

Consultation response

Department of Education, Northern Ireland – Potential short term changes to A levels

UCAS' mission is to help learners make informed higher education (HE) choices that best suit their aspirations and abilities and maximise their opportunity for success, and to benefit our members through the provision of shared services. UCAS provides information and advice on courses and entry requirements, and admissions services to around 650,000 applicants to over 350 UK HE providers each year. These applicants make over 2 million applications to HE courses. Our services support applications for full-time HNCs, HNDs and foundation degrees as well as undergraduate and some postgraduate degrees.

UCAS has remained engaged in the debate surrounding qualification reform throughout the UK and welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation on the short term plans for A levels in Northern Ireland. UCAS recognises that A levels are the predominant qualification used by UK learners for progression to HE, therefore it is important that any changes made to the qualification are carefully considered to ensure that the reputation of these qualifications is upheld.

UCAS data shows the importance of A levels to Northern Ireland domiciled students for progression to HE both in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. For example, in 2011 Northern Ireland domiciled applicants aged 18 and 19 made 71,700 choices¹. 52,265 (73%) of these were from applicants with three or more A level passes. 34% of these choices were made to institutions outside of Northern Ireland. In 2012 there were 19,377 Northern Ireland domiciled applicants with an acceptance rate of 68.6%. Just under 1/3 of these applicants were accepted to institutions in England, Wales or Scotland.

The above data indicates the importance of A levels for progression to HE not only in Northern Ireland, but also in the other devolved nations, therefore the maintenance of standards and comparability is key. We would be happy to discuss with the Department of Education how UCAS data can inform the review of GCSE and GCE A level qualifications in Northern Ireland.

UCAS response to the Ofqual A level reform consultation

UCAS has recently responded to the 2012 Ofqual consultation regarding the future development of A levels in England. A number of the considerations detailed in our consultation response are also applicable to the Northern Ireland consultation and we would suggest that our response to the Ofqual consultation is read in conjunction with our response to the Northern Ireland consultation.

The key points raised in our consultation response to Ofqual were:

- The A level is regarded as the main currency used within HE admissions and therefore maintaining consistency in standards across A level subjects and countries is essential.

¹ A choice is the course and institution that an applicant decides apply to. Applicants are able to make up to five choices in Apply. Applicants are also able to add an additional choice if they have used all five choices and not secured a place.

- The AS qualification is seen as valuable by institutions as a basis for selection, especially in conjunction with predicted grades. The AS is also valuable in allowing students to achieve a greater breadth of study.
- UCAS feels that the removal of the January resit window will create a more even playing field for HE applicants.
- Any engagement with HE in the development of A level content needs to be from a central group that contains representatives from across the HE sector. This group could help develop the agreed core content for each A level subject.
- The phased introduction of reformed A levels is likely to cause challenges for HE admissions tutors as they will need to consider how they will adapt to these new qualifications.
- If significant changes to subject specifications, structure, assessment and grading are to be introduced, we believe that the new qualifications should be piloted.

The UCAS full response to the Ofqual 2012 consultation on A level reform can be found here:

<http://www.ucas.ac.uk/documents/ucasofqualconsultationresponse.pdf>

We have the following specific points in relation to this consultation on Northern Ireland.

UK Divergence

UCAS notes the increasing divergence between the UK devolved nations in terms of qualifications, in particular in relation to AS and A levels. Although the extent of reforms to A levels are still being considered, it is possible that the reforms could result in fundamentally different AS and A level qualifications being offered in Northern Ireland, England and Wales. This could create significant challenges to HEIs, learners, advisers as well as for other stakeholders, such as employers who may be less familiar with intricacies of qualifications.

Consistency in standards is important across all of the UK nations to ensure that individuals have similar opportunities to study and work anywhere in the UK and hold qualifications which are internationally recognised and understood.

UCAS notes that the initial soundings from School Principals, as detailed in the consultation document, have stressed the importance of equal currency and value.

Previously Ofqual would have ensured standards and consistency across Northern Ireland, Wales and England, although its role in this respect is now less clear with the formation of Qualification Wales. If comparability and common standards cannot be assured, we believe that a new nomenclature and branding would be required to distinguish between the different types of AS and A levels to aid the understanding of learners, admissions staff, and employers.

UCAS notes that the consultation recognises this difficulty by saying “that the local Regulator should engage with universities and ensure at the point of accreditation that GCEs taken [in Northern Ireland] should be comparable in standard and demand to GCEs taken elsewhere.”

Timeline and Communications

Paragraph 5 of the consultation document indicates that there is the potential for further changes to A levels following the completion of the fundamental review of GCSEs and A levels in June 2013. Although the consultation document acknowledges that it would be “some time before these longer term changes are implemented” this may nevertheless result

in two tranches of changes over what in education and progression terms could be a relatively short period of time.

Students, teachers and advisers as well as higher education admissions staff need clarity about what and when changes are likely to happen, and ideally changes should be piloted prior to implementation. Agreed changes should be implemented for all subjects at the same time.

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 the Department of Education ways in which we can support the communication of any reforms.