Review of GCSE and A levels
Qualifications Issues Paper

CCEA Qualifications Skills and Accreditation
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Introduction

The commission to CCEA to review GCSE\(^1\) and A level\(^2\) qualifications requires CCEA to advise on the appropriateness (or otherwise) of these qualifications and make recommendations for the qualification system in the future.

In arriving at recommendations there will be a need to consider proposals against the requirements of the terms of reference of the review. This will include consideration of the following:

- the balance between the needs of learners and the local economy. This links to some degree to the relationship between education policy in N Ireland with ‘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;
- a qualifications system that can stand up to comparison with qualifications (of a similar nature) offered nationally and internationally.

Leading from these points recommendations will be developed for an improved GCSE and A level system, or a replacement qualifications system, that 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 draft issues paper is for discussion purposes with the expert group and to inform questions for discussion at stakeholder events. The paper is based on the considerations identified in the terms of reference for the review. It is designed to provide background information, to introduce qualifications issues, and to inform discussions during the review. It is not intended to indicate particular opinions nor the direction of travel for recommendations; these will be developed based on the evidence provided through consultations, engagement with stakeholders and consideration of the issues.

The Accreditation team will work with Research and Statistics to ensure that findings from the online consultation and other research activities, along with feedback from the expert group and other stakeholders, inform the continuing development of the issues paper.

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\(^1\) 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.

\(^2\) 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.
1 The Purpose of Qualifications
Qualifications fulfil a range of purposes which can vary depending on the qualification type and qualification assessment mechanisms. Purposes currently being expected of GCSEs and A levels include:

a) providing recognition, i.e. reward learners for their attainment;
b) ensuring standards, i.e. that the achievement of a particular grade ensures specific attainment has been achieved by all learners;
c) allowing for selection within the cohort, i.e. the rank ordering of learners within a qualification so as to allow selection of the higher performing candidates for further study/employment;
d) measuring the education system, i.e. the output of learners in qualifications being used to measure school performance or improvement;
e) a combination of some or all of these?

1.1 Assessment

1.1.1 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 were made in 2012. Further information on GCSEs is available in Appendix I.

GCSEs provide a base for progression, onto Level 3 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 provide a ‘passport’ to employment also. 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 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 16 is the former, the culmination of five years of learning, there should only be a narrow range of GCSE courses aligned with the KS3 and 4 revised curriculum areas of learning (see Appendix V). 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.

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3 There are currently 17 types of qualifications on the Register of Accredited Qualifications, including GCSE and GCE A level, for a full list see http://www2.ofqual.gov.uk/for-awarding-organisations/96-articles/615-qualification-types-

4 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 http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/accreditation/guidance/across_boundaries.asp

5 The EF guarantees all pupils access to a minimum number of courses at Key Stage 4 and post-16, of which at least one third must be general and one third applied. Further information can be found at http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/curriculum-and-learningt-new/curriculum-and-assessment-2/entitlement-framework.htm
GCSEs now serve further purposes. Attainment is reported by schools to the Department of Education. This information is used by the Department, in order to develop targets and strategies for improving standards in education in N Ireland. 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 2.4.1). This information 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.

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. A levels are studied over a two year period with modular assessment delivery. They provide the post-16 academic route taken by approx. 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 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 GCSE. They:
• assess and certify the knowledge, understanding and skills achieved by the learner;
• provide recognition of achievement that can are 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.

The 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

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6 International Comparisons in Senior Secondary Assessment [http://www2.ofqual.gov.uk/downloads/category/96-international-comparability](http://www2.ofqual.gov.uk/downloads/category/96-international-comparability)
demand. The smaller number of subjects typically taken at A level allows each to be the main focus of a student’s study. Elsewhere, courses normally comprise much broader offerings, ranging from 5 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 other countries studied have a system for a population of 4 to 7 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 all systems with more than two compulsory subjects, mathematics is compulsory, for example Finland and France.

A series of themes emerged through the research, which included:
- **Breadth vs 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.
- **Independent study** – the inclusion of independent research, projects and extended essays
- **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 distinctly 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 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 part of the system.
- **Multiple-choice questions can be used to test large amounts of knowledge and assess skills which 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 5/6 years. At the time of re-accreditation opportunities are taken to review/refresh:
- content and ensure alignment with ‘national’ curriculum requirements (GCSE only);
- assessment arrangements, including the balance across Assessment Objectives, and between internal/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 Sample Assessment Materials that are subsequently ‘accredited’ by the Regulators.

For A levels and GCSEs there are currently 2 levels of criteria:
- qualification (setting out the common requirements across all subjects);
- 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 judgmental grade boundaries to ensure 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 so as to be fair to past, current and future candidates. Comparable outcomes means 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 previous years;
- the syllabus and the exams and other assessments are fit for purpose;
- the purpose, requirements and nature of the qualification is 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, there are sometimes changes to the cohort, that is why small differences can emerge from year to year.

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, i.e. 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 2-year period.

The processes AOs are to follow in the awarding of qualifications is set out in the GCSE, A level, principal learning project code of Practice section 67.

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 judgments 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 which covers the largest percentage of their cohort as a whole. At A level, candidates’ prior GCSE attainment is used. At GCSE, two types of predictions are used: KS28 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 cohort’s corresponding attainment at KS2 allows them to produce a model of the relationship they could use to predict outcomes in year x.

8 Foundation and Key Stages 1-4 provide for the statutory curriculum at pre-school (Foundation), Key Stage 1 for P1-3, Key Stage 2 for P4-7, Key Stage 3 for secondary years 8-10 and Key Stage 4 for secondary years 11-12, further information can be found at http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk
KS2 tests are not taken in Wales and N Ireland, therefore common centres is 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 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 there is 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 underway in England the qualifications regulators now engage in parallel decision-making, i.e. 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\(^9\). 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 re-sit 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\(^10\) 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 have not prohibited AOs from including it in the specifications being taken by candidates in Wales.

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\(^10\) 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 re-sit of each unit of assessment.
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. Wales have recommended retaining AS as part of A level and the Department is currently consulting on this issue in N. Ireland.

Recent announcements in England on future reforms of GCSEs include: confirming linearity; removing tiering; minimum use of exam aids and internal assessment; more extended writing; possible extension papers offering access to higher grades alongside a common core. ‘New GCSEs’ in ‘the core academic subjects of English, maths, 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.

1.3.2 Wales
The Welsh Government has just completed a fundamental review of ‘14-19 qualifications in Wales’ and recommendations from this are currently under consideration by the Welsh Education Minister. 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.

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 which 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, and often for entrance to higher education specifically English and mathematics 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 5 GCSEs at grade C or above will be required to access post 16 provision, i.e. 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 & Higher Education (FHE) - FHE offer a range of Level 2 and 3 programs requiring GCSEs (or equivalent) as entry requirements. Commonly 4 or 5 GCSEs at grade C or above will be required to access Level 3 Programs and 2 GCSEs at grade G or above to access Level 2 programs. Entry requirements to FHE Higher Education programs (Level 4 and above) will often specify 2 A level passes in addition to 5 GCSEs including English and mathematics.
- Progression to Training - Access to training programs at levels 1 to 3 will often depend on the achievement of vocational qualifications. GCSEs will provide access to higher levels on these programs. A learner with less than 4 or 5 GCSEs at grade C or above will often be given access to levels 1 or 2, or a learner with 5 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 5. 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 is 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 major implications on 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, as against 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) and 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, i.e. the ability the use these qualifications for progression outside Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, is accommodated through collaboration on National Qualification 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 in 2007, and is structured under;

- Areas of Learning;
- Religious Education;
- Cross-curricular Skills: Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT;
- Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities.

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 in 2013 and Using ICT in 2014. In addition, there is an emphasis on Assessment for Learning including self and peer 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 concentrate on the delivery of the content of the qualifications which can result in repetition of learning from the KS3 curriculum.

11 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 http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/docs/assessment_for_learning/AfL_A%20Practical%20Guide.pdf
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\(^{12}\) methodologies;
• meeting the needs of the statutory curriculum;
• taking opportunities for the inclusion and assessment of other skills, and;
• ensuring that the development is taken forward by current and informed practitioners.

3 Skills Development within 14-19 Education

The N 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, creativity, 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 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.

Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities are also required at KS4. These skills are required to be delivered through the Areas of Learning and are reported on, usually through the annual report for learners. 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.

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 GCSE 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 portfolio only and is marked internally.

\(^{12}\) Formative assessment is about assessment for learning throughout a course as opposed to summative where assessment is of learning at a particular point
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 Levels 1- 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 these/parts of these skills, such as the CoPE (Certificate of Personal Effectiveness - Level 3) qualification taken at mostly 16-19. 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 which enables them to progress either to further study, training or employment. The achievement of a Level 2 qualification in Communication and Mathematics for the majority of 16 year olds will come through GCSE English and Mathematics. 59.5%\(^{13}\) of those taking GCSE English and Mathematics achieve Grade C or above in both\(^{14}\). This will allow them to access Post-16 study, employment or training requiring these qualifications for entry. It is unlikely therefore 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 rather than qualifications. Some of


\(^{14}\) 68.2% Grade C or above in GCSE English and 62.9% Grade C or above in GCSE Mathematics, 2012
these skills include; communication, teamwork, showing initiative and flexibility, interpersonal and organisational skills. More recent research has recorded that there is a greater emphasis on soft skills (e.g. 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 which 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 they value foreign language skills.

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 progress 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.

17 69.2% from year 12 (in 2011/12) stayed on in school to year 13 (in 2012/13), DE
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.

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 to 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 which facilitates 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 for a learner that recognises their achievements, based on their rank order in assessments. Assessments are generally a mix 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 other 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 including 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 Education Needs (SEN). 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 onto 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 2 year course but final recognition of achievement does not take place until the full course is competed at the end of the 2 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 2 years to achieve might take another learner 3 or 4 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\(^{18}\), and could access qualifications earlier than at the end of 2 years. There are currently non GCSE/A level qualifications that facilitate learners being assessed when ready.

### 4.4 Other qualifications taken by 14-16 and 17-19 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 GCSEs and 20% taken at GCE are other than A levels\(^{19}\), 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 Northern Ireland 14-19 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 focussed offering flexibility of choice of qualification size, level, units, assessment methods and availability of assessment.

The EF policy encourages a breath 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 1/3 of which are ‘applied’\(^{20}\) 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\(^{21}\). Smaller qualifications that do not qualify for the EF are taken by 14-19 pupils in schools as enrichment, and are increasingly being used to recognise the achievement of learners with SEN.

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\(^{18}\) An Accelerated Learning Programme is an educational system which allows academically able or gifted children to progress more rapidly through school

\(^{19}\) 76,904 qualifications other than GCSE are taken at Key Stage 4 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)

\(^{20}\) An applied course is one in which subject knowledge, understanding and skills are developed in relation to a work context - [http://www.deni.gov.uk/2005_18-entitlement_framework-initial_guidance.pdf](http://www.deni.gov.uk/2005_18-entitlement_framework-initial_guidance.pdf)

(OS) was taken by approximately 9000 learners in 2011/12, mostly by pupils in secondary schools and a lesser number in SEN contexts or for enrichment in post 16 Grammar schools. It was introduced in 2004 as an alternative work-related (Other General) Level 1/2 qualification at KS4, based on continuous internal assessment of learners carrying out and evaluating practical tasks. This alternative qualification provision has been evaluated as providing high levels of motivation for pupils and has been well received by teachers/lecturers and school managers²².

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, were 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 qualifications at 14-19. 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 5 GCSEs at grade C or above. Pupils use these qualifications to support their progression pathways to a range of post 16 learning contexts, for example;

- Level 2 Award/Certificate/Diploma/Extended Diplomas are used in conjunction with GCSEs/other qualifications or stand alone 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 14-19 schools contexts. A variety of evaluations carried out for other qualifications used in 14-19 contexts, show very high levels of motivation for pupils taking the qualifications, and high satisfaction rates for teachers/lecturers delivering the qualifications and by school managers.²³ These qualifications are providing valuable alternatives to GCSE/A Levels for a range of learners, which encourage engagement at school/further education college and result 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 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. Other issues for consideration may arise from the analysis of the quantitative data from the online survey. These will be added below as appropriate.

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?
Appendix I: GCSEs

Background
Prior to the introduction of GCSE qualifications 16 year olds studied for either Ordinary Levels (OLs), the 'academic' qualification, or the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) which had a more vocational/skills base. The CSE qualification had different forms of assessment ranging from external papers (Mode 1) - similar to the Ordinary Levels - to internally marked by teachers (Mode 3). The outcomes of OLs and CSEs were linked; Grade 1 in CSE was deemed equivalent to an OL Grade C.

GCSE courses in were introduced in 1986, and were an inclusive qualification covering levels 1 and 2 on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). They had a 7-point grading system: A-G\(^{24}\) designed to accommodate both the OL and CSE candidature, thereby catering for around 90% of the 16 year old cohort. Grades A to C indicated Level 2 achievement, with grades D to G Level 1 achievement. Initially all GCSE assessments were linear, with the added dimension of coursework (teacher-assessed) components. Some GCSEs were tiered to allow for greater access to assessment for all learners; foundation tier offers access to grades C to G and higher tier offers access to A* to D. Un-tiered GCSEs offer access to the entire grade range. The requirements for the GCSEs were summed up in GCSE National Criteria (1986):

‘All examinations must be designed in such a way as to ensure proper discrimination so that candidates across the ability range are given opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge, abilities and achievement – that is, to show what they know, understand and can do’

Perceptions of Users
GCSEs are available in over 50 subjects and more than 6.5 million are awarded each year in E/W/NI; most are taken in England (90%) compared to 4% taken here. The GCSE ‘brand’ has a strong recognition factor and GCSE qualifications carry with them assurances of quality and standards. Detailed rules and regulations currently form the basis of GCSE development.

GCSEs are taken by over 90% of young people at age 16 in N Ireland and cater for a wide range of ability. They are used for learner progression. With the emphasis in N Ireland on school improvement and its measurement according to the achievement of five GCSEs, including English and Mathematics, at A*-C Grades, it is currently important that all young people have access to GCSE qualifications.

The GCSE qualification is unique in covering two levels within the NQF. It was anticipated that, with proper differentiation within the assessment arrangements, the qualification would meet the needs of a large majority of the 14-16 school population. The top 5-6% of candidates achieve grade A* with around a third of pupils getting grades D to G. Often the users of qualifications, particularly employers, see GCSEs as having ‘currency’ only if the achievement is at Level 2 (i.e. Grade C or above). School performance is based on the grades A* to C. Grades D – G represent positive achievements for the learner achieving these grades however they provide a limited ‘passport’ to further learning and/or employment.

\(^{24}\) Now an 8 point grade range A* to G
Relevance in the 21st century

A 16 year old may attain a number of GCSE certificates, up to 11/12 in some cases. This raises the question as to whether these should all relate to subject disciplines. A definition of the GCSE qualifications stated that they ‘mainly involve study of the theory of a subject, combined with some investigative work and/or, in the case of an ‘applied’ subjects, study of related broad areas of work, such as engineering or tourism’. This definition allowed the introduction of a broader range of GCSE criteria and to accommodate this broader agenda GCSE titles expanded considerably over the past 10 years to include a range of new subject areas including ‘applied’ subjects which previously had been covered by vocational qualifications.

The issue of ‘meeting needs’ is closely related young people’s motivation and aspirations. Research undertaken by CCEA in developing the revised curriculum showed that, even within the traditional curriculum subjects, young people wanted to understand the relationship of the GCSEs they were studying to the ‘real’ world.

Nature of assessment.

Most GCSE qualifications have an element of internal assessment (previously know as coursework, but now referred to as controlled assessment). This is to accommodate some aspects, particularly skills, of the subject that are not easily assessed using external written tests. The weighting of internal assessment varies with the nature of the subject and is either 60%, 25% or 0%.

Formally GCSE internal assessment was through coursework. Following preparation with the teacher, candidates could complete the task outside school with access to resources as available. Work could be redrafted. While teachers work with candidates in preparation for controlled assessment tasks, candidates must generally complete the work individually, under timed and controlled conditions in their school or college, with limited access to resources. Once the task is completed in the time allocated it cannot be reworked by the candidate. The piece is then marked by teachers using mark grids provided by the AOs.

In August 2012, the AOs in E/W/Ni combined issued 5,638,240 GCSE results. This figure includes:

- 5,225,288 GCSE Full Courses [NI: 171,354 (down 7,000 entries from 2011)]
- 371,352 GCSE Short Courses [NI: 6,953]
- 41,600 GCSE Double Award [NI: 7,965]

The qualifications with the largest numbers of entries were:

- GCSE Mathematics, with 675,789 entries [NI: 24,498 (down 2078 from 2011)]; and,
- GCSE English, with 669,534 entries [NI: 22,207 (down 1679 from 2011)].
Appendix II: A levels

Background
Prior to A levels students studied for the Senior/Higher School Certificate which required students to study a range of subjects. In the 1950s it was noted that students were failing the qualification due to poor performance in a single subject and the decision was taken to develop qualifications that assessed students in single subjects. These A Level (Advanced Level) qualifications could be taken by students on a subject by subject basis, according to their strengths and interests.

Initial A level grading was pass or fail, however, as the number of students taking the exam increased, greater differentiation of achievement was needed. Grading was introduced and was norm-referenced, for example the top 10% achieved a grade A, the following 15% a grade B and so on. Candidates falling between the 10th and 30th percentiles were awarded an Ordinary Level pass which indicated a performance equivalent to at least an OL grade C. Performance below that was judged a fail.

This was reviewed in the 1980s to take into account the larger number of students staying on at school. Subsequently, a system that fixed specific performance criteria for grades A and E (known as the judgmental grade boundaries), and then divided out the other grades accordingly, was introduced. Rather than awarding an Ordinary Level for the lowest pass, a new "N" grade was introduced.

Curriculum 2000
In 2000 A levels were modularised into Advanced subsidiary (AS) and A2. The AS is a stand-alone qualification and is worth half a full A level. The material studied in an AS is less demanding than in the A2. The A2 is the second half of the full A level qualification, it is not a qualification in its own right. Its completion is required following AS, to achieve the full A level. The 'N' grade was replaced by 'U' - ungraded.

Most modules are assessed by examination, but some are assessed internally. Prior to the 2008 revision of the AS/A2 structure, the majority of A levels contained six modules. Currently the majority of A levels have four units: 2 AS and 2 A2. The A* grade was introduced in 2008 for university entry in 2010. A* is awarded to candidates who achieve an A in the qualification overall, and 90% of the uniform marks available at A2. There is no A* grade at AS or unit level.

An Applied GCE A level suite has followed from VCE A levels, with a more employment-related and practical focus.

Raw and uniform marks
When assessments are marked, the mark given by the examiner, or the teacher for internal assessment, is known as the raw mark. Raw marks are converted to uniform marks for modular specifications.

Modular specifications allow candidates to take their unit assessments in different examination series. These assessments can vary slightly in the level of demand from series to series. Where this happens, the raw marks chosen as the grade boundaries for a January unit may
be slightly different from those set for the corresponding summer unit although they will represent the same level of achievement. It would not be fair that, for work representing the same level of achievement, candidates in one assessment series have more raw marks to use towards their final AS or A level result, than those in another. The uniform mark scale (ums) is used to smooth out the small variations in assessment demand. It ensures that work representing the same level of achievement, produced in different examination series, ends up with the same (uniform) mark to contribute to the final AS or A level result. It allows a fair aggregation of the results of different assessments taken in different series and allows an overall grade to be calculated by aggregation of the total uniform mark.

Table 1 shows the ums grade boundaries for an A level subject with 400 uniform marks available. In a given unit, for example, the A boundary could be set at 72 raw marks in summer 2010. In a slightly more demanding paper in that unit in January 2011, 70 raw marks could represent the same level of achievement and be set as the boundary. In both cases the raw mark chosen for the A grade boundary would be mapped on to 80% of the ums available for the unit. The ums mark is what will be used when the candidates marks are being aggregated for the overall grade awarded in the subject.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Uniform Mark</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maximum UMS</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A*</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In August 2012, the AOs in E/W/NI combined issued 2,308,527 GCE results. This figure includes:
- 861,819 results for GCE A level [NI: 32,908]
- 1,350,345 results for GCE AS [NI: 44,486]
- 6,636 results for Applied GCE double award A-level
- 32,447 results for the Applied GCE single award A-level
- 7,113 results for Applied GCE double award AS
- 50,167 results for the Applied GCE single award AS
Appendix III: England

Post 16
Policy in England is impacting upon:

- who decides on the GCE content (current Government thinking is for HE to lead, working with Awarding Organisations; Regulators/Government role more limited);
- removal of subject criteria and development of GCE qualification criteria to ensure standards and comparability how GCE qualification level criteria can/will ensure standards and comparability;
- whether there should continue to be unitised assessment - and if so, the scope of the unitisation;
- the future of current GCE titles that may not attract HE sign-off; and

The Secretary of State in England has indicated that he wants to engage Higher Education (HE) in A level reform. In his view HE are, in particular ‘our best, research intensive universities such as those represented by the Russell group’, and should have a far greater involvement in the design and development of A levels than is the case at present ‘University ownership of the exams must be real and committed’.

In a letter to Ofqual Michael Gove made the following points:
- the purpose of A level qualifications is to prepare young people for further study at university;
- current A levels ‘fall short’ of commanding the levels of confidence he would want;
- universities should have a particular role in determining subject content;
- awarding organisations should work with universities to develop qualifications without the constraints of centrally determined (universal) criteria;
- development of A levels should not be constrained by any concept of comparability across all subjects;
- there is an acknowledgement of the diverse nature of Level 3 qualifications and that different universities have different requirements;
- Ofqual’s role should be to establish a system that engages universities in the ongoing development of the core ‘design’ rules needed to secure standards within an A level subject - reference is made to assessment, grading and monitoring;
- Government in England will step back from involvement in deciding A level content; and
- reference is made to the modular structure of A levels; Secretary of State wanted to hear views of on modularity/resits, particularly on the current AS/A2 division. [This decision has subsequently been taken, see section 3.1]

The letter indicated that, following discussions with AOs, the teaching of the new A levels could start from September 2014.

The response from Ofqual made the following points:
- there is agreement on universities having a larger role in development of A levels and design rules being kept to a minimum;
- consultation will be held with HE, schools and colleges ‘to get the detail right’ (consultation from June 2012);
- A levels being ‘fit for purpose’ means getting four things right; content; teaching; assessment and level of demand;
- university support and sign up will be required for the content of each new A level;
- there will be consultation on assessment arrangements, including modular assessment and re-sits;
- once new A levels are in place Ofqual will check that level(s) of demand is maintained;
- Ofqual will work, as far as possible, with CCEA and Welsh Government;
- Ofqual agree that, with full commitment by all stakeholders, starting date of September 2014 is possible at least for some A levels.

Ofqual consulted on the future of A levels. This closed in September 2012. The consultation set out proposals for the structure of A levels and what conditions they would put in place in England to ensure exam boards appropriately involved HE in future A level design. The responses to the consultation are currently being analysed.

A copy of the consultation document can be accessed here [http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/a-level-reform/](http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/a-level-reform/)

**GCSE**

Initial proposals in England were that GCSEs in ‘core’ subjects were to be replaced by English Baccalaureate Certificates (EBCs). This has subsequently been reviewed and an announcement has been made by the Secretary of State that GCSEs will remain but be reviewed in the core subjects (see section 1.3.1). As further detail of these proposals emerge the paper will be updated accordingly.
Appendix IV: Wales

The Welsh Government commissioned a review of 14-19 qualifications in Wales. This Review was led by an independent group which reported its recommendations to the Minister in November 2012. The Government in Wales is responded in January 2013 broadly accepting all of the review’s recommendations.

http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/qualificationsinwales/revofqualen/?lang=en

Main points

The review supports a qualifications system that meets the needs of learners in Wales; including divergence form other parts of the UK system where appropriate. It recognised that a large portion of the qualifications offered/available in Wales may continue to be shared with England (and Northern Ireland) assuming GCSEs and A levels are retained in a similar form in these jurisdictions. It noted that there is scope to work toward alignment with Scotland, and Europe but the starting point must be what is best for Welsh learners and the Welsh economy.

The review wants to build on the well-established Baccalaureate system already operating in Wales. Reference is made to the Welsh Baccalaureate (WB) providing:
- subject-specific core knowledge and understanding; and
- wider knowledge and skills required for life and work.

It notes that the WB can provide a framework to support vocational and academic pathways for progression across 14-19 education. It is to be encouraged for universal adoption by centres. The WB is also seen as basis for measuring the performance of learners and providers in Wales.

Portability of qualifications taken in Wales is recognised as critical. The importance of comparability is emphasised and the need for international bench-marking and verification of standards. There is strong support for retaining and strengthening GCSE and A level qualifications. For vocational qualification the basis must be robust, and include valid, appropriate and proportionate assessment.

The qualifications system in Wales needs to support improved levels of literacy and numeracy. New GCSEs that assess ‘literacy’ and ‘numeracy’ should be developed to replace ES (Wales). There is a need for improvement in the content and assessment of ES (Wales) and the wider Key Skills qualifications.

A new and stronger approach should be taken to regulation. Ministers will continue to determine strategic policy but regulatory decisions would be separate from Government and will necessitate the establishment of a new body: Qualifications Wales. This single body should be established to:
- regulate;
- develop and award most qualifications for 14-16 years and most general qualifications for 16-19 year olds general qualifications; and
- approve and assure the quality of qualifications (up to Level 3).
Recommendations

- Wales should consider divergence from other parts of the UK where this is in the interests of learners in Wales.
- Comparability should be supported by scrutiny programmes; benchmarking and independent verification of standards.
- A single body (Qualifications Wales) should be established with responsibility for regulation of qualifications in Wales. In time, this body should be responsible for developing and awarding most qualifications taken by 14-19 year olds.
- A revised and more rigorous WB model should be at the heart of 14-19 qualifications, it should be introduced from September 2015. WB should be available across Foundation to Post-16 (Level 3). The main work needed is on assessment of skills, with grading of WB to be considered.
- WB will be used for performance measures for learners in Wales across Levels 1, 2, and 3.
- Providers of qualifications should work with employers more effectively to support work-related, skills-based and enterprise education. This would be linked to WB development.
- GCSEs in English and Mathematics should be reviewed to ensure a greater focus on literary and numeracy, to include:
  - progression from levels of attainment at the end of Key Stage 3;
  - more emphasis on quality and accuracy of writing and core writing skills, including spelling, punctuation and grammar;
  - predominantly externally assessed;
  - two new mathematics GCSEs should be developed (from 2015 – first teaching). One would focus on numeracy and the other on aspects of mathematics techniques. The ‘numeracy’ GCSE should be linked to the levels of achievement at the end of KS3. These new GCSEs would replace Essential Skills (ES).
- GCSEs should be retained as the main Level 1 and 2 qualifications for 14-16 year olds. Consideration should be given to the need for qualifications other than GCSEs. There should only be limited internal assessment, and tiering; unitisation should continue; questions should be real-life contextualised; grading should be reviewed in due course.
- A levels should be retained as the main Level 3 qualifications for 16-19 year olds. Ensuring the comparability of A levels taken in Wales is important. There is a need to encourage employers/HE to be appropriately involved in A level development/review. AS should be retained as part of the overall A level with one resit per unit rule.
- There is to be an exploration of a programme-based approach that engages learners working at entry level. Disengaged young people should have access to personalised packages of learning. These should consist of regulated qualifications/units, and a core of literacy and numeracy. There is a need for recognised progression routes for SEN learners.
- ES (Wales) assessment should be reviewed to make it more robust. Wider skills qualifications should be reviewed.
- Vocational qualifications should be treated on a par with GCSEs. WB should include up to 40% of vocational qualifications as the external element of the qualification. For 16-19, 100% vocational supporting qualifications will be allowed.
- There should be the adoption of the European Convention for classification of Vocational Qualifications – Initial Vocational Education and Training. (IVET) and Continuing Education and Training (CVET). For 14-16 IVETs should be only vocational qualifications available.
• With the introduction of Qualification Wales there is the opportunity to have a new and stronger ‘gatekeeper’ for the accreditation and approval of all qualification for use by 14-16 and 16-19 year old in Wales. Detailed criteria for these qualifications are outlined in the report and are similar to those set out in the Wolf report in England.
• Data across all education levels should be better linked to enable progression and value added to be measured. This should be supported by the wider use of the Unique Learner Numbers (ULN) system.
Appendix V: Overview of KS3 Northern Ireland Curriculum and Assessment

The Northern Ireland Revised Curriculum became statutory in September 2007. The Curriculum is structured in a similar way throughout the four Key Stages.

Table 2 Curriculum Content and Structure from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foundation stage: Yrs 1 &amp; 2</th>
<th>Key Stage 1: Yrs 3 &amp; 4</th>
<th>Key Stage 3: Yrs 8 to 10 [ages 11-13]</th>
<th>Key Stage 4: Yrs 11 &amp; 12 [ages 14-16]</th>
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Rationale and Detail, and 'Big Picture' of the KS3 Curriculum
Appendix VI: Qualifications Frameworks

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) links different countries’ qualifications frameworks together. It makes qualifications levels easier to understand across different countries and can help compare qualifications with those of other countries.

The EQF uses eight levels that are based on the knowledge, skills and competence required to achieve the qualifications. Each level should be achievable through a variety of educational paths. The focus is on learning outcomes – what a person holding a particular qualification actually knows and is able to do. It applies to all types of qualifications within the different education systems from those achieved at schools to academic, profession or vocational qualifications.

The Qualifications Across Boundaries leaflet shows how the levels in each system in the UK translate to levels in the EQF.

http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/compare/ie/uk-en_i_en.htm#comparison