

Subject:

**APPROVAL OF QUALIFICATIONS FOR USE IN
POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN NORTHERN
IRELAND**

DE Circular Number: 2023/16

Date of Issue: 30 November 2023

Target Audience:

- Principals and Boards of Governors (BoG) of all grant-aided post-primary schools and special schools with secondary departments;
- EOTAS;
- Education Authority (EA);
- Controlled Schools' Support Council; (CSSC);
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS);
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG);
- Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE);
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA);
- General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI).

Summary of Contents:

This circular, issued by the Department of Education, sets out the process for seeking approval for qualifications for use in schools in NI:

- It is a statutory requirement that qualifications taught in NI schools must be approved by the Department of Education before teaching commences;
- It is the responsibility of each school to check the NIEFQAN file to ensure that qualifications it plans to deliver are approved;
- *Fully completed* requests for approval for qualifications not in the NIEFQAN file, for first teaching in 2024/25 academic year, must be submitted to the DE by **22 March 2024** at the latest;
- Requests made after this date will **not** be considered.
- ***DE and CCEA Regulation will trial a qualifications approval app for most qualifications from February 2024. This will enable schools to make their application online via CCEA's central login. Further details will be provided to schools in advance and schools will still have the option to make their application through the normal process of submitting a completed form to the DE***

Governor Awareness:
Essential

Status of Contents:
For information and action by
schools

Superseded Documents:

DE Circular 2022/10

Expiry Date: N/A

qualsapproval inbox. Approval requests for large size qualifications will continue to be made using the process outlined in this circular.

Enquiries:

Any enquiries about the content of this Circular should be addressed to:

Qualifications Team
Department of Education
Rathgael House
Balloo Road
BANGOR
BT19 7PR

DE Website: www.education-ni.gov.uk

DE: Tel: 028 9127 9565/028
9052 0557

Email:
Qualifications-Team@education-ni.gov.uk

STATUTORY DUTY

1. Qualifications being delivered in schools in Northern Ireland (NI) must be approved by the Department of Education (DE) **before** teaching of the qualification commences. Article 81 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, places a **duty on the Board of Governors and the principal of grant aided schools** to ensure that no course of study leading to an external qualification is provided unless the qualification has been approved in advance by DE.
2. Schools are advised that the content of this DE circular should be brought to the attention of all relevant members of staff in order to facilitate compliance with its requirements, in the best interests of learners.
3. All qualifications currently approved for use in NI schools are listed in the NIEFQAN File which is available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/niefqan>
4. **Only qualifications listed in the NIEFQAN File are approved for use in schools in NI** and it is the responsibility of schools to check that approvals are in place **before** any course is offered to pupils.
5. Schools are advised that qualifications with operational end dates (OED) falling **before** September 2024 should not be offered to new cohorts of learners from September 2024. For Vocational Qualifications, schools should check both the OED and certification end dates (CED) to ensure there is sufficient time for learners to complete, certify and potentially resit these qualifications.
6. Schools are reminded that while Awarding Organisations may provide operational guidance to schools, they cannot give **approval** for a school to deliver a qualification. **Approval can only be given by DE.** If a qualification is not in the NIEFQAN File schools must request approval from DE.
7. Schools should note that qualifications not approved and included in the NIEFQAN File in September 2024 will not be available to select as an option on the Entitlement Framework (EF) online audit in the 2024/25 academic year. Requests for retrospective approval will not be considered to facilitate completion of the EF online audit during the autumn term in 2024, as it is a statutory requirement that qualifications are approved before teaching starts.

8. It should be noted that qualifications being offered in an FE College may *not* have been approved by DE for use with pupils registered in NI schools. Where schools intend to offer a qualification in collaboration with another school/college, or other provider (including Further Education Colleges), **it remains the responsibility of each school to check that the qualification is approved and included in the NIEFQAN File before teaching starts.**

APPROVAL OF QUALIFICATIONS NOT IN THE NIEFQAN FILE

9. Where a school wants to offer a qualification not currently in the NIEFQAN File they should seek DE approval by following the process set out below.
10. DE may liaise with the Education and Training Inspectorate and CCEA Regulation when considering approval requests from schools. However, decisions on whether to approve qualifications rest solely with DE. *Schools are asked to note the Education Authority (EA) has no responsibility for the approval of qualifications process and is unable to intervene in the approvals process.*
11. **It will not be possible for schools to upload examination results for any qualification which has not been approved by DE. DE will not consider requests for retrospective approvals to facilitate the recording of results for qualifications that were not approved before teaching started.**

APPROVAL REQUESTS FOR THE 2024/25 ACADEMIC YEAR

12. Schools should make approval requests for any qualifications intended for teaching in the 2024/25 academic year as soon as possible, if they are not already included in the NIEFQAN File. All requests should be forwarded to DE **by 22 March 2024 at the latest** to enable decisions to be taken and communicated to schools in a timely manner. **Requests for retrospective approvals will not be considered.**
13. Schools wishing to make a qualification approval request should complete an Approval Request Form available at: [Qualification Approval Request Form](#)

14. All Qualification Approval Request Forms must be authorised by the school Principal or Vice Principal (Curriculum).

Completed Approval Request Forms should be forwarded to:

qualsapprovals@education-ni.gov.uk

15. This form may only be used for qualifications with a GLH size equivalence up to and including **3 GCSEs at KS4** and up to and including **2 A Levels at post-16**.

Please note, in collaboration with CCEA Regulation, the Department intends to trial a Qualification Approval App for these qualifications from February 2024. This will enable schools to make their application online via CCEA's central login. The Department will provide further details closer to the time.

16. Qualifications in excess of these sizes are considered “**large qualifications**” and the process for requesting approval for these is outlined below.

APPROVAL REQUESTS FOR LARGE QUALIFICATIONS

17. In order to meet the statutory requirements in respect of the curriculum for all grant-aided schools in NI, as set out in Article 4(2) of the 2006 Education (Northern Ireland) Order, schools must ensure that the curricular offer for all pupils has sufficient breadth and balance to enable progression. Use of large size qualifications may impact on a school's ability to meet this requirement. However, DE acknowledges that there may be instances where it is appropriate for individual pupils, by exception, to have access to large size qualifications.

18. Schools wishing to offer large qualifications must be able to provide sufficient information, by the closing date of 22 March 2024, to demonstrate/support the rationale for offering the proposed provision, based on the current needs and immediate challenges facing the identified pupils.

19. All large size qualification approval requests, at both Key Stage 4 and Post-16, will require, *via the completion of an additional supporting Annex*, the provision of detailed supporting information. Information sought will include the profile of the individual pupils identified to follow the qualification(s) and how the individual pupils have been

supported to make an informed choice before uptake. In addition to this, details of the progression routes for individual past pupils as a result of following large sized qualification(s) and, where applicable, any legacy qualification(s), will be required.

20. An approval for a large qualification will apply only to the specific pupil(s) identified in the approval request. Large size qualifications will therefore not appear in the published NIEFQAN File (but systems will be in place to allow schools to record them on the EF online audit and enter results for them).
21. **You should also note that while the qualification you have chosen will have a GCSE/A Level “size equivalency”, equivalences relate to how the qualification is counted for the annual return of examination results and are not an indicator of how the qualification is viewed by employers and/or Further/Higher Education. It is therefore strongly recommended that parental permission is obtained in relation to the qualification the school plans to offer to the identified pupils, and that parents are made aware that ‘size equivalencies’ for statistical returns do not necessarily equate to qualifications being “equal to” a certain number of GCSEs/ A Levels for other purposes.**
22. A large qualification Approval Request Form is available at: [Qualification Approval Request Form – Large Size Qualification](#)
23. All Qualification Approval Request Forms must be authorised by the school Principal or Vice Principal (Curriculum).
24. Fully completed Approval Request Forms should be forwarded to: qualsapprovals@education-ni.gov.uk by 22 March 2024. Forms and annexes submitted after this date will not be processed.
25. To assist schools with planning for the next academic year (September 2024), a regular update (usually monthly) of the NIEFQAN File will be made available on the DE website. These updated files will include newly approved qualifications, for teaching from September 2024. Qualifications that are no longer available to new learners will be removed, however, these qualifications will still be approved for teaching to pupils who have already started these qualifications up until their certification end date. It may be the case that some schools are in the midst of completing these qualifications and will be certificating later in the year or indeed the next year. In such cases, systems will be

in place to allow schools to enter results for qualifications up until the certification end date of the qualification.

26. A number of Level 2 qualifications suitable **for post-16 candidates only** are currently included in the NIEFQAN File and schools may deliver these as enrichment courses to post 16 pupils, however, **these qualifications are not approved for use with KS4 cohorts**. Schools must therefore check that any qualification they intend to offer is age appropriate for their particular cohort. These qualifications will not be counted for the purpose of school performance measures.
27. Schools that have been using a qualification for a number of years should not assume that these qualifications will continue to remain in the NIEFQAN File. All qualifications have operational end dates and the revised specifications offered by Awarding Organisations to replace these qualifications will *not* automatically be approved by DE. Schools must seek DE approval for these new specifications by following the process set out in this circular.
28. At Key Stage 4, qualifications offered must provide opportunities to reach Level 2 **and** have a minimum of 120 Guided Learning Hours (GLH). Qualifications not meeting these requirements will be classed as Not Eligible (NE) under the EF from September 2024. As part of the broader actions resulting from the DE/DfE 14-19 Framework, a small number of Level 2 qualifications have been identified as having GLHs below the minimum requirement of 120 GLHs. These qualifications which were previously designated as APPLIED will, from September 2024, be classed as Not Eligible (NE) under the Entitlement Framework requirements. Schools are strongly advised to check the NIEFQAN file to ascertain if this applies to any qualifications they have been delivering.
29. In relation to literacy and numeracy qualifications that support progression, schools should note the DfE circular pertaining to Essential Skills (link below). This highlights that in Northern Ireland, other than GCSE Mathematics and English, Essential Skills Application of Number and Essential Skills Communication are the only alternative level 2 literacy and numeracy qualifications that offer progression opportunities:

<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/fe-circular-1222-operational-requirements-essential-skills-application-number-communication-and-ict>

30. Details of the process used to approve qualifications can be found at: [Decision Making Process | Department of Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/Decision-Making-Process)

PERFORMANCE POINTS

31. **Schools should note that performance points are used as a means of gathering data for the purpose of reporting school performance across a range of qualifications that have a variety of different grading scales. They relate to how the qualification is counted for the annual return of examination results and are not an indicator of how the qualification is viewed by employers and/or Further/Higher Education. The allocation of performance points should not be interpreted as an indication that qualifications/grades with the same performance points are the same. Qualifications differ in terms of their purpose, the degree to which they prepare learners for progression to higher levels of education, or how they will be treated for the purpose of admission to educational institutions or for employment. It is important that learners understand the benefits and limitations of Level 2 and Level 3 alternatives to GCSE, AS and A level qualifications.**

EOTAS CENTRES

32. Given the timing and circumstances surrounding enrolment at Education Other Than At Schools (EOTAS) Centres, the Department is aware that qualification approval deadlines cannot always be met, therefore, we will consider applications from EOTAS centres on a case-by-case basis. Please use the relevant application form as per paragraphs 13 (standard application form) and 22 (large application form).



JOAN CASSELLS

Head of Qualifications Team