

Subject:

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

DE Circular Number: 2016/25

Date of Issue: 21 November 2016

Target Audience:

- Principals and Boards of Governors (BoG) of all grant-aided post-primary schools and special schools with secondary departments;
- Education Authority (EA);
- 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 and criteria which are applied to approve qualifications for use in schools in NI. It also provides details on how the NIEFQAN file should be used.

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Governor Awareness: Essential

Status of Contents:

For information and action by schools

Related Documents:

DE Circular 2016/10

Expiry Date: N/A

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Introduction

1. This circular sets out the process and criteria which are applied to approve qualifications for use in schools in NI. It also provides details on how the NIEFQAN file should be used.
2. If a school wishes to use a qualification which has not already been approved by the Department of Education (DE) for use in schools in NI, a request for approval must be submitted to DE.

Seeking approval

3. Schools should send approval requests by email to:
qualsapprovals@education-ni.gov.uk A Qualification Approval Request Form should be completed and attached to the email. (See Annex B).
4. Qualifications are put through the DE approval process to determine whether or not they will be made available for use in schools.
5. Schools will receive an email response from DE advising them of the outcome of their approval request.
6. Once approved, performance points are allocated to the qualification and it is added to the NIEFQAN file. Performance points and GCSE/GCE size equivalence are used within key stage 4 and post-16 as they allow qualifications of different size and grade structure to be compared. Further details on performance points are set out at Annex A to this circular.
7. In addition to updating the NIEFQAN file, the NI specific information relating to the qualification is added to the Qualifications Register.
<http://register.ofqual.gov.uk>
8. All qualifications offered in schools must be included in the final version of the NIEFQAN file which is published in February each year. This will ensure that exam results can be entered over the summer period.

9. More details on the NIEFQAN file are at paragraphs 29 to 41 of this circular.

Considering qualifications for approval

The approval process involves 3 steps:

Step one – is this qualification eligible to be considered for use in schools?

10. In the first step a set of ‘core criteria’ is applied to new qualifications to ensure that qualifications outside of the remit of NI Regulation for schools are not approved.

11. Removed from the initial list of qualifications are those that:

- i. Awarding Organisations (AOs) have not made available for use in NI
- ii. AOs have not made available for use by learners aged 14-19
- iii. Are offered by an AO not recognised by CCEA Regulation

Step two – can the qualification automatically be approved?

12. The following groups of qualifications are automatically approved providing they have met the criteria in step one and have been accredited by the Qualifications Regulators:

- i. General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE)
- ii. Advanced Level and Advanced Subsidiary Level (GCE)
- iii. Essential Skills Northern Ireland

13. Qualifications that will not be approved:

- i. GCSE English where the assessment of Speaking and Listening does not contribute to overall grade
- ii. GCSE Science where the assessment of practical skills does not contribute to the overall grade¹

¹ This is currently under review by CCEA. The review is expected to conclude in January 2017.

- iii. GCE (A level) Science where the assessment of practical skills does not contribute to the overall grade

Step three – application of the school eligibility rules

- 14. If a qualification is not approved automatically, because it does not appear in the list of categories above, it is subject to scrutiny to determine whether it should be approved for use in schools.
- 15. The following rules are applied when approving a qualification.

Rule 1 – Size

- 16. The approval process outlined in this circular will apply only to qualifications at Key Stage 4 with a size equivalence of up to 3 GCSEs and at post-16 to qualifications with a size equivalence of up to 3 A levels. Approval of larger qualifications may also be granted. This will require further consideration and dialogue between the school, the 14-19 Curriculum Entitlement Team (CET), and the Assessment & Qualifications Team within DE, and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). From 1 January 2017, a school requesting the approval of a qualification above the size limit of 3 may be asked to provide further information. These qualifications will not routinely appear on the NIEFQAN file (but systems will be in place to allow schools to enter results for these qualifications).
- 17. The **qualification** size information (GLH) in the Register is used to apply this rule.

Justification for this rule

- 18. The **Entitlement Framework** aims to provide learners with a breadth of learning experience across the curriculum areas of learning. A significantly large qualification in one subject area may limit this experience.

Rule 2 – Purpose

19. Qualifications whose main purpose relates to one or more of the following will not automatically be approved:
- i. achievement of a licence for a specific company/industry
 - ii. where the qualification being proposed requires specialist equipment, facilities and/or teaching expertise that would not normally be associated with a school setting.
20. Qualifications whose purpose relates to both or either of the above may be approved by DE. This will require further consideration and dialogue between the school, CET and the Assessment & Qualifications Team within DE and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).

Justification for this rule

21. Post-primary schools cater for learners aged 14-19. The 14-19 Entitlement Framework ensures that schools provide pupils with access to a broad and balanced curriculum which will include a range of courses that facilitate progression towards relevant learning and career pathways. However, offering a qualification that requires a significant amount of investment in specialist equipment, facilities and acquisition of teaching expertise related to a specific industry may not be suitable or appropriate for the EF learning experience desired for learners in a school setting.

Following Approval – EF requirements

22. Once a qualification is recommended for use in schools and inclusion on the NIEFQAN file, the EF eligibility criteria are then applied so that this detail can also be included. There are 2 steps to this:

Step one – does the qualification meet EF requirements in terms of level and size?

23. At Key Stage 4, qualifications offered must provide opportunities to reach Level 2 and have a minimum of 120 guided learning hours (GLH).

24. At post-16, qualifications must provide opportunities to reach Level 3 and have a minimum of 360 GLH.

25. Qualifications not meeting these requirements will be classed as Not Eligible (NE) under the EF.

Step 2 – classification of eligible qualifications as applied or general

26. Once it is determined that a qualification meets EF requirements the classification of applied or general is assigned. The definitions issued by DE below are used:

General

27. The assessment arrangements are designed to enable learners to demonstrate the level of their knowledge, understanding and skills mainly through written tasks. The learning and assessment focus is set within a subject specific context.

Applied

28. The assessment arrangements are designed to enable learners to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills through practical demonstration and/or within a context related to employability.

The Entitlement Framework Audit and the NIEFQAN File Process

29. The Entitlement Framework (EF) Audit takes place during the first two months of the autumn term. CET will write to schools on an annual basis to advise when the EF Audit site will open and close. It is important that schools update their curricular offer within the specified timeframe.

30. Schools must follow the process outlined below to ensure that all of the qualifications they offer have been approved by DE and are included in the EF Audit exercise.

For delivery of qualifications in the current academic year

September to October

31. All qualifications must be approved by DE in advance of delivery in schools.

32. Schools must ensure that the qualifications they upload to the audit database have been approved by DE. There will no longer be a facility to request approvals for new qualifications through the EF Audit exercise. Schools wishing to have qualifications approved must follow the process outlined in paragraphs 3 to 9 of this circular.

33. Schools can refer to the Register of Qualifications or the current NIEFQAN file for details of the qualifications that DE has approved.

November and December

34. During the EF audit verification, details of schools' qualifications offers are made available to DE and CCEA Regulation. This will form the basis of the new and updated NIEFQAN file.

35. During December the new NIEFQAN file will be made available to schools.

January to February

36. **Schools must check that all the qualifications they are offering and intend to certificate in August are on the new NIEFQAN file.** If not, they must make an approval request via qualsapprovals@education-ni.gov.uk (in line with process outlined at paragraphs 3 to 9 of this circular). This check should be completed by the end of February.
37. Upon completion of these checks, the version of the NIEFQAN file at the end of February will be uploaded to SIMS and will be used as the basis for recording exam results that issue in August.
38. After February the NIEFQAN file will be closed to additions and amendments for the coming August results. **Schools should note that it is not possible to enter exam results for any qualifications not shown in the NIEFQAN file.**
39. **In cases where schools have offered and received pupils' results for qualifications not on the NIEFQAN file, qualifications will only be added to the file in exceptional circumstances. In such cases, schools will be asked to explain why the qualification needs to be added after the EF Audit process and subsequent NIEFQAN file checks have been completed.**

For delivery of qualifications in the next academic year

March to August

40. From March onwards schools can make approval requests for qualifications intended for teaching in the following academic year. Details of these qualifications will be published on the DE website on a monthly basis from March to August.
41. The NIEFQAN file will be updated in September to take account of newly approved qualifications.

**DALE HEANEY
ASSESSMENT & QUALIFICATIONS TEAM**

Annex A – Performance Points

Introduction

All qualifications that have been approved for use in schools here will appear in the NIEFQAN file. The NIEFQAN file shows details of GCSE equivalences for level 1 and level 2 qualifications, and A level equivalences for qualifications at level 3. This annex sets out how these equivalences are calculated.

The system is designed to enable schools to report their performance. The information on equivalency applies **only** to the allocation of school performance points.

It is not intended for use in relation to the equivalency of qualifications for employment and/or further/higher education purposes.

How Performance points are allocated

Performance points and GCSE/GCE size equivalence are used within key stage 4 and post-16 as they allow qualifications of different size and grade structures to be compared.

The calculation of points is defined as 'size' times 'challenge'.

Size is a measure of the average length of time it takes to teach the qualification. Average time is taken from the guided learning hours (GLH) from the Register of Regulated Qualifications. Challenge reflects the level of the qualification and grade achieved.

To calculate the points for a qualification, follow the rules below:

For level 1 or level 2 qualifications:

- calculate the GCSE size equivalence from Table 1;
- calculate the base points for each grade from Table 2; and
- for each grade, multiply the GCSE size equivalence and the base points together to determine the points for that grade

Performance points allocated to Revised GCSEs from CCEA are shown in Table 3.

Performance points allocated to Reformed GCSEs from AQA, Eduqas, OCR and Pearson are shown in Table 4.

For level 3 qualifications:

- calculate the A level size equivalence from Table 1;
- calculate the base points for each grade from Table 5; and
- for each grade, multiply the A level size equivalence and the base points together to determine the points for that grade

Size

The points system bands together qualifications of different sizes based on the following table.

Table 1: Size Bands

	GLH		GCSE size equivalence	GCE A level size equivalence
	Minimum	Maximum	Entry level, level 1 or level 2	Level 3
A	1	44	0.25	0.1
B	45	89	0.5	0.2
C	90	144	1	0.3
D	145	234	2	0.5
E	235	324	3	0.75
F	325	414	4	1
G	415	504	5	1.25
H	505	594		1.5
I	595	684		1.75
J	685	774		2
K	775	864		2.25
L	865	954		2.5
M	955	1044		2.75
N	1045	1134		3

The table shows that a qualification of 120 GLH at either, level 1 or level 2 would have a size equivalence of one GCSE. A similarly sized qualification of 120 GLH at level 3 would be equivalent to 0.3 of an A level.

Challenge

The following challenge tables contain the 'base points' for a level and grade structure combination – the points a qualification would achieve if it was size 1 (one GCSE equivalent level 1 and level 2 qualifications; one GCE A level equivalent for level 3 qualifications). It is important to note that the key factor in the grade structure is the number of grades – not the names of the grades. The pass/merit/distinction/distinction* grade structure is the same as the C grade/B grade/A grade/A* grade structure, because there are four grades in both.

Table 2 – Level 1 and level 2 qualifications

Level 1 grade structure	Example grade	Points
Pass only general	Pass	25
Pass only NVQ	Pass	28
2 grade scheme	Pass	22
	Credit	31
3 grade scheme	Pass	19
	Merit	28
	Distinction	34
4 grade scheme	G	16
	F	22
	E	28
	D	34
5 grade scheme	E	16
	D	20.5
	C	25
	B	29.5
	A	34

Level 2 grade structure	Example grade	Points
Pass only general	Pass	46
Pass only NVQ	Pass	49
2 grade scheme	Pass	43
	Credit	52
3 grade scheme	Pass	40
	Merit	49
	Distinction	55
4 grade scheme	C	40
	B	46
	A	52
	A*	58
5 grade scheme	E	40
	D	43
	C	46
	B	49
	A	52

Table 3 – Revised GCSEs from CCEA (Alphabetic)

Level 1 grades	Points
G	16
F	22
E	28
D	34

Level 2 grades	Points
C	40
C*	43
B	46
A	52
A*	58

Table 4 – Reformed GCSEs from AQA, Eduqas, OCR and Pearson (Numeric)

Level 1 grades	Points
1	16
2	28
3	34

Level 2 grades	Points
4	40
5	43
6	46
7	52
8	52
9	58

Table 5 – Level 3 qualifications

Level 3 grade structure	Example grade	Points
Pass only General	Pass	210
Pass only NVQ	Pass	240
2 grade scheme	Pass	195
	Credit	240
3 grade scheme	Pass	165
	Merit	225
	Distinction	270
4 grade scheme	Pass	165
	Merit	210
	Distinction	225
	Distinction*	270
5 grade scheme	E	150
	D	180
	C	210
	B	240
	A	270
A Level (with A* grade)	E	150
	D	180
	C	210
	B	240
	A	270
	A*	300

Annex B - Approval Request Form

Qualification Approval Request Form

Please complete the following information to seek approval to use a qualification which has not already been approved by the Department of Education (DE) for use in schools in NI.

DE School Ref No	
School name	
Contact name	
Contact number	
Submission Date	
QAN	
Qualification Title	
Intended Key Stage	
Intended start Date	
Comments	

Schools must ensure that the qualification is approved **before** they start to teach it.

Completed request forms should be emailed to: qualsapprovals@education-ni.gov.uk

This email address is automated and should not be used for any other purpose. Other qualifications queries should be forwarded to: AQT@education-ni.gov.uk