

Consultation response

DENI – Fundamental Review of GCSEs and A levels: Consultation on proposed recommendations

UCAS' mission is to help learners make informed choices that best suit their aspirations and abilities and maximise their opportunity for success, and to benefit universities and colleges providers through the provision of shared services.

UCAS provides information and advice, course information, entry requirements, and application services to around 650,000 applicants to over 370 UK higher education providers (HEPs) each year. These applicants make over 2 million applications to higher education (HE) courses. UCAS services support applications for full-time HNCs, HNDs and foundation degrees as well as undergraduate and some postgraduate degrees.

UCAS welcomes the opportunity to comment on the future of GCSEs and A levels in Northern Ireland. UCAS broadly supports any policy initiative that seeks to improve the quality and rigour of qualifications and enhances the progression opportunities of learners holding that particular qualification.

UK divergence

The qualifications landscape is becoming increasingly diverse across the UK, particularly in relation to A levels and GCSEs. The current direction of travel for reform suggests that we may see fundamentally different qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland but with the same title. For example, A levels in Northern Ireland are to retain an AS component, whereas A levels in England are to have the AS “decoupled”.

GCSEs will also vary across the UK. For example, GCSEs in England are to have a numerical grading scale, whereas GCSEs in Northern Ireland will retain their existing grading scale. We will also see differences in the use of tiering of examinations across the UK.

This divergence raises a number of issues in relation to education progression. For 2013 entry, 32% of Northern Irish domiciled applicants accepted onto HE courses were accepted outside of Northern Ireland¹. Most of these learners will be holding A level qualifications, therefore it is particularly important that A levels and GCSEs are of the same standard across the UK to ensure that A levels provide equal opportunities for learners regardless of where they are gained.

UCAS is pleased to note that the principles underpinning qualifications in Northern Ireland recognise the importance of portability, comparability and equality of access across the UK. We are also pleased to note that recommendation seven of the CCEA report recommends that DENI and CCEA should work with partners to ensure comparability of qualifications taken in Northern Ireland and those taken elsewhere.

¹ UCAS. September 2013. Interim assessment of UCAS acceptances – 2013 cycle, 4 weeks after A level results day

Qualifications reform timeline

Annex A contains a schedule of the qualifications reforms happening throughout the UK. The volume of reform and the likely divergence in approach means that HEPs will require high quality information regarding these changes to support selection for admission.

Institutions will need to understand these revised qualifications in depth, and if there is a significant change and/or divergence in approach, they may need to review their entry requirements and offer making strategies.

UCAS is currently looking at ways in which it can support the HE sector by providing high quality qualification information to our members through the New Qualification Information System (NQIS) project. This includes the replacement of the current UCAS Tariff with a new, simpler points system.

We would be keen to engage with DENI as we continue to develop our qualifications information provision.

Non-General and Vocational qualifications

UCAS is pleased to note that the consultation makes reference to the need to ensure that high quality vocational qualifications are available to all 14-18 year old learners in the north of Ireland. UCAS believes it is important that learners have a wide range of qualification options, and are able to select high quality qualifications that are most suitable for them and offer a broad range of progression opportunities, including higher education and employment. UCAS would be interested to hear how DENI intend to ensure that these qualifications are of a sufficiently high quality and offer a broad range of progression opportunities.

The HE sector is diverse and a wide range of qualifications assist progression into HE. HEPs are autonomous in their decision making processes, and different providers take different views on the suitability and relevance of qualifications for progression on to their courses. Whilst vocational qualifications are accepted by some institutions, other institutions may not view them as suitable for entry into their institution or courses.

Vocational qualifications, such as BTECs, play a significant role in allowing learners to progress into HE. BTECs remain the second largest qualification family used for progression to HE behind A levels. Between 2008 and 2012 the entry rate for 18 year old UK domiciled applicants holding BTECs increased 2 percentage points (81% proportionally). About a half of this increase has come from applicants holding BTECs in combination with A levels². 2013 data indicates that the acceptance rate of learners holding BTEC qualifications and the number of BTEC learners being accepted in HE has continued to increase. This has been the case across all institution types and POLAR2 quintiles.

We would like to suggest that DENI review our response to the Department for Education (England) consultation on the reform of vocational qualifications for 16-19 year olds³. Our response to this consultation contains a detailed analysis of the progression trends and

² UCAS. December 2012. End of Cycle Report 2012. Page 52.

³ <http://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/dfe-consultation-vocational-quals-may-2013.pdf>

behaviours of learners holding a mixed profile of qualifications, such as A levels and BTECs. This response provides an insight into the progression behaviour of learners holding vocational qualifications. Our 2013 End of Cycle report, due to be published on the 19th December, will also provide further analysis of the progression behaviour of these applicants.

The consultation also makes reference to the need to promote the value of non-general qualifications. UCAS communications reach audiences of tens of thousands of students, parents, teachers and advisers as well as admissions professionals in UK universities and colleges. We would be happy to discuss with DENI ways in which we can help to support awareness of qualifications taken in Northern Ireland.

14-19 Joint Education Strategy

The CCEA Review of GCSE and A level Qualifications in Northern Ireland recommends that a strategy for 14-19 education be developed that considers all aspects of education, including qualifications, to ensure provision is seamless and that the system provides a wide range of choices and flexibility.

UCAS' position as the central application service provides us with a unique insight into the way qualifications are used for progression into HE. We would be happy to discuss with DENI and DELNI how our data could inform the development of this future strategy.

We hope that our above comments have been of use to you and would happily elaborate on any points if required.

Annex A: Qualifications reform throughout the UK (based on current publically available information)

- **2013**
 - Graded Welsh Baccalaureate introduced (Wales).
 - First teaching of the new Scottish National 5 (Scotland).
 - Final January assessment for A levels in England.
- **2014**
 - A levels taught in England without January assessment.
 - First teaching of revised Apprenticeships in some areas (England).
 - First teaching of the revised Access to HE Diploma (England and Wales).
 - First teaching of vocational qualifications that meet the interim standard and count towards the 2016 and 2017 performance tables (England).
 - First teaching of the revised Scottish Higher (Scotland).
 - Technical Baccalaureate introduced. Reported in performance tables in January 2017 (England).
- **2015**
 - First teaching of revised Apprenticeships in remaining areas (England).
 - First teaching of revised A level qualifications in subjects that require minimal content change (England and Wales). **Confirmed subjects for England:** *English language and literature, the sciences, history, geography, psychology, art and design, sociology, business studies, economics and computing.*
 - First teaching of revised GCSE qualifications in English Language, English Literature and maths (England).
 - Revised Welsh Baccalaureate introduced (Wales).
 - First teaching of the revised Scottish Advanced Higher (Scotland).
- **2016**
 - First teaching of revised A levels and GCSEs in Northern Ireland (based on current proposals).
 - First teaching of vocational qualifications that meet the full standard and count towards the 2018 performance tables (England).
 - First teaching of revised A level qualifications for Maths and Further Maths (England).
 - First teaching of other GCSE subjects that have been consulted on (England).