**Background Quality Report:** Summary of Annual Examination Results

(January 2024)

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| **Dimension** | **Assessment by the author** |
| **Introduction** | ***Context for the quality report.*** |
| The Department of Education (DE) adheres to the UK Statistics Authority [Code of Practice for Statistics](https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/code-of-practice/) and the National Statistician’s guidance on quality. This document provides a summary of how the Summary of Annual Examination Results National Statistics publication (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/school-performance>) adheres to the code in terms of quality.  School level information on GCSE (and equivalent) and A Level (and equivalent) attainment is collected annually from grant-aided post-primary schools in Northern Ireland. This data collection exercise starts in April/May of each year when schools are asked to identify which of their Year 12 and Year 14/15 pupils are eligible for inclusion in the data collection. Summary attainment information is collected from schools in September. The main purpose of collecting this data is to create a statistical base to inform a wide range of policy areas aimed at raising standards and tackling underachievement. The data are also used in the development, implementation and monitoring of policies and relevant Departmental milestones.  The collection of data is facilitated by C2k, who are responsible for the provision of ICT systems in schools. Each school submits an electronic return to the Department for GCSE (and equivalent) and A Level (and equivalent) attainment.  When the data are returned to the Department, statisticians are responsible for processing and validating this information. This process is the main responsibility of one Assistant Statistician with input from one Deputy Principal Statistician. A detailed statistical bulletin based on final data is released in December / January. |
| **Relevance** | ***The degree to which the statistical product meets user needs in both coverage and content.*** |
| Relevant users within DE are consulted annually about what data are collated, including any additional information to be collected or any data that is no longer required. This ensures that data meets the key users’ needs.  In addition to this, feedback is welcomed from customers outside DE/EA via the feedback section on our website. Contact details are also provided for the relevant statistician, should a member of the public wish to offer any feedback directly or request further analysis of data.  In liaising and engaging with other users, there are very rarely circumstances where necessary information is not collected. In these situations, consideration is made to collecting requested data in the future if it is practical and cost-effective to do so. |
| **Accuracy and Reliability** | ***The proximity between an estimate and the unknown true value.*** |
| Coverage of the data is normally 100%.  In 2022/23, data from 14 schools (7%) were not made available due to ongoing Action Short of Strike (ASOS) in schools. The profile of the 2022/23 data collection was not found to be substantially different from the profile in 2018/19 (the previous year for which data was available).   |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | |  | 2018/19 | 2022/23 | | Non-grammar schools | 64.5% | 63.2% | | Grammar schools | 35.5% | 36.8% | | Year 12 Females | 50.2% | 50.3% | | Year 12 Males | 49.8% | 49.7% | | Year 14 Females | 57.1% | 57.0% | | Year 14 Males | 42.9% | 43.0% | | Year 12 FSME pupils | 28.1% | 24.4% | | Year 14 FSME pupils | 17.8% | 15.5% |   As the data collected are from an administrative source and are used for schools’ management information purposes, there is a basis to assume that it is within the school’s benefit that the data supplied is as accurate and reliable as possible.  Schools receive examination results directly from awarding organisations but can also manually enter other results by using the code that uniquely identifies each qualification. Where possible, validation checks are incorporated in the SIMS module in an attempt to mitigate against common mistakes. However, statisticians will also carry out detailed validation processes including ensuring all pupils are accounted for and figures total. |
| **Timeliness and Punctuality** | ***Timeliness refers to the time gap between publication and the reference period. Punctuality refers to the gap between planned and actual publication dates.*** |
| Summary examinations data are requested in September following the release of examination outcomes in August. One file contains GCSE and equivalent outcome data and, where relevant, a second file is sent containing A Level and equivalent outcome data. Data validation takes place throughout October/November and the publication is prepared, checked and released in December / January. Given the workload to process and thoroughly validate the data to the standard required, there is no scope to release data any sooner. |
| **Accessibility and Clarity** | ***Accessibility is the ease with which users are able to access the data, also reflecting the format in which the data are available and the availability of supporting information. Clarity refers to the quality and sufficiency of the metadata, illustrations and accompanying advice.*** |
| Data tables are available for key GCSE (and equivalent) and A Level (and equivalent) indicators both within the publication and as OpenDocument Spreadsheet (ODS) tables. These data tables include commonly used and requested data, examples of which include: qualifications by free school meal entitlement, school type and gender. Previous years’ data is included on the website also, so time series analysis is accessible.  Metadata explaining the process and all key terms is appended to the tables. School-level data is also available to view one school at a time on the DE website at the Schools+ link ([Schools Plus | Department of Education (education-ni.gov.uk)](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/services/schools-plus)) or through OpenData NI ([Portal | Search (opendatani.gov.uk)](https://www.opendatani.gov.uk/search-global?q=SAER)).  If data is not available online, users are invited to request specific data via email. These data requests are routinely answered within 15 working days. All data available is provided, the only exception being any figures deemed sensitive, which are suppressed to avoid the potential identification of individual pupils. |
| **Coherence and Comparability** | ***Coherence is the degree to which data that are derived from different sources or methods, but refer to the same topic, are similar. Comparability is the degree to which data can be compared over time and domain.*** |
| All data is obtained directly from schools, thus guaranteeing coherence of the data.  The variables collected have been largely stable since 2008/09 when key indicator data on pupils with free school meal entitlement was included for the first time. It is also worth noting that the process of identifying eligible pupils was brought forward to April/May from 2013/14 onwards.  The [Minister for Education suspended the SAER process](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/minister-announces-arrangements-summer-examinations) in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was initially to protect the integrity of the alternative awarding measures. A Ministerial decision was taken that no school-level examination data should be collected for accountability or inspection purposes and no examination data would be released at school-level for these years. The suspension covered the 2018/19 to 2021/22 academic years.  [CCEA](https://ccea.org.uk/regulation/news/2022/october/ccea-announces-approach-awarding-grades-202223-academic-year)’s stepped approach back to pre-pandemic awarding standards, and the provision of Advance Information for qualifications in 2022/23, will have affected figures for 2022/23. In addition, data from 14 schools (7%) were not made available due to ongoing Action Short of Strike (ASOS) in schools. Any changes in attainment levels since 2018/19, the previous year for which data is available, may be due to a combination of these factors rather than reflecting a change in underlying performance.  As education is a devolved issue, the other UK administrations often have different approaches or different policies underlying data that is collected, for example, qualifications included in key indicators, free school meal entitlement criteria, the process to designating pupils as having special educational needs, etc, differ across the regions. This means that making direct comparisons can be difficult. |
| **Trade-offs between Output Quality Components** | ***Trade-offs are the extent to which different aspects of quality are balanced against each other.*** |
| The main trade-off is timeliness against accuracy. The process is carried out by one Assistant Statistician with input from one Deputy Principal Statistician thus there are limited resources available for validation. This results in data being available in December.  Accuracy is not comprised to meet these deadlines, particularly because these data are underpinned by the Education (School Information and Prospectuses) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 as well as their use to monitor progress towards Departmental targets. A detailed range of validation checks are conducted prior to data being made available, and this list of validation checks is reviewed on an annual basis and is amended depending on user needs and common errors. |
| **Assessment of User Needs and Perceptions** | ***The processes for finding out about users and uses, and their views on the statistical products.*** |
| The content of the data collection is defined by the Department’s information needs. The relevance of this is checked each year when key users across DE are consulted for additions and amendments for the following year. DE statisticians also meet several times per year with policy officials, ETI, school principals and other groups of interested officials. An additional forum in which we participate is the C2k Liaison Group which captures formal feedback from C2k help teams (and indirectly schools) about the experiences of schools in providing census data.  Users of the data are surveyed annually via the NISRA Customer Satisfaction Survey. It is not possible to break down the results of the survey to those that specifically used examination outcome data; however, the satisfaction levels across NISRA as a whole are very high. There is scope for any comments raised in the survey to be fed back to the team that manages the Summary of Annual Examination Results dataset to take on-board for improvements going forward.  Users are invited in the statistical bulletins to provide feedback on the publication and to request further information if required. |
| **Performance, Cost and Respondent Burden** | ***The effectiveness, efficiency and economy of the statistical output.*** |
| As the infrastructure to collect the data already exists, and schools need to generate much of this data for their own management information purposes, the annual operational cost is minimal year on year.  Respondent burden is measured via a sample survey of schools making data returns. It found that the compliance costs for all schools in 2013/14 is estimated to cost around £37,000 of school staff’s time. |
| **Confidentiality, Transparency and Security** | ***The procedures and policy used to ensure sound confidentiality, security and transparent practices.*** |
| Given the potentially sensitive nature of the pupil level eligibility data collected, confidentiality is something that is taken very seriously.  Data is transferred securely via the school’s SIMS system to a secure web exchange. The data are then downloaded from the web exchange to a secure server, which only statistical staff has access to.  Sensitive data relating to small numbers of pupils, are not published or released externally. In this instance, sensitive data are considered as free school meal entitlement and qualification outcomes data. For this data, figures that relate to less than five pupils are generally suppressed, and an adjacent figure in a column or row in any table with a total is counter-suppressed to avoid the potential identification of individual pupils. However, consideration is given to balancing provision of information against the risk of potentially disclosive information. |