

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



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GCSEs, AS and A levels in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are changing, which means that in most subjects they will be different in each jurisdiction. As the regulators of qualifications in each jurisdiction, we are overseeing 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, there may be 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 size and equally recognise the achievements of the same cohort of students.

The qualifications developed to meet the different requirements of each regulator will be awarded independently of each other. This means the grades awarded within a subject will no longer be benchmarked across jurisdictions. Each regulator is committed, however, to carrying forward the standards set in existing qualifications to the reformed ones, using well established principles and methods. Those that rely on these qualifications will therefore still be able to make broad comparisons between the different qualifications, for example when applying for work or to higher education.

Throughout the change 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, and we will keep working closely together so that these qualifications continue to command public confidence.

Changes to AS and A levels

Across the 3 countries, 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:

- Students' grades will be reported as A*-E for A level and A-E for AS.
- The content requirements are broadly similar in most subjects. For more details about the content requirements for individual subjects and to see where and how these requirements differ, you can follow the links at the end of this document.
- 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 across jurisdictions, for example in biology, physics and chemistry for which the approach to reporting outcomes to non-exam assessment is different too.

- 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, through the links at the end of this document.
- 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.
- 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 will not contribute to A level results. 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.

Structure of assessment:

- New AS and A levels that are designed to meet Ofqual requirements will be 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 will be 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:

- 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.
- 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 countries. There are also a greater number of differences at subject level between the new GCSEs to be 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:

- The qualifications will be of approximately the same size and accessible to the same range of students as the qualifications they replace.
- 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.
- 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:

- There will be 3 different grading scales for GCSEs across the 3 countries.
- GCSEs that are designed to meet Ofqual requirements will be graded 9-1, with 9 being the highest grade. Further information on this new grading scale can be found here: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/537147/Pstcard - Grading New GCSEs.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/537147/Pstcard_-_Grading_New_GCSEs.pdf).
- GCSEs designed to meet the Qualifications Wales requirements will be graded A*-G.
- GCSEs designed to meet CCEA Regulation requirements will be graded on a nine-point scale A*-G. This includes a new grade C* that CCEA will aim to align with the grade 5 in England; and CCEA will also aim to align the A* with the grade 9 in England.

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 accessed through the links at the end of the document.

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 accessed through the links at the end of the document.

Structure of assessment:

- All new GCSEs that are designed to meet the Ofqual requirements will be linear qualifications with all exams taken at the end of the course.
- 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. Some subjects will be linear and some will be unitised, schools will need to check with their exam board.

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

- 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.
- 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 will carry forward standards from the legacy qualifications.

In subsequent years, each regulator will apply methodologies for maintaining grade standards over time. We expect these to be based on similar and well-established principles. The specific detail of the approaches will differ slightly from one country 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 and key links are included at the end of this document.¹

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

¹ Some decisions about grading arrangements in Northern Ireland remain to be made. We will update this document as those decisions are made.

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

The following exam boards are designing new GCSE, AS and A levels that meet the Ofqual requirements – AQA, OCR, Pearson, Eduqas (WJEC). These qualifications will be available for all subjects in England, for most subjects in Northern Ireland, and for some subjects in Wales.

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

Subject level arrangements

The table below sets out the specific subjects in which qualifications are being reformed to meet the requirements set by each regulator. Schools and colleges can use this table to see which qualifications have been developed for use in each jurisdiction and, in combination with the table above, which qualifications in which subjects are available to them.

The reforms to qualifications are taking place on a phased transition which means some subjects are being reformed at different times across the 3 countries. Not all subjects have yet been reformed – check the website of the relevant regulator or with your exam board for more details.

A level subject	Requirements set by Ofqual	Requirements set by Qualifications Wales	Requirements set by CCEA Regulation
Subject title	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
Accounting	Yes	No	No
Ancient history	Yes	No	No
Ancient languages (classical Greek and Latin)	Yes	No	No
Archaeology	Yes	No	No
Art and design	Yes	Yes	Yes
Business	Yes	Yes	Yes
Classical civilization	Yes	No	No
Computer science	Yes	Yes	No
Dance	Yes	No	No
Design and technology	Yes	Yes	Yes
Digital technology	No	No	Yes
Drama and theatre	Yes	Yes	No
Economics	Yes	Yes	Yes
Electronics	Yes	No	No
English language	Yes	Yes	No
English language and literature	Yes	Yes	No
English literature	Yes	Yes	Yes
Environmental science	Yes	No	No
Environmental technology	No	No	Yes
Film studies	Yes	No	No
Further maths	Yes	Yes	Yes
Geography	Yes	Yes	Yes
Geology	Yes	No	No
Government and politics ²	No	Yes	Yes
Health and social care	No	No	Yes
History	Yes	Yes	Yes

² Note that politics with separate subject content is available in England.

A level subject	Requirements set by Ofqual	Requirements set by Qualifications Wales	Requirements set by CCEA Regulation
Subject title	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
History of art	Yes	No	Yes
Irish	No	No	Yes
Journalism	No	No	Yes
Law	Yes	Yes	No
Life and health sciences		No	Yes
Modern foreign languages (French, German, and Spanish)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Modern foreign languages (other languages)	Yes	No	No
Mathematics	Yes	Yes	Yes
Media studies	Yes	Yes	No
Moving image arts	No	No	Yes
Music	Yes	Yes	Yes
Music technology	Yes	No	No
Nutrition and food science	No	No	Yes
Performing arts	No	No	Yes
Philosophy	Yes	No	No
Physical education	Yes	Yes	No
Politics ³	Yes	No	No
Psychology	Yes	Yes	No
Religious studies	Yes	Yes	Yes
Science (biology, chemistry, and physics)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sociology	Yes	No	No
Software systems development	No	No	Yes
Sports science and the active leisure industry	No	No	Yes
Statistics	Yes	No	No
Welsh	No	Yes	No
Welsh second language	No	Yes	No

³ Government and politics with separate subject content is available in Wales and Northern Ireland.

GCSE subject	Requirements set by Ofqual	Requirements set by Qualifications Wales	Requirements set by CCEA Regulation
Subject title	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
Ancient history	Yes	No	No
Ancient languages (classical Greek and Latin)	Yes	No	No
Agriculture and land use	No	No	Yes
Applied science (single award)	No	Yes	No
Applied science (double award)	No	Yes	No
Astronomy	Yes	No	No
Art and design	Yes	Yes	Yes
Design & technology	Yes	Yes	Yes
Biology	Yes	Yes	Yes
Business	Yes	Yes	Yes
Business and communications systems	No	No	Yes
Chemistry	Yes	Yes	Yes
Child development	No	No ⁴	Yes
Citizenship studies	Yes	No	No
Classical civilisation	Yes	No	No
Combined science (double award)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Computer science	Yes	Yes	No
Construction	No	No	Yes
Contemporary crafts	No	No	Yes
Dance	Yes	No	No
Digital technology	No	No	Yes
Drama	Yes	Yes	Yes
Economics	Yes	No	Yes
Electronics	Yes	No	No
Engineering	Yes	No	No
Engineering and Manufacturing	No	No	Yes
English language	Yes	Yes	Yes
English literature	Yes	Yes	Yes
Film studies	Yes	No	No
Food preparation and nutrition	Yes	Yes	Yes
Further maths	No	No	Yes
Gaeilge	No	No	Yes
Geography	Yes	Yes	Yes
Geology	Yes	No	No
Government and politics	No	No	Yes

Health and social care	No	No ⁵	Yes
History	Yes	Yes	Yes
GCSE subject	Requirements set by Ofqual	Requirements set by Qualifications Wales	Requirements set by CCEA Regulation
Subject title	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
Hospitality	No	No	Yes
Irish	No	No	Yes
Journalism	No	No	Yes
Learning for life and work	No	No	Yes
Leisure travel and tourism	No	No	Yes
Mathematics	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mathematics – numeracy	No	Yes	No
Media studies	Yes	Yes	No
Modern foreign languages (French, German, and Spanish)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Modern foreign languages (other languages)	Yes	No	No
Motor vehicle and road user studies	No	No	Yes
Moving image arts	No	No	Yes
Music	Yes	Yes	Yes
Physical education	Yes	Yes	Yes
Physical education short course	Yes	Yes	No
Physics	Yes	Yes	Yes
Psychology	Yes	No	No
Religious studies	Yes	Yes	Yes
Religious studies short course	Yes	Yes	No
Single award science	No	No	Yes
Sociology	Yes	No	No
Statistics	Yes	No	Yes
Welsh	No	Yes	No
Welsh literature	No	Yes	No
Welsh second language	No	Yes	No

⁴ Legacy GCSE provision will continue to be available in Wales until 2020.

⁵ Legacy GCSE provision will continue to be available in Wales until 2020.

Useful Links

www.ofqual.gov.uk

Overview of reforms in England - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/your-qualification-our-regulation-gcse-as-and-a-level-reforms>

Information on new GCSE grading scale -
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/537147/Pstcard - Grading New GCSEs.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/537147/Pstcard_-_Grading_New_GCSEs.pdf)

www.dfe.gov.uk

GCSE content - <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/gcse-subject-content>

A level content - <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/gce-as-and-a-level-subject-content>

<http://qualificationswales.org>

Availability of reformed general and vocational qualifications in Wales -
<http://qualificationswales.org/development/?lang=en>

Qualifications Wales Admissions Guide for Higher Education -
<http://qualificationswales.org/media/1657/he-guide-eng-2016.pdf>

WJEC GCSE qualifications – <http://www.wjec.co.uk/qualifications/levels/gcse/>

WJEC AS and A level qualifications –
<http://www.wjec.co.uk/qualifications/levels/gceaas.html>

<http://ccea.org.uk/regulation>

Information on the qualifications available to schools in Northern Ireland -
<http://ccea.org.uk/regulation/qualsni>

Details of the new CCEA GCSE and AS and A level qualifications -
<http://ccea.org.uk/qualifications/revision>