications

Dear Richard,

As discussed with Gavin Boyd, I had agreed to provide, in writing, the position of Queen's University Belfast on the above Review. Summarised below are a number of key points which I trust will inform your discussions around this important issue.

1. In the context of reforms proposed by Westminster, it is important that school leavers in Northern Ireland are not put at a disadvantage because of lack of compatibility of Northern Ireland qualifications. For example, if multiple re-sits are reduced by English Exam Boards, but not by the CCEA Board, this could mean that some Northern Ireland students who have taken repeated attempts at an A-level face problems when applying to English universities.

2. We view A-levels as broadly fit for purpose. However, we do have some concerns in a number of areas, particularly in relation to the increased number of re-sits and the current assessment of A-levels. We would also like to make some points about the comparability between subjects.

3. The ability to re-sit modules multiple times can mean that valuable time during the A-level course is consumed by preparation for and taking assessments rather than extending or consolidating learning. There have been suggestions that experience of re-sitting modules multiple times also affects new undergraduates' attitudes to assessments, as they are unfamiliar with the concept that an exam cannot be retaken to achieve a higher mark.

4. We have some concerns that A-level assessments do not always assess all elements of a specification equally, reducing the likelihood of some elements being taught or practised frequently. There have also been suggestions that mark schemes lead to teaching focused on the 'right' way to answer a question and therefore how to pass the test itself, that assessments do not require enough extended writing, and that there are not enough more complex and multi-step questions.

5. Whilst subject content is not our biggest concern overall, we do have some specific problems in relation to the content of some subjects. There are a number of issues with the content of A-level Mathematics in particular, and the extent to which this prepares students for undergraduate study at our universities, both in Mathematics and in related disciplines. Similarly we have some concerns about the science subjects, and in particular the mathematical content of these.

RHM

Fax 028 9097 5397 www.qub.ac.uk
6. The issue of comparability between subjects can present some challenges for us. While we accept a very wide range of A levels and other qualifications for entry to our courses, it is the case that some A levels do not prepare students as well for undergraduate study in certain courses at our university as others. For example an A level in ICT is not comparable to an A level in Maths which is key preparation for entry to undergraduate courses in Computing and other Sciences.

7. The relative difficulty of achieving the highest grades in different subjects can mean that some students, if they do not have access to good advice, make less appropriate subject choices. We have concerns that students make A level choices on the basis of the likelihood of achieving a high grade, rather than the actual subject content and the future opportunities to be afforded by given subjects.

8. In relation to the A3-level qualification, we believe that the opportunity for students to take an additional smaller qualification in a contrasting subject alongside their main A-level subjects adds valuable breadth and flexibility to their learning programme, and can encourage take-up of strategically important subjects.

9. On the issue of modularity, it is fair to say that there are differing views in this university on modularity and it is probably the case that not one size fits all. There may be better reason for modularity in some subjects than others. However it is important that a modular structure is not used in a way that encourages students to learn and then forget each element of the course rather than retain that knowledge and relate it to other elements of the subject. The assessment of modules should follow the principles set out under 4 above.

I trust that this is helpful and if the University can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact either myself or Professor Ellen Douglas-Cowie, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education and Students.

Your sincerely,

[Signature]

Professor Sir Peter Gregson
President and Vice-Chancellor
Dear

I write in response to the current review of GCSE and A Level qualifications currently being undertaken by CCEA on behalf of the Department for Education.

Signature is a recognised awarding body offering nationally accredited qualifications that cover the whole range of languages and communication methods used by deaf and deafblind people. Amongst our suite are qualifications at Levels 1, 2, 3 and 6 in British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) Our qualifications are also mapped on the National Framework of Qualifications in Ireland.

At a UK level, we are currently working with the Department for Education at Westminster to develop a GCSE in BSL to be offered in secondary schools across England and Wales. We are also beginning discussions with the Scottish Qualifications Authority about a Standard Grade in BSL being made available as a community language in schools in Scotland.

Offering BSL and ISL as a language option in post primary schools in Northern Ireland would help to break down the communication barriers faced by Deaf pupils. It would also allow Deaf pupils to achieve a GCSE in their first language.

There may be up to 5,000 British Sign Language users across Northern Ireland, and a GCSE in BSL or ISL would begin to address their social exclusion.

This is outlined in the Department of Education strategy ‘Languages for the Future’ launched last Autumn which recommended that opportunities for pupils to learn sign languages should be provided (Recommended Action 3.2)

We would like this to be considered as an option within the current review and would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss this.

Kind regards

Pam Tilson
Communications Manager
CCEA - Consultation on GCSE & GCE Qualifications.
Response from Ulster Teachers’ Union (UTU).

1. The Ulster Teachers’ Union (UTU) represents approximately 6,500 members of the teaching profession including principals, vice-principals, teachers and trainee teachers. UTU members are employed in all five area boards, across all the sectors in nursery, primary, post-primary (including grammar schools) and special schools.

GCSE

2. GCSE - Proposal 1 – Retain GCSEs in line with the policy direction in England. The UTU are totally opposed to this proposal. This would be a step backwards. Universities and other higher level courses are assessed in a modular system so pupils should experience modular preparation. The modular system also promotes a continuous work ethic over two years.

3. GCSE – Proposal 2 - Retain GCSEs with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies, and the N. Ireland economy. The Ulster Teachers’ Union support this option. It is the feeling that cross-curricular and other skills do not need to be assessed at this level. The UTU also feel that a combination of modular and linear assessment to suit individual subjects is the best way forward. The Welsh and N. Ireland economies have similarities and it would be beneficial to work together and retain GCSEs both general and applied.

4. GCSE - Proposal 3 - The UTU also feel that CCEA should consider and explore the development of new 14-16 qualifications for N.Ireland in line with Wales. By having increased subject choice we can meet the needs of all learners for their future.

5. GCSE - Proposal 4 - Remove the emphasis on high stakes examinations at age 16 - for example externally assessed qualifications in core subjects only and school-based assessment in other subjects. The UTU feel all subjects should be treated the same whether general or applied. School based assessment will have an ill adverse workload on teachers as defined in the workload agreement. Internal assessment is also time consuming and disrupts learning in the classroom. A modular approach removes the emphasis on high stake examination. Pupils can be awarded module marks over the two years in appropriate subjects.

6. We feel that the Education Minister in England should have entered into discussion with his Welsh and Northern Irish counterparts before making any announcements regarding changes. There is also no evidence based research against retaining the modular approach.
16-18 Qualifications

7. **16-18 Qualifications.** UTU feels that the AS qualification should be retained and remain part of the A-level qualifications.

8. We support the Northern Ireland Education Minister’s proposal on GCE where AS would be 40% and A2 would be worth 60%.

9. **Proposal 1: Retain A-levels in line with policy direction in England.** UTU totally reject this proposal. Universities and other higher level courses are assessed in a modular system so pupils should experience modular preparation. The modular system also promotes a continuous work ethic over two years.

10. **Proposal 2: Retain A levels with amendments to reflect the needs of N. Ireland educational policies, and the needs of the N. Ireland economy.** The Ulster Teachers’ Union support this option. It is the feeling that cross-curricular and other skills do not need to be assessed at this level. The UTU also feel that a combination of modular and linear assessment to suit individual subjects is the best way forward. The Welsh and N. Ireland economies have similarities and it would be beneficial to work together and retain GCEs. In order to give breadth to the learners’ experience the development of an AS level or general qualification in skills with appropriate currency value would benefit post-16 pupils.

11. **Proposal 3: Develop new 16-18 qualifications for N. Ireland that retain features of A level qualifications.** It is the UTU’s view that CCEA should explore with the Welsh providers and develop new qualifications to ensure comparability using the National Qualification Framework.

12. At 16-18 there must be breadth of qualifications that include general and applied subjects accessible to all pupils. Pupils have a variety of learning styles and courses must be developed to support the learning needs of all. This infers that a broader approach to assessment is necessary and must be included in the National Qualification Framework.

13. As this has far reaching implications for pupils, our society and world economy, it is important that any changes to our current system are introduced with continued consultation and consideration with the key stakeholders.

**Ulster Teachers’ Union**
94 Malone Road
BELFAST
BT9 5HP
[Office@utu.edu](mailto:Office@utu.edu)

028 90662216
We welcome the opportunity to be contacted if necessary by CCEA.
I have recently taken on some work placement students on various training programmes and my thoughts are that young people leaving school or in further education are not ready for work placement. Their customer service and interpersonal skills are just not there. Whether these are confidence issues or lack of any proper training I feel that they are certainly not up to scratch. This will have an adverse effect on them when they are going for interviews as well. I think it would be a great idea for there to be a module based on customer service and interpersonal skills to help them gain the confidence to slot easily into the workplace.

I hope this feedback helps

Malachy McAleese

Malachy McAleese Cert CII
Branch Manager
Autoline Insurance Group
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Hi,
CBI First steps report may be of relevance to your review of GCSE and A’level qualifications in Northern Ireland.
Thanks

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The CBI's (Confederation of British Industry's) registered address is:
Centre Point, 103 New Oxford Street, London WC1A 1DU
Company number: RC000139
To Whom It May Concern

I have been asked to respond to a survey regarding above by Ballymena Chamber of Commerce. My response as follows:

It is our experience that many young people are not prepared for the workplace:

- They do not understand the importance of doing research
- They are not confident in the interview process
- They do not understand the importance of the information on their cv
- They do not know how to prepare for an interview
- They lack confidence and knowledge in the whole process

Hopefully this is a positive contribution and I do believe that there is a great need for education and industry to work together on this topic in order for real changes and positive outcomes.

KR
Eunice

Eunice Campbell
Regional Manager
Diamond Recruitment Group
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www.diamondrg.com
I am currently a employee of a top ten Pharmaceutical Company. I am a former lecturer in Further Education. I will keep this short and sweet!!! I have many friends teaching in secondary education in N.Ireland. They have a narrow minded, warped, inward looking approach to careers!!! They tell their students that the only way forward is in the Public Sector!! Teachers produce more teachers, nurses, doctors and Civil Servants!! The education system is set up to allow students gain qualifications to access courses for the above.

My wife, a nurse, was involved in interviews for access to degree course at Queens. Applicants for 200+ places topped 2500!!! The private sector is not even seen as viable option....yet many, including myself have seen that it is a fantastic career option, and have afforded opportunities to travel, learn, meet like minded individuals and above all, earn lots of money and be productive.

We must completely redesign our education system to reflect the need to redesign our economy!!

This is not news to the policy makers, but it must be addressed!!

Eugene Reid BSc (Hons)
Health Care Development Manager
To whom it may concern,
In response to your query below,
**What is your experience when recruiting staff? Is our education system fit for purpose? Are young people ready for the workplace?**

As the majority of our recruits are for service positions I am unable to comment extensively on the education system. However, I would point out that the majority of applications we receive from school leavers lack any type of work experience. I feel perhaps more time on interview techniques and skills, and perhaps an extensive work placement as part of their assessment would be beneficial. When I was in sixth form ten years ago, a one week placement was required, this was not formally assessed and the value of it is entirely questionable in my mind.

Even for service positions such as waitresses, we would be unlikely to recruit anyone, age aside, without any form of work experience on their CV. I have also had experiences of young people coming in on spec and stating no work experience, when I delve deeper they may have completed several spells which would warrant as experience, the construction of CV’s and the process of ‘selling’ oneself is also often as issue with school leavers.

I hope this response may assist in some way.

Kind Regards,

Lauren McAteer
Human Resource Officer
Galgorm Resort & Spa
Main Switchboard: +44 (0)28 2588 1001
Website: www.galgorm.com
Please see below for business response as requested by Ballymena chamber of commerce. Our experience of recruiting technical apprentices has shown a great variation in the capabilities and skill levels. Often in schools and educational establishments engineering, or any technical qualifications (electricians, plumbers etc.) are seen as “if you haven’t the brains for academics, get a trade”. This was the same even 5 years ago in the grammar school that I attended. Engineering and similar vocational qualifications are not given the time or respect they deserve and are not attracting the most beneficial and talented candidates. Apprentices in our organisation that have higher qualification backgrounds before beginning the apprenticeship excel, we have one apprentice in particular who has a degree in accountancy and he has a good grasp of the communication, leadership, business management and soft skills required for a business to be successful, this is an area most if not all technical apprentices lack, which down the line creates managers and organisations that are driven solely by technical priority and are not concerned with the multi-faceted needs of an organisation.

It has also been discovered that apprentices and students who do not continue in higher education of some form have little to no experience of the “real world” and little desire or ambition to go beyond what is required of them, this is most unfortunate as the opportunities, salaries, skills etc. available to those who show desire and initiative are great for a competent and successful Engineer, with our company and with others.

Kind Regards
Rachel
Rachel Doherty
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Students should be encouraged to undertake more vocational type subjects particularly for A Level. We need to ensure that our “A” Levels and Education system continue to command respect in Northern Ireland, the UK and through the world. Otherwise we will not attract foreign employers to set up in Northern Ireland. Other boards examinations have had the reputation of being easier in the past than the Northern Ireland Board. We do not want this position reversed. The English Minister is implying that the English “A” levels will become harder and therefore of a higher standard. Is this the Case? Perhaps we need better PR for our system.

Kind regards
Ian Aiken
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Review of GCSEs and A levels
Response from Omagh Chamber of Commerce

1. It is understandable, though disappointing, given the focus of CCEA on academic qualifications that so little is being asked in these questions about vocational qualifications. It remains a blight on our education system that so little value is accorded to this extremely valuable pathway. Many young people are simply provided to age 18 with an academic curriculum and with little or no opportunity to choose alternative routes which can lead to gainful and fulfilling employment. It represents a failure of the two Departments (and CCEA) with an interest in the education of 14+ young people to provide a coherent education policy. This harms not just individuals but the prospects for the wider economy.

2. The answer to the first question is, therefore, that while the academic qualifications meet many of the needs of employers, they almost completely fail to prepare young people for the world of employment outside those jobs requiring academic skills. It could not be argued, for example, that they prepare young people for employment in construction, manufacturing, catering, horticulture/agriculture, transport and logistics, etc. Vocational qualifications which are currently offered by CCEA with no practical dimension and which are being taught largely from books may seem to provide schools with an acceptable vocational dimension to enable them to appear to comply with the minimum requirements of the Entitlement Framework. However, these are of no benefit to students, certainly do not meet the needs of employers, and undermine the very worthwhile objectives which the Entitlement Framework sought to achieve.

3. The answer to the third question is that qualifications other than GCSEs and A-levels receive very little attention and, therefore, there is little public engagement with them. This affects adversely the public view of them.

4. The core skills of literacy, numeracy and IT are key to successful education by the age of 16. Yet so many of our young people by that age have nominal qualifications in these areas without having mastered the basic skills. GCSE English and mathematics in particular do not seem to provide enough young people with the appropriate levels of writing, spelling, grammar, and number.

5. The picture in respect of grades and levels is inconsistent and confusing. How many people know what is meant by a level 2 performance at GCSE?

6. Grades/levels/pass-fail depends to a large extent on the purpose of the qualification. If the purpose is to sort out who goes to university it will require grades/levels/test scores. If the purpose is to determine whether a young person has acquired a skill they are not as important.