

A comparison of Graded Examinations in Music, Dance and Drama with relevant GCSEs and A levels

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Section 1: Summary

The report investigates the key differences and similarities between GCSEs/A levels and graded examinations, including wider factors such as assessment methodology and modes of delivery. It also questions whether there is a relationship between the two qualification types and whether the qualifications offer skills, knowledge and understanding that are complementary.

The report draws several conclusions as follows:

- Whilst there are a number of differences between the qualification types, there are also ways in which they are complementary and can be studied together by students.
- The key difference lies in the breadth of study of a GCSE and A level compared with the narrow but deeper focus of a graded examination.
- The key area of similarity is in the content covering technique and performance and contextual and historical aspects.
- There are also other factors that need to be considered in comparing the two types of qualifications, namely the mode of study and the mode of assessment.

Section 2: Introduction

It may seem that comparing a graded examination to a GCSE or an A level is like comparing ‘chalk and cheese’. The qualifications have different aims and objectives, target audiences, and models of delivery and assessment. While inevitably there are areas of overlap between them in terms of the skills, knowledge and understanding they demand, the qualifications usefully complement each other to provide breadth and depth for learners. The skills, knowledge and understanding gained in one qualification enhance the study of another.

No formal relationship exists between school-based examinations and graded examinations (which tend to be entered by candidates independently), although there was a relationship prior to the introduction of GCSEs in 1986 for music. Despite the many thousands of students in the UK who have taken both qualifications within the same discipline, this report is the first to make a detailed comparison between the content of the different qualifications in order to establish more firmly their similarities and differences. It considers the background and development of both types of qualifications and looks in more detail at their objectives, content and assessment criteria, in order to determine which of these aspects can be considered comparable in terms of the outcome and level expected.

There have been a number of instances where qualifications have been combined as part of a coherent programme of study. In the past, work has been carried out to make formal connections between subject areas. For example during 2004 to 2008 a joint project by the Adult Basic Skills Unit of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) sought to ‘embed’ Key and Basic Skills qualifications into vocational provision through establishing appropriate links in delivery and assessment. There are also numerous instances of curriculum mapping, both on a national basis (carried out by the QCA amongst others) and on a local basis by schools and colleges.

The report does not attempt to compare assessment methodologies in detail, although there are references to assessment within the report. This is because assessment methods will vary between qualifications, particularly where multiple awarding organisations offer GCSEs and A levels in the same subject area.

The report considers only written documentation, so any judgements made about level and outcome are based on written evidence from qualification specifications and assessment information. No attempt has been made to compare the qualifications in terms of the way they are implemented in practice, such as a comparability study of performance standards over time and across awarding organisations.

Section 3: Background and development of GCSEs, A levels and graded examinations in music, dance and drama

3.1 Background of GCSEs

GCSEs were introduced in 1986 as a replacement for the O level and CSE examinations taken by 14-16 year olds in schools. They follow the requirements of the National Curriculum at Key Stage 4 and are available in a wide variety of subjects. Students will normally take a range of subjects as part of their Key Stage 4 study. The number of subjects taken varies between students and the schools they attend, but it is usual for students to take around 8 subjects including English, mathematics and a science.

GCSEs are offered by a small number of awarding organisations who design and develop the qualifications in accordance with strict requirements set out by the Department of Education (DfE) and Ofqual, the regulator for qualifications in England. Other UK countries have their own versions of GCSEs (for example, Northern Ireland and more recently, Wales) and Scotland has its own set of distinct qualifications for the schools market.

Since their introduction, GCSEs have undergone numerous changes by successive governments. Most recently there have been changes to subject content, assessment criteria and assessment methodology. A new grading system has also been introduced adjusting the current system of A*-G to grades 1-9.

GCSEs are located at levels 1 and 2 in the qualifications framework level descriptors with the highest grades showing achievement at level 2 and lower grades showing achievement at level 1.

At the time of writing this report, GCSEs in music, dance and drama have all been subject to changes in content and assessment due for introduction from 2016. The comparisons of content detailed in this report are based on the most up to date information available. For music and dance the substance is taken from the recently agreed subject content published by the Department for Education, and the assessment objectives are taken from the agreed objectives published by Ofqual (both dated January 2015). The drama subject content and assessment objectives are still the focus of consultation as of early 2015 so the comparison is based on the subject criteria published by Ofqual in 2011.

Currently the following awarding organisations offer GCSEs in music, dance and/or drama as well as related subjects:

- Music—offered by WJEC, OCR, Edexcel, CCEA and AQA
- Dance—offered by AQA
- Drama—offered by WJEC, OCR, Edexcel, CCEA and AQA
- Performing Arts—offered by WJEC and AQA (AQA will not be offering this qualification after 2017)

3.2 Background of A levels

A level qualifications have been in existence in one form or another since the 1950s and were introduced at the same time as O levels. They are intended to be taken by 16-18 year olds in schools or colleges after GCSEs. Students normally study a narrower range of subjects at A level than GCSE, as the A level is designed to facilitate a more in-depth study of a subject. A levels are available in a wide variety of subjects.

A levels have been through a number of substantial developments since they were introduced. The most notable change was the introduction of Curriculum 2000 which split the A level into two separate qualifications. The AS level was designed to be taken in the first year with students moving on to A2 in

the second year, with the full A level achieved over both years. The rationale for the change was to encourage more students to take a broader range of study in the first year; it was also hoped that some students would take vocational qualifications alongside the AS levels. Typically a student took up to 5 AS levels in the first year, choosing their favourite three subjects for further study at A2.

In 2012, the Education Secretary Michael Gove expressed concern that Curriculum 2000 was encouraging too many re-sits by students wishing to obtain better grades for entry to Higher Education. Subsequently in 2013 after a period of consultation, A levels were reformed to become a single two-year qualification. AS levels are still available, but only in the form of stand-alone provision in their own right.

A levels have in recent years been the subject of controversy with accusations of “grade inflation” as results have continued to improve year on year. They have also been criticised for providing too narrow a field of study for students and for not providing the right foundation for the workplace or for higher education.

The government expects the recent reforms to A level to address the range of concerns which have been raised over the years.

Currently the following awarding organisations offer A levels in music, dance and/or drama and related subjects:

- Music—offered by WJEC, OCR, Edexcel and AQA
- Music Technology—offered by Edexcel
- Dance—offered by AQA
- Drama and Theatre Studies—offered by WJEC, Edexcel and AQA
- Applied Performing Arts—offered by Edexcel and OCR
- Performance Studies—offered by OCR

3.3 Background of Graded examinations

Graded examinations were originally developed as a means of providing a vehicle for the cultural development of young people by encouraging them to study a discipline in the arts. Students would progress from learning the most basic functions within their chosen subject to practising at a high technical level. A number of music, dance, speech and drama organisations were founded to formalise these study programmes by providing examinations—a number of these were linked closely to well-known music, dance and drama conservatoires or vocational schools.

Many of the organisations have existed for well over a hundred years, with LAMDA and Trinity College London amongst the longest running providers, having offered graded examinations since the 1870s. The largest provider of graded examinations in the UK, the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) was established by the Royal Academy of Music and the Royal College of Music in 1889.

The majority of graded examinations are taken by candidates who are privately funded either by themselves or their parents. This means that candidates have selected their chosen discipline and have invested in their studies independently of government policy and initiatives.

Graded examinations have also been closely linked with the school curriculum for a number of years, particularly with the National Curriculum programme of study for music, the programme of study for physical education, which includes dance, and the programme of study for English which includes speech and drama. Peripatetic teaching by private teachers (particularly in music) complements teaching and learning throughout the primary and secondary curriculum where this option is available in schools.

Graded examinations are based on a model of “progressive mastery”. This means that students develop and demonstrate skills in a specific discipline which increase in technical difficulty and complexity as they progress up the levels. Once the skills at one level have been mastered, the student moves on to the next. Students are tested when ready throughout the year, so they can take the amount of time that is appropriate for them to master one stage before progressing.

A number of awarding organisations offer graded examinations in music, dance, and speech and drama which are available through the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and recognised by Ofqual and the Welsh Government (further, graded examinations offered by the Royal Academy of Dance and Rockschoool are also accredited in Scotland by the Scottish Qualifications Authority). These are:

Graded examinations in music

- Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music
- Trinity College London
- Rockschoool Ltd
- London College of Music (recognised as the University of West London)

Graded examinations in dance

- British Ballet Organization
- Graded Qualifications Alliance (incorporating the British Theatre Dance Association and working in partnership with United Teachers of Dance)
- Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing
- Royal Academy of Dance
- International Dance Teachers’ Association
- National Association of Teachers of Dancing
- Rockschoool Ltd. (working in partnership with the Spanish Dance Society, the Russian Ballet Society, the Professional Teachers of Dancing and the United Kingdom Alliance)
- Trinity College London

NB. All the organisations above are Validated by the Council for Dance Education and Training (CDET). The British Association of Teachers of Dancing (BATD) is also a CDET Validated awarding organisation but is not yet regulated in England, Wales or Scotland.

Graded examinations in speech and drama

- English Speaking Board
- London College of Music
- London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art
- New Era Academy
- Trinity College London

Section 4: Overview of the relationship between graded examinations, GCSEs and A levels

There is no formal relationship between graded examinations, GCSEs and A levels; however there are numerous examples and anecdotal evidence of students studying towards GCSEs or A levels and graded examinations simultaneously. This usually happens in schools and colleges where a programme of peripatetic teaching of graded examinations is offered as an extracurricular or enhancement activity. Students who are already following a graded examination syllabus may take the relevant GCSE or A level to complement this in-depth study. There are also numerous examples of students taking private lessons with a teacher to support preparation towards a relevant GCSE or A level.

There is also a relationship between the disciplines of music, dance, and speech and drama, and the national curriculum programmes of study.

The programme of study for Key Stage 3 Music states that the aims of the national curriculum for music are to ensure that *“all pupils:*

- *perform, listen to, review and evaluate music across a range of historical periods, genres, styles and traditions, including the works of the great composers and musicians*
- *learn to sing and to use their voices, to create and compose music on their own and with others, have the opportunity to learn a musical instrument, use technology appropriately and have the opportunity to progress to the next level of musical excellence*
- *understand and explore how music is created, produced and communicated, including through the inter-related dimensions: pitch, duration, dynamics, tempo, timbre, texture, structure and appropriate musical notations”.*

The English programme of study at Key Stage 4 states that as part of the requirements for spoken English *“pupils should be taught to speak confidently, audibly and effectively, including through improvising, rehearsing and performing play scripts and poetry in order to generate language and discuss language use and meaning, using role, intonation, tone, volume, mood, silence, stillness and action to add impact”.*

The programme of study for Physical Education at Key Stage 4 states that, amongst other things, *“pupils should be taught to develop their technique and improve their performance in other competitive sports (for example, athletics and gymnastics), or other physical activities (for example, dance).”*

Current specifications for GCSEs and A levels do not make specific reference to graded examinations. This is because they are designed to be open to any student wishing to study the selected subject. However there have in the past been references to graded examinations in some specifications: for example, the UCAS Expert Group report confirming how graded music examinations should be recognised in the UCAS Tariff highlights that the Edexcel specification, at the time, for GCE Music stated that *“The qualifications have been designed on the assumption that they are available to everyone who can achieve the required standard. However, it is recommended that students embarking on the course should have shown themselves capable of operating at a level of practice and understanding equivalent to that required for one of the higher grades in GCSE Music. They should be able to perform to a standard roughly equivalent to a pass at Grade IV.”*¹

¹ Source: report of the Expert Group established to consider the role of graded examinations in music in the UCAS tariff www.ucas.ac.uk

Section 5: Comparison of requirements for GCSEs and graded examinations

5.1 Introduction

This section will look in more detail at the requirements for relevant GCSEs and the related graded examination syllabuses.

For Music and Dance the requirements are drawn from the subject content documents published by the Department for Education which have been produced following the most recent consultations. The first qualifications based on this content will be available in 2016.

For Drama the requirements have been drawn from the subject criteria published by Ofqual in 2011. New subject criteria are under consultation and final versions have not yet been published at the time of writing this report.

The following exemplar syllabuses and specifications for graded examinations have been used in the comparison process:

For Music

- The specification for graded examinations in music performance from the London College of Music (University of West London).
- The specification for graded music theory examinations from the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM).

For Dance

- The specification for graded and vocational graded examinations from the Royal Academy of Dance.

For Drama and Speech

- The specification for graded examinations from LAMDA.

5.1.1 Content and assessment

Each set of qualifications has a detailed listing in a separate appendix. There are appendices for music, dance, and speech and drama.

The qualifications are compared under the following headings with extracts included from the relevant subject criteria or specifications. The headings have been put together using key elements from the subject criteria and through consideration of how best to make comparisons and draw conclusions. It should be noted that the subject criteria will be used by awarding organisations to construct qualifications and therefore content and skills detailed in the subject criteria will be assessed through a variety of means including practical and written assessment. The categories have therefore been constructed to allow the author to draw broad comparisons based on the information in the subject criteria and the specifications.

These headings are:

- a) Qualification aims and objectives
- b) Content (divided into the following sub-headings)

- Practical
- Theoretical understanding
- Historical and contextual understanding
- c) Assessment (divided into the following sub-headings)
 - Practical
 - Knowledge and understanding

The extracts included in the appendices are drawn from a range of publicly available sources. The websites used are listed in the Bibliography. References to subject criteria and assessment objectives have been made as they form the basis of awarding organisation specifications. Individual specifications will however vary in format, style and the manner in which information about delivery, content and assessment is expressed.

Similarly, there is a variety of specifications available from those awarding organisations offering graded examinations. These all follow the progressive mastery route and are assessed using external examiners and a performance based examination (except for music theory). There may be differences in the way in which requirements are set out in various syllabuses with similar content expressed according to stylistic preferences depending on awarding organisation.

However, awarding organisations for the most part use a common set of units which have been developed for the QCF and contain learning outcomes and assessment criteria for each graded examination. Where appropriate, the learning outcomes and assessment criteria from these units have been used to demonstrate the assessment requirements.

5.2 Comparison of overarching aims and objectives for GCSEs and graded examinations

At first glance, the relevant graded examination and GCSE appear to have very few similarities. For example:

- Graded examinations are almost all taught and examined outside of or in addition to the school curriculum, whereas the GCSE is the main qualification used in mainstream education for learners at Key Stage 4 (typically aged 14-16).
- Graded examinations are open to students of all ages, although the typical age range of candidates at Grades 4 and 5 is between 12 and 16 years old. By contrast, a GCSE is specifically targeted at the 14 to 16 age group in the mainstream school sector.
- Graded examinations are focused on the study of a specific genre (e.g. Classical music or Jazz) or performance discipline (e.g. Ballet or Tap) whereas a GCSE considers a wider breadth of subject study.
- Graded examinations can be taken when the student is ready on a “roll on, roll off” basis, similar to a driving test. A GCSE can only be taken at certain points in the academic year—usually at the end of a programme of teaching and learning devised by the school which is based on the subject requirements.

However, a relationship can be found within the content and assessment of the two qualification types.

5.3 Making a comparative analysis of the qualifications

5.3.1 Level

The following qualifications have been chosen for comparison based on their level in the current framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Table 1 highlights the location of relevant qualifications at levels 1 and 2. GCSE has historically been awarded at levels 1 and 2, with the results

awarded split between the levels. Higher attainment is awarded at level 2 and lower attainment at level 1.

Table 1 – Comparison of GCSEs to graded examinations by level

Level	GCSE/A level	Graded examinations
1	GCSE grades 1-3 (<i>D-G</i>)	Grades 1-3
2	GCSE grades 4-9 (<i>A*-C</i>)	Grades 4 and 5 Dance Intermediate Foundation
3	A level all grades	Grades 6-8 Dance Intermediate and Advanced Foundation
4	Higher education	Music and Speech & Drama diplomas Dance Advanced 1 and 2

Graded examinations offer multiple qualifications within framework levels to facilitate the progressive mastery model. Level 2 encompasses both Grades 4 and 5. In Dance ‘vocational graded examinations’ which offer a route for dancers wishing to progress to further training are also awarded at levels 2, 3 and 4.

For the purposes of this comparison, GCSE will be compared at level 2 with Grades 4 and 5. Where a particular descriptor defines a specific level of graded examination only, this assumption will be stated in the comparison table.

5.3.2 Assessment methodology

Graded examinations and GCSEs differ significantly in the method and style of assessment. Graded examinations are usually assessed when the candidate is ready—so students are entered for assessment throughout the year. Assessment for performance related graded examinations involves practical tests. The only exception to this is music theory where the assessment is in a written format.

By contrast, a GCSE could be subject to a variety of assessment methods as theory and practice can be assessed in a number of ways.

There may also be differences between the styles of written and practical assessment. For example, a graded examination is always a practical ‘time-bound’ examination which is assessed by an examiner who is appointed, trained and standardised by the awarding organisation. Each examiner for graded examinations typically examines hundreds of candidates throughout the year leading to a high degree of reliability. GCSEs may be assessed in a variety of ways including externally moderated internal assessments, externally assessed written or practical examinations and/or coursework (NB coursework is less likely to be used in the new specifications) with appropriate checks and systems in place.

Assessment is also affected by the style of delivery for study-courses leading to graded examinations and GCSE. Whereas a GCSE programme is a set length based on the academic year (from September to July) with fixed assessment ‘windows’, a graded examination can be taken at any point in the year i.e. when a student is ready to do so. This means that there is usually a low failure rate for graded examinations as it is generally expected that a candidate has reached the required standard before entering for assessment. By contrast, students taking GCSE have to undergo assessments as dictated by the examination window, whether they are prepared or not. Further, graded examination results are based solely on the outcomes from the single assessment event, whereas GCSE “raw” marks will be subject to a degree of norm-referencing as part of the awarding process.

5.3.3 Grading

GCSEs and graded examinations are awarded according to different attainment scales.

GCSE students can be awarded one of a range of attainment bands, which are historically represented by an alphabetical letter—with A* being the most successful and G the least. Recent government changes mean that GCSEs and A levels will in the future be awarded using a numerical system with 9 being the highest grade and 1 the lowest. This reflects the broad range of students entering GCSEs and the fact that it is the main qualification offered in schools to 16 year olds. At GCSE, a 'C' result has traditionally been acknowledged as an acceptable standard of achievement in school performance tables.

Graded examinations are awarded as pass, merit and distinction. A key difference between the award of graded examinations and GCSE is that, as a skills-focused assessment, the graded examination is assessed in such a way that the mark awarded reflects the cumulative balance of strengths and weaknesses that the candidate has demonstrated, taking into account the overall quality of the response in each activity. GCSE content is broader meaning that a range of assessment methodologies is needed including written assessment alongside practical assessment. This means that the qualification is usually awarded according to a combination of elements whilst still being based on the principle of compensatory assessment.

During earlier discussions with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) it was recommended that all awarding organisations offering graded examinations should follow a similar grading methodology to promote comparability. Consequently the majority of awarding organisations offering graded examinations have adopted this methodology. As the qualifications are normally entered at a time when students are ready, the number not achieving a pass is usually small.

5.4 Comparing GCSE and graded examinations in music performance

Appendix A shows a comparative table for music qualifications. The left hand column includes the subject criteria and assessment objectives as set out by the Department for Education and Ofqual. The text in the right hand column is taken from the specification offered by London College of Music (University of West London).

5.4.1 Aims and objectives

The aims and objectives for GCSE show the breadth of study required of students, demonstrating musicianship skills through performing, composing and appraising. The aims and objectives of the London College of Music examinations relate not only to the acquisition of skills, knowledge and understanding but also to the method of assessment as a means of providing an appropriate measure of the quality of performance. The aims also cover broader skills such as being able to plan and organise own work, etc.

5.4.2 Content—practical

The GCSE focuses on generic musicianship skills although these are quite detailed in description covering tonality, tempo and dynamics. The content for graded examinations focuses on the assessment event and therefore explains each stage of the examination process, typically containing technical work, performance, aural tests and sight-reading.

The content of graded examinations focuses primarily on the mastery of a specific instrument and the ability to play repertoire on that instrument at a set level as well as an overall demonstration of musicianship through supporting tests. The candidate is expected to perform with assurance and

commitment, and to communicate musical character and style in a short programme of varied repertoire – usually consisting of three contrasted pieces. These performance skills are supplemented by a range of additional skills, including the ability to play scales and arpeggios and to sight-read. These supplementary activities are, in effect, ‘applied theory’, as they rely on the candidate’s knowledge and understanding of the rudiments of music theory whilst projecting these in a performance context.

5.4.3 Content—theoretical understanding

The subject criteria for GCSE include specific detail about the reading and writing of notation as well as general knowledge and understanding of musical requirements. The graded examination assesses theoretical, notational and contextual understanding through the viva voce, and knowledge and understanding of music notation and musical processes are also implicit within the aural tests.

5.4.4 Content—historical and contextual understanding

Both qualifications require an understanding of historical and contextual aspects of music. However there are some differences in approach. The GCSE requires an understanding of a wide range of musical contexts in relation to the effect and intention of composers and performers across a varied range of genres, such as those within popular, world and folk music. Although not specified, it is likely that this area would be assessed in a written format. The graded examination however covers historical and contextual understanding, to some extent, as part of a viva voce—during which the candidate explores aspects of their study with the examiner. This discussion focuses on the chosen instrument and pieces performed in the examination, including the ability to communicate style within performance, understanding of musical context and the interpretation of notation, such as ornamentation, rubato and swing.

5.4.5 Assessment—practical

The graded examination is assessed by practical means, largely through performance, with supporting tests, such as sight-reading, technical work and aural skills accounting for a significant proportion of the overall marks. Although the GCSE subject criteria does not specify how the assessment objectives will be assessed, it is likely that AO1 (performing) and AO2 (composing) will be made up of a mixture of practical and written assessment where students demonstrate their knowledge and understanding through performance and in written form.

There are similarities in the requirements for performance with both qualification types demanding that students demonstrate a degree of technique and control on their chosen instrument.

5.4.6 Assessment—knowledge and understanding

GCSE assessment objectives AO2, AO3 and AO4 are likely to cover elements of knowledge and understanding as well as practical skills. These cover composing, the demonstration and application of musical knowledge as well as the ability to evaluate and make ‘critical judgements about music’.

The graded examination requires students to demonstrate ‘synthesis of theoretical, notational and contextual knowledge’ but given the weightings of various assessment components this is focussed almost entirely on the performance element with a small part explored through the viva voce.

5.4.7 Conclusion

Whilst there are differences in approach, both qualification types contain a significant focus on the performance of music to a high standard of technical proficiency and musical communication. Both qualifications also require a secure appreciation of music theory. The key differences are in:

- The breadth of content where the GCSE assumes a broad musical study across different genres and the graded examination focuses almost exclusively on performance of varied repertoire, on a specific instrument.
- The method of assessment in which the GCSE also contains written assessment.
- The amount of content being assessed. In the GCSE, music theory is an explicit assessment outcome whereas in the graded performance examination, appreciation of music theory is covered through the viva voce and to some extent, in performance, technical work and sight-reading.

5.5 Comparing GCSE and graded examinations in music theory

Appendix B shows a comparative table for the GCSE and the graded examination in music theory. The left hand column includes the subject criteria and assessment objectives as set out by the Department for Education and Ofqual. The text in the right hand column is taken from the syllabus offered by the ABRSM.

5.5.1 Aims and objectives

The aims and objectives for GCSE illustrate the breadth of study required of students. They are expected to demonstrate musicianship skills through performing, composing and appraising. The aims and objectives of the ABRSM written examinations relate solely to the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of music theory, although this does include an element of composition (typically accounting for 15% of the overall marks).

5.5.2 Content—practical

The GCSE focuses on generic musicianship skills although these are quite detailed covering tonality, tempo and dynamics. The content of the graded examination is focussed on knowledge and understanding of music theory, therefore there is no performance expectation.

5.5.3 Content—theoretical understanding

The subject criteria for GCSE include specific details about the reading and writing of notation as well as general knowledge and understanding of musical requirements. The graded examination focuses entirely on the study of music theory. From the content described for both qualifications, it appears that the requirements for ABRSM music theory are higher at Grade 4 than those for the GCSE. For example, the graded examination requires knowledge of alto, bass and treble clefs as well as key signatures to 5 sharps and flats, whereas the GCSE only requires 4 sharps and flats.

5.5.4 Content—historical and contextual understanding

The GCSE requires an understanding of musical contexts particularly in relation to the effect and intention of composers and performers. This is enabled partly through the study of set works during the course of study. The written graded examination, which is not predicated on a course of study of a set duration or of a given curriculum, does not cover historical understanding (up to Grade 5), as it focuses on notational aspects of music theory and does not require specific stylistic awareness to be demonstrated.

5.5.5 Assessment—practical

Although the GCSE subject criteria does not specify how the assessment objectives will be assessed, it is likely that AO1 (performing) and AO2 (composing) will be made up of a mixture of practical and written assessment where students demonstrate their knowledge and understanding both through performance and in written form.

The graded examination in music theory does not assess performance.

5.5.6 Assessment—knowledge and understanding

GCSE assessment objectives AO2, AO3 and AO4 are likely to cover elements of knowledge and understanding as well as practical skills. These cover composing, the demonstration and application of musical knowledge as well as the ability to evaluate and make ‘critical judgements about music’.

The comparison of assessment can only be related to objective AO3 of the GCSE which requires students to ‘demonstrate and apply musical knowledge’. This is because the graded examination requirements are specific to the knowledge and understanding of music theory as described in the QCF unit for Grade 4 music theory available on Ofqual’s Register of Regulated Qualifications. The graded examination is a purely written assessment.

5.5.7 Conclusion

These two qualifications can only be compared in terms of the content relating to music theory, knowledge and understanding, although this is only a part (less than half) of the GCSE. The key difference is in the breadth of study—the GCSE is a broad based qualification covering performance, composing, knowledge and critical evaluation. The graded examination is concerned with the knowledge and understanding of music theory, especially relating to the notation of art music of the Western classical tradition. Through the activity of rhythm and melody writing, there is also an element of composition in ABRSM’s music theory exams.

A student taking graded examinations in both music performance and music theory would demonstrate greater coverage of the GCSE content as this would mean that knowledge and understanding, as well as performance skills, would be explicitly assessed. It is worth noting that a candidate wishing to study ABRSM graded examinations in performance above grade 5 is required to have achieved a grade 5 music theory qualification. In this way, students provide evidence of both musical performance and knowledge to be able to progress to higher grades. ABRSM’s syllabuses state that ‘a thorough understanding of the elements of music is essential for a full and satisfying performance at these higher grades.’

5.6 Comparing GCSE and graded examinations in dance

Appendix C shows a comparative table for dance qualifications. The left hand column includes the subject criteria and assessment objectives as set out by the Department for Education and Ofqual. The text in the right hand column is taken from the specification offered by the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD).

A comparison of the content and assessment shows the following:

5.6.1 Aims and objectives

The aim of the GCSE is to enable students to learn to choreograph, perform and appreciate dance as an art form. This holistic engagement with dance informs their development as creative and artistic individuals and broadens their aesthetic, social and cultural experience.

The aims and objectives stated for the graded examination offered by the RAD cover not only the development of technical skills and competence in a specific genre, but also the ability to participate in and enjoy dance as well as the development of personal skills such as confidence.

5.6.2 Content—practical

The graded examination is assessed only by practical performance so elements of knowledge and understanding are covered implicitly rather than explicitly. The graded examination is also designed to test knowledge, understanding and skills in a specific genre.

The GCSE on the other hand offers a much broader based programme of study with a range of dance styles and style fusions being covered.

5.6.3 Content—theoretical understanding

There is no specific content in the graded examination relating to theoretical understanding. There is content in the GCSE specification offered by AQA in the written examination paper.

In both qualifications, this is implicit in the requirements for practical performance. Students must have an understanding and knowledge of dance in order to be able to perform to a certain standard.

5.6.4 Content—historical and contextual understanding

The GCSE contains specific content about the appreciation of dance, through the study of two or more professional works by two or more choreographers which reflect different styles of dance and different approaches to choreography—as well as critical appreciation and analysis of own and others performance. The subject criteria additionally contain a requirement for written communication.

In contrast, the graded examination does not contain explicit information about contextual understanding although students studying dance (in this instance ballet) are likely to have some knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the historical and contextual aspects of the genre that they are performing.

5.6.5 Assessment—practical

Both qualifications contain performance and practical demonstration. The graded examination is exclusively practical whilst the GCSE assessment is split between 60% practical and 40% written assessment.

5.6.6 Assessment—knowledge and understanding

The GCSE contains four assessment objectives, two of which are related to practical application of knowledge and understanding through performance and choreography (equally weighted), and two of which are related to knowledge and understanding demonstrated through a written examination.

The graded examination is assessed entirely through practical performance so there is no specific requirement for knowledge and understanding to be evidenced separately.

5.6.7 Conclusion

Both qualifications contain requirements about the ability to perform dance and expectations in terms of demonstrable technique. However the GCSE is broader in content requiring students to perform and choreograph dance. The GCSE has a quarter of the assessment devoted to appreciation of dance with an emphasis on critical evaluation of own work and professional works. The graded examination, on the other hand, is entirely focused on practical performance skills.

5.7 Comparing GCSE and graded examinations in speech and drama

Appendix D shows a comparative table for GCSE drama and graded examinations in speech and drama at Grades 4 and 5. The left hand column includes the subject criteria and assessment objectives as set out by Ofqual in 2011. The text in the right hand column is taken from the specification offered by LAMDA.

A comparison of the content and assessment shows the following:

5.7.1 Aims and objectives

The aim of the GCSE is to develop an appreciation of drama. The aims state that learners can ‘be inspired, moved and changed by following a broad, coherent, satisfying and worthwhile course of study’.

The aims of the LAMDA qualifications in performance are divided into disciplines. The discipline chosen as an example for the comparison process is Acting, although the assessment methodology is the same regardless of choice. The Acting qualification includes the statement that ‘learners will be able to demonstrate a sound understanding of the material, leading to an imaginative interpretation in which there is application of appropriate technical skills’.

5.7.2 Content—practical

The GCSE has a broader field of study requiring learners to demonstrate skills ‘in a range of drama contexts’. In contrast, the content of the graded examination is focussed only on the discipline of Acting.

5.7.3 Content—knowledge and understanding

Both qualifications require students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding. The GCSE requires knowledge and understanding of the broader aspects of drama, whereas the graded examination focuses only on knowledge and understanding of the pieces performed. However, both qualifications require students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of creating, interpreting and communicating characters.

5.7.4 Content—historical and contextual understanding

As part of the theoretical content in GCSE, students are required to show an understanding of the social, cultural and historical contexts of drama. The graded examination does not require historical and contextual understanding to be evidenced directly as part of the assessment, however students are unlikely to reach the standards required without some knowledge and understanding of technical and specialist terminology, or how meaning is communicated through performance to an audience.

5.7.5 Assessment—practical

The GCSE has a significant focus on the ability to perform drama, however AO1 may also relate to demonstration of knowledge and understanding in other ways. The graded examination awards 80% of the marks available to performance.

5.7.6 Assessment—knowledge and understanding

The GCSE specifically requires students to analyse and evaluate their own work and that of others. The graded examination, on the other hand, focuses on knowledge and understanding of the pieces performed in the examination.

5.7.7 Conclusion

Both qualifications contain requirements for students to perform. However, the GCSE is broader in terms of the range of drama studied. The GCSE also utilises a variety of methodologies for assessment rather than focussing exclusively on practical performance.

Section 6: Comparison of requirements for A level and graded examinations

6.1 Introduction

This section will look in more detail at the individual AS and A level requirements and the relevant graded examination syllabuses.

For Music and Dance, the requirements are drawn from the subject content documents published by the Department for Education which have been produced following the most recent consultations. The first qualifications based on this content will be available in 2016.

For Drama, the requirements have been drawn from the subject criteria published by Ofqual in 2011. New subject criteria are the focus of consultation and have not yet been published at the time of writing this report.

The following exemplar syllabuses and specifications for graded examinations have been used in the comparison process:

For Music

- The specification for Grades 6 to 8 in music performance from Trinity College London (TCL)
- The specification for graded music theory examinations from the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM).

For Dance

- The specification for Grades 6-8 from the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) and the Intermediate Vocational graded examination from the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD).

For speech and drama

- The specification for graded examinations in performance from New Era Academy.

6.1.1 Content and assessment

Each set of qualifications has a detailed listing in a separate appendix. There are appendices for music, dance, and speech and drama.

The qualifications are compared under the following headings with extracts included from the relevant subject criteria or specifications. The headings have been put together using key elements from the subject criteria and through consideration of how best to make comparisons and draw conclusions. It should be noted that the subject criteria will be used by awarding organisations to construct qualifications and therefore content and skills detailed in the subject criteria will be assessed through a variety of means, including practical and written assessment. The categories have therefore been constructed to allow the author to draw broad comparisons based on the information in the subject criteria and the specifications.

These headings are:

- a) Qualification aims and objectives
- b) Content (divided into the following sub-headings)
 - Practical

- Theoretical understanding
 - Historical and contextual understanding
- c) Assessment (divided into the following sub-headings)
- Practical
 - Knowledge and understanding

The extracts included in the appendices are drawn from a range of publicly available sources. The websites used are listed in the Bibliography. References to subject criteria and assessment objectives have been made as they form the basis of awarding organisation specifications. Individual specifications will however vary in format, style and the ways in which information about delivery, content and assessment is expressed.

Similarly, there is a variety of specifications available from those awarding organisations offering graded examinations. These all follow the progressive mastery model and are assessed using external examiners and performance-based examination (except for music theory). There may be differences in the way in which requirements are set out across various syllabuses with similar content expressed according to stylistic preferences depending on awarding organisation.

However, awarding organisations for the most part use a common set of units which have been developed for the QCF and contain learning outcomes and assessment criteria for each grade. Where appropriate the learning outcomes and assessment criteria from these units have been used to demonstrate the assessment requirements.

6.2 Comparison of A level and graded examinations overarching aims and objectives

At first glance the graded examination and GCSE appear to have very few similarities. For example:

- Graded examinations are almost all taught and examined outside of or in addition to the school curriculum, whereas the A level is a staple qualification offered in 6th forms at mainstream schools and Further Education Colleges.
- Graded examinations are open to students of all ages, although the typical average age range of candidates at Grades 6-8 is between 12 and 18 years old. By contrast, an A level is specifically targeted at the 16-18 age group in the state sector. This means that learners taking graded examinations at Grades 6-8 can often be several years younger than their A level counterparts.
- Graded examinations can be taken when the student is ready on a “roll on, roll off” basis, similar to a driving test. An A level can only be taken at certain points in the academic year—usually at the end of a programme of teaching and learning devised by the school which is based on the subject requirements.

However, a relationship can be found within the content and assessment of the two qualification types.

6.3 Making a comparative analysis of the qualifications

6.3.1 Level

The following qualifications have been chosen for comparison based on their level in the current framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Table 2 – Comparison of A levels to graded examinations by level

Level	GCSE/A level	Graded examinations
1	GCSE grades 1-3 (D-G)	Grades 1-3
2	GCSE grades 4-9 (A*-C)	Grades 4 and 5 Dance Intermediate Foundation
3	A level all grades	Grades 6-8 Dance Intermediate and Advanced Foundation
4	Higher education	Music and Speech and Drama diplomas Dance Advanced 1 and 2

A level is situated at level 3 and has been throughout all its various incarnations. This is because level 3 has traditionally been seen as the level immediately below higher education, which is benchmarked from level 4 to level 8 (i.e. level 4 being the first year of a degree course and level 8 being a Doctorate). Therefore any attainment band awarded at A level is awarded at level 3.

Graded examinations offer multiple qualifications within framework levels to allow for the progressive mastery model. Level 3 encompasses Grades 6-8. In Dance ‘vocational graded examinations’, which offer a route for dancers wishing to progress to further training, are also awarded at levels 2, 3 and 4.

For the purposes of this comparison, A level will be compared with Grades 6-8. For Dance, Intermediate and Advanced Foundation qualifications will also be considered.

6.3.2 Assessment methodology

Graded examinations and A levels differ significantly in the method and style of assessment. Graded examinations are usually assessed when the candidate is ready—so students are entered for assessment throughout the year. Assessment for performance-related graded examinations involves practical tests. The only exception to this is music theory where the assessment is in a written format.

By contrast, an A level could be subject to a variety of assessment methods.

There may also be differences between the styles of written and practical assessment. For example, a graded examination is always a practical ‘time-bound’ examination which is assessed by an examiner who is appointed, trained and standardised by the awarding organisation. A levels are assessed in a variety of ways including externally moderated internal assessments, externally assessed written or practical examinations and/or coursework (NB coursework is less likely to be used in the new specifications).

Assessment is also affected by the style of delivery for study-courses leading to graded examinations and A level. Whereas an A level programme is a set length based on the academic year (from September to July) with fixed assessment ‘windows’, a graded examination can be taken at any point in the year i.e. when a student is ready to do so. This means that there is usually a low failure rate for graded examinations as it is generally expected that a candidate has reached the required standard before entering for assessment. By contrast students taking A level have to undergo assessments as dictated by the examination window, whether they are prepared or not. Additionally, some assessment for A level students may be progressive and measure “distance travelled” from the start of their programme. Graded examinations only assess the standard of performance of a student at a particular moment in time in relation to the set criteria. Also, the assessment is based solely on the outcomes from the examination, whereas A and AS level “raw” marks are subject to a degree of norm-referencing as part of the awarding process.

6.3.3 Grading

A levels and graded examinations are awarded according to different attainment scales.

A level students can be awarded one of a range of attainment bands, which are historically represented by an alphabetical letter—with A being the most successful and E the least. Recent government changes mean that GCSEs and A levels will in the future be awarded using a numerical system with 9 being the highest grade and 1 the lowest. This reflects the broad range of students entering these qualifications. A level results have traditionally been seen as a means for students to gauge their choices for entry into higher education or employment. All the results from A to E are thought of as a 'pass', however offers from universities will specify the required result (or UCAS tariff points needed) to be guaranteed a place.

Graded examinations are awarded as pass, merit and distinction. This approach was further acknowledged following discussions with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority which recommended that all awarding organisations should follow a similar grading methodology to promote comparability. Consequently the majority of awarding organisations offering graded examinations have adopted this methodology. As the qualifications are normally entered at a time when students are ready, the number not achieving a pass is usually small.

6.4 Comparing A level and graded examinations in music performance

Appendix E shows a comparative table for music performance qualifications. The left hand column includes the subject criteria and assessment objectives as set out by the Department for Education and Ofqual for AS and A level Music. The text in the right hand column is taken from the specification for grades 6-8 music performance offered by Trinity College London (TCL).

6.4.1 Aims and objectives

Although the aims and objectives for the AS and A level are broader than those for graded examinations in music performance, there are links between the aims, particularly in terms of developing creativity and imagination.

6.4.2 Content—practical

The subject criteria for performance in the AS and A level refer to general musicianship skills including references to terminology such as tonality, structure, sonority, tempo and dynamics. The content for graded examinations is guided primarily by the repertoire which allows candidates to demonstrate the required standard of musical skills and artistry.

6.4.3 Content—theoretical understanding

Appraisal is a specific requirement for AS and A level and it also forms a key part of the aural tests and the viva voce at the higher grades, through the use of correct musical and technical vocabulary as well as aural perception, demonstrating understanding of musical structures and the application of notation.

The graded examination however does not contain specific requirements for students to reflect and form critical judgements on their own and others work.

6.4.4 Content—historical and contextual understanding

The AS and A level require an understanding of musical genres, styles and traditions. The graded examination does not explicitly define the areas to be covered in a similar manner. However, the

programme of repertoire to be performed typically covers a broad stylistic territory, from Baroque pieces through to twentieth and twenty-first century items, and these also feature within the supporting tests, including the aural tests.

6.4.5 Assessment—practical

The graded examination focuses almost entirely on instrumental (or vocal) performance. The A level objective AO1 relates most closely to the requirements set for the graded examination in music performance. Assessment objective AO2 (composing) is likely to contain a mixture of practical and written assessment as it covers both practical and theoretical elements.

6.4.6 Assessment—knowledge and understanding

Assessment objectives, AO2, AO3 and AO4 are likely to involve a mixture of assessment methods including written and practical. These assessment objectives cover composing, the demonstration and application of musical knowledge as well as the ability to ‘make evaluative and critical judgements about music’.

Comparisons can be made, in the most part, to assessment objective AO3 of the AS and A level which requires students to ‘demonstrate and apply musical knowledge’ as this can refer to the practical demonstration of musical knowledge through performance. In the graded examination, there is limited opportunity for students to make critical judgements about music (though this does feature in some aural tests), but it is likely that at the higher grades they will be appraising music as part of the development of their musical skills and rehearsal of repertoire.

6.4.7 Conclusion

The key difference is in the breadth of study—the A level covers aspects of performance, composing, knowledge and critical evaluation. The graded examination is concerned with the performance of musical pieces in a variety of styles and the practical demonstration of musical skills, knowledge and understanding, including the ability to play scales and arpeggios on an instrument in all keys (by Grade 8), to sightread and to demonstrate theoretical knowledge of a range of musical features (e.g. cadences and chords) through tests of aural awareness.

6.5 Comparing A level and graded examinations in music theory

6.5.1 Aims and objectives

The aims and objectives for AS and A level show the breadth of study required by students who are expected to evidence musicianship skills through performing, composing and appraising. The aims and objectives of the relevant ABRSM examinations relate to the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of music theory, although at the higher grades there is an increasing focus on stylistic awareness and analysis (through score reading), and composition (through a requirement to compose a melody for a specified instrument). For example, from Grade 6 the melody is to contain a modulation and at Grade 8, the melody is to be of not less than 12 bars in length continuing the given opening in the same style.

6.5.2 Content—practical

The AS and A level focus on generic musicianship skills with specific references to terminology such as tonality, structure, sonority, tempo and dynamics. The graded examination content is focussed on knowledge and understanding of music theory only, therefore there is no coverage of performance skills.

6.5.3 Content—theoretical understanding

The AS and A level subject criteria covering understanding focus on composing, the appraisal of music and the ability of students to make critical judgements about their own and others' work. The graded examination focuses on the study of music theory with specific requirements set for each grade. At higher grades, the demonstration of knowledge and understanding extends into composing and the ability to critically evaluate pieces of music in relation to form, structure, style and performance. At Grades 6-8, the 'context' questions, including those based on unfamiliar orchestral scores, are a core feature of theory examinations which account for half of the overall marks.

6.5.4 Content—historical and contextual understanding

The AS and A level require an understanding of specified musical genres, styles and traditions which are supported by the study of repertoire set by the awarding organisations, usually undertaken as part of the school music curriculum. The graded examinations do not cover specified historical periods or set works, but demand a high degree of contextual and stylistic understanding within questions based on unfamiliar scores, including orchestral work from the Baroque period to the twentieth century. Examination questions such as the continuation of a given opening of a musical passage from a Baroque trio sonata also demand an in-depth knowledge and understanding of specific styles.

6.5.5 Assessment—practical

The AS and A level assessment objectives AO1 and AO2 are likely to contain a mixture of practical and written assessment which will include performance. The music theory grades do not assess performance.

6.5.6 Assessment—knowledge and understanding

AS and A level assessment objectives AO2, AO3, and AO4 cover areas of knowledge and understanding through a mixture of practical and written assessment. These include composition, the demonstration and application of musical knowledge as well as the ability to 'make evaluative and critical judgements about music'.

Comparisons can be made, in the most part, to assessment objective AO3 of the AS and A level which requires students to 'demonstrate and apply musical knowledge'. This is because the graded examination requirements are specific to knowledge and understanding of music theory. However, elements of Grades 6 to 8 do demand that students make evaluative and critical judgements about particular styles of music to form an appropriate response to set questions. There is also a relationship to AO2 as some of the higher grades require a greater creative response to aspects of composition.

The assessment requirements have been taken from the QCF unit for Grade 8 Music Theory which is available on Ofqual's Register of Regulated Qualifications. The relevant graded examination is a purely written assessment. At the higher grades, not only is musical knowledge required but also a deeper understanding and appreciation of musical styles and forms.

6.5.7 Conclusion

The key difference is in the breadth of study—the A level covers aspects of performance, composing, knowledge and critical evaluation. The A level qualifications are more generalised and demand greater focus on specific aspects of music history. The graded examination is concerned with the knowledge and understanding of music theory and includes composition, analysis of scores, stylistic awareness, features of orchestral examples and a broad range of skills relating to the completion of skeleton scores in an appropriate manner. However at this level the graded examination requirements also contain deeper

and more sophisticated means of questioning for which students need to utilise critical evaluation and appreciation of musical styles, idioms and forms. Through the activity of melody writing, there is also an element of composition in each grade of ABRSM's music theory exams.

A student taking graded exams in both music performance and music theory would demonstrate significant coverage of the A level content. This is because knowledge and understanding as well as performance skills would be explicitly assessed. It is very likely that a student who has achieved both music performance and music theory at Level 3 will have a range of theoretical and practical knowledge, skills and understanding which is comparable to, and at Grade 8 in excess of, that required at A level.

This is supported by the findings of the UCAS Expert group who reached the following conclusions in 2002. Whilst they were comparing a different version of the A level the basic format and structure has not changed considerably since then. *"A comparison of the aims of the qualifications showed that there was a significant degree of common ground between the performing and listening components of the GCE A-level and the Music Awards, but that the A-level included components which are not addressed by the Music Awards, e.g. the development of the skills of composition and the understanding of the history of music. In addition to this difference in size of the respective qualifications, there were also differences in the modes of assessment and in the grading systems. It was also noted that the Practical and Theory were independent qualifications, which can be taken at different grades and at different times."*²

In relation to the relative position of Grade 8 theory and A level in the university admission process, it is notable that most universities accept the graded examination as a viable alternative to A level music. Cambridge University's website, for example, states that 'All colleges will consider an application with Grade 8 theory instead of A level music'.

6.6 Comparing A level and graded examinations in dance

Appendix G shows a comparative table of dance qualifications. The left hand column includes the subject criteria and assessment objectives as set out by the Department for Education and Ofqual for the AS and A level Dance. The text in the middle column is taken from the specification for grades 6-8 dance (ballet) offered by the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD). The right hand column includes text from the specification for Intermediate Classical Ballet offered by the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD).

6.6.1 Aims and objectives

The aims of the A level focus on a holistic approach to dance studies combining performance, choreography, theoretical understanding and appraisal. The emphasis is very much on critical evaluation and appreciation including an explicit requirement regarding written communication.

Whilst the graded examination includes the development of technical skills, it also references the importance of building self confidence and appreciation of dance as an artist—though preparation towards examination can also involve group work. These aims are general and cover all levels of graded examinations.

² UCAS Expert Group Report for graded examinations in music performance and music theory at grades 6, 7 and 8 published April 2002.

6.6.2 Content—practical

There are a number of similarities in the content requirements for A level dance and the graded and vocational graded examinations. Both have a strong emphasis on the development of technical skills, although the A level refers to the general technique that could be applied to a number of genres whereas the graded examinations refer specifically to ballet technique.

In addition, the A level requires students to be able to develop and present their own choreography and perform as part of an ensemble. These are not requirements for graded examinations; however it is likely that students will encounter group performance as part of the teaching and learning process in preparation for assessment, including some choreography.

6.6.3 Content—theoretical understanding

Theoretical understanding is an explicit assessment requirement in A level but not in the graded examinations where it is implied through the standards demonstrated by students in performance during examination.

The A level places significant emphasis on critical evaluation and analysis of performance, requiring students to not only reflect on their own work but also that of others, particularly in written form.

6.6.4 Content—historical and contextual understanding

As with theoretical understanding, the A level places great emphasis on critical analysis and evaluation of dance, including the historical and cultural aspects. This kind of knowledge and understanding is not explicitly assessed in the graded examinations although it could be argued that students are unlikely to reach the standards required without some knowledge and understanding of technical and specialist terminology, and how meaning is communicated/conveyed through performance to an audience.

6.6.5 Assessment—practical

The graded examinations focus exclusively on practical performance. The closest relationship to A level is objective AO1 which requires students to 'perform dance through the application of physical, technical, interpretive and performance skills'. This carries a 25-30% weighting. The other practical assessment objective in A level relates specifically to the ability to create dance using choreographic skills. This is likely to contain a mixture of practical and written assessment. Whilst graded examinations at this level require a degree of interpretation and expression of dance movements, students are not expected to create their own work for assessment.

6.6.6 Assessment—knowledge and understanding

The A level places a significant emphasis on knowledge and understanding with very specific assessment requirements. For example, objective AO3 which relates to underpinning knowledge and understanding of performance requires students to study different periods and genres.

The overall assessment weighting for knowledge and understanding in A level is around half of the requirements. This shifts the focus of the qualification to being as much about theory as about practice. This is in contrast to the graded examinations which capture knowledge and understanding of the genre as expressed through practical performance.

6.6.7 Conclusion

Of all the subjects considered as part of this study, A level dance is the most different to its graded examination counterparts. This reflects the shift in nature of the qualification from practical performance (although this still forms a significant element of the assessment) towards a more theoretical approach.

That is not to say that there is no relationship at all with the graded examinations. The practical elements of both qualifications are similar and require a focus on the development of technical skills, although the A level requires the study of a broader range of genres than the graded examinations.

The UCAS Expert group summed up the variation in approach in its conclusions in 2011. *“GCE A level Dance is a broad foundation which provides suitable progression into HE – in developing both academic and practical skills, knowledge and understanding of the subject as an art form and being able to place dance within the context of other art forms, society and culture. The qualification has the scope to prepare candidates for non-dance related courses, as written papers are similar in content to other arts-related subjects. By contrast graded and vocational graded qualifications are narrower in focus which potentially allows for more in-depth study and skill acquisition in one specific subject area. Taken alongside academic qualifications they would provide appropriate preparation for HE study of this subject. As preparation for courses in HE that are not dance related, the main strengths lie within the areas of personal and social skills, learning skills and experience of work-related skills and attitudes.”*³

6.7 Comparing A level and graded examinations in speech and drama

Appendix H shows a comparative table for AS and A level drama and graded examinations in speech and drama at Grades 6, 7 and 8. The left hand column includes extracts from the subject criteria and assessment objectives as set out by Ofqual from 2011. The text in the right hand column is taken from the specification offered by New Era Academy.

6.7.1 Aims and objectives

There are similarities between the aims and objectives of the qualifications. Whilst the A level objectives are broader in nature, both sets of objectives mention the fostering of creativity and imagination in practical performance.

6.7.2 Content—practical

Both qualifications demonstrate similar intentions for students to use performance skills, working creatively and collaboratively. The key difference is in the breadth of study where the graded examination focuses on the study and performance of specific pieces. Both qualifications require a degree of analysis and interpretation; however the graded examination focuses specifically on analysis of the pieces performed.

6.7.3 Content—theoretical understanding

Only the AS and A level content specify requirements for knowledge and understanding. However, assessment of knowledge and understanding for a graded examination is implied as informing performance. This is because students are unlikely to reach the standards required without knowledge

³ UCAS expert group report for graded and vocational graded examinations in dance published June 2011.

and understanding of technical and specialist terminology, or how meaning is communicated through performance to an audience.

6.7.4 Content—historical and contextual understanding

As with theoretical understanding, much of the coverage of historical and contextual understanding is implied rather than specific. For example, the requirement in a graded examination for a student to study and perform two contrasting pieces relates to the AS and A level requirements to demonstrate *'understanding of how style, form, dramatic structure and characterisation can be interpreted and realised in performance and how plays relate to their historical, social and cultural context.'*

Similarly, the requirement in the AS and A level criteria for students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of 'connections between theory and practice' can be related to the Grade 8 content requirements for students to discuss *'the creative thought and technical details involved in preparing to play a character in performance'*.

6.7.5 Assessment—practical

The assessment objectives for AS and A level are comparable to the learning outcomes and assessment criteria for the graded examination, particularly in their requirements for performance. (NB Assessment objectives AO1 and AO2 sum up the more detailed requirements articulated for the graded examinations.)

6.7.6 Assessment—knowledge and understanding

Knowledge and understanding is implied as underpinning performance in the graded examination. However the requirement for AS and A level students to 'interpret plays from different periods and genres' (AO3) relates closely to the requirements for graded examination students to perform and discuss contrasting pieces.

The key difference is in the requirement at AS and A level for students to critically analyse and evaluate live theatre from the point of view of an audience member. The graded examination is focussed solely on performance and students are not required to evaluate specifically as audience members.

6.7.7 Conclusion

There are a number of similarities between the AS and A level subject criteria and graded examinations at Grades 6-8, particularly in relation to the requirements for performance and the analysis of character.

The key difference is the breadth of study demanded of AS and A level students and the requirement for students to critically evaluate live theatre from the perspective of an audience member.

Section 7: Conclusion

This report presents a detailed analysis of the content requirements for both GCSE and A level and their related graded examinations.

The conclusions made can be summarised as follows.

7.1 Key differences

7.1.1 Breadth and depth of study

This is the key difference between graded examinations and their counterpart GCSE and A level subject requirements. Whilst both GCSE and A level contain a significant element of performance, there is also a requirement for students to survey the subject more broadly, incorporating a number of genres, styles, instruments and/or disciplines along with developing a set of skills, knowledge and understanding informed by these wider studies. In addition, for music and dance there is a requirement for students to demonstrate the skills of composing and choreography. By contrast, a graded examination focuses only on a specific genre, instrument or discipline and is therefore more narrowly defined; however the level of demand in terms of specialist study and technique demonstrated is deeper than that of GCSE and A level.

7.1.2 Appreciation and critical evaluation

Another key difference is the requirement in GCSE and A level for students to demonstrate their appreciation of music, dance or speech and drama through analysis and evaluation. This covers not only their own performance, but extends to the performance of others and critical evaluation of forms, styles and traditions etc.

Whilst it is likely that students taking graded examinations, particularly at the higher levels, will have developed an appreciation of their genre, instrument or discipline in order to perform effectively and convincingly at the standard required, this forms only a small part of the assessment—either discretely through a viva voce or implied as underpinning preparation towards performance.

7.2 Similarities

7.2.1 Technique and performance

Both sets of requirements make specific reference to performance and detail the standards demanded of students. Knowledge and understanding as expressed in the subject criteria can also be demonstrated practically through performance, meaning that a substantial part of a GCSE and A level is performance based.

7.2.2 Contextual and historical aspects

Whilst there is no specific assessment requirement for contextual and historical aspects in a graded examination, students at the higher levels are likely to have some knowledge and understanding of how these aspects influence their chosen genre, instrument or discipline. For music theory, it is likely that students will be required to demonstrate contextual knowledge and understanding through the demonstration and application of theoretical concepts.

7.3 Wider factors

Of course, the content is not the only factor to consider when looking at the similarities and differences between GCSE, A level and graded examinations. However, some of the wider factors do not necessarily have significant impact on whether there is a relationship between the two qualifications in terms of a student being able to move from the study of one to another. That said, such factors include:

7.3.1 Mode of study

Graded examinations and GCSE/A level have very different delivery methods and this can be seen as a significant difference between the two qualification types. Whereas one is delivered flexibly and could contain significant personal study, the other is delivered within a school/college context with a particular amount of guided learning hours allocated and a set assessment window.

7.3.2 Mode of assessment

Students typically only enter for graded examinations when they are ready to be assessed. This means that the majority of students are likely to achieve a pass as they have reached the required standard. However the examination format means that students will be assessed at that moment in time and are not able to submit any other evidence towards the assessment.

GCSE and A levels involve a variety of assessment methods including examinations, controlled assignments, and coursework. So students may have opportunities to submit a range of evidence toward their qualification during the course.

7.4 Is there a relationship between the two qualification types?

Taking into account the detailed information in this report alongside some of the wider factors, there is no reason why students cannot study a graded examination alongside a GCSE or A level, and for the detailed preparation towards one qualification to complement the other. In particular:

- The study of technique for a graded examination gives a student practical skills, knowledge and understanding which could be usefully applied in their preparations toward a GCSE or A level qualification in a related subject. i.e. students taking a graded examination often have a higher level of technique in a specific discipline, instrument or genre as their study has been highly focussed on performance.
- Through their study of a specific genre, instrument or discipline in preparation for a graded examination, students can develop a more specialist appreciation of their chosen subject which could then be applied more broadly in GCSE or A level.
- Through studying GCSE or A level, students acquire a broader understanding of relevant contextual and historical aspects of the subject which could be used to enhance their study of a specialist genre, instrument or discipline in a graded examination.

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