

Consultation on Proposed Changes to CCEA GCSE AS and A-Level Qualifications for Summer 2021

INTO Response

Section 1 Public Health Adaptations

Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposals to implement public health adaptations to CCEA qualifications?

Public health adaptations are inevitable in the context of the pandemic. It is essential that CCEA actively seek out the views of centre leaders and subject teachers beyond this consultation to fully develop subject specific proposals and overarching principles guided by up to date and accurate public health advice. Following from that is the requirement for clear and open lines of communication between centres and CCEA throughout. Such an approach would allow for centres to make clear, accurate and timely decisions without fear of negative repercussions for the centre, staff or pupils. The inevitability of variance to the guidance is alluded to in the introduction to the consultation. Such recognition of a ‘fluid’ and ‘evolving’ situation is welcome but it must lead to improvements in the speed of response and guidance from CCEA which, to date, has caused serious difficulty for a workforce faced with a raft of additional tasks over and above their already onerous ‘normal’ workload.

In respect to public health adaptations, once these are made there should be no reintroduction of those elements of courses that are withdrawn should the public health situation improve to the point at which more ‘normal’ practices could be resumed during this academic year. Changes now which must also take into account the likely effect of these on the following academic year 2021/22.

Question: Do you have any comment on the proposed subject specific amendments?

INTO does not have any comment on subject specific amendments but expects that CCEA will take due cognisance of responses from teachers and other stakeholders in regard to the detailed, or not so detailed, proposed amendments. Suffice to say that there appear to be some inconsistencies as reported to INTO by members and the broad area of inconsistency is addressed elsewhere in this response.

2 Specification Order

Questions: To what extent do you agree or disagree that CCEA should provide guidance on the order of unit delivery in a specification?

INTO objects to any longer term reversal of any existing flexibility in the system, however in the current context of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the possibility of further disruption to in school delivery of content, guidance from CCEA to centres and staff on the order in which specifications will be delivered, where possible, may be useful. However, there may be subject specific reasons as outlined by specialists and centres that render this inappropriate in certain subject areas. In these areas it is vital to give clear guidance on the adaption of the schemes of work, as well as guidance on the adaption of assessments. That way, the teacher can make the best professional judgement on what order to deliver the course, taking into account prior learning and teaching as well as the ability of the students.

Again, it is crucial that any such decision is subject to review, constant monitoring and two-way communication between CCEA, centres and other stakeholders to identify potential and actualised problems and to react to these in a timely and constructive manner throughout.

Where it is claimed that it is not possible, as stated in the consultation document, to make the same arrangements for the Year 12 cohort, CCEA must be clear in regard to how problems arising will be dealt with across a range of potential foreseeable scenarios. The consultation proposals appear to be silent on this and it is a significant and problematic omission in planning.

Question: Could you suggest any other information that CCEA could provide that may assist delivery planning?

Actual plans for year 12 Specification Order to guide delivery and allow for potential future challenges including contingency planning based on a number of potential scenarios up to and including localised lockdowns, whole classes forced to isolate for periods of time or indeed another system wide ‘lockdown’. For instance, CCEA should be planning now for mechanisms by which centres record such absences with them in order to apply for some form of special consideration for students affected as described.

Additional advice or guidance on any changes of the weighting of topics in exams or the precedence of certain topics/material that will likely feature in assessment as a result of whatever adaptations are applied is required.

Such information must be provided as soon as possible to guide centres and staff in their practice. It is already beyond time when this should have happened.

3. AS and A Level Assessment Arrangements

Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with our proposal that in Summer 2021 students in the second year of their A level studies should be required to take A2 unit assessment only?

It is noted that students will continue to have the option of sitting AS examinations should they wish to do so and receive the higher grade based on the outcome of A2 examinations only or AS and A2 exams together. This may be welcome by some students and centres but the increased pressure of additional examinations, revision, preparation and so on may well lead to teachers coming under pressure from parents and managers to prepare pupils for additional examinations that seem to be superfluous to requirements in most cases. It should be recognised by CCEA that there are contractual limits to teachers working time. This will necessarily be reflected in the ability of centres and staff to provide the additional support that would be required to prepare students adequately for AS examinations alongside those for A2.

On balance the option to sit AS levels in Year 14 may, in most cases, be more problematic than simply using the A2 examinations to calculate the overall grades for summer 2021. The option should remain but workload issues for teachers and students, coupled with the additional challenges to their wellbeing that could result must be borne in mind.

INTO welcomes CCEA recognition of the need to keep such arrangements under review but calls on such review to be regular, transparent and inclusive of centres and practitioners with any changes being communicated in good time.

Question: Other than public health adaptations (outlined in Appendix D) do you think course content should remain largely unchanged at AS and A Level at this time?

Broadly speaking it is preferable to leave content as it is and it should remain unchanged at this time, however this must remain under review in the context of the wider public health situation and contingency planning to prepare for a range of foreseeable challenges must begin immediately. Such planning should involve centres, practitioners and their representative organisations including Trade Unions.

Question: Do you have any additional comments on the proposed arrangements for CCEA AS and A level qualifications?

A number of schools have already experienced pupils and teachers having to self isolate during the early part of this term. This is likely to continue. There is no detailed planning in regard to how such disruptions can be mitigated in terms of adaptation to AS and A-Level assessments. Add to this a lack of a clear plan in relation to blended learning having yet been provided to centres and practitioners, serious vagaries in the availability of the required technology for such learning to take place across the jurisdiction and there is a serious mismatch in rhetoric around contingency planning and the actuality of such planning in any meaningful and practical sense . This gap must be addressed without delay.

4. Changes to Assessment at GCSE

Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed approach that, where omission of a unit is possible, CCEA should specify the GCSE units to be taken, with the intention of ensuring consistency, as far as possible, for schools and colleges?

In the interests of uniformity across the system it is likely to be useful for CCEA to specify required examination units, notwithstanding any issues that may be highlighted in individual specifications by centres and specialists. From a teacher workload point of view such guidance is required as soon as possible. It cannot be stressed enough that teachers are currently teaching specifications without the guidance in place and that this situation has been allowed to develop is a matter of serious concern to INTO.

Question: Do you have any comments on CCEA specifying required examination units for GCSE specifications?

There appear to be inconsistencies across specifications which raise questions about impact on workload for teachers and fairness for students in some subject areas. It appears that specifications offered by other awarding bodies have implemented reductions in subject areas in which CCEA have not. There could be ramifications in this in terms of entries for the incoming academic year. CCEA should remain responsive and open with practitioners throughout with a view to adapting courses where obvious problems and issues arise throughout the coming year and beyond.

From the beginning of their secondary education, students are encouraged to strive for a minimum of five GCSE A*-C grades including English and Math, yet by reducing the content of most other GCSE courses and retaining the significant content of the core subjects of English and Maths, we are limiting students' chances of attaining the five A*-C including English and Maths. Additionally,

reducing the content of other GCSE courses but retaining the content of English and Maths pertains to severe inconsistency across GCSE courses and compromises the integrity of a GCSE grade.

Question To what extent do you agree or disagree that the total amount of any qualification adjustment in 2020/21 should not exceed 40% of the examination?

Concerns have been expressed by INTO members that not all specification content has been amended, so the mitigations in terms of workload and additional stresses on teachers and students are not being uniformly addressed.

Question: Do you have any comments on the arrangements for limiting the amount of change to 40% of the total assessment?

This would be the most equitable way of dealing with the potential loss of teaching time. The 40% removal could be calculated on the basis of other completed tasks, much like the equations that used to be applied had a student missed an external exam due to illness.

Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the 2021 exams should not include more optional questions than usual?

One potential solution to the loss of teaching and learning time caused by the ‘lockdown’ and now exacerbated by lack of guidance in the early weeks of the new term is to ensure that all units, modules and so on are included on exam papers and other assessments as options, ensuring that no teaching and learning time is wasted. This might have allowed for the ‘flexible approach taken by some schools to date’ to be catered for and would go some way to leaving options open in the event of further disruption to centres in the year ahead. While the theory of prescribing the order in which units are delivered is generally fine, the practice in centres with different types of pupils is likely to lead to difficulties for some centres more so than others in doing so.

The reasoning in the consultation appears to assume that there will be no further disruption and that the entire content will be taught. While this is what all parties would want it is not realistic and while it may be reasonable at this point to take this approach this option should be kept open in the likely event of ongoing disruption to teaching and learning.

Question: Do you have any additional comments regarding GCSE arrangements considered in this section?

Whatever the agreed changes are they must be communicated to centres and staff as soon as possible. Future changes must be dealt with in a more timely manner and be guided by practitioners.

INTO reiterates throughout that planning for a number of potential scenarios is crucial.

5. GCSE English Language and Mathematics

Question: Do you think that students should be assessed in all elements of GCSE English and Mathematics?

Ideally this would be the case, however, we are very far from the ‘ideal’ at present and contingencies must be in place to mitigate the effect of further disruption to teaching and learning and to minimise the impact on teacher workload. The content of these subjects is already heavy and challenging to students and teachers in terms of timely delivery.

A range of serious challenges and disruptions will be caused by this proposal. For instance, there are 8 units in Maths. Pupils must complete one from M1-M4 (45%) and one from M5-M8 (55%). Schools decide the order of papers. Few schools choose to complete them in the one year and those who do are generally completing it early to do Further Maths in Year 12. The vast majority of non-selective schools entered pupils for M5-M8 units last year. We were informed in June that we would therefore need to cover the other unit (M1-M4) this year.

Schools have therefore written a scheme, produced material and planned teaching for the academic year based on this. The content heavy course means schools are always tight for time so there is no possible way they can finish last years' unit alongside teaching this years' unit and revise for both in preparation for examinations in Summer 2021. This will be a cause of undue stress for learners and teachers.

CCEA rightly recognises the centrality and importance of numeracy and literacy as vital life skills, skills for work and passports to career progression. However, appearing to try to carry on with 'business as usual' in these subject areas is puzzling at best.

There is an opportunity here, in part, to engage with FE, HE, apprenticeship providers, employers and trade unions with a view to establishing new and more effective practices with regard to developing numeracy and literacy skills for life and for the workplace that is long overdue. There has traditionally been an over emphasis on Maths and English as indicators of 'success' in examinations which has ignored the talents, abilities and achievements of countless young people who may have struggled in these areas yet excelled in others. Shared responsibility for developing and enhancing these skills is possible in the short term if the will is there among DE, CCEA, FE, HE and employers' groups.

It is undeniable that learners and those entering the workforce need the skills developed through Mathematics and English, however, the high stakes nature of failure to achieve a C grade or above in these subjects at the age of 16 closes career paths and limits life chances before many of those who 'failed' have had a chance to reach their full educational potential. Employers and Higher Education institutions, alongside government, also have a role to play in developing the functional and employment specific literacy and numeracy skills across the workforce and society generally.

The decision to leave these specifications unaltered seems to run counter to the theory behind every other proposed course of action in this consultation and speaks largely to a lack of imagination and looking at the 'bigger picture' and a system of education and assessment or indeed of access to FE, HE and the workplace beyond the traditional that the system has become wedded to. INTO would welcome involvement in discussion and planning for a fit for purpose system of assessment beyond the narrow remit of this consultation.

Question: Do you have any additional comments regarding students being fully assessed on all elements of these qualifications?

This is likely to have a disproportionate impact on the workload of teachers delivering these specifications. The lack of detailed planning to mitigate for this and for the possibility of further disruption is cause for concern to INTO and must be addressed immediately.

6. Equality

Question: Please outline any potential equality impacts which you feel we should consider

While it is not covered under the terms of the relevant legislation in Northern Ireland socio economic inequality remains the primary cause of educational disparity in our society. CCEA should not disregard the major impact that such deprivation has on educational outcomes on students from such backgrounds. This is the case not only through COVID-19 but moving forward. The current system of assessment disproportionately disadvantages deprived communities and is therefore in need of overhaul and reconstruction.

In terms of those learners with protected characteristics, it is foreseeable that some of those covered under the terms of the Disability Discrimination Act may be more severely impacted by the proposed arrangements and CCEA should consider additional adjustments as a result.

Given the widely publicised increased risk that COVID-19 poses to BAME communities CCEA should consider the impact and potential mitigations for learners from BAME backgrounds.

Additional mitigations for BAME and students likely to fall under DDA and SEN related legislation must be identified, considered, and implemented where required.

Also, while not covered under equality legislation, inequitable access to technology at home, including a wide variance of decent broadband access across this jurisdiction and particularly rural areas, caused either by poor infrastructure and/ or socio economic disadvantage, must be considered and addressed.

7. Summary

Question: Do you have any other comments you would like to make regarding the consultation proposals or any other potential changes to qualifications?

INTO is first and foremost concerned with the impact of changes to assessment arrangements on the workload of our members. This in turn has implications for industrial relations in centres, health and wellbeing of our members and so on.

The chaos caused to the present suite of qualifications offered by CCEA by the lockdown has exposed a fragile and outdated mode of assessment in this jurisdiction and should result in a root and branch review of qualifications aimed at producing a fit for purpose, modern and robust system that meets the human and economic needs of learners and society and which opens more career pathways, not fewer, as students progress through it.