

Statement from the qualification regulators on changes to GCSEs, AS and A levels

GCSEs, AS and A levels in England, Wales and Northern Ireland have changed, which means that in most subjects they are different in each jurisdiction. As the regulators of qualifications, we have overseen these changes: Ofqual in England, Qualifications Wales in Wales, and the Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in Northern Ireland.

Some differences are immediately noticeable, such as the grading scale for GCSEs or the relationship of AS qualifications to A levels. Others are less apparent, for example, where there are differences in subject content or the assessment methods used within subjects. All GCSE and A level qualifications continue to share important common features. In particular, they remain of the same size¹ as they always have been and recognise the achievements of the same cohort of students.

The qualifications developed to meet the different requirements of each regulator are awarded independently of each other. This means the grades awarded within a subject are no longer benchmarked across jurisdictions. Each regulator, however, has required the exam boards to carry forward the standards set in legacy qualifications to the reformed ones, using well established principles and methods. Therefore, those who rely on these qualifications can still make broad comparisons between the different qualifications, for example when considering applications for work or to higher education.

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.

We have worked together to produce this overview of the main similarities and differences between the new qualifications, including an infographic, and we will keep working closely together so that these qualifications continue to command public confidence.

We have published a table setting out the specific subjects in which qualifications are being reformed to meet the requirements set by each regulator alongside this statement.

Changes to AS and A levels

There are important differences in some of the design features of the new AS and A level qualifications; however, they also continue to share a number of important features.

Common features:

1. Students' grades are reported as A*-E for A level and A-E for AS.
2. The content requirements are broadly similar in most subjects. For more details about the content requirements for individual subjects, you should refer to each regulator's website.

¹ Ofqual has noted that, exceptionally, the subject content to be covered in the new GCSE mathematics was designed to be bigger than the GCSE it replaced.

3. The proportion of non-exam assessment has been set at the minimum deemed necessary to assess the essential aspects of the subject that cannot be assessed validly by exam. These judgements sometimes vary between regulators, for example in biology, physics and chemistry for which the approach to reporting outcomes in non-exam assessment is different too.
4. Assessment objectives and their weightings are the same in most subjects. You can see the detail of these, and where and how these requirements differ on each regulator's website.
5. Assessments at A level in all subjects must require students to draw on knowledge and understanding from across the subject content. In most subjects there is a common requirement for students to produce extended responses.
6. The amount of content in AS qualifications continues to be approximately half that of the full A levels.

Key differences

Relationship of the AS to the A level:

New AS qualifications that are designed to meet requirements set by Ofqual are standalone qualifications and do not contribute to A level results. Students taking A levels regulated by Ofqual do not, therefore, have to take the corresponding AS qualification; their assessments, taken at the end of their A level course cover the full A level content.

New AS qualifications designed to meet the requirements set by Qualifications Wales and by CCEA Regulation contribute 40% of the total marks of the full A level. Students taking these A levels must therefore, also enter for the corresponding AS assessments.

Structure of assessment:

New AS and A levels that are designed to meet Ofqual requirements are linear qualifications with all exams taken at the end of the course. In new AS qualifications that have been designed to meet requirements set by Qualifications Wales and those set by CCEA Regulation, AS exams are available for students to take either at the end of the AS course or alongside the A2 units at the end of the A level course.

Opportunities to retake assessments:

1. For all AS and A levels that are designed to meet Ofqual requirements, students must retake all of their exams when retaking the qualification. Non-exam assessment marks can be reused.
2. In unitised AS and A levels that are designed to meet requirements set by Qualifications Wales and those designed to meet requirements set by CCEA Regulation, individual units can be retaken by students only once.

Changes to GCSEs

There are important differences in the design of new GCSEs across the 3 jurisdictions. There are also a greater number of differences at subject level between the new GCSEs being offered in England, Wales and Northern Ireland than there are between the new AS and A levels. However, GCSEs continue to share a number of important design features.

Common features:

1. The qualifications are of approximately the same size¹ and accessible to the same range of students as the qualifications they replaced.
2. The proportion of non-exam assessment has been set at the minimum deemed necessary to assess the essential aspects of the subject that cannot be validly assessed by exam. However, the differences in content requirements mean that in some subjects the amount of non-exam assessment required by each regulator is different; this is the case for example in history and in English literature.
3. Assessments at GCSE in all subjects require students to draw on knowledge and understanding from across the subject content. In most subjects there is a common requirement for students to produce extended responses.

Key differences

Grading:

1. There are 3 different grading scales for GCSEs across the 3 jurisdictions.
2. GCSEs that are designed to meet Ofqual requirements are graded 9-1, with 9 being the highest grade. Ofqual has published further information on this new grading scale here <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-gcse-9-to-1-grades-coming-soon>.
3. GCSEs designed to meet the Qualifications Wales requirements are graded A*-G. These are the same grades as have always been used for GCSEs. More information on GCSE grading in Wales can be found here <https://qualificationswales.org/english/qualifications/gcses-and-a-levels/gcses/>
4. GCSEs designed to meet CCEA Regulation requirements are graded on a nine-point scale A*-G. This includes a new grade C* that CCEA aims to align with the grade 5 in England; and CCEA also aims to align the A* with the grade 9 in England. More information on GCSE grading in Northern Ireland can be found here http://ccea.org.uk/regulation/gcse_grading

Subject content

The content requirements are different in most subjects, though the nature and extent of these differences vary. Details of the different content expectations can be found on each regulator's website.

Assessment objectives

The assessment objectives and their weightings differ in some subjects, reflecting the difference in subject content expectations. Details of these different assessment objectives can be found on each regulator's website.

Structure of assessment:

1. All new GCSEs that are designed to meet the Ofqual requirements are linear qualifications with all exams taken at the end of the course.
2. For linear GCSE qualifications meeting requirements set by Qualifications Wales and CCEA Regulation students must similarly take all of their exams at the end of the qualification. In Wales and Northern Ireland some subjects are linear and some are unitised.

Opportunities to retake assessments and carry forward non-exam assessment:

1. For new GCSEs that are designed to meet the Ofqual requirements students must retake all of their exams when retaking the qualification. Non-exam assessment marks can be reused.
2. For linear GCSEs that are designed to meet requirements set by Qualifications Wales or by CCEA Regulation students must retake all of their exams when retaking the qualification. For unitised qualifications each unit can be retaken by students only once.

Setting and maintaining standards:

In setting standards for the first award of new qualifications each regulator has required exam boards to carry forward standards from the legacy qualifications.

In subsequent years, each regulator has and will continue to apply methodologies for maintaining grade standards over time and between exam boards offering the same qualification. We expect these to be based on similar and well-established principles. The specific detail of the approaches differ slightly from one jurisdiction to another reflecting the cohorts taking the qualifications and the data available to the regulators. More information about the methodologies that will be applied can be found on each regulator's website.

The qualifications developed to meet the different requirements of each regulator are awarded independently of each other. This means the grades awarded within a subject are no longer benchmarked across jurisdictions. As each regulator is carrying forward the standards set in legacy qualifications to the reformed ones, those that rely on these qualifications can therefore still make broad comparisons between the different qualifications, for example when considering applications for work or to higher education. The 3 regulators are working together as they keep their respective approaches to maintaining standards under review.

Availability of reformed GCSE, AS and A levels in England, Wales and Northern Ireland:

The following exam boards have designed new GCSE, AS and A levels that meet the Ofqual requirements:

AQA

OCR

Pearson

Eduqas (WJEC).

These qualifications are available for all subjects in England, for most subjects in Northern Ireland, and for a small number of subjects in Wales.

WJEC has also designed new GCSE, AS and A levels to meet requirements set by Qualifications Wales. AS and A levels designed to meet these requirements are available in Wales and Northern Ireland. GCSEs designed to meet these requirements are available in Wales only. CCEA Awarding Organisation has designed new GCSE, AS and A levels to meet the CCEA Regulation requirements. These qualifications are only available in Northern Ireland.

Qualifications requirements set by	Available in	Awarding Organisations
Ofqual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• England for all subjects• Northern Ireland for most subjects• Wales for subjects where there is no qualification developed to meet Qualifications Wales requirements	AQA, Eduqas (WJEC), OCR, Pearson
Qualifications Wales	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wales• Northern Ireland for AS and A level only	WJEC
CCEA Regulation	Northern Ireland	CCEA Awarding Organisation