

Subject:

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

**DE Circular Number:** 2026/01

**Date of Issue:** 13 January 2026

**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 delivery by schools in Northern Ireland:

- It is a statutory requirement that qualifications taught in Northern Ireland schools must be approved by the Department of Education before teaching commences.
- It is the responsibility of each school to check the NIEFQAN File (within the CCEA Central Login area) to ensure that qualifications it plans to deliver are approved.
- *Fully completed* requests for approval for qualifications not on the NIEFQAN File, for first teaching in 2026/27 academic year, must be submitted to the DE by **27 March 2026** at the latest.
- Requests made after this date will **not** be considered.
- **All requests**, except for large size Level 3 qualifications, must be made online via CCEA's

**Governor Awareness:**  
Essential

**Status of Contents:**  
For information and action by  
schools

**Superseded Documents:**

DE Circular 2025/01

**Expiry Date:** N/A

NIEFQAN App. Further details are provided in this circular, and any school experiencing access issues relating to the NIEFQAN App should contact CCEA at [ccearegulation@ccea.org.uk](mailto:ccearegulation@ccea.org.uk).

**Enquiries:**

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

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## 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 delivery by NI schools are listed on the NIEFQAN File which is available within the CCEA Central Login Area.
4. All examination officers with existing access to the CCEA Central Login Area should automatically have access to the NIEFQAN File within the NIEFQAN App. The examination officer within the centre has permission to grant additional members of staff access to the Central Login area and to the NIEFQAN App. It is up to each school to determine how many members of staff should have access to Central Login and to specific apps within the Central Login. The CCEA Central Login may be accessed at the following link:  
<https://ccea.org.uk/learning-resources/ccea-central-login>.
5. **Only qualifications listed on the NIEFQAN File are approved for delivery by 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 is a matter for schools to be satisfied that the qualifications they propose to offer meet the needs of their pupils, support their progression and facilitate delivery of the broadly based and balanced curriculum. In particular, for Level 3 qualifications, schools have a responsibility to ascertain if the qualification (or the combination of qualifications

taken) will enable a range of progression pathways for its pupils and that it will retain currency across HE and FE settings for a sustained period of time.

6. Schools are advised that qualifications with operational end dates (OED) falling **before** September 2026 should not be offered to new cohorts of learners from September 2026. 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. These can be checked on the Register of Qualifications website: <https://www.gov.uk/find-a-regulated-qualification>. Please note, this website only shows if a qualification has been accredited for use in NI and not that it is approved for teaching in a school. As set out in paragraphs 1 and 5 above, **only qualifications approved by the Department and listed on the NIEFQAN File** may be delivered by schools.
7. 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 on the NIEFQAN File schools must request approval from DE.
8. Schools should note that qualifications not approved and therefore not included on the NIEFQAN File in September 2026 will not be available to select as an option on the Entitlement Framework (EF) online audit in the 2026/27 academic year. **Requests for retrospective approval will not be considered** to facilitate completion of the 2026/27 EF online audit, as it is a statutory requirement that qualifications are approved before teaching starts.
9. Where schools intend to offer a qualification in collaboration with another school or other provider (including Further Education Colleges), **it remains the responsibility of each school to check that the qualification is approved and included on the NIEFQAN File before teaching starts**.
10. Where the delivery of a qualification involves work experience, schools are advised to consider the guidance in [Circular 2025/06 - Pre-Employment /](#)

*AccessNI Check Requirements and Safer Recruitment Practices for Staff and Volunteers Working in or Providing a Service for Schools/Education Settings.*

## **APPROVAL OF QUALIFICATIONS NOT ON THE NIEFQAN FILE**

11. Where a school wants to offer a qualification not currently on the NIEFQAN File they should seek DE approval by following the process set out in the paragraphs below.

## **STANDARD APPROVAL REQUESTS FOR THE 2026/27 ACADEMIC YEAR**

12. Schools should make approval requests for any qualifications not already included on the NIEFQAN File and intended for teaching in the 2026/27 academic year as soon as possible. All requests should be submitted **by 27 March 2026 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 do so via the NIEFQAN App on CCEA's Central Login Area at <https://ccea.org.uk/learning-resources/ccea-central-login>. **Microsoft Word forms will no longer be accepted.** As noted earlier, all examination officers with existing access to the CCEA Central Login Area should automatically have access to the NIEFQAN App and have permission to grant access to additional members of staff.
14. All qualification approval requests must be authorised by the school Principal or Vice Principal (Curriculum). Therefore, applications will only be processed if this information is noted.
15. All applications for Level 2 qualifications, regardless of size, may be made via the NIEFQAN App in the CCEA Central Login Area. For Level 3 qualifications, only requests for qualifications with guided learning hours (GLH) up to the size equivalent to 2 A levels may be submitted via the app. Applications for qualifications with guided learning hours in excess of this – i.e. of 1080 GLH (3

A level equivalent) and over should follow the process for large size qualifications outlined below.

### **APPROVAL REQUESTS FOR LARGE SIZE LEVEL 3 QUALIFICATIONS**

16. As has been stressed in previous circulars, the Department considers large size Level 3 qualifications to be inconsistent with the requirement to deliver a broadly based and balanced curriculum and any approvals granted are by exception for specific pupils. Last year we applied interim arrangements in respect of requests for by exception approval for these qualifications while the Department considered their longer-term future in the context of curriculum developments. As this work has not yet been finalised, the interim arrangements implemented for 2025/26 (as set out below) will continue for one further year for new cohorts whom schools plan to start on these qualifications in September 2026.
  
17. For the 2026/27 school year, **only schools with existing approval for a large size Level 3 qualification may seek approval for new cohorts for the 2026/27 academic year – and approval will only be considered up to the existing approved numbers for the 2025/26 cohort. New applications will not be accepted from schools who have not previously received approval.** Schools should note that, as this is a continued interim arrangement for qualifications to be delivered in 2026/27, the approach to large size Level 3 qualifications in subsequent years remains under consideration and may be subject to change for academic year 2027/28.
  
18. The Department will write separately to schools eligible to apply for approval under these interim arrangements with details of how to apply and the information that will be required to support this request – this will reflect the level of detail about individual pupils requested in previous years.

## IMPORTANT POINTS THAT APPLY TO ALL QUALIFICATIONS APPROVAL REQUESTS

19. DE may liaise with the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) 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 that the Education Authority (EA) has no responsibility for the approval of qualifications process and is unable to intervene in the approvals process.*
20. **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.**

## UPDATING OF THE NIEFQAN FILE

21. To assist schools with planning for the next academic year (September 2026), the NIEFQAN File will be regularly updated, as necessary, on the CCEA Central Login area. Any school experiencing access issues relating to the NIEFQAN App should contact CCEA at [ccearegulation@ccea.org.uk](mailto:ccearegulation@ccea.org.uk)
22. Updates of the file will include newly approved qualifications, for teaching from September 2026. Qualifications that were previously approved but 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.

23. A number of Level 2 qualifications suitable **for post-16 candidates only** are currently included on 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; this will be stated on the qualification specification. These qualifications will not be counted for the purpose of school performance measures.
24. Schools that have been using a qualification for a number of years should not assume that these qualifications will continue to remain on 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.

## LITERACY AND NUMERACY QUALIFICATIONS

### ESSENTIAL SKILLS

25. 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 schools, other than GCSE Mathematics and English, Essential Skills Application of Number and Essential Skills Communication **are the only permitted 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>

### PERFORMANCE POINTS

26. Schools should note that performance points (indicated on the NIEFQAN File) 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. **Information on the calculation of performance points is provided in Annex A.** 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.

## **DECISION MAKING PROCESS DOCUMENT**

27. Details of the process used to approve qualifications can be found at: [Decision Making Process](#).

## **EOTAS CENTRES**

28. 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. If EOTAS Centres have any queries they should contact Qualifications Team.

**DARREN BEGGS**

**Qualifications Team**

## ANNEX A – Performance Measures

- A pass grade for all Level 2 qualifications that are graded pass or fail only, receive performance points aligned to grade C. This is consistent with the performance points for a Level 2 pass in other qualifications such as GCSEs and BTECs.
- Size equivalency for qualifications is based on the whole equivalents of the guided learning hours (GLH) for GCSEs (120 GLH) and A Levels (360 GLH).
- Performance points for large size Level 2 qualifications are capped at a maximum of the equivalent of two GCSEs.

### Size band tables

#### Key Stage 4

Guided Learning Hours (GLH)		GCSE Size Equivalence
Minimum	Maximum	Level 2
30	59	0.25
60	119	0.5
120	239	1
240	241+	2

#### Level 3

Guided Learning Hours (GLH)		GCE A Level size equivalence
Minimum	Maximum	Level 3
180	359	0.5
360	719	1
720	1079	2
1080	1439	3