



Department of  
**Education**  
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# Transform**ED**

The future of CCEA

**GCSEs, AS Levels & A Levels**

CONSULTATION DOCUMENT





## Ministerial Foreword

Education is the cornerstone of opportunity, aspiration and progress. In Northern Ireland, the qualifications available to our young people need to reflect the evolving needs of our students, our economy and our society. As Minister of Education, I am committed to ensuring that the qualifications offered by schools are not only rigorous and fair, but also highly relevant, trusted by all stakeholders and suitable for the future.

Each year, GCSEs, AS levels and A levels are taken by thousands of young people across Northern Ireland. These qualifications help shape pathways into further study, employment and lifelong learning. It is therefore essential that they remain fit for purpose, aligned with the needs of our students and responsive to the changing demands of the world around us.

This consultation, which is a key element of my TransformED Strategy, is an important step in reviewing the policy framework that underpins our qualifications. It invites views from students, parents, educators, employers, and wider stakeholders on how we can improve the structure, content and assessment of CCEA GCSE, AS level and A level qualifications. It is vital that these qualifications, developed in Northern Ireland, facilitate high-quality teaching and learning and reduce unnecessary pressure on students and teachers. Equally, the standards of these qualifications must be maintained so that they continue to be recognised both nationally and internationally.

I encourage everyone with an interest in education to engage with this consultation and to complete the consultation questionnaire. Your insights and experiences are important in shaping a qualifications system that works for all students. Together, we can build a suite of qualifications that empower our young people to thrive and succeed in a rapidly changing world.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul Givan". The signature is stylized and includes a horizontal line underneath.

**Paul Givan MLA**  
Education Minister

## Who is conducting the consultation?

The consultation is being conducted by the Department of Education (Department). It is targeted at everyone who has an interest in the qualifications available in Northern Ireland, notably students, schools, parents, further education, higher education and employers.

## Introduction

Qualifications represent the formal recognition of knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through study, training or experience. They affirm that a student has met a certain standard, mastered a body of knowledge or demonstrated the ability to perform in a specific field.

In society, qualifications help establish trust. Employers rely on them to assess the suitability of candidates for jobs; institutions use them to ensure the readiness of students for higher levels of learning. Good qualifications create a shared language of capability, helping to align expectations across diverse sectors and cultures.

GCSEs, AS levels and A levels are the main qualifications taken by post-primary students in Northern Ireland.

## GCSEs

GCSEs (General Certificates of Secondary Education) are nationally recognised academic qualifications typically undertaken by students aged 14 to 16 across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, they are usually completed at the end of Year 12. GCSEs provide a broad foundation across a range of subjects, with a core focus on English and mathematics (maths). They serve as a key benchmark of attainment at the end of compulsory secondary education. GCSEs are used to inform progression routes into sixth form, further education, vocational training, or employment and they play a key role in shaping a student's academic and career pathways.

## GCE AS and A levels

GCE A levels (General Certificate of Education Advanced Level) are subject-based academic courses generally taken between ages 16 and 18 across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. They allow for in-depth study of a smaller number of subjects, usually three or four, preparing students for university or advanced vocational routes. A levels require deeper levels of critical thinking, subject mastery and independent study. They are widely recognised by universities, employers and training providers, serving as key qualifications for entry into higher education and many professional pathways.

In Northern Ireland, AS levels represent the first year of an A level course and are usually completed in Year 13. An AS level can be taken as a separate standalone qualification by students not wishing to undertake a full A level.

## GCSEs, AS levels and A levels in Northern Ireland

CCEA (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment) oversees these qualifications in Northern Ireland to ensure they meet the needs of local students and employers. A full review of GCSEs and A levels in 2012 led to updated content and assessment methods, with revised A levels introduced in 2016 and revised GCSEs in 2017.

While these qualifications share the same GCSE, AS and A level brand names across the UK, there are some differences in structure, assessment and grading between jurisdictions.

- CCEA uses modular exams and non-exam assessment (mainly coursework) in many subjects.
- This is different to England where general qualifications have a linear model where exams are taken at the end of a full course of study (usually two years) and there are very few non-exam assessments unless absolutely necessary for the subject.
- Wales, like Northern Ireland, uses modular exams and deploys non-exam assessment in the same way.

All three jurisdictions have a different grading scale for GCSEs.

## Overview of Current CCEA Qualifications

### CCEA GCSEs

CCEA offers 41 GCSEs across a broad subject range, from core areas like English Language, maths and science to specialised subjects such as agriculture and moving image arts. Most follow a modular structure with assessments that can be taken at the end of Year 11 as well as Year 12 (English, maths and some sciences offer more opportunities) and may include non-exam assessments (coursework, controlled assessments or practicals). Grades are awarded on the A\*–G scale.

### CCEA AS and A levels

A levels are split into AS (40% of the total A level) and A2 (60% of the total A level). AS and A2 are normally taken in Years 13 and 14 respectively. CCEA provides 31 AS and A level qualifications, covering both academic and applied subjects. Assessment methods vary by subject and include exams, coursework and practical assessments. Grades are awarded on an A–E scale, with an A\* available at A level.

### Why are GCSEs and A levels being reviewed?

CCEA has a legal duty to regularly review its qualifications to ensure they remain current, fair and portable for students, schools and employers. Subject specifications are normally reviewed every five years. CCEA's GCSE and A level subject specifications were last reviewed in 2015/16, so a review is now overdue. Feedback from school leaders, teachers and students has also highlighted the need for a review particularly in regard to content and assessment.

The first step in the review process is for the Department to set out the overarching qualifications policy framework which will guide the review of CCEA specifications. This framework sets the rules and principles on which qualifications should be developed, including structure, content, assessment and grading.

This consultation, therefore, seeks views on the proposed policy framework for reviewing and revising CCEA's GCSE, AS level and A level qualifications.

## Current Policy Framework

The current broad policy framework for GCSEs, AS levels and A levels in Northern Ireland is as follows:

1. **Curriculum Alignment:** Qualifications must support Northern Ireland's statutory curriculum and CCEA should provide a broad, balanced and economically relevant range of courses with clear progression pathways.
2. **Open Market Access:** Schools may use qualifications from awarding organisations other than CCEA (e.g. those based in England and Wales), provided they meet Northern Ireland's policy requirements.
3. **Standards and Comparability:** CCEA qualifications must be equivalent in standard to similar qualifications in England and Wales.
4. **Modular Format:** Most CCEA qualifications are modular, allowing exams taken across the course of study to count toward final grades.
5. **Resits:** Students may resit each module until the qualification is awarded. Resits are usually taken at the next available opportunity.
6. **Grading:** GCSEs must use either a nine-point A\*-G scale or a 9-1 scale as is used in England.
7. **AS / A level Structure:** AS levels contribute 40% to the full A level and can also be awarded as a standalone qualification.
8. **Specific Assessment Requirements:**
  - GCSE English Language must include a speaking and listening assessment component.
  - A level science qualifications must include practical assessments as part of the overall grade.
  - Modern languages must assess speaking and listening.
  - Non-exam assessments are permitted: Typically, controlled assessments and coursework at GCSE and at A level.
  - Practical assessments may be internally assessed, externally moderated, or examined, depending on the subject.

## The need for reform

The Department is increasingly concerned that the current qualifications policy framework in Northern Ireland is no longer fit for purpose. Many students are now sitting formal examinations across four consecutive years, placing undue pressure on students and schools. The modular structure of many qualifications has also reduced the time available for effective teaching and learning, particularly in Years 11 and 13. Controlled assessment has increased both teacher and student workload. Additionally, the use of a different grading scale from England at GCSE risks creating confusion among employers and universities, potentially undermining the credibility and recognition of Northern Ireland's qualifications.

A more coherent and streamlined approach is needed to ensure the system better supports students and maintains confidence in the qualifications awarded.

To inform the development of this consultation, the Department held extensive meetings with Area Learning Communities (ALCs) from March 2025. The conversations with school leaders provided helpful insights, with a number of key themes emerging from the discussions.

## Key Themes from Discussions:

- **Excessive Content:** Concerns were highlighted that many qualifications contain too much content leading to limited time for deeper learning and increased pressure on teachers.
- **Assessment Overload:** Concerns were raised that students face too many exams and assessments, contributing to stress and reducing teaching time.
- **Teacher Workload:** Internal assessments (e.g. controlled assessments, practicals) add significant workload burden. There was broad support for reducing or removing these, where possible.
- **Linear vs Modular:** There were different views on this issue. Some leaders worry linear exams may disadvantage weaker students and affect student wellbeing. Others support linear exams for promoting deeper learning and freeing up teaching time and providing students with space to participate more in extra-curricular activities and developmental opportunities.
- **Grading Concerns:** There was broad support for aligning the CCEA GCSE grading scale with England's 9–1 scale. The current system where three scales operate across GCSEs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland can be confusing.
- **Qualification Portability:** There was general agreement that any changes must ensure Northern Ireland qualifications remain comparable and recognised across the UK and Ireland.
- **GCSE Maths:** There were concerns that the current content is too theoretical with an imbalance towards progression to A level maths and science. While this is an important aspect of maths, the vast majority of students take the qualification to demonstrate a competent level of numeracy without taking A level maths or science.
- **GCSE English Language:** Concerns about its relevance in a changing communication and technological landscape and its effectiveness in developing everyday communication skills.
- **Performance Measures:** Level 1 GCSE passes (grades D–G) are not counted in the Department's accountability measures, leading schools to favour alternative qualifications even when GCSEs may offer better learning experiences.

## Proposed Changes to CCEA GCSE, AS level and A level Qualifications

The Department has, therefore, developed proposals to update the qualifications policy for CCEA's GCSE and A level qualifications.

These proposals build on insights from the TransformED Strategy, the Strategic Review of the Curriculum, and previous reports like the Independent Review of Education, A Fair Start, and the 14–19 Strategy. They also reflect international best practices as well as feedback from school leaders in Northern Ireland.

**We welcome feedback through this consultation to help inform the Minister's final decisions.**

### Proposal 1

#### Shared GCSE and GCE A level brands and maintaining standards

Qualifications need to be understood by schools, employers and further and higher education providers. The GCSE and (GCE) A level brands are well known throughout the UK and Ireland and are also commonly recognised by many international jurisdictions for admission to universities.

The Department proposes that CCEA qualifications should continue to use the GCSE and A level brands.

**Your views are sought on whether or not you support this.**

### Proposal 2

#### Qualification Content

School leaders consistently highlight the pressure on teachers to cover the content of many CCEA specifications, leaving little time for deeper learning. England has experienced similar challenges. The current modular structure, with exams in both Years 13 and 14, further reduces teaching time due to the AS timetable.

While qualification content underpins its integrity and facilitates progression, there is scope to reduce content across many CCEA qualifications. However, any changes must preserve the integrity of the qualifications and ensure they continue to support progression to further or higher education.

The Department proposes that CCEA reduce the overall content in each specification, while maintaining subject integrity and ensuring these facilitate further study and progression.

**Your views are sought on whether or not you support this proposal.**

### Proposal 3

#### Reduce the overall number of assessments for each CCEA qualification

Over time there has been an increase in the number of assessments required for many of CCEA's qualifications. To some degree this is a consequence of the modular structure, particularly at A level. This has raised concerns among school leaders and featured prominently in the Independent Review of Education. England's Curriculum and Assessment Review is also exploring ways to reduce student assessment burden.

While there is broad support for fewer assessments, care must be taken to avoid unintended consequences - especially for subjects requiring assessment of practical skills. It is noted that reducing the number of assessment units could lead to longer written exams in the remaining assessment units or less content being formally assessed.

Overall, there is no strong educational justification for exceeding two assessments in most subjects. The Department, therefore, proposes limiting CCEA GCSE and A level qualifications to a maximum of two assessments, other than in specific excepted cases to meet all assessment objectives.

**Your views are sought on whether or not you support this proposal.**

## Proposal 4

### Reducing or removing the use of controlled / internal assessments from CCEA Specifications

School leaders report that controlled and other internal assessments add to teacher workload, with some questioning their value to learning and teaching. Furthermore, contrary to popular belief, research has demonstrated that controlled / internal assessments do not on average improve the grade outcomes for some students. The Department supports reducing or removing these assessments to ease pressure on teachers while maintaining qualification credibility. This approach aligns with developments in England, particularly in response to concerns about the misuse of AI in non-exam assessments.

While some skills, such as speaking and listening in languages or performing in music, require practical assessment, objectives in most subjects can be met through exams. Therefore, the Department proposes to remove internal / controlled assessments from CCEA qualifications unless they are essential for demonstrating knowledge or skills detailed in the subject specification. This will reduce the assessment burden on candidates and the marking burden on teachers.

**Your views are sought on whether or not you support this proposal.**

## Proposal 5

### Subject-Specific Qualification Changes

In addition to consulting on the general principle of reducing or removing internal and controlled assessments, the Department is seeking views on changes to specific qualifications as set out below.

#### GCSE English Language Controlled Assessments

School leaders raised concerns about the time and workload involved in controlled assessments in GCSE English Language, which often duplicate other parts of the qualification. The Department, therefore, proposes removing controlled assessments from GCSE English Language.

**Your views are sought on whether or not you support this proposal.**

#### GCSE English Language - Speaking and Listening

Effective speaking and listening are vital skills needed for both life and work, making their development a core component of GCSE English Language. Currently, these skills are formally assessed through a series of practical tasks, which can place additional demands on both teachers and students and may be overly prescriptive in their delivery and assessment. The Department proposes that speaking and listening should remain a central feature of the specification, however, schools will be required to endorse that students have had opportunities to build these skills through varied activities. This will remove the need for a formal assessment.

**Your views are sought on whether or not you support this proposal.**

## Modern Languages

Speaking and listening are vital skills when learning an additional language, representing an understanding of the use of the language and building progression for achieving fluency. The Department proposes that these assessments should remain part of modern language GCSEs and contribute to the final grade.

**Your views are sought on whether or not you support this proposal.**

## Science

Practical skills are essential in science education. However, when these skills are assessed discretely, it can shift the focus from an investigative and exploratory experience to a contrived exercise. The formal assessment of practical skills, and the high-stakes outcome that goes with this assessment contributing to the overall grade, may limit opportunities for varied experiments and the vital learning that occurs through making mistakes. To address this, the Department proposes that practical assessments in all CCEA science specifications, including A levels, should no longer contribute to final grades. Instead, students must complete a set number of practical exercises, signed off by a teacher without grading - similar to the approach used in England. This change would also allow Northern Ireland schools to offer A level science qualifications from other awarding organisations and represents greater choice for schools.

**Your views are sought on whether or not you support this proposal.**

## Irish Language Qualifications

CCEA currently offers GCSEs in both Gaeilge (for those educated in the medium of Irish) and Irish (for those studying Irish as a second language). There is, however, a gap existing for an A level qualification designed to suit those students educated through the medium of Irish. Both stakeholders and CCEA Regulation have suggested introducing a separate A level for students educated through the medium of Irish, distinct from that currently available for those learning Irish as a second language in English-medium schools. A dedicated A level similar to GCSE Gaeilge would allow those educated through the medium of Irish to demonstrate advanced written and oral skills. The Department proposes that a separate A level Gaeilge should be introduced.

**Your views are sought on whether or not you support this proposal.**

## Proposal 6 GCSE Grading Scale

The different GCSE grading scales used in England, Wales and by CCEA in Northern Ireland can cause confusion, particularly in university applications and employment. Wales (WJEC) uses an 8-point A\*-G scale, while CCEA uses a 9-point scale that includes a unique C\* grade. England also uses a 9-point scale, but with numbers (9-1) instead of letters.

To improve clarity and portability, the Department proposes aligning CCEA's GCSE grading with England's 9-1 scale. This would reflect the closer structural similarity between the two systems and align Northern Ireland with the grading scale used by the majority of GCSE students across the UK.

**Your views are sought on whether or not you support this proposal.**

## Modular vs Linear Qualifications

Currently, many Northern Ireland students sit high-stakes exams annually from Year 11 to Year 14. This is an uncommon practice internationally, where exams typically occur only at the end of compulsory education, usually at

age 18. This is a matter of concern and means valuable teaching and learning time is lost through frequent assessments. The Department sees clear benefits in moving to a linear structure for GCSEs and A levels but also acknowledges some potential drawbacks which have been highlighted by stakeholders.

Linear and modular structures are compared in the table below:

### Comparison of Linear vs Modular Structures

ASPECT	LINEAR	MODULAR
<b>STRUCTURE</b>	All exams are usually taken at the completion of a two-year course. (Though all assessments could in theory be taken in one year if the course of study was completed in this timescale).	Exams / assessments can be taken throughout the course of study where there is opportunity to do so (in most subjects this is in a summer series but in some subjects in November and March series also).
<b>PROS</b>	<p>May encourage a more rounded understanding of the subject, in particular making connections and identifying themes.</p> <p>Reduces frequent exam pressure.</p> <p>More time for teaching and learning and less disruption due to frequent examination series, notably in Years 11 and 13.</p> <p>Allows more time for students to mature before sitting public examinations.</p> <p>Provides greater opportunities for synoptic assessment which assesses a student's understanding of the connections between different parts of a subject.</p>	<p>Allows opportunity for early assessment and feedback (where available) on performance.</p> <p>Provides opportunities to retake individual assessment units.</p> <p>Fewer examinations in any one sitting.</p>
<b>CONS</b>	<p>Higher pressure at the end of the course.</p> <p>Less flexibility for resits as entire qualification needs to be retaken.</p>	<p>Can lead to "teaching to the test".</p> <p>May encourage short-term focus on helping students pass modules.</p> <p>Can result in fragmented learning.</p> <p>Can cause stress due to frequent examinations.</p> <p>Less time for teaching and learning, particularly in Years 11 and 13.</p>
<b>ASSESSMENT STYLE</b>	The emphasis is on testing knowledge and skills that have accumulated by the end of the course.	There is a greater emphasis on assessing knowledge and skills that have accumulated incrementally.
<b>STUDENT SUITABILITY</b>	Better for students who perform well under final exam conditions or students who require time to mature as students.	Better for students who prefer or benefit from continuous assessment.
<b>ADMINISTRATIVE LOAD</b>	Lower overall exam administration and burden for schools and awarding body.	Higher administration for schools because of multiple exam sittings and the need to track individual module results.
<b>RESIT OPPORTUNITIES</b>	Limited – usually only full subject resits.	More flexible – individual module resits possible.

## Benefits of Linear Structure

Linear qualifications concentrate assessments at the end of a two-year course, allowing more time for deeper learning and stronger subject understanding. Without frequent exams, students can build knowledge gradually and make meaningful connections across topics. Research appears to support this, showing that modular systems may promote short-term learning and fragmented understanding. Research has also shown that contrary to popular belief modular exams do not improve the grade outcomes for some students.

Linear courses also provide opportunities to foster skills like planning, resilience, and independent study - valuable for higher education and employment. While final exams may seem stressful, they can reduce the ongoing pressure of repeated assessments and resits. Teachers also report more coherent teaching opportunities and better pacing under linear structures.

A linear structure also has benefits in regard to awarding. Modular resits involve complex arrangements with mixed-age cohorts sitting different papers across multiple exam series. This can lead to inconsistencies and unfairness, for example, younger students may be disadvantaged when their performance is judged alongside older peers with more learning experience in the course of study. It is also a more costly system to operate and a linear structure provides opportunities for financial savings within the education budget.

## Challenges and Concerns

Despite the potential benefits, some are concerned that final exams may increase stress for students who struggle with exam anxiety or prefer assessments spread over time. Modular systems offer more opportunities for feedback and improvement through staged assessments and resits.

## GCSE Considerations

Modular GCSEs can make the awarding and grading process fragmented and consequently more complicated. Frequent exams and resits may also reduce teaching time and increase students stress throughout the course of study.

Given the importance of GCSE English Language and GCSE Mathematics, the Department would propose to retain modularity in these subjects to support students in acquiring these important qualifications through providing modular resit opportunities.

## Proposal 7

### Change the structure of CCEA GCSEs from modular to linear

#### GCSEs:

- a. Change to a linear structure for most CCEA GCSE qualifications, except where the nature of the subject is better suited to modular assessment;
- b. Retain the option for a modular exam structure for GCSE English Language and GCSE Mathematics.

**Your views are sought on both parts of this proposal.**

## A levels: Modular vs Linear Structure

Currently, CCEA A levels follow a modular structure: students take AS exams (worth 40% of the A level) at the end of Year 13, then complete A2 exams (60% of the A level) in Year 14. While Wales (WJEC) uses a similar model, most English awarding organisations have adopted a linear structure since 2015, with all exams taken at the end of a two-year A level course. In England, AS levels are a standalone qualification separate to A levels and do not contribute to an A level grade.

This modular approach means Northern Ireland students often sit twice as many exams across Years 13 and 14 compared to their English peers. Combined with modular GCSEs, this results in some students having four consecutive years of high-stakes exams. This is an uncommon practice globally that may contribute to higher levels of stress for students.

## Impacts of the Modular Structure

The modular system places sustained pressure on students and requires them to be prepared for AS level exams within the first year of the course. Teachers may feel pressured to spend more time preparing for these exams rather than teaching for a deeper-level and more rounded comprehensive subject understanding. By contrast, England's linear model has freed up teaching time, allowing students to develop broader skills and engage in enrichment activities. For example, students are able to take a separate Level 3 extended project qualification, worth half an A level, that is designed to develop independent learning, research skills and project management.

## Arguments for Retaining Modularity

Some students may benefit from the flexibility of AS levels, using them to explore four subjects in Year 13 before narrowing the focus to three subjects in Year 14. Additionally, some students prefer staged assessment.

However, modularity can lead to schools using AS grade outcomes in Year 13 to decide whether students are allowed to progress to Year 14, despite A levels being intended as two-year courses. This can unfairly limit students' post-16 education. AS grades may also disadvantage students in university applications if they underperform in Year 13 but could improve in Year 14.

The Department proposes moving to a linear structure for CCEA A levels: A two-year programme with all assessments at the end, though completion in one year would remain possible. This would reduce the number of exams and increase the available teaching time. CCEA would also stop offering standalone AS qualifications, as demand is low.

## Proposal 8

### Change the structure of CCEA A levels from modular to linear

- a. Move to linear structure for CCEA A level qualifications
- b. CCEA will not provide a suite of stand-alone AS qualifications
- c. CCEA A levels will have a reduced number of assessments required to complete the qualification

**Your views are sought on all parts of this proposal.**

## Longer-term reform of qualifications at Key Stage 4

### Proposal 9

#### **A Future Northern Ireland Diploma of Education (NIDE)**

We would welcome views on the recommendation in the Strategic Review of the Curriculum to develop a new diploma to be awarded to students at the end of Key Stage 4, entitled the Northern Ireland Diploma for Education (NIDE).

The NIDE would encourage schools to offer a broad, balanced curriculum to all students and therefore avoid undue narrowing of the curriculum for some students. It could potentially be structured as below:

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

**Your views are sought on whether you agree that consideration should be given to the introduction of a Northern Ireland Diploma of Education structured in this way.**

## How to respond to the consultation

The Department would welcome your views on these proposals. You can do this by completing the questionnaire associated with this consultation document. The questionnaire can be completed online by clicking [HERE](#) or by using the QR code below:



The questionnaire can be completed online until 11.59pm on **13 November 2025**. If you have any difficulties completing the survey or require it in an alternative format, please contact the Department using the contact details below: [reformofqualifications@education-ni.gov.uk](mailto:reformofqualifications@education-ni.gov.uk)

or

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## How consultation responses will be used by DE

The Department will use the consultation responses to inform policy development, refine proposals and ensure that changes to CCEA GCSEs, AS levels and A levels are both practical and effective.

Responses will help the Department understand public opinion, identify potential challenges and make necessary adjustments to its plans. The feedback received will be analysed and used to shape the final policy framework.