

Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual)

Annual Report

to the Northern Ireland Assembly

2011–12

Ofqual Annual Report to the Northern Ireland Assembly 2011–12

For the period 1st April 2011– 31st March 2012

Annual Report presented to the Northern Ireland Assembly in pursuance of Section 171 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual).

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Foreword

This second annual report to the Northern Ireland Assembly sets out what we have achieved in the period April 2011–March 2012. It also includes reference to some events after that period where these are directly related to work commenced in 2011–12. It is through our reports to the Assembly (and our parallel reports to Parliament) that we are publicly accountable for our work. To reinforce this accountability, we have appeared in front of the Assembly’s Employment and Learning Committee in the last year, and we fully expect to do so again in the coming year.

Our primary role is to regulate qualifications, maintaining the highest possible standards, while ensuring long-term confidence in the qualifications system. We take decisions based on evidence and we monitor the various awarding organisations closely both to ensure compliance with our standards and to maintain a clear understanding of the qualifications market.

Success is based on our ability to inspire confidence in a robust and fair qualifications system. This is what we stand for.

Where this is jeopardised, we will not hesitate to take decisive and proportionate action. This is in the long-term interests of the qualifications system.

Accountability is particularly important for a qualifications regulator. If people can see that we are open, honest and independent (including when things go wrong), they are more likely to trust us and to have confidence in the standards and integrity of the qualifications and assessments that we regulate.

Confidence is of course critical. It is essential that we continue with a robust and independent approach to regulation in order to maintain confidence in the system and ensure that improvements take place where necessary.

Qualifications and assessments recognise and help to encourage the achievements of young people and adults. It is important that these qualifications and assessments do not become ends in themselves. We want to find ways through our regulatory approach that allow teachers and trainers to focus on true learning that prepares their students for further learning or employment.

2011–12 was a busy and challenging year for Ofqual. This report sets out in detail what we achieved in that period and highlights particular areas of our work.

First, backed by new powers, we have been putting in place the foundations of our new regulatory approach. We expect awarding organisations to take responsibility for the qualifications they offer – we cannot check every single qualification. We set out the requirements awarding organisations must meet and asked them to provide assurances that they will be able to comply. We can take action where our requirements are not met, including, where appropriate, using our new power to fine. We are looking at how we can regulate for a healthy market for qualifications.

Second, we have been developing Ofqual itself. If we are to deliver the ambitious plans that we have – and meet the high expectations of others – we need to build our capability and capacity as an organisation. We

are currently going through a significant programme of change that will achieve this.

Third, we contributed to the work by the Department of Education (DE) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) in their joint review of regulatory arrangements for Northern Ireland. This has now been put on hold pending a review of qualifications for 14 to 19 year olds in Northern Ireland.

Fourth, we now have a more complete view of the qualifications market in Northern Ireland and published, jointly with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), our first annual statistics bulletin in June 2012. This bulletin will provide very useful data on all achievements in Northern Ireland, and it will help us prioritise and target our resources towards the awarding organisations and qualifications that are awarded in Northern Ireland.

Finally, we worked with those who have an interest in qualifications. Our conversations with our Northern Ireland Committee, the Assembly's Employment and Learning Committee, government officials, employers and students have helped to shape our priorities for the coming year and inform our first *Corporate Plan*¹, covering the period 2012–15, which we published earlier this year. You can read our plan alongside this report to see how we have developed our thinking in the light of the issues and challenges over the last year.

We hope you find this report interesting and informative. We would be pleased to have your comments on it – you can contact us via our website, www.ofqual.gov.uk.



Amanda Spielman, Chair



Glenys Stacey, Chief Regulator

1. *Corporate Plan 2012-15*: www.ofqual.gov.uk/news-and-announcements/83-news-and-announcements-news/902-our-corporate-plan

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Summary of the year

Summary of the year

The year 2011–12 was our second as a statutory regulator. During this year we focused on building on the foundations of our new regulatory arrangements and on setting these out for stakeholders in Northern Ireland.

We worked closely with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), the body that is both the provider and the regulator of general qualifications, principally GCSEs and A levels, in Northern Ireland, and with the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and the Department of Education (DE) to agree new approaches to our ways of working. With the two departments and CCEA, we sought to minimise confusion about our respective regulatory roles and functions. This culminated in an agreement that explains which regulator regulates which qualifications in Northern Ireland. We issued this communication to every awarding organisation in February 2012².

We held two consultation events in Northern Ireland: the first in May 2011, on our new strategic approach to regulation; and the second in March 2012, on our new powers and our approach to accreditation, monitoring and risk. Although these consultations were aimed primarily at awarding organisations, we invited other stakeholders with an interest, including regulatory colleagues from CCEA, officials from DEL and DE, and our Northern Ireland Committee. We also consulted on our new equality scheme, which received approval from the Equality Commission Northern Ireland in July 2012.

2. In Northern Ireland we regulate the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), vocationally related qualifications, occupational qualifications, higher level qualifications, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) qualifications, key skills, basic skills and free-standing mathematics qualifications. CCEA regulates GCE A level, GCE AS level, GCSE, other general qualifications and entry level qualifications on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

In May 2011 we published our new criteria and conditions, and by February 2012 we had completed a challenging programme of visits to each one of the 87 awarding organisations that award qualifications in Northern Ireland. Three of these are based in Northern Ireland, one in the Republic of Ireland and the remainder elsewhere in the UK.

In May and June 2011 we were invited to participate in two events to celebrate achievements in vocational qualifications. The Apprentice of the Year Awards and the Vocational Qualification (VQ) Learner of the Year Award are events demonstrating the vocational qualification achievements of individuals.

In June 2011 we hosted a round-table discussion with employers to hear first-hand what they value about regulated vocational qualifications. In general their feedback was positive, but we gained some valuable insights into how these important stakeholders perceive the value of vocational qualifications, and what they expect from them in the future.

Later in the year we met a wider network of employer representative groups and a number of students to hear their views on vocational qualifications. These discussions were important to us and provided us with a useful benchmark against which to measure confidence in vocational qualifications in the future.

In September 2011 the Assembly's Employment and Learning Committee and the Northern Ireland Executive endorsed amendments to the Education Bill³, giving us stronger powers to tackle any serious non-compliance by awarding organisations. The Bill was passed in November, and the new powers, notably the power to fine, came into force at the beginning of May 2012.

3. Education Act 2011: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/21/contents/enacted

In November 2011 we made two additional appointments to our Northern Ireland Committee, with one new member coming from a higher education background and one from an employer representative body. They joined other members of the committee who come from further education, private training and the public sector.

The full Ofqual Board came to Northern Ireland in March 2012 and held its meeting at Belfast Metropolitan College. This provided the Board members an opportunity to meet, staff and students of the college and to view their new campus at the Titanic Quarter.

We published, jointly with CCEA, the first annual statistics bulletin on qualification achievements in Northern Ireland, for the period January–December 2011, and the first quarterly statistics bulletin, for the period January–March 2012.

The DE and the DEL announced, as expected, a review of regulation in Northern Ireland in December 2011, which they promised when the current arrangements were put in place in 2010. The review was to consider whether current arrangements should change and we provided input to this review until it was put on hold in October 2012.

The next section reports on some of the other key events during the year, to provide some context for this annual report.

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Our regulatory framework

Our regulatory framework

Qualifications are an important feature of a well-functioning skills market, acting as a signal of achievement and skills levels. For this role, qualifications need to be rigorous and recognised. We regulate 179 awarding organisations in total and over 15,000 qualifications. Eighty-seven of these awarding organisations awarded a total of 441,950 achievements in Northern Ireland in 2011 (this figure combines all qualifications regulated by us and by CCEA).

Our priorities are to:

- secure (and, where necessary, recalibrate) the standards of qualifications, and to promote confidence in them;
- secure a healthy, robust and efficient qualifications system.

Our priorities and our statutory objectives⁴ shape the way we regulate. During the year we developed our strategic risk-based model of regulation. We hold awarding organisations to account, and we expect them to be accountable for their actions and for the quality, standards and efficiency of the qualifications they develop, deliver and award.

Getting the foundations in place

Our *General Conditions of Recognition*⁵ are at the core of our regulatory arrangements and all regulated awarding organisations must meet them. Following extensive consultation, revised, broader and more stringent conditions came into effect in July 2011. The conditions are central to our new strategic and risk-based approach to regulation. They set out the requirements that all awarding organisations must meet, but they do not dictate how an awarding organisation must work.

4. See Appendix 1 on Statutory Objectives

5. *General Conditions of Recognition*: www.ofqual.gov.uk/how-we-regulate

We required every awarding organisation to submit to us, by May 2012, a statement of compliance setting out whether it was compliant with the conditions, and if not, what it was doing to become compliant. We put in place a programme to help awarding organisations understand the conditions and our expectations of them, which included us visiting every awarding organisation governing body. We received statements of compliance from all the 171 awarding organisations that wish to continue as recognised awarding organisations.

With the conditions in place, we continued to develop other key parts of our regulatory approach, including monitoring, guidance, risk, recognition and enforcement. In February 2012 we launched a consultation on risk-based regulation. Currently all qualifications are subject to an accreditation requirement. This means that they must be checked by us before they can be delivered. When we are confident that an awarding organisation is compliant with our conditions of recognition we can consider lifting this accreditation requirement.

We make our recognition decisions based on our recognition criteria. This means that only awarding organisations that have proved themselves are allowed to award qualifications that we regulate. By April 2012 we had issued one statutory direction and agreed six formal undertakings with awarding organisations⁶, and three awarding organisations had surrendered in full their recognition.

Our new Chief Executive, Glenys Stacey, took up post in March 2011, and our new Chair, Amanda Spielman, started in July 2011. The Education Act 2011 transferred the title of Chief Regulator from the Chair to the Chief Executive, and Glenys Stacey was confirmed as the new Chief Regulator in April 2012 (a Crown appointment) following a successful pre-appointment hearing. The Secretary of State confirmed the appointment of five new members of our Board⁷ in April 2012.

6. www.ofqual.gov.uk/how-we-regulate/90-articles/876-examples-of-cases-where-we-have-taken-regulatory-action

7. www.ofqual.gov.uk/about-us/our-board

With new leadership and new regulatory arrangements in place we are reviewing the structure and capability of the organisation.

Our ambition is to regulate in a strategic, risk-based and focused way that keeps standards at the centre of what we do.

Taking regulatory action

The Education Act 2011 amended our powers to take action when an awarding organisation breaches its conditions. We consulted on and then adopted a revised sanctions and enforcement policy, *Taking Regulatory Action*⁸.

Under this policy we now:

- have the power to fine an awarding organisation that has breached a condition;
- can recover our costs when we investigate cases that result in certain forms of action;
- have more freedom to direct an awarding organisation to comply with its conditions or withdraw its recognition.

Qualification monitoring

Our vocational qualifications monitoring focused on three qualifications in 2011–12: English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), hairdressing and retail investment advisers. We looked at a number of awarding organisations offering these qualifications and although numbers of candidates in Northern Ireland were small, compared with numbers in England, the findings will lead to improvements in the experience of all future students.

We conducted a standards review of ESOL Skills for Life entry level qualifications, which are increasingly being used to support UK citizenship applications. Although we found that suitable progression was offered between levels, we also found that some qualifications did not fully meet the requirements

of ESOL qualification criteria. We required awarding organisations to address all issues, so that those qualifications now meet the requirements of the qualification criteria.

In 2012–13 we will, in conjunction with other agencies, review and revise the ESOL Skills for Life qualification criteria to ensure they meet the requirements of students and other users. We will consult on draft criteria before they are published and will allow time for awarding organisations to revise their qualifications before any new criteria come into effect.

We reviewed the level 3 Diploma in hairdressing qualifications offered by five different awarding organisations. We found that the assessments were not meeting the sector skills body's requirement for all of the content to be assessed in each exam, but were testing only samples of the content. It was clear to us that the awarding organisations and the sector skills body had different expectations. Testing all of the content would make the exams too long. However the awarding organisations have taken action to improve the quality and coverage of their assessments. In the longer term the sector skills body intends to review and change its assessment strategy.

Our monitoring of qualifications for retail investment advisers⁹ confirmed that these qualifications are fit for purpose. We are satisfied with the assurances we received from awarding organisations that all students who meet the minimum standards will have demonstrated sufficient knowledge and skills to work as retail investment advisers.

8. *Taking Regulatory Action*: www.ofqual.gov.uk/how-we-regulate

9. *Findings from the Review of Level 4 Retail Investment Adviser Qualifications*: www.ofqual.gov.uk/news-and-announcements/83-news-and-announcements-news/908-findings-from-the-review-of-level-4-retail-investment-adviser-qualifications

The Northern Ireland Committee

The Northern Ireland Committee was established in November 2011 to provide strategic advice to us on the implementation and impact of the regulation of vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland, and on matters concerning Northern Ireland in relation to our statutory objectives.

The Northern Ireland Committee is chaired by the Northern Ireland Ofqual Board member Ray Coughlin, whose background includes work in the financial services industry, having held general management positions in human resources and strategic management. Two other members of the Ofqual Board are also members of the Northern Ireland Committee: Sandra Burslem and Maggie Galliers.

The Northern Ireland Committee has a further eight independent members appointed from Northern Ireland:

- Trevor Carson – Associate Director with BBA Training.
- Thérèse Rogan – Independent Business and Skills Consultant.
- Dr. Catherine O’Mullan – Director of Curriculum, Northern Regional College.
- Elsbeth Rea – Professional Adviser, Northern Ireland Social Care Council.
- Donna Sheerin – Totalis Northern Ireland.
- Justin Edwards – Assistant Chief Executive and Director of Curriculum, Belfast Metropolitan College.
- Elizabeth Hull – Professor Emerita of the University of Ulster.
- Trevor Johnston, Operations Manager, Northern Ireland for SummitSkills.

During 2011–12 the Northern Ireland Committee held meetings in June, September and December 2011 and in March 2012.

In June 2011 the committee agreed the first annual report to the Northern Ireland Assembly and discussed ways in which we could use our

communications plan for Northern Ireland to promote awareness of regulation and the benefits of regulated qualifications. A series of meetings with students and employers was agreed as the most effective approach.

At its September 2011 meeting the committee met the office of the Northern Ireland Adviser on Employment and Skills to discuss its research on priority skills in Northern Ireland. The meeting also provided an opportunity for the Committee to discuss their work in Northern Ireland with Amanda Spielman, our newly appointed Chair.

This was followed in December 2011 with a session from DEL on the Northern Ireland Skills Strategy. This meeting provided valuable insights into the emerging skills priorities for Northern Ireland and the role that qualifications will play in meeting the skills targets. At this meeting the committee also had the opportunity to comment on our consultations and on the plans for reporting on qualification achievements for the first time in Northern Ireland.

At its March 2012 meeting the committee had the opportunity to comment on the draft *Corporate Plan* and to discuss plans for the review of regulation in Northern Ireland with officials from DE and DEL.

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The Northern Ireland qualifications market

The Northern Ireland qualifications market

The Northern Ireland Skills Strategy, Success through Skills – Transforming Futures¹⁰, places qualifications at the heart of its vision to increase the skills levels of Northern Ireland’s workforce. The twin goals of the Skills Strategy are to raise the levels of productivity and social inclusion within Northern Ireland.

Throughout the Strategy, qualifications are used as a measure of skills because they are valuable to:

- individuals, in terms of providing mobility in the labour market and enhancing self-esteem;
- employers, for providing information when recruiting workers;
- government, for measuring the skills levels of the workforce.

The skills of Northern Ireland’s workforce have an important role to play in helping Northern Ireland reach its full economic potential.

The Skills Strategy is one of the building blocks of the Northern Ireland Executive’s *Programme for Government 2011–15*¹¹, which sets out the actions the Executive will take to build a shared and better future for all. One of the commitments made in the programme, to be realised through the Skills Strategy, is to up-skill the working age population by delivering over 200,000 qualifications within the lifetime of the programme. As a regulator of these qualifications we can contribute to the delivery of this Strategy by making sure the qualifications we regulate are of a high quality. We will discuss with officials in DEL how our regulations can continue to help achieve this goal and consider what priorities this commitment will highlight.

10. *Success through Skills – Transforming Futures*: www.delni.gov.uk/success-through-skills-transforming-futures

11. *Programme for Government 2011–15*: www.northernireland.gov.uk/pfg

Healthy markets

In November 2011 we wrote to ministers in Northern Ireland and England, setting out our healthy markets programme to investigate various aspects of the qualifications market. The Minister for Employment and Learning welcomed our plans to investigate various aspects of the qualifications market and asked us to work closely with his officials as the work programme rolls out.

Our healthy markets work will inform our developing approach to regulating vocational qualifications. This work will help us to understand better the implications of the current market structure on the standards and efficiency of qualifications. It will give us a better understanding of the incentives in the market to consistently provide vocational qualifications that are fit for purpose and meet the requirements of employers and other users.

Northern Ireland statistics bulletins

Our *Annual Qualifications Market Report 2012*¹², published jointly with CCEA and the Welsh Government, brings a range of information about the qualifications market together into a single document, providing an overview of the activity, scale and players within the qualifications market in Northern Ireland, England and Wales.

In January 2011 we asked all awarding organisations to provide regional data on qualification achievements in Northern Ireland, and in June 2012 we published, jointly with CCEA, the first *Northern Ireland Annual Statistics Bulletin* on regulated qualifications in Northern Ireland, for the period January–December 2011¹³.

The bulletin provides summary data on all regulated qualifications in Northern Ireland and all recognised awarding organisations. It presents data on

12. *Annual Qualifications Market Report 2012*: www.ofqual.gov.uk/news-and-announcements/130/896

13. *Northern Ireland Annual Statistics Bulletin 2011*: www.ofqual.gov.uk/standards/150/910

achievements in all qualifications regulated by both us and CCEA, regardless of age of student, centre type or funding status of the qualification.

An awarding organisation must first submit its qualification to the regulators for accreditation before it is made available to students. At the point of accreditation, regulated qualifications are allocated to one of 17 qualification types¹⁴, which are used to classify qualifications. For the purposes of the *Northern Ireland Annual Statistics Bulletin*, qualifications other than GCEs and GCSEs are grouped as other regulated qualifications, and these include all the vocational qualifications we regulate in Northern Ireland.

The data in the bulletin includes the 20 awarding organisations offering the highest number of qualifications in Northern Ireland and the greatest number of achievements for GCEs, GCSEs and other regulated qualifications. It also provides data on achievements by type, level and sector area.

Between January and December 2011, a total of 164,500 regulated qualifications, other than GCEs and GCSEs, were awarded to students in Northern Ireland. Qualifications in the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) had the greatest share of achievements in Northern Ireland, with a 40 per cent share of the achievements awarded. The QCF is a system for recognising skills and qualifications. It does this by awarding credit for qualifications and units (small steps of learning). Each unit has a credit value. This value specifies the number of credits gained by students who complete that unit. The flexibility of the system allows students to gain qualifications at their own pace along routes that suit them best.

14. Qualification types: functional skills, free-standing maths qualifications, other general qualifications, entry level, GCE A level, GCE AS level, GCSE, higher level, Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), vocationally related qualifications, occupational qualifications, basic skills, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) qualifications, key skills, project, principal learning.

In 2012–13 we will also report on a quarterly basis, jointly with CCEA, on all achievements in Northern Ireland. This market data will provide us with intelligence that we will use to target our regulation on specific awarding organisations, qualifications and themes that are high-stake and priority areas for Northern Ireland. The first quarterly report for January–March 2012 was published in May 2012¹⁵.

Listening to the views of stakeholders

While awarding organisations are at the core of the regulated system, there are many stakeholders in Northern Ireland with an interest in the regulation and standards of vocational qualifications. Government, of course, has a stake in the quality of the qualifications it funds, as do the providers, the further education colleges and private training providers, who need to know that the qualifications they deliver meet regulatory requirements and government priorities. Employers and higher education providers need to be confident that the results students receive are the results they deserve. But, of course, it is students who ultimately rely on the regulation system to safeguard their interests. That is why, this year, we met students and employers to understand better what they look for from a regulated vocational qualification.

Employers' views

In June 2011 we convened a panel of employers to hear about the value they place on regulated vocational qualifications. We met six employers from companies ranging from small to large enterprises. We were joined by officials from DEL.

In the main the employers we spoke to were very confident that the regulated vocational qualifications they use meet their needs. They were able to cite examples of how investment in vocational qualifications had resulted in tangible and measurable business benefits, such as reduction in waste, increase in production and up-skilling to meet new business challenges.

15. *Northern Ireland Qualifications Quarterly: January to March 2012*: www.ofqual.gov.uk/standards/150/909

Employers with a smaller workforce said it is very difficult for the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Northern Ireland to “shop around” as their larger counterparts can do. Often, they are limited in the choice of provision and have little say in how or where the qualification is delivered.

The discussion we had with this group of employers gave us a focus for a later discussion we had with a number of employer representative bodies in Northern Ireland. We met a total of 14 such bodies through the year, and the majority were satisfied that:

- qualifications for their sector are current and appropriate to job roles, and are designed to reflect new trends, technology or legislation;
- the range of vocational qualifications available in Northern Ireland is sufficient;
- there is a greater benefit in using regulated vocational qualifications than unregulated provision;
- the length of time it takes to complete vocational qualifications is appropriate;
- investment in vocational qualifications can be measured against bottom-line business benefits.

The discussions provided us with some useful insights into what at least some sector and employer representatives value about vocational qualifications. We need to know that the qualifications we regulate meet the required standard and are fit for purpose. We plan to share these views with our Northern Ireland Committee and to look at ways in which we can better engage with employers to understand what they need out of the qualifications market.

We were pleased to be accompanied by Basil McCrea, Chair of the Assembly’s Employment and Learning Committee, on our visit to Bombardier Aerospace in Belfast in November 2011. Bombardier has the largest modern apprenticeship programme in Northern Ireland, and during the visit we had the opportunity to talk to instructors and apprentices about their experiences on the programme and about the vocational qualifications that underpin all apprenticeship frameworks.

Another significant employer investing in vocational qualifications is Wrightbus in Ballymena, one of Europe’s leading providers of passenger transport solutions. We visited the company in June 2011 and heard that our regulation gave it confidence in the qualifications it invests in.

Students’ views

Employers are important users of regulated qualifications, but, of course, it is students who depend most on the regulated system to provide them with the confidence that the qualifications they take are fit for purpose and valued by employers and higher education providers. During the year we met students from various settings and vocational areas.

Overall, the students we met confirmed a very positive view of regulated vocational qualifications. They saw having a vocational qualification as a means to getting a job, being promoted or continuing to a higher level of qualification. They were generally happy with the assessment methods used in vocational qualifications, many preferring the methods used in workplace assessment to classroom-based assessment.

Although we met only a small sample of students, we found the discussions with them very useful. We were particularly encouraged by how informed they were about their qualifications and how confident they were that their qualifications would be of value to them and their employers.

The students we talked to placed a great deal of importance on successfully achieving their qualification, and their achievements being recognised. Celebrating achievement is an important incentive to others who may be considering embarking on a vocational qualification. In Northern Ireland we are centrally involved in two important celebration events.

The VQ Learner of the Year Award recognises students who clearly demonstrate progression and excellence in vocational studies – students who have made considerable achievements in their field. We

worked alongside DEL to encourage stakeholders in Northern Ireland to nominate outstanding students who have achieved excellence in their chosen field.

In June 2011, at the National VQ Day ceremony in Parliament Buildings, we joined the Minister, Dr Stephen Farry, in congratulating the finalists and winner of the prestigious title Northern Ireland 2011 VQ Learner of the Year.

The skills and talent displayed by Northern Ireland apprentices are celebrated each year at the Apprentice of the Year Awards. Employers and training organisations nominate their most skillful and promising apprentices. We were pleased to participate in the judging of this important competition and to address the audience attending the celebration event in May 2011.

Focus on equality

Our duties to the wider public are also covered under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998¹⁶ (the Act), which requires us, in carrying out our functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have:

- due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between persons of different religious belief or political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation, between men and women generally, between persons with a disability and persons without, and between persons with dependants and persons without;
- regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

Our revised equality scheme, which was approved by the Equality Commission at the end of July 2012, demonstrates how determined we are to make sure there are opportunities for people affected by our work to positively influence how we carry out our functions in line with our Section 75 statutory duties.

We have also undertaken an audit of inequalities and are developing a Section 75 action plan to cover the period of our Corporate Plan to manage the effective implementation of our duties through our internal reporting systems.

Awarding organisations are subject to statutory duties not to discriminate against candidates on the grounds of protected characteristics. We require awarding organisations to comply with their legal duties, and we can take regulatory action against an awarding organisation that has breached equalities law.

Our recognition conditions also require awarding organisations to monitor their qualifications for any features that could disadvantage a group of students who share particular protected characteristics, and to remove any disadvantages that cannot be justified. We have exercised our power to limit the reasonable adjustments that an awarding organisation must make for disabled candidates. We have taken into account the need to minimise the disadvantage disabled students can experience, while recognising that qualifications must give a reliable indication of a student's knowledge, skills and understanding. We require awarding organisations to have clear arrangements for making reasonable adjustments in relation to qualifications for disabled students, as the law requires.

During the year we interviewed a sample of awarding organisations to understand how they are meeting their equality-related obligations. We are using the outcomes of this research to inform our wider work on equalities, in particular the guidance we should give to awarding organisations.

16. The Northern Ireland Act 1998: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/47/contents

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Looking ahead

Looking ahead

We are in a time of significant change for qualifications. This section sets out briefly our work over the next year.

Our focus in Northern Ireland must be on making sure that vocational qualifications are of the right standard, both academic and vocational, are of the right standard, and this focus will drive all we do. We will oversee the implementation of reforms in line with our objectives and regulatory approach. Where the government requests changes we will continue to exercise our responsibility to secure the best way to implement these without undue risk to standards or delivery.

In 2012–13 we will:

- review and where required improve functional skills and ESOL qualifications;
- continue our programme of work on healthy markets, including a review of textbooks and other qualifications-related awarding organisation activities;
- put in place restrictions on training events that relate directly to particular qualifications;
- strengthen our regulatory practices and monitor awarding organisations according to risk and identify and mitigate (where possible) systemic risks;
- continue to build organisational capability and capacity.

Most vocational qualifications and units are contained in the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). We will begin a review of how the QCF works for students, employers and those in education and training. The QCF is designed to enable qualifications to be built up from credits for individual units of study. In practice the QCF is complicated for users, and we are also concerned about the quality of some units and the standards of the qualifications that result, and about market practices that limit choice.

We will develop new ways of working with employers to understand what they need out of the qualifications market, and we will put in place further arrangements to understand what different people need and expect from qualifications.

We will also develop our register of qualifications to make it a more user-friendly, accessible and information-rich tool for users, to help inform the right choices. And we will review the titling of qualifications to make sure their names are consistent and make sense to users. We will also continue to work with others in aligning frameworks within the UK internationally, for example with the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in the Republic of Ireland and the European Qualifications Framework.

Finally, we will continue to work closely with CCEA on all common matters concerning the regulation system in Northern Ireland. We will act jointly, where we can, to minimise unnecessary burdens on the awarding organisations that we each regulate, and we will share information to enable us each to make our own decisions.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Statutory objectives in the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009, as amended by the Education Act 2011

1. **The qualifications standards objective** is to secure that –
 - (a) regulated qualifications give a reliable indication of knowledge, skills and understanding, and
 - (b) regulated qualifications indicate –
 - (i) a consistent level of attainment (including over time) between comparable regulated qualifications, and
 - (ii) a consistent level of attainment (but not over time) between regulated qualifications and comparable qualifications (including those awarded outside the United Kingdom) which are not qualifications to which this Part applies.
2. **The assessments standards objective** is to promote the development and implementation of regulated assessment arrangements, which –
 - (a) give a reliable indication of achievement, and
 - (b) indicate a consistent level of attainment (including over time) between comparable assessments.
3. **The public confidence objective** is to promote public confidence in regulated qualifications and regulated assessment arrangements.
4. **The awareness objective** is to promote awareness and understanding of –
 - (a) the range of regulated qualifications available,
 - (b) the benefits of regulated qualifications to learners, employers and institutions within the higher education sector, and
 - (c) the benefits of recognition under section 132 to bodies awarding or authenticating qualifications to which this Part applies.
5. **The efficiency objective** is to secure that regulated qualifications are provided efficiently and in particular that any relevant sums payable to a body awarding or authenticating a qualification in respect of which the body is recognised under section 132 represent value for money.

Appendix 2: Summary of our 2011–12 expenditure (Northern Ireland office only)

Estimated income and expenditure 2011–12

Income	£000
Funding from DEL	397
Total expenditure	397

Expenditure	£000
Permanent staff costs	269
Personnel overheads	25
Accommodation	31
IT and communication costs	44
Operational spend	28
Total expenditure	397

While this table is unaudited, these figures will be incorporated into our outturn within the audited *Annual Report and Accounts 2011–12*¹⁷.

17. *Ofqual Annual Report and Accounts 2011–12*: www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/hc1213/hc00/0064/0064.asp



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