



Regulation

A Guide to
GCSEs
and
A Levels
in Northern Ireland



A Guide to GCSEs and A Levels in Northern Ireland

A guide for universities and colleges

CCEA Regulation, the qualifications regulator in Northern Ireland, has produced this guide to clarify the availability of GCSEs and A levels from different awarding organisations here.

There is an open qualifications market in Northern Ireland. This means that schools are free to offer A levels and GCSEs from AQA, CCEA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC, as long as the qualifications comply with Northern Ireland Department of Education (DE) policy. All awarding organisations wishing to offer qualifications in Northern Ireland have to meet CCEA Regulation's Criteria of Recognition and [General Conditions of Recognition](#). Those that offer GCSEs and A levels must also meet the [Northern Ireland GCE and GCSE Qualifications Criteria](#).

Qualifications Reform

GCSEs and A levels in Northern Ireland, England and Wales have changed in recent years. The regulators in the three countries have overseen these changes – CCEA Regulation, Ofqual in England, and Qualifications Wales. Throughout the changes, the three regulators' aim is that the qualifications retain the same value for those who take and rely on them, regardless of the qualification taken.

The changes mean that there are now some differences between the countries, such as in GCSE grading and the relationship between AS qualifications and A levels. However, all GCSEs and A levels continue to share important features. They remain of the same size and equally recognise the achievements of the same cohort of students. Those that rely on the qualifications can still make broad comparisons between them, for example when applying for work or to higher education.

You can access a joint statement on the changes at <http://ccea.org.uk/regulation/qualsni>

A levels available in Northern Ireland

CCEA Regulation accredits A levels offered by CCEA Awarding Organisation (CCEA). A levels accredited by Ofqual in England and Qualifications Wales are also available in Northern Ireland, as long as they comply with educational policy set by DE; this affects the choice of A level science qualifications available to schools here.

The open qualifications market means that applicants to university may have a mixture of A levels offered by AQA, CCEA, OCR, Pearson, WJEC and WJEC (Eduqas).

There are common features to all the A levels offered in Northern Ireland, England and Wales. These are:

- a common grading scale (A*–E for A levels and A–E for AS levels);
- broadly similar content requirements in most subjects;
- broadly similar assessment objectives and weightings; and
- the amount of content in the AS qualifications (approximately half that of the A levels).

The A levels offered by CCEA and WJEC have the following features:

- A levels are unitised, with AS and A2 units available in the summer series.
- AS levels contribute 40% to the overall A level.

The A levels offered by AQA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC (Eduqas) have the following features:

- All qualifications are linear, meaning students take all examinations at the end of the course.
- AS and A levels are de-coupled, which means AS levels make no contribution to the overall A level grade.

Science A levels

It is DE policy that schools must offer only those A level science qualifications where marks for the assessment of practical skills contribute to the overall grade. This means that schools in Northern Ireland may offer only CCEA or WJEC A level science qualifications.

GCSEs available in Northern Ireland

CCEA Regulation accredits GCSEs offered by CCEA Awarding Organisation (CCEA). GCSEs accredited by Ofqual in England are also available in Northern Ireland, as long as they comply with educational policy set by DE; this affects the choice of GCSE English Language qualifications available to schools here.

The open qualifications market means that applicants to university may have a mixture of GCSEs offered by AQA, CCEA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC (Eduqas). (Since September 2017, WJEC GCSEs have not been available to schools in Northern Ireland.)

All of the reformed GCSEs offered in the three countries are of approximately the same size and accessible to the same range of students as the qualifications they replace.

The GCSEs offered by CCEA have the following features:

- Some GCSEs are linear and some are unitised.
- Some units are available in the January series (English Language and Mathematics), and some are available in the November and March series (science units).
- GCSEs are graded A*–G and include, from summer 2019, a new C* grade and a realigned A* grade.

The GCSEs offered by AQA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC (Eduqas) have the following features:

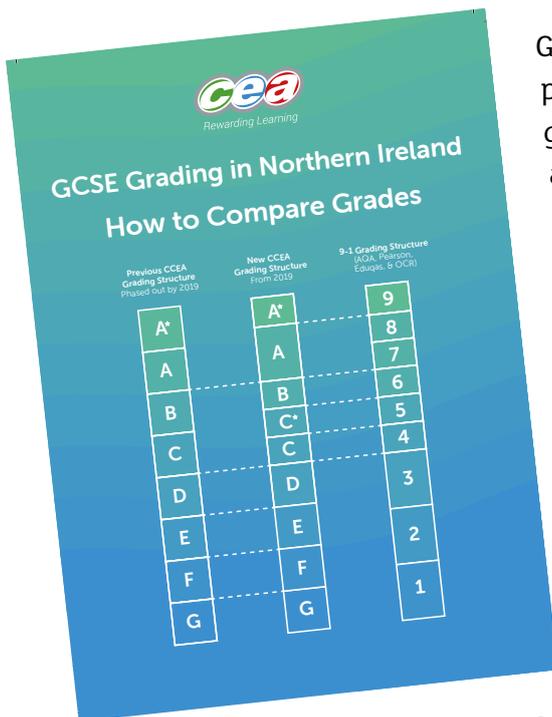
- All qualifications are linear, meaning students take all examinations at the end of the course.
- GCSEs are graded 9–1.

GCSE English Language

It is DE policy that schools must offer only GCSE English Language qualifications where marks for the assessment of speaking and listening contribute to the overall grade. This means that, since September 2015, schools in Northern Ireland have only been able to offer CCEA GCSE English Language.

Comparing Grading Scales: 9-1 and CCEA's A*-G

As students in Northern Ireland can take their GCSE qualifications with one or a combination of awarding organisations, they may receive both 9–1 and A*–G GCSE grades. This section shows how to draw accurate comparisons between the two grading scales.



Grades A* and 9 will reflect students' exceptional performance. The alignment of the A* grade with the grade 9 will mean that the percentage of students achieving an A* grade will reduce. This means it will be more difficult to achieve an A*.

The A grade will cover grades 7 and 8.

Approximately the same percentage of students that achieved an A grade and above in the past will achieve grades A or 7 and above.

The B grade will equate to a grade 6.

The new C* grade will equate to a grade 5.

Approximately the same percentage of students that achieved a C grade and above in the past will achieve grades C or 4 and above.

Introducing the C* grade will mean that the percentage of students achieving grades B and C will reduce.

When do the changes take effect?

GCSEs

The first 9–1 GCSE results were issued in 2017, and by summer 2020 all GCSEs offered by AQA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC (Eduqas) will be graded 9–1.

Results from the first full award of GCSE using CCEA's new grading (A*–G with the C* grade) will be issued in summer 2019.

A Levels

The first results for the de-coupled AS qualifications offered by AQA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC (Eduqas) were issued in 2016, and the first results for the de-coupled A levels were issued in 2017.

By summer 2020, the first results for all reformed de-coupled A levels will have been issued.

About CCEA Regulation

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in Northern Ireland has three distinct functions. It operates as a Regulator of Qualifications, as an Awarding Organisation and as a Curriculum Council. Its regulatory powers stem from the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, which states that CCEA shall:

- with the approval of the Department of Education (DE) develop and publish criteria for the accreditation of relevant external qualifications and accredit, where they meet such criteria, any such qualifications submitted for accreditation; and
- seek to ensure that the standards of examinations and assessments conducted by bodies or authorities in Northern Ireland are recognised as equivalent to the standards of examinations and assessments conducted by bodies or authorities exercising similar functions elsewhere in the United Kingdom.





For further information or copies of this report, please contact:

CCEA Regulation Team
29 Clarendon Road, Clarendon Dock
Belfast BT1 3BG

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COUNCIL FOR THE CURRICULUM, EXAMINATIONS AND ASSESSMENT

29 Clarendon Road, Clarendon Dock, Belfast BT1 3BG

Tel: +44(0)28 9026 1200

Email: info@ccea.org.uk Web: www.ccea.org.uk

