

Consultation Document – GCSE Grading

Introduction

1. This consultation is intended to seek your views on the potential change of grading from the current alphabetic grades A* to G to numeric grades 9 to 1 for General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) specifications produced by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).

Background

2. The GCSE is a qualification awarded in a specified subject, generally taken in a number of subjects by students aged 14-16 in secondary education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It was introduced in 1986 (with the first examinations taking place in 1988), replacing the former General Certificate of Education GCE O Level / CSE qualifications.

3. The qualification was graded A to G until the A* was introduced in 1994 to reward performance at the highest level. Grades D to G constitute a level 1 qualification and grades A* to C constitute a level 2 qualification as defined by the National Qualifications Framework.

4. Qualifications reform in England means that with effect from September 2015 (first teaching), new GCSEs provided by Awarding Organisations to schools in England must be graded 9 to 1, with 9 being the highest and 1 the lowest. The regulator of qualifications in England (Ofqual) is proposing that outcomes at grade 4 and above should equate to current outcomes at grade C and above.

5. In England, new GCSEs in English language, English literature and maths will be introduced from September 2015 (first teaching), with further GCSE titles to follow from September 2016. The first new GCSE qualifications will be awarded in summer 2017 (2018 for those subjects taught from 2016).

6. In its support for the new grading arrangements, Ofqual states that currently there is bunching of candidates in the middle of the range. The new grade range can provide for greater differentiation at level 2, as there will be six grades (from 4 to 9) compared with four as at present (C to A*).

7. Ofqual is setting the threshold for a Level 2 qualification at GCSE at the bottom of the new grade 4 (i.e. where it is currently, at the bottom of the Grade C). In the longer term, however, consideration may be given to setting the expected level for performance at age 16 at grade 5 in order to stretch the performance of learners. However the distinction between a level 1 and a level 2 qualification will remain unchanged.

8. We consulted widely with schools and there was very strong support for retaining an open qualifications market here. This means that qualifications designed by Awarding Organisations based in England should be available for use in schools here. **These GCSEs will use the 9-1 grading system when they are first awarded in 2017.**

9. CCEA will be revising its GCSE specifications and they will be available for first teaching from September 2017. Regardless of whether CCEA changes its grading from alphabetic to numeric, there will be a mixture of the two grading systems in place in 2017 and 2018. We will need to manage this period of transition.

Interim Arrangements

10. From September 2015 to August 2017, schools here will continue to be able to offer examinations from a range of awarding organisations which means that GCSEs awarded here will have different grading systems. We have set out below a matrix which explains how the alphabetic grade maps to the numeric grading for use by pupils, parents, employers, universities FE colleges etc.

Table showing how 9-1 grades will be anchored to A* - G

A	7 (20% of candidates who get a grade 7 or above will get a grade 9)
C	4
G	1

Ofqual has stated that statistics will be used to predict outcomes and – if the statistics show that there has not been a major change in the cohort – the % of the cohort getting a grade 4 or above will be roughly the same as those who would have

achieved a grade C or above the previous year. Grades 7 and 1 will be anchored to grades A and G in a similar fashion.

Longer term policy position here

11. It is for us to consider whether there is merit in adopting a 9 to 1 grading system here. Or whether there is merit in retaining the existing grading system.

Potential benefits of changing

12. These include:

- a. One common grading system for 99.4%¹ of GCSEs taken here will mean a reduced risk of confusion and misunderstanding for all stakeholders, including pupils, parents, employers etc;
- b. It will make the process of comparability simpler and easier;
- c. It will enable pupils who currently achieve a grade C and above to be more clearly differentiated in terms of their abilities since they will be assessed against 6 grades (9 to 4) compared with 4 (A* to C) as at present;

Potential risks of changing

13. These include:

- a. There remains the potential for confusion amongst stakeholders who have been used to alphabetic grades for over 25 years;
- b. There would be numeric grades at GCSE and alphabetic grades at A level and the two do not necessarily sit comfortably together;
- c. There is reduced opportunity for those at the lowest grades to demonstrate what they have achieved since there are fewer grades (3 to 1) below a Grade 4 / C compared with 4 grades / D to G as at present.
- d. There is a potential risk of confusion for parents and other stakeholders about the numbers used in Levels of Progression at Key Stage 3 and 4 and numbers to grade GCSEs.

¹ Based on figures from RM Data for 2012/13 – the awarding organisation WJEC had 0.6% of the GCSE market share in the north of Ireland. It will be retaining an alphabetic grading structure.

Potential benefits of not changing

14. These include:

- a. We would continue to use an alphabetic grading system with which all stakeholders have become familiar;
- b. It would more clearly distinguish GCSEs produced by CCEA from those produced by other (English) Awarding Organisations (WJEC will provide GCSEs using alphabetic grades for the Welsh market and other markets).

Potential risks of not changing

15. These include:

- a. Increases the perception of difference between CCEA qualifications and those awarded by English Awarding organisations;
- b. Confusion for pupils and parents who will have to interpret two different grading systems on an on-going basis;

Your views

16. We would welcome your views on these issues by completing the questions as outlined at Annex A – preferably on-line but, if you prefer, a return can be made in hard-copy.

Section 75 Considerations

17. Section 75 of the NI Act 1998 requires all public authorities in carrying out their functions relating to the north of Ireland, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between –

- persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
- men and women generally;
- persons with a disability and persons without; and
- persons with dependants and persons without.

18. In addition, without prejudice to the above obligation, public authorities must also, in carrying out their functions relating to the north of Ireland, have regard to the

desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

19. The proposals in this consultation have been considered in the context of Section 75(1) and Section 75(2) of the NI Act 1998 and have been screened out. A copy of the screening document can be found at www.deni.gov.uk. The Department will monitor the impact of these proposed changes on an on-going basis.

Timescales

20. This consultation will take place between 23 March 2015 and 19 June 2015. Taking into account the analysis process and the need to update the Minister and Education Committee in Stormont, we estimate that final decisions are likely to follow in summer 2015.

21. If a decision was taken to change the GCSE grading from alphabetic to numeric, the effective date of change would be September 2017 for GCSEs produced by CCEA. . The Awarding Organisations based in England - AQA, Eduqas, OCR and Pearson - will be implementing a numeric grading system from September 2015 onwards. WJEC which is based in Wales will continue to use the A*-G grading system.