

Subject:

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

DE Circular Number: 2022/10

Date of Issue: 30 November 2022

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;
- 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;
- **PLEASE NOTE REVISED DEADLINE** - Requests for approval for qualifications not in the NIEFQAN file, for first teaching in 2023/24 academic year, must be submitted to the DE by **31 March 2023** at the latest;
- Requests for retrospective approvals will **not** be considered.

Governor Awareness:
Essential

Status of Contents:
For information and action by
schools

Superseded Documents:

DE Circular 2021/24

Expiry Date: N/A

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
91 279566

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. Given this statutory requirement, **retrospective requests for approval will not be considered.**
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. It should be noted that where the Ofqual Register lists a qualification as 'Offered in Northern Ireland' this means that it is available for use in any setting in NI, including through FE colleges or other providers, but it does not necessarily mean that it has been approved by DE for use **in schools** here. Only the NIEFQAN file contains that information.
5. Schools are advised that qualifications with operational end dates falling **before** September 2023 should not be offered to new cohorts of learners from September 2023.
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. Awarding Organisations cannot directly request DE approval.

7. Schools should note that qualifications not approved and included in the NIEFQAN File in September 2023 will not be available to select as an option on the Entitlement Framework (EF) online audit in the 2023/24 academic year. Requests for retrospective approval will not be considered to facilitate completion of the EF online audit during the autumn term in 2023, as it is a statutory requirement that qualifications are approved before teaching starts.

8. 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**. It should be noted that qualifications being offered in a Further Education College may not have been approved by DE for use with pupils registered in NI schools.

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. Before seeking approval for new qualifications, schools should, in the first instance, consider any similar qualifications already approved and in the NIEFQAN File. If, having considered all similar qualifications in the NIEFQAN File, a school still wants to seek approval for the new qualification, the Department will require an explanation of why the pre-approved qualification(s) is not suitable and a justification for seeking the addition of the new, similar, qualification to the NIEFQAN File.

11. It is the Department's expectation that, when considering new qualifications, schools will seek to establish whether such courses will facilitate progression.

12. For example, 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>

13. 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.*

14. **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 2023/24 ACADEMIC YEAR

15. Schools should make approval requests for any qualifications intended for teaching in the 2023/24 academic year as soon as possible, if they are not already included in the NIEFQAN File. All requests should be forwarded to DE **by 31 March 2023** to enable decisions to be taken and communicated to schools in a timely manner. **Requests for retrospective approvals will not be considered.**

16. Schools wishing to make a qualification approval request should complete an Approval Request Form available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/qualification-approval-request-form>

Completed Approval Request Forms should be forwarded to:
qualsapprovals@education-ni.gov.uk

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

18. 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 to have access to large size qualifications.

19. Schools wishing to offer large qualifications must be able to provide sufficient information to demonstrate/support the rationale for offering the proposed provision based on the current needs and immediate challenges facing the identified pupils.
20. 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.
21. 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).
22. You should also note that while the qualification you have chosen may have a GCSE/A Level "size equivalency", equivalences relate to how the qualification is counted for the annual return of examination results and it is not possible for DE to provide advice on 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.
23. A large qualification Approval Request Form is available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/qualification-approval-request-form-large-size-qualification>

Completed Approval Request Forms should be forwarded to:
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24. To assist schools with planning for the next academic year (September 2023), 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 2023. Qualifications that are no longer available to new learners will be removed, however, these qualifications will still be approved for teaching to existing cohorts 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. Systems will be in place to allow schools to enter results for qualifications up until the certification end date of the qualification.

25. **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.

26. 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.

27. Details of the process used to approve qualifications can be found at:
<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/decision-making-process>

REVIEW OF QUALIFICATIONS

28. To help ensure that the qualifications landscape meets the needs of young people and the economy, and in light of other developments such as the publication of the 14-19 Framework, the reform of vocational qualifications in England, and the vocational qualifications reform project being led by the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland, the Department of Education plans to review the qualifications currently approved for teaching in NI schools and the current qualification approval process. This work will be progressed over the next couple of years. Schools will be consulted where

any significant changes are proposed. One action to be progressed first is a review of the NIEFQAN file. This may need to be taken forward in stages, but in the first instance, the Department has asked CCEA to remove from the NIEFQAN file any qualifications that have not been delivered in NI schools in the past 5 years.

The 14-19 Framework publication can be found at: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/developing-more-strategic-approach-14-19-education-and-training-framework-transform-14-19-education>

EOTAS CENTRES

29. 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 14 (standard application form) and 21 (large application form).



JOAN CASSELLS
Head of Qualifications Team