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Principles and general objectives of education

Northern Ireland is a constituent part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It consists of six of the nine counties of the Irish province of Ulster in the north-east of Ireland. It was created as a distinct subdivision of the United Kingdom (UK) in 1921, under the Government of Ireland Act 1920. In 1999, power was devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and its committee of ministers, the Northern Ireland Executive. This gave the Assembly legislative authority in areas previously administered by the UK government, one of which was education. Certain matters, such as international relations, were not devolved to the Assembly, and Northern Irish interests in these areas are represented in the UK Cabinet by a Secretary of State appointed by the UK Prime Minister.

The education and training systems of England, Wales and Northern Ireland are broadly similar. The education system in Scotland has always been completely separate with its own laws and practices. Differences across the United Kingdom are particularly marked in the school systems. At the higher education and training levels, this is less so.

The vision of the Department of Education, Northern Ireland is of an education system that is recognized internationally for the quality of its teaching and learning and for the achievements of its young people and of an education service that has at its centre a focus on the needs of children and young people. The basic principle underlying school education in Northern Ireland is that it should provide a balanced and broadly based curriculum which is suitable to a child's age, ability, aptitude and to any special educational needs which he/she may have. According to the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, the curriculum is designed specifically to: promote the spiritual, emotional, moral, cultural, intellectual and physical development of pupils at the school and thereby of society; and prepare such pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life by equipping them with appropriate knowledge, understanding and skills. According to the Education Bill currently being discussed by the Northern Ireland Assembly (October 2012), the overall aim of education is to contribute towards the spiritual, moral, cultural, social, intellectual and physical development of children and young persons... and... of the community at large.

The economy is the top priority of the Northern Ireland Executive, with the aspiration to grow a dynamic and innovative economy to provide the wealth and resources required to build a peaceful, prosperous and fair society. Within the context of *The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland*, the vision for 'skills' must be to support this economic aspiration by ensuring that excellent leadership is provided from well qualified managers supported by a highly skilled workforce. This will be done by focusing on those entering the labour force for the first time, up-skilling the existing workforce and ensuring those currently excluded from the labour force are provided with the skills to compete for jobs, retain jobs and progress up the skills ladder. Where

there are insufficient numbers of people with high level skills to meet employers' needs, the Department for Employment and Learning will encourage skilled people to consider Northern Ireland as a place to work and live. The aim is to enable people to access and progress up the skills ladder, in order to: raise the skills level of the whole workforce; raise productivity; increase levels of social inclusion by enhancing the employability of those currently excluded from the labour market; and secure Northern Ireland's future in a global marketplace. (DEL, 2011).

Laws and other basic regulations concerning education

The legislative framework for the compulsory school system in Northern Ireland consists of the many Education Orders made since 1986. The **Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986** defines compulsory education and its underlying principles. The **Education Reform (NI) Order 1989** reflects many of the provisions of the Education Reform Act (1988) for England and Wales. This Order increased school autonomy by transferring responsibility for the management of finance and human resources from central and local bodies to schools. The power of inspection is contained in the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986, which was extended by the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 to include a general duty to promote high educational standards, and further amended by the **Education (NI) Order 1996** to widen the range of people involved in the inspection process.

The main provisions of the **Children (NI) Order 1995** came into operation on 4 November 1996. The Order, which was jointly promoted by the Department of Health and Social Services and the Office of Law Reform, followed the introduction of the Children Act 1989 in England and Wales and broadly replicates it. It is the most comprehensive piece of legislation ever enacted in Northern Ireland in relation to children. It reformed and brought together much of the law relating to the care, upbringing and protection of children, and it fundamentally changed the balance between parental care and state intervention.

The **Special Educational Needs and Disability (NI) Order 2005** increased the rights of pupils with special educational needs to be educated in mainstream schools. The legislation further requires that schools and institutions of further and higher education become more accessible to pupils and students with disabilities.

Under the provisions of the **Education (NI) Order 1998**, the Department of Education, Northern Ireland approves qualifications delivered by schools for students over compulsory school age, while courses delivered by colleges to under-19s leading to external qualifications are approved by the Department for Employment and Learning. Qualifications delivered by schools are regulated by the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). The Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator (Ofqual) regulates all National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in Northern Ireland with CCEA regulating other external qualifications delivered by colleges to under-19s.

The **Education (NI) Order 2006** provided the broad legislative framework to implement the revised statutory curriculum. It also provides the legislative framework for new post-primary arrangements including the revised secondary curriculum and



assessment arrangements which began to be implemented in September 2007. The revised curriculum started to be phased in September 2007 on the basis of the **Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (NI) 2007**. The minimum content for each area of learning and key stage is defined as the knowledge, understanding and skills within that area of learning which are required to be taught to pupils of different abilities and maturities during that stage.

Under the **Education (Assessment Arrangements) Order (NI) 2007**, pupils in the autumn term of years 4–7 (ages 7 to 11) must be assessed in reading and mathematics for diagnostic purposes. They are assessed using computer-based tests called InCAS (Interactive Computerized Assessments). The InCAS assessment outcomes must be reported to parents in writing during the autumn term.

The **Education (2006 Order) (Commencement No.3) Order (NI) 2011** brings the Entitlement Framework into operation applies from 1 September 2013. The Entitlement Framework aims to provide access for pupils to a broad and balanced curriculum to enable them to reach their full potential no matter which school they attend or where they live. It will provide the opportunities for pupils to access a range of courses with clear progression pathways that engage and interest them and that properly prepare them for life and work in the 21st century. It will guarantee all pupils access to a minimum number of courses at key stage 4 (years 11 and 12, ages 14–16) and post-16, of which at least one third must be general and one third applied. The specified numbers of courses are being introduced on a phased basis as follows: (i) at key stage 4, 18 courses from 2013/14, 21 courses from 2014/15, and 24 from 2015/16; (ii) at post-16, 21 courses from 2013/14, 24 courses from 2014/15, and 27 courses from 2015/16. At least one must be a course in an official language of the European Union, other than English and, in Irish-speaking schools, Irish.

The legislative framework for further education is set out in the **Further Education (NI) Order 1997**. Higher education is defined in the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989.

In Northern Ireland compulsory schooling begins at age 4 and ends at age 16.

Administration and management of the education system

The **Department of Education, Northern Ireland (DE)** is responsible for the central administration of all aspects of education and related services, excluding further and higher education, which is in the remit of the Department for Employment and Learning. The primary statutory duty of the Department of Education is to promote the education of the people of the North of Ireland and to ensure the effective implementation of education policy. The Department's main statutory areas of responsibility are 0-4 provision, primary, post-primary and special education and the youth service. The Department is accountable through its Minister to the Assembly for the effective delivery of its statutory functions and for the effective use of the public funds for which it is responsible. The DE's main functions include advising ministers on education policy; framing legislation; accounting for the effectiveness of the education system; and allocating, monitoring and accounting for resources. The DE also monitors and evaluates the quality of pastoral care, teaching, learning, youth



provision and teacher education through the Education and Training Inspectorate. For 2011-2015 the Department has identified five corporate goals – two overarching goals and three enabling goals – that support the vision for education and the wider vision for economic and community growth that is captured in the Programme for Government. The two overarching goals are: raising standards for all; and closing the performance gap, increasing access and equity. The three enabling goals reflect the three priority areas through which the DE will work to achieve the overarching goals. They are: developing the education workforce; improving the learning environment; and transforming the governance and management of education.

The **Education and Training Inspectorate**, which operates within the Department, is the sole body with responsibility for the inspection of education and training. It has responsibility for inspecting and reporting on the quality of education and training throughout the education system, excluding higher education. The power of inspection is contained in the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, which was extended by the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989 to include a general duty to promote high educational standards, and further amended by the Education (NI) Order 1996 to widen the range of people involved in the inspection process to include associate assessors and lay members.

The main responsibilities of the **Department for Employment and Learning** (DEL) include: further and higher education; skills and vocational training; employment services; employment law and labour relations; student support and postgraduate awards; and training grants. DEL's aim is to promote learning and skills, to prepare people for work and to support the economy. Its four key areas of activity are: enhancing the provision of learning and skills; increasing the level of research and innovation in the economy; helping individuals acquire jobs and ensuring skills policy is informed by the requirements of the labour market; and maintaining a framework of employment rights and responsibilities.

The **Council for Catholic-Maintained Schools** (CCMS) coordinates the Catholic-maintained school system. It employs teachers; works to rationalize school provision in the Catholic-maintained sector; advises boards of governors on admissions criteria and curriculum delivery; and ensures provision for students with special educational needs. As part of its wider role it promotes high standards within the sector and works with education partners to influence policy in areas such as curriculum review, pastoral care and leadership.

The **Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment** (CCEA) is a non-departmental public body established in April 1994 and funded by the Department of Education. The main functions of the Council include: keeping under review all aspects of the curriculum, examinations and assessment; conducting and moderating examinations and assessment; publishing and distributing information on the curriculum, assessment, examinations and external qualifications; consulting stakeholders on proposed changes to legislation in these areas; and advising policymakers. CCEA also develops guidance and teaching materials for pre-school children; develops educational technology and multimedia resources; and produces support and guidance materials for teachers. In addition, CCEA is the regulator of qualifications in Northern Ireland (with the exception of certain vocational qualifications which are regulated by the Office of the Qualifications and



Examinations Regulator in England. CCEA regulates by: developing and publishing criteria for accreditation of qualifications; accrediting qualifications against those criteria; keeping qualifications under review; and publishing and sharing information relating to accredited qualifications. All accredited qualifications should be capable of operating within the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF).

Northern Ireland shares a common system of external qualifications with England and Wales. These qualifications are normally taken between the ages of 16 and 18 and are provided by independent organizations known as awarding bodies, largely funded by examination fees. Awarding bodies are subject to statutory regulation and their role involves: developing qualifications; assessing and quality assuring qualifications; awarding qualifications; and providing customer service to centres (including schools and further and higher education colleges) offering courses leading to their qualifications. The five principal awarding bodies are: the CCEA, the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA); Edexcel; OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations); and the WJEC (a leading UK awarding body providing examinations throughout England and Wales). These main awarding bodies offer both general and vocational qualifications. They offer the same type of qualifications, which must be centrally approved, but schools are free to choose examination specifications from any one of the five providers across England, Wales and Northern Ireland (although the CCEA offers qualifications which are tailored to the Northern Ireland context). There are also a very large number of smaller awarding bodies which offer mainly vocational and professional qualifications. These qualifications, which are regulated by Ofqual (Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation), should have support from the relevant sector skills council or similar organization, and they should conform to national occupational standards. (Eurydice, CEDEFOP & ETF, 2009/10).

The **General Teaching Council, Northern Ireland** (GTCNI) is an independent professional body for the teaching profession. All teachers wishing to teach in grant-aided (publicly-funded) schools must register with the GTCNI. The Council maintains a register of teachers and their publication *Teaching: the Reflective Profession* includes the Council's Code of Values and Professional Practices and competences.

There are five **Education and Library Boards** (ELBs) responsible for the local administration of education, and they each cover one or more district council areas. ELBs are wholly funded by the DE. ELBs are responsible for the administration of preschool, primary and secondary education, and youth and library services in local communities. They must ensure that there are enough schools to meet local needs. They employ teachers and are wholly responsible for the schools under their management, which are known as controlled schools. ELBs are also responsible for enforcing school attendance and providing a curriculum advisory and support service to schools in their area. They are required to ensure that school premises and delivery of the curriculum are accessible to disabled children, and they must prepare a statement for arrangements for the education of children with behavioural difficulties. They provide transport to and from school for pupils who need it; school meals services, including free meals for children from low-income families; and financial support for pupils from low-income families to purchase school uniforms.



At the centre of the Education Bill being currently discussed by the Northern Ireland Assembly (October 2012) is the creation of the **Education and Skills Authority** (ESA), a new and different type of organization with a new and different role. Its purpose will be to improve education outcomes, not to run schools. ESA will have four main functions. First, it will plan the education estate; it will consult and involve stakeholders, but it will be the only body with a statutory education planning function. Secondly, ESA will be the employing authority; its role will focus on system-wide workforce planning and development, while boards of governors will take all employment decisions in their school. Thirdly, ESA will promote the raising of standards. Fourthly, ESA will support professional development. It will provide or procure support and development services for schools and support schools to provide services themselves. ESA will take on the functions of the bodies it will replace, such as school maintenance, school library and meal services, transport and youth services.

In principle the new Education and Skills Authority will assume the responsibilities of the five ELBs as well as those of other non-departmental public bodies including the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, and the Youth Council. The Department of Education will continue to direct education policy and strategy, but some of its operational functions will transfer to the ESA. (Eurydice, CEDEFOP & ETF, 2009/10).

The Education Reform (NI) Order 1989 increased school autonomy by transferring responsibility for the management of finance and human resources from central and local bodies to schools. **Local management of schools** enables schools to spend the funding they receive according to their own priorities. For maintained and controlled schools, this funding is allocated to schools' Boards of Governors via the relevant ELB. Grant-maintained integrated and voluntary grammar schools receive their share of funding directly from the DE. Most of the administration and management of individual schools is delegated to School Boards of Governors and principals. The composition of the Board of Governors varies according to the category of school. The principal (head teacher) is a non-voting member. Schools can also co-opt members of the local business community on to the board as non-voting members. The **Board of Governors** provides strategic direction for the school and has a statutory duty to draw up a school development plan. It oversees implementation of the curriculum ensuring that statutory requirements are met; decides how the budget will be spent; determines the number and composition of the staff; selects the principal and other members of the school's leadership group; and directs performance management and teacher appraisal. It also ensures accountability by monitoring and evaluating school effectiveness, and receiving reports from the principal on the school's performance. It is required by law to prepare an annual report.

School principals (head teachers) are responsible for the internal organization, management and control of the school. With regard to strategic development, principals operate within the framework set by the Board of Governors, and must abide by education legislation and the terms of their appointment. In performing their duties, they are obliged to consult, as appropriate, the ELB, the Board of Governors, and the parents of the students. They have overall responsibility for: formulating school aims and objectives; appointment, management, appraisal and



development of staff; liaising with staff unions and associations; implementing the curriculum; keeping under review school organization; evaluating standards of teaching and learning; monitoring pupil progress; pastoral care; discipline; promoting good relations with parents and the wider community; managing resources and premises; and monitoring absence. Many schools have school councils in which pupils, often representing individual year groups, can make an active contribution to the school environment and ethos.

Further education institutions are autonomous and have a legal status similar to that of public companies. The institution's corporation (usually called the governing body) is responsible, within the limits imposed by its statutory obligations, for all decisions affecting the institution, including setting and monitoring the college's strategic direction, appointing the senior staff and ensuring that the college acts as a responsible employer. The principal of the college has automatic membership of the governing body and, along with the senior staff, is responsible for day-to-day management.

For higher education, the **Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education** (QAA), which was set up in 1997, provides an integrated quality assurance service for all the United Kingdom higher education institutions. The Agency is an independent body, funded by subscriptions from universities and colleges of higher education and through contracts with the higher education funding bodies. Funding for teaching and research in higher education is delivered through the Department for Employment and Learning. The **Higher Education Statistics Agency** collects and publishes financial information from universities and colleges in the United Kingdom. The **Higher Education Academy** (HEA) is a UK-wide organization committed to enhancing the student learning experience, and championing excellent learning and teaching in higher education. It is an independent organization funded by grants from the four UK higher education funding bodies, subscriptions from higher education institutions, and grant and contract income for specific initiatives. In Northern Ireland, the HEA seeks to deliver services and activities that support the higher education sector and meet institutional priorities and agendas, wider policy, and social and economic drivers and challenges.

Structure and organization of the education system

Pre-school education

The Education (NI) Order 1998, defines pre-primary education as education provided for a child (whether at school or any other premises) between the ages of 2 and 4 years, other than in the reception class of a primary school. Participation in pre-primary education is not compulsory. Since 2003/04 free part-time nursery provision is available for all 3- to 4-year-olds whose parents want it. Children are entitled to attend five sessions per week (each lasting 2.5 hours) for 38 weeks a year. Places are available in a range of settings including nursery schools, nursery units attached to primary schools, voluntary playgroups and private day nurseries. Education and Library Boards have overall responsibility for pre-primary provision at local level.



Primary education

Compulsory education begins at age 4 and the usual age for transfer to secondary schools is 11 years. Within the framework of the revised curriculum, primary education comprises the foundation stage (years 1 and 2, typically ages 4–6), key stage 1 (years 3 and 4, ages 6–8), and key stage 2 (years 5 to 7, ages 8–11). At the end of key stage 1 and of key stage 2, schools are required to report teacher assessment results in language and literacy and mathematics and numeracy to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). In addition, under the Education (Assessment Arrangements) Order (NI) 2007, pupils in the autumn term of years 4 to 7 must be assessed in reading and mathematics for diagnostic purposes using computer-based tests called Interactive Computerised Assessments (InCAS). The InCAS assessment outcomes must be reported to parents but data is not collated centrally.

Secondary education

At post-primary level, there has traditionally been a selective system with pupils transferring to (selective) grammar schools or (non-selective) secondary schools at age 11. The Department of Education no longer supports academic selection of pupils and no longer provides the 'transfer tests' previously taken by children at age 11 to determine whether they would attend a selective post-primary school. Within the framework of the revised curriculum, compulsory secondary education covers five years and comprises key stage 3 (years 8 to 10, ages 11–14) and key stage 4 (years 11 and 12, ages 14–16). At the end of key stage 3, schools are required to report teacher assessment results in language and literacy and mathematics and numeracy to the CCEA. A range of national qualifications are available at the end of key stage 4, although the majority of students take General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations in single general/academic or vocational/applied subjects (typically between five and ten subjects). Entry-level qualifications (in general subjects, vocational subjects and in skills required for life and employment) are available to key stage 4 students who are not ready to take GCSEs, but they can also be taken by students 16- to 19-year-olds. The qualifications are made up of a number of units, and a certificate is awarded on successful completion of all units. Entry-level qualifications prepare students for GCSEs and higher-level vocational qualifications. Post-compulsory upper secondary education typically lasts two years from age 16 to 18 (provision for students aged 16 to 18+ in schools is usually known as the sixth form). Students at this stage are again assessed by means of external qualifications. They may choose between general/academic and applied subjects or take a mixture of the two. They can remain in school, or they can transfer to a further education college. Colleges of further and higher education offer a balance of general and vocational subjects, and currently schools tend to offer general rather than vocational subjects. A-levels are single-subject examinations which may be studied in any combination and are traditionally the required qualification for entry to higher education. Students study up to five subjects in the first year of post-compulsory education, and upon successful completion are awarded an AS level qualification. In the second year, they study more demanding units in three of the five subjects (at what is known as A2 level), and, if successful, are awarded the full A-level qualification. Successful students receive a certificate listing the subjects taken, and the grade awarded in each. Key skills qualifications are available to students across all post-16 routes. They



comprise communication, application of number and information technology, and wider skills such as problem-solving. Assessment comprises a portfolio and (except for wider key skills) external tests. They are designed to be taken in tandem with the full range of post-16 qualifications. BTECs (Business and Technical Education Council) and OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and Royal Society of Arts) Nationals are also designed for study in occupational areas. They involve a mixture of theoretical and practical work and are available at three levels (BTEC Firsts are available for students aged 14 to 16 in compulsory education). They enable progression to employment or higher level vocational courses. Apprenticeships are available in a broad range of professional and technical areas. They can be taken by anyone over 16, and learning takes place both in the workplace and with a local learning provider. National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) enable students as well as employees who have left full-time education to gain recognized qualifications for specific occupations. They recognize work-based competences, as well as study in an education or training provider. They are assessed on practical assignments and a portfolio of evidence and they offer progression routes to further education and training or employment.

Higher education

The higher education sector in Northern Ireland consists of three universities and two university colleges (as of November 2011). Some higher education courses are provided through colleges of further and higher education. Higher education institutions (HEIs) determine their own admissions policies and the entry requirements for each programme. These may be expressed as UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) tariff points. The UCAS tariff establishes agreed comparability between different types of qualifications across the whole of the United Kingdom. However, HEIs are not obliged to express their entry requirements in these terms and many courses require specific A-level subjects at specific grades. The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland has five levels numbered 4 to 8, with bachelor's degrees located within level 6, master's degrees in level 7 and doctorates in level 8. The level numbers correspond with levels 4 to 8 in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)/Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) for the vocational qualifications system and can assist with transfer and progression between different levels and types of study. Courses leading to qualifications at FHEQ level 4 (certificates of higher education, higher national certificates) are usually offered in a vocational subject and normally take one year of full-time study or the part-time equivalent. Courses leading to qualifications at FHEQ level 5 (higher national diplomas, diplomas of higher education, foundation degrees) are intended to take two years of full-time study to complete or the part-time equivalent. Courses leading to qualifications at FHEQ level 6 include bachelor's degrees with honours (honours degrees) which form the largest group of higher education qualifications. Honours degree programmes typically last three years if taken full-time, although they may be longer or shorter than three years. Shorter courses include accelerated two-year degrees which require students to study during the normal vacation periods. Courses leading to qualifications at FHEQ level 7 include master's courses which typically last at least one year (on a full-time basis), and are taken by persons holding an honours degrees. Longer, research-based programmes often lead to the degree of MPhil. Integrated master's degrees – available in some science and engineering subjects – are awarded after extended undergraduate programmes that last, typically, a year longer than honours degree programmes



(usually four years). Also at this level are advanced short courses, often forming parts of continuing professional development programmes, leading to postgraduate certificates and postgraduate diplomas. Courses leading to qualifications at FHEQ level 8 (doctoral degrees) normally require the equivalent of three years' full-time study.

Schools are required to be in operation for up to 200 days a year. Five of these days are allocated to training and development purposes and the school is closed to children, and up to five days may be taken as optional closure days, intended to cover particular circumstances. Term and holiday dates are set by the Education and Library Board or the board of governors, depending on the legal category of school. The school year begins in early September and finishes at the end of June. Minimum daily attendance hours are three hours for pupils under 8 years of age and 4.5 hours for those over 8. Most schools provide more hours than the minimum. The school day generally runs from around 9:00 to between 15:00 and 16:00. The organization of time within the school day is determined by the school. Higher education institutions are increasingly organizing their teaching along the two-semester-system.

The educational process

The Northern Ireland school system has gone through substantial changes in recent years, especially since the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. After September 1996, when the new curriculum and the associated statutory assessment arrangements were set in place, the government accepted that a period of curricular stability in statutory requirements will be appropriate to allow the benefits of the changes to come to fruition. Following a period of extensive consultation, proposals for a radical restructuring of the curriculum were approved. The Education (NI) Order 2006, which became law in July 2006, provides the broad legislative framework to implement the revised statutory curriculum, including new arrangements for post-primary education. On the basis of The Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (NI) 2007, the new curriculum has been phased in from September 2007.

The revised curriculum is organized around learning areas which are broadly the same as the previous curriculum, the difference is that the law no longer sets out in as much detail what the content has to be for each subject and that there is an increased emphasis on skills. 'Personal development and mutual understanding' has been introduced as part of the curriculum from year 1 to year 10, in which young people will learn about themselves and how they interact with others, and the society and world in which they live. The revised curriculum also provides for key elements such as personal health, cultural and spiritual awareness, employability and sustainable development, which challenge and inform young people's views of the world. Religious education also remains part of the curriculum.

The Northern Ireland Curriculum sets out the minimum requirement that should be taught at each key stage. Within these requirements, schools have a responsibility to provide a broad and balanced curriculum for all children and schools should aim to give every child the opportunity to experience success in learning and to achieve as high a standard as possible. Teachers, however, have considerable flexibility to make decisions about how best to interpret and combine the requirements so as to prepare young people for a rapidly changing world. The



statutory curriculum is the starting point for planning a school curriculum that meets the needs of individual pupils. The Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Framework allows teachers to teach the knowledge, skills and understanding in ways that suit individual pupils' ability. The whole curriculum aim is to empower young people to achieve their potential and to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives. The Northern Ireland Curriculum should provide learning opportunities for each young person to develop as: Throughout the primary stages the learning opportunities provided through the curriculum should help young people to develop as individuals, contributors to society, and contributors to the economy and environment. At the heart of the curriculum lies an explicit emphasis on the development of skills and capabilities for lifelong learning and for operating effectively in society. Through opportunities to engage in active learning contexts across all areas of the curriculum, children should progressively develop: (i) cross-curricular skills: communication; using mathematics; using Information and Communications Technology (ICT); and (ii) thinking skills and personal capabilities: thinking, problem-solving and decision-making; self-management; working with others; managing information; being creative. Through each area of learning, children develop the skills that they need for life and work. The minimum content for each area of learning and key stage means the knowledge, understanding and skills within that area of learning which are required to be taught to pupils of different abilities and maturities during that stage. The learning outcomes require the demonstration of skills and application of knowledge and understanding. (CCEAS, 2007a).

In addition to the values implied in the Northern Ireland Curriculum Framework, the following statement of values would underpin each of the curriculum objectives: 'we value each individual's unique capacity for spiritual, moral, emotional, physical and intellectual growth; we value equality, justice and human rights within our society and our capacity as citizens to resolve conflict by democratic means; we value the environment as the basis of life and the need to sustain it for future generations; and we value each individual's right to work and to earn a living in accordance with personal preferences and attributes.' (CCEAS, 2007b).

The revised curriculum now applies to all 12 years of compulsory education. The revised primary curriculum (P1 to P7, foundation stage and key stages 1 and 2) is made up of religious education and the following areas of learning: language and literacy; mathematics and numeracy; the arts; the world around us; personal development and mutual understanding; and physical education. The revised post-primary curriculum (key stage 3 covering years 8–10 and key stage 4 covering years 11 and 12) includes a new area of 'learning for life and work', made up of employability, personal development, local and global citizenship and home economics (at key stage 3). In addition, it is made up of religious education and the following areas of learning: language and literacy; mathematics and numeracy; modern languages; the arts; environment and society; physical education; and science and technology. At key stage 4, the statutory requirements have been reduced to learning for life and work, physical education, religious education and developing skills and capabilities. This is to provide greater choice and flexibility for students and will enable them to access the wider range of opportunities schools will have to provide through the Curriculum Entitlement Framework.



Concerning key stage 3, to assist schools in translating the overarching aims and these values into classroom practice, the aim and former cross-curricular themes have been re-configured into a revised Curriculum Framework comprising a clearer aim, three focused objectives, and, within each of these, a number of key elements. These have been structured into an overarching curriculum framework which, in turn, informs and guides the minimum requirements for each area of learning/subject strand. The purpose of this re-configuration is to ensure that important aspects of the overarching aim, and the former educational (cross-curricular) themes, are more fully reflected in curriculum planning. The overall aim is to empower young people to achieve their potential and to make informed and responsible decisions through their lives. The curriculum should provide learning opportunities for each young person to develop as an individual, a contributor to society, and a contributor to the economy and environment. The rationale for the revised aim is informed by the extent to which our lives are determined by a succession of choices. By promoting methodologies that encourage young people to develop the skills to acquire and manage information, to solve problems and make decisions, the intention of the Northern Ireland Curriculum is to help young people make use of the knowledge, and the associated skills, values, and attitudes developed during the process of learning, to inform their lives. The key elements within each objective encompass important aspects of the overarching aim and the previous cross-curricular themes. They also embrace additional matters such as citizenship, education for sustainable development, employability, and media awareness that are accepted as key issues for modern society. The key elements are made explicit within the minimum requirements for areas of learning/subject strands. By reiterating the overarching aim and the former cross-curricular themes as key elements in this way, greater attention is focused within and across areas of learning/subject strands, on issues that are considered the bedrock of preparing young people for life and work in the 21st century. (CCEAS, 2007b).

A pivotal idea informing the curriculum is to help young people achieve personal fulfilment and individual wellbeing through living successful lives. This means success in worthwhile activities and relationships in which they have freely engaged and which they pursue wholeheartedly. The key elements associated with this objective include: personal understanding; mutual understanding; personal health; moral character; and spiritual awareness. The key elements associated with developing young people as positive contributors to society include citizenship, cultural understanding, media awareness and ethical awareness. The key elements associated with developing young people as positive contributors to the economy and environment include employability, economic awareness and education for sustainable development. At the heart of the curriculum lies an explicit emphasis on the development of skills and capabilities for lifelong learning and for contributing effectively to society. These whole curriculum skills and capabilities consist of the cross-curricular skills and thinking skills and personal capabilities. The 'whole curriculum skills and capabilities' have now been described explicitly within two clusters – the cross-curricular and the thinking skills/personal capabilities. The reason for the separate clusters is for purposes of categorization and assessment. This, however, does not imply that they should be taught separately from curriculum contexts or from each other. Rather, they are embedded and infused throughout the curriculum at each key stage and pupils should have opportunities to acquire, develop and demonstrate these skills in all areas of the curriculum in ways which are appropriate to the methodology of individual subjects. At times, however, teachers



may wish to focus on developing particular skills explicitly. A distinctive feature of the thinking skills/personal capabilities framework is that it integrates a range of different types of thinking skills and learning dispositions with collaborative learning (working with others) and independent learning (self-management). Developing thinking skills and personal capabilities requires a different approach to teaching compared to more traditional methods. To develop these kinds of skills, learners need to be thoroughly engaged with their own learning and given opportunities to practice their skills, reflect on their achievements and to recognize their strengths and weaknesses. This shift to a more active approach to learning will enable children to become autonomous and to work more independently. Similarly, as well as communication, using mathematics and using ICT, each area of learning/subject strand also require the demonstration of thinking skills and personal capabilities, including information management, problem-solving and decision-making, creativity, self-management and working with others. (*Ibid.*).

Over the course of the implementation of the revised curriculum, first introduced in September 2007, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) published two evaluation reports on the arrangements and their impact in primary, special and post-primary schools; the first of these in December 2007, covering the period 2006-2007, and the second in April 2009 covering the year 2008. From September 2009 the changes have been introduced to every year group from year 1 to year 12. A recent evaluation assesses the progress made since January 2009. The evidence reflects a considerable improvement in effectiveness of the communication strategy. While inspection evidence indicates that changes in curriculum and teaching have been introduced in their initial stages in most schools, as reflected in Inspectorate findings about teaching and learning, the one issue about which schools express most concern is assessment. In the primary phase, the quality of the teaching was good or better in most of the 2,079 lessons observed, which were mainly in literacy, numeracy, play-based learning and the world around us. The quality of the primary children's learning experiences were characterized by: (i) their levels of motivation, which were evaluated as good or better in most lessons; (ii) their involvement with the assessment for learning strategies being good or better in two-fifths of schools; it is an area for development in a majority of schools; and (iii) the development of the children as independent learners able to apply their skills and understanding to new situations in a majority of schools; it remains underdeveloped in one-third of schools. In the 608 lessons observed at key stage 3 in post-primary schools, a majority of the lessons ranged from good to outstanding. Importantly, nearly a third of the lessons were evaluated as only satisfactory or less than satisfactory. In contrast, in the sample of 140 lessons in special schools, almost all were assessed as good or better. (ETI, April 2010).

In all schools, the process of monitoring and evaluating implementation remains the most significant issue, with a significant minority of schools evaluated as either satisfactory or inadequate in this regard. In special, post-primary and primary schools where the monitoring and evaluation was evaluated as good or better, schools are developing their procedures well to identify good classroom practice. While more than half of the schools surveyed are using quantitative and qualitative data effectively to monitor and evaluate the impact of curriculum change, there is still no significant quantifiable evidence emerging from these schools relating to improvement or otherwise in the attainment of the pupils. For example, the findings in



primary schools indicate that in one-third of all classes, the quality of the children's knowledge, skills and understanding of literacy and numeracy is less than satisfactory. The quality of leadership and management in implementing the curriculum ranges from good to very good in 70% of primary schools and 83% of post-primary schools; in 75% of special schools it ranges from good to outstanding. A small number of schools report that they plan a skills-infused approach to enhance teaching and learning at key stage 4 and beyond, most post-primary schools still report a lack of alignment between the skills-infused curriculum at key stage 3 and the knowledge content specification and assessment approaches predominant at GCSE level. It is apparent that this issue is more critical in some subjects, less so in others.

There is a continued growth in the use of curriculum mapping tools in schools. There is a need to evaluate the use and the effectiveness of these tools, especially as assessment arrangements are combined with teaching and learning. The need to map the coverage of curriculum topics across the curriculum and the learners' experience of active learning methods and to track the progression and continuity of skills development through connected learning becomes increasingly important. Based upon the 2009 findings as well as those for the year 2008, the Inspectorate recommended that the emphasis for the next period to 2013 needs to be upon: (i) understanding the continuing implementation of curricular change, and especially the embedding of assessment, in the context of whole school improvement for the purpose of raising standards and improving outcomes for learners; (ii) an accountable convergence of services for schools, bringing together support for continued improvement in teaching and in assessment in a fully unified and co-ordinated way; (iii) building the capacity of teachers (individually and collectively) to undertake self-evaluation of their teaching effectiveness and outcomes, which informs school improvement and can also provide evidence, at the system level, of improvement; and (iv) developing the capacity of schools (individually and collectively) to cooperate in shared collegial professional development and in planning and providing educational provision collaboratively. (*Ibid.*).

Pre-primary education

The Education (NI) Order 1998, defines pre-primary education as education provided for a child (whether at school or any other premises) between the ages of 2 and 4 years, other than in the reception class of a primary school. Participation in pre-primary education is not compulsory.

Since 2003/04 free part-time nursery provision is available for all 3- to 4-year-olds whose parents want it. Children are entitled to attend five sessions per week (each lasting 2.5 hours) for 38 weeks a year between September and June (full-time pre-primary education is defined as at least 4.5 hours each school day). Places are available in a range of settings including nursery schools, nursery units attached to primary schools, voluntary playgroups and private day nurseries. Some free full-time places may be available within statutory nursery schools and units attached to primary schools. Voluntary or private sector providers are only funded by the government to offer part-time provision. Education and Library Boards (ELBs) have overall responsibility for pre-primary provision at local level. ELBs are expected to submit a preschool education development plan to the Department of Education detailing how they provide preschool education for children resident in the local area. In addition,



the ELBs are expected to develop partnerships with pre-primary education providers in all sectors (statutory, voluntary, private, integrated and Irish-medium), in order to collaborate on preschool provision and promotion of good practice. The recommended ratio of staff to children in statutory nursery schools and units attached to primary schools is two members of staff to 26 children. One member of staff must be a qualified teacher, the other, a qualified nursery assistant. Private and voluntary providers must comply with the requirements of the Children (NI) Order 1995 which stipulates a ratio of one staff member to eight children. (Eurydice, CEDEFOP & ETF, 2009/10).

In June 2004 the Department of Education launched a consultation to review pre-school education. Following the review, the Department has confirmed that the focus of future early years provision in Northern Ireland will be integrated, family-friendly services and early years support (from birth to 4 years of age).

There is no centrally-prescribed curriculum for preschool education, although providers receiving public funding are expected to follow curriculum guidance issued by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). The guidance has been developed to provide for progression to the foundation stage (the first two years of primary education). The overarching aim of the guidance is to provide a broad curriculum, based on opportunities for learning through play and other experiences, across the following areas: arts, language development, early mathematical experiences, personal social and emotional development, physical development and movement, and the world around us. Providers are also expected to use ICT resources to enhance children's learning. The curricular guidance for preschool education was originally produced in 1997 and revised in 2006. (Eurydice, 2011).

The revised preschool curricular guidance states that all children should have the opportunity to follow a preschool curriculum that enables them to make appropriate progress in learning and to achieve their full potential. It is expected that children should experience the preschool curriculum in a holistic and engaging way, with opportunities for play, and that they will use a range of ICT resources to motivate them and enhance their learning across the following six areas: the arts; personal, social and emotional development; physical development and movement; language development; early mathematical experiences; and the world around us. The time to be spent on each area of the curriculum is not prescribed. (CCEA, 2006a).

There is no statutory requirement to assess children during pre-primary education. However, the 2006 curriculum guidance promotes the monitoring of children's progress as good practice and stresses the need for careful planning to meet the learning needs of individual children and ensure their progress. Parents should also be kept fully informed about their child's development. (Eurydice, CEDEFOP & ETF, 2009/10).

According to the Department of Education, in 2011/12 there were 14,580 children in nursery schools and classes (both full-time and part-time); an additional 8,149 children were receiving preschool education in other centres such as playgroups, day nurseries and other provisions (part-time funded places only). In the same year there were 381 voluntary and private preschool education centres and 97

nursery schools (of which 65 controlled and 32 Catholic maintained). The number of (full-time equivalent) teachers in nursery school was 195.

Primary education

As mentioned, compulsory education begins at age 4 and the usual age for transfer to secondary schools is 11 years. There is little or no specialist subject teaching, but great emphasis on literacy and numeracy in early years. Within the framework of the revised curriculum, primary education comprises the foundation stage (years 1 and 2, typically ages 4–6), key stage 1 (years 3 and 4, ages 6–8), and key stage 2 (years 5 to 7, ages 8–11).

The foundation stage aims to provide children aged 4–6 with an appropriate learning programme to develop their dispositions to learn and to provide them with the skills and competencies they will need to succeed in school and future life. The foundation stage aims to provide a learning programme which will: promote children's personal development; promote positive attitudes and dispositions to learning; promote children's thinking skills and personal capabilities; encourage creativity and imagination; enable children to develop physical confidence and competence; develop children's curiosity and interest in the world around them; enable children to communicate in a variety of ways; motivate children to develop literacy and numeracy skills in meaningful contexts. Young children learn best when learning is interactive, practical and enjoyable for both children and teachers. (CCEA, 2006b).

According to The Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007, in order to meet their statutory requirements schools must provide learning opportunities in relation to the following: religious education, in accordance with the core syllabus drafted by the four main Christian Churches in Northern Ireland and specified by the Department of Education; and several areas of learning. At the foundation stage (years 1 and 2) the areas of learning are: language and literacy (including talking and listening, reading and writing); mathematics and numeracy (including number, measures, shape and space, sorting and patterns and relationships); the arts (including art and design, music and drama); the world around us (including geography, history and science and technology); personal development and mutual understanding (including personal understanding and health; and mutual understanding in the local and wider community); physical development and movement (including athletics, dance, games and gymnastics). (CCEA, 2007a).

Although these areas of learning are set out separately, teachers should integrate learning to enable children to make appropriate connections. Further integration is encouraged to help children to transfer skills and make links in their learning. Young children learn best when learning is interactive, practical and enjoyable for both children and teachers. Children should have opportunities to experience much of their learning through well-planned and challenging play. Self-initiated play helps children to understand and learn about themselves and their surroundings. Relationships are strengthened through shared enjoyment and respect, where adults working with young children respond positively with warmth, genuine praise and encouragement. Positive relationships with children enable the development of independence, self-assertion and positive self-image. It is important



that adults have realistic expectations of children and avoid comparisons or inappropriate competitiveness. Learning environments should be secure, interesting and challenging. Teachers have flexibility to interpret the programmes to suit the needs, interests and abilities of the children. It is important to view learning, teaching and assessment as a continuous cycle, where assessment is not an end point but should feed back into the process to help improve learning. Assessment is an integral part of the learning and teaching process. By gathering information about a child's progress over a period of time, teachers build a comprehensive picture of the learning in order to plan future work. In developing Assessment for Learning practices in the foundation stage adults should, when appropriate, engage in dialogue with children about their learning. The Pupil Profile at the foundation stage is the statutory means of reporting to parents. The format will address and reflect the curriculum. It will also provide a record of the child's learning and attainment together with any learning issues. The Pupil Profile will inform parents how their child is progressing at school and will help form the basis for planning future learning. (CCEA, 2006b).

Children at key stages 1 and 2 should build and develop the experiences provided at the foundation stage. Continued emphasis should be placed on personal, social and emotional development as well as an explicit emphasis on the development of skills in communication, using mathematics, using ICT and thinking skills and personal capabilities. Children should be provided with opportunities to develop these skills through a range of worthwhile, challenging, relevant and enjoyable learning experiences. Learning at key stages 1 and 2 should continue to foster the intellectual, social, emotional, physical, cultural, moral and spiritual development of children by: providing opportunities for children to continue to develop the transferable skills of communication, using mathematics, using ICT and thinking skills and personal capabilities through the opportunities provided; developing self-confidence and self-esteem; developing the skills necessary to enable children to participate as contributing members of groups; providing opportunities for children to engage in exploration, problem-solving and decision-making; promoting, in children, positive attitudes to learning to help them make informed and responsible choices and decisions; continuing to develop children's creativity; using a range of strategies, including thematic approaches, in a wide range of contexts which are worthwhile, challenging, relevant and enjoyable; developing a greater depth of knowledge, understanding and skills through a wide range of contexts; and providing opportunities for children to express their individual needs and to make realistic choices. At key stages 1 and 2 (years 3–7) the learning areas are the same as at the foundation stage, namely: language and literacy (including talking and listening, reading and writing); mathematics and numeracy (including processes in mathematics, number, measures, shape and space, handling data); the arts (including art and design, music and drama); the world around us (history, geography, science and technology, focusing on interdependence, place, movement and energy, and change over time); personal development and mutual understanding (personal understanding and health; mutual understanding in the local and wider community); and physical education (including athletics, dance, games and gymnastics, and swimming at key stage 2). (CCEA, 2007a).

Language and literacy should be considered in a holistic way, taking account of the integral nature of the areas of talking and listening, reading and writing which extend across all areas of the curriculum. Language and literacy are fundamental



prerequisites for thinking, learning and interacting in personal, social and work contexts throughout life. Moreover, learning a second language serves to consolidate ideas, concepts and skills already taught in other areas of the curriculum and, when combined with elements from the areas of personal development and mutual understanding and the world around us, can help to create a meaningful and real context in which to develop children's inter-cultural understanding. Numeracy is the development and application of mathematics across the curriculum and in real life situations. Skills in numeracy should help children to make informed and responsible choices and decisions throughout their lives. Numeracy is a life skill used in making everyday decisions and in virtually every work context. Mathematics and numeracy should be developed and applied across the curriculum. Creativity is developed through every area of the curriculum. Art and design, drama and music provide rich opportunities for developing creativity, allowing children to express their ideas, feelings and interpretations of the world in diverse ways. Personal development and mutual understanding focuses on encouraging each child to become personally, emotionally, socially effective, to lead healthy, safe and fulfilled lives and to become confident, independent and responsible citizens, making informed and responsible choices and decisions throughout their lives. The purpose of personal development and mutual understanding as a separate area of learning within the primary curriculum is to provide the opportunity for specific attention to be given to emotional development, health and safety, relationships and the development of moral thinking, values and action. Personal development and mutual understanding also has implications beyond the curriculum for school ethos, the pastoral care system, the school's discipline policy and relationships within the school and beyond. As personal development and mutual understanding is very much about the development of values and attitudes, it is extremely important that children have an opportunity to develop these naturally as a consequence of their investigations and guided critical reflection on issues. Learning should therefore be active, with children being encouraged to investigate issues for themselves, to suggest solutions and to make decisions based on what they have learned. (*Ibid.*).

All schools are required to provide a balanced and broadly-based curriculum and they have discretion to develop the whole curriculum to reflect their particular needs and circumstances. There are also specific statutory requirements for particular subjects. These requirements are the same for all publicly-funded schools. Publicly-funded schools are known as grant-aided schools. The main categories of grant-aided primary schools are: (i) controlled schools, which educate mainly Protestant children and are owned and funded by their Education and Library Board (ELB); (ii) controlled integrated schools, owned and funded by the ELB, which educate Catholics and Protestants together; (iii) Catholic maintained schools, which educate mainly Catholic children, are owned by the Catholic Church and funded by the ELB and the Department of Education (DE); (iv) grant-maintained integrated schools which are owned by trustees or the school Board of Governors, fully funded by the DE and educate Catholics and Protestants together. There are also private schools, which are usually known as independent schools. Most independent schools receive no public funding and are largely financed by fees paid by parents. These are not bound by the same legal framework as grant-aided schools. Grant-aided (publicly-funded) schools cannot charge for education provided wholly or mainly within school hours (excluding mid-day breaks). (Eurydice, CEDEFOP & ETF, 2009/10).



Pupils under 8 are required to attend school for a minimum of three hours each day. Those over 8 must attend for at least 4.5 hours a day, in two sessions, separated by a period of at least half an hour. Schools are generally open between 9:00 and 15:30/16:00, with approximately one hour for lunch. There may be a break of around 15 minutes during morning and afternoon sessions. Classes normally take place five days a week, Monday to Friday. Under the Class Sizes in Primary Schools Regulations (NI) 1999, all classes in the foundation stage (ages 4 to 6) and key stage 1 (ages 6 to 8) are limited to 30 pupils. There are no statutory limits on class sizes at key stage 2. Normally, children are taught in mixed-ability classes with children of the same age, with one teacher in charge of the class. Primary schools are usually co-educational. Teaching methods and learning materials are usually decided by the class teachers, in consultation with the head teacher and subject leaders. Textbooks are produced by commercial publishers and do not require government approval. However, the CCEA does provide teacher guidance documents for teaching specific areas of the curriculum. In all subjects, teachers are expected to differentiate their teaching in order to cater for the learning needs of individual students. (*Ibid.*).

At the end of key stage 1 and of key stage 2, schools are required to report teacher assessment results in language and literacy and mathematics and numeracy to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). In addition, under the Education (Assessment Arrangements) Order (NI) 2007, pupils in the autumn term of years 4 to 7 must be assessed in reading and mathematics for diagnostic purposes using computer-based tests called Interactive Computerised Assessments (InCAS). The InCAS assessment outcomes must be reported to parents but data is not collated centrally.

The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 provided the legislative framework for the introduction of revised assessment arrangements from September 2007. The former system of statutory tests has been replaced by annual teacher assessment in each of the areas of learning, and the cross-curricular and other skills. The results are reported to parents using a standardized annual report containing a broad range of information on students' achievements, progress, interests, aptitudes and participation in enrichment activities such as clubs, societies and sports opportunities. As mentioned, schools are also required to report to the CCEA teacher assessment results in language and literacy (English and/or Irish as appropriate in Irish-medium schools) and mathematics and numeracy at the end of key stage 1 (pupils aged 8), and at the end of key stage 2 (pupils aged 11). This involves formal teacher assessment of pupils' work in these learning areas. To support this assessment, CCEA provides assessment unit tasks, but pupils are not required to sit formal tests. Moderation of teacher assessment is undertaken as a three year rolling programme by CCEA. In addition, under the Education (Assessment Arrangements) Order (NI) 2007, pupils in the autumn term of years 4 to 7 (ages 7 to 11) must be assessed in reading and mathematics for diagnostic purposes. They are assessed using computer-based tests called InCAS (Interactive Computerised Assessments). The InCAS assessment outcomes must be reported to parents in writing during the autumn term. In primary education, pupils progress to the next class at the end of the school year. There are no legal requirements stipulating this; it happens by custom and practice. There is an expectation that low attainment of individual pupils should be addressed through differentiated teaching and additional support rather than by the



repetition of a year. The most common age for pupils to transfer from primary to secondary schools is typically 11 years (i.e. upon completion of year 7). (*Ibid.*).

According to the Department of Education, in 2011/12 there were 153,740 children enrolled in primary education (years 1–7); an additional 1,954 pupils were in grammar school preparatory departments. In the same year there were 839 primary schools, of which 378 controlled and 392 Catholic maintained. The number of (full-time equivalent–FTE) teachers in primary schools (including teachers in nursery classes) was 7,871. There were also 15 grammar school preparatory departments, with 123 FTE teachers. The total enrolment in special education was 4,549 pupils (mainly in controlled schools); the number of special schools was 41 (excluding hospital schools) and the number of FTE teachers was 753.

Secondary education

At post-primary level, there has traditionally been a selective system with pupils transferring to (selective) grammar schools or (non-selective) secondary schools at age 11. The Department of Education (DE) no longer supports academic selection of pupils and no longer provides the ‘transfer tests’ previously taken by children at age 11 to determine whether they would attend a selective post-primary school. However, selection is not prohibited and many schools are continuing to select pupils academically using tests from other providers.

Within the framework of the revised curriculum, compulsory secondary education covers five years and comprises key stage 3 (years 8 to 10, ages 11–14) and key stage 4 (years 11 and 12, ages 14–16). At the end of key stage 3, schools are required to report teacher assessment results in language and literacy and mathematics and numeracy to the CCEA. A range of national qualifications are available at the end of key stage 4, although the majority of students take General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations in single general/academic or vocational/applied subjects (typically between five and ten subjects). In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the GCSE was introduced in 1988, replacing the GCE O-level and the Certificate of Secondary Education examinations, and serves as the principal examination taken by secondary school pupils at 16+. Students receive a certificate listing the subjects taken, and the grade awarded in each. Entry-level qualifications (in general subjects, vocational subjects and in skills required for life and employment) are available to key stage 4 students who are not ready to take GCSEs, but they can also be taken by students 16- to 19-year-olds. The qualifications are made up of a number of units, and a certificate is awarded on successful completion of all units. Entry-level qualifications prepare students for GCSEs and higher-level vocational qualifications.

Post-compulsory upper secondary education typically lasts two years, from age 16 to 18. Students at this stage are again assessed by means of external qualifications. They may choose between general/academic and applied subjects or take a mixture of the two. They can remain in school, or they can transfer to a further education college. Colleges of further and higher education offer a balance of general and vocational subjects, and currently schools tend to offer general rather than vocational subjects. A-levels are single-subject examinations which may be studied in any combination and are traditionally the required qualification for entry to higher



education. Students study up to five subjects in the first year of post-compulsory education, and upon successful completion are awarded an AS level qualification. In the second year, they study more demanding units in three of the five subjects (at what is known as A2 level), and, if successful, are awarded the full A-level qualification. Successful students receive a certificate listing the subjects taken, and the grade awarded in each. Key skills qualifications are available to students across all post-16 routes. They comprise communication, application of number and information technology, and wider skills such as problem-solving. Assessment comprises a portfolio and (except for wider key skills) external tests. They are designed to be taken in tandem with the full range of post-16 qualifications. BTECs (Business and Technical Education Council) and OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and Royal Society of Arts) Nationals are also designed for study in occupational areas. They involve a mixture of theoretical and practical work and are available at three levels (BTEC Firsts are available for students aged 14 to 16 in compulsory education). They enable progression to employment or higher level vocational courses.

Apprenticeships are available in a broad range of professional and technical areas. They can be taken by anyone over 16, and learning takes place both in the workplace and with a local learning provider. National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) enable students as well as employees who have left full-time education to gain recognized qualifications for specific occupations. They recognize work-based competences, as well as study in an education or training provider. They are available in 11 occupational areas at five levels, from foundation skills to chartered and professional. They are assessed on practical assignments and a portfolio of evidence and they offer progression routes to further education and training or employment.

The Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator (Ofqual) regulates all NVQs in Northern Ireland with CCEA regulating other external qualifications delivered by colleges to under-19s. Once external qualifications have been accredited by the regulators in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, they are placed on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) or the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), which is currently being implemented. The NQF includes both general academic and vocational qualifications at nine levels as follows: Level 8 (e.g. specialist awards); Level 7 (e.g. BTEC advanced professional diplomas, certificates and awards); Level 6 (e.g. BTEC professional diplomas, certificates and awards); Level 5 (e.g. NVQ level 5); Level 4 (e.g. NVQ level 4); Level 3 (e.g. GCE A-levels, A-levels in applied subjects and NVQ level 3); Level 2 (e.g. GCSE grades A*–C and NVQ level 2); Level 1 (e.g. GCSE grades D–G and NVQ level 1); and Entry level (e.g. entry level qualifications). The QCF is a new framework which aims to enable learners to gain qualifications at their own pace along flexible routes by awarding credit for qualifications and units. All vocational qualifications are being placed on the QCF and it is expected that academic qualifications will also in the future be placed on the QCF. The aims of the QCF are to simplify the current complicated system by presenting qualifications in a way which is easier to understand, to recognise more learning through the award of qualifications and to instil more flexibility into the system through the use of units (components of qualifications) and credit awarded for achieving those units. Like the NQF, every unit and qualification in the 9-level QCF has a level between Entry level and level 8 which indicates the degree of difficulty. Level 2 is equivalent to GCSEs (grade A* to C), level 3 is equivalent to A levels, and level 8 is equivalent to a doctorate. Every unit



and qualification also has a credit value (with one credit representing 10 hours of study). There are three sizes of qualifications in the QCF: Awards (1 to 12 credits); Certificates (13 to 36 credits); Diplomas (37 credits or more). In the framework, it is possible to have an award at level 1 or an award at level 8, because the qualification type ('award, certificate, diploma') represents the size of a qualification, not how difficult it is. (Eurydice, CEDEFOP & ETF, 2009/10).

According to The Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007, in order to meet their statutory requirements schools must provide learning opportunities in relation to the following: religious education, in accordance with the core syllabus drafted by the four main Christian Churches in Northern Ireland and specified by the Department of Education; and several areas of learning. At key stage 3 (years 8–10) the areas of learning are: language and literacy (including English, Irish in Irish-speaking schools, media education); mathematics and numeracy (including mathematics, financial capability); modern languages (including any official language of the European Union other than English and Irish); the arts (including art and design, music and drama); environment and society (history, geography); science and technology (science, technology and design); learning for life and work (including employability, local and global citizenship, personal development, home economics); and physical education. At key stages 4 (years 11 and 12) they are: language and literacy; mathematics and numeracy; modern languages; the arts; environment and society; science and technology; learning for life and work (including employability, local and global citizenship, personal development); and physical education.

With regard to learning for life and work, in addition to cross-curricular provision specified through the minimum requirement for each area of learning/subject strand, it was felt that specific provision was required for the aspects of personal development, home economics, citizenship and employability that may not be catered for adequately within existing subjects or through cross-curricular learning. For employability, the key concepts are: work in the local and global economy, career management, and enterprise and entrepreneurship. For local and global citizenship, the key concepts are: diversity and inclusion, human rights and social responsibility, equality and social justice, and democracy and active participation. For personal development, the key concepts are self-awareness, personal health and relationships. For home economics they are: healthy eating; home and family life; and independent living. In addition to the areas outlined within learning for life and work it was felt that other issues of enhanced significance to 21st century learning, in particular media education and financial capability, could best be catered for by ensuring that they were 'owned' by a specific discipline, even if provision for them also required cross-curricular support. Accordingly, the arts and/or English will have some responsibility to ensure provision for drama, mathematics for financial capability and English for media education. These subjects take lead responsibility for these elements while, at the same time, encouraging provision across the curriculum. (CCEA, 2007b).

The key stage 3 curriculum is structured to facilitate progression from key stage 2 and to key stage 4. The aim, curriculum objectives, key elements and skills are common to all key stages, as is the emphasis on relevance and application to learning for life and work. At primary level the curriculum focuses on child-centred learning.



At key stage 3 the curriculum takes on a more enquiry-based, problem-centred, decision-making focus. It is intended that the knowledge and understanding and the range of skills acquired at primary school will be developed in greater depth to help pupils identify and investigate issues and problems from the media and the world around them. All teachers should have high expectations for all young people and should provide suitably challenging opportunities for each young person to take part fully and effectively in lessons, to experience success in learning and to achieve as high a standard as possible. Curriculum and assessment planning and approaches to teaching and learning for all pupils, and especially for pupils identified as having special educational needs, should, as far as possible, take account of: pupils' different experiences, interests and strengths; pupils' varied cultural, ethnic, linguistic and social background, (including the travelling community) and gender; and the nature, extent and duration of any special need and/or disabilities which may influence the way in which they learn. (*Ibid.*).

At key stage 4, schools are required to provide access to all areas of the revised curriculum, but the compulsory elements are limited to learning for life and work (education for employability, local and global citizenship, personal development, but not home economics); physical education; developing skills and capabilities; and religious education. At key stage 4, students select specific programmes of study which lead to a range of nationally recognized qualifications taken at the end of the key stage (aged 16). External qualifications, provided for students of compulsory school age in grant-aided schools, must be approved by the Department of Education (DE), with the advice of the CCEA. The curriculum for these qualifications depends on the specifications laid down by awarding bodies. To provide key stage 4 students with greater choice and flexibility when deciding what to study, the DE has begun to introduce an 'Entitlement Framework', which aims to provide students aged between 14 and 19 with a guaranteed minimum number and range of applied (vocational) and general (academic) courses. The framework is a counter-balance to the reduced core curriculum at key stage 4 and will ensure that students have more equal access to a broad range of courses, including greater balance between general (academic) and applied courses. From 2013, schools will be required to provide key stage 4 students with access to a minimum of 24 courses, and post-16 students with access to a minimum of 27 courses. At least one third of the courses must be general and a further third must be applied. Some schools will have sufficient capacity to deliver the requirements of the Entitlement Framework; others will have to work with other schools and further education colleges to provide access to the full range of courses. (Eurydice, CEDEFOP & ETF, 2009/10).

During key stage 3 the emphasis is on continuous formative assessment in each area of learning. One of the main objectives of key stage 3 assessment is not only to chart progress, but to use assessment information for lesson planning and feedback which helps students to improve their performance. At the end of each school year during key stage 3, teachers are required to assess students in all areas of learning and cross-curricular and other skills included in the curriculum. The results do not affect progression to the next year, but they should be reported to parents. Annual reports to parents must be provided in accordance with the Education (NI) Order 2006. Each year, parents should receive information on annual assessment results for language and literacy (including Irish as appropriate), and mathematics and numeracy; achievement in areas of learning or activities which form part of the curriculum; and a



formative record of progress and achievement. At the end of key stage 3, teachers assess pupils in language and literacy (English and/or Irish as appropriate in Irish-medium schools), and mathematics and numeracy, and send these results to the CCEA, so that they can monitor standards across schools. Assessment outcomes in these subjects can be based purely on teacher assessment, or on a combination of teacher assessment and the results of centrally-provided tests which schools can continue to use on a voluntary basis. Students are assessed against the attainment targets which set out expected standards of student performance in specific areas of a curriculum subject in terms of level descriptions. The levels provide the basis for judging students' attainment and there are eight levels per attainment target. By the end of key stage 3, the performance of the great majority of students should be between levels 3 and 7. Level 8 is available for very able students and, to help teachers differentiate exceptional performance at key stage 3, a description above level 8 is provided. These end-of-key stage 3 assessment results must also be reported to parents. (*Ibid.*).

Schools provide post-primary education at both compulsory and post-compulsory level. Publicly-funded schools are known as grant-aided schools. The main legal categories of grant-aided post-primary schools are: (i) controlled schools, which educate mainly Protestant students and are owned and funded by the local ELB; (ii) controlled integrated schools, owned and funded by the ELB, which educate Catholics and Protestants together; (iii) Catholic maintained schools, owned by the Catholic Church, funded by the ELB and the Department of Education (DE), which educate mainly Catholics; (v) grant-maintained integrated schools which are owned by trustees or the school Board of Governors, are fully funded by DE and educate Catholics and Protestants together; and (vi) voluntary grammar schools, which are owned by trustees or the school's founding body, and are fully funded by DE, although some contribute towards capital costs. No charge may be made for education provided wholly or mainly within school hours (excluding mid-day breaks) for students in grant-aided post-primary schools. Education which takes place wholly or mainly outside school hours, which is part of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, must also be provided free of charge. At age 16, students may transfer to a college of further and higher education (FE college). In Northern Ireland, there are six large, area-based colleges. These institutions are autonomous and have a legal status similar to that of public companies. The governing body is responsible, within the limits imposed by its statutory obligations, for all decisions affecting the institution. FE colleges offer a wide variety of full- and part-time courses to students over the age of 16, leading to a range of nationally recognized qualifications. These courses may be general, vocational or job-specific. FE colleges may also provide education (particularly vocational courses) for students in key stage 4 (aged 14 to 16). In publicly-funded further education institutions, provision is generally free for 16- to 19-year-olds. However, students may incur some costs, for example for books and equipment.

Students must attend school for a minimum of 4.5 hours a day, in two sessions, separated by a period of not less than half an hour. In practice, schools are generally open between 9:00 15:30/16:00, with approximately one hour for lunch, and breaks of around 15 minutes during morning and/or afternoon sessions. Classes normally take place five days per week, Monday to Friday. Students are generally organized into year groups with a senior teacher as head of year. Within the year



group, students may be divided into tutor groups with a designated teacher who has organizational and pastoral care responsibilities. Students are taught by specialist subject teachers either in mixed-ability groups, or, according to ability in a particular subject (known as 'setting'). Most schools use setting for some subjects only, such as mathematics and languages, and teach other subjects in mixed-ability groups. Some schools use a combination of these teaching groups/methods. Provision for students aged 16 to 18+ in schools is usually known as the sixth form. They are taught by specialist subject teachers, normally in smaller groups than younger students. There are no regulations covering class sizes. Their attendance at school is determined by the requirements of the programmes of study which they are following. At FE colleges students attend for three terms per year. However, there is considerable variation in the way in which courses are organized. Colleges increasingly offer courses throughout the year, including during the traditional holiday periods. FE colleges tend to operate three sessions per day: morning, afternoon and evening. They are generally open from around 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. The duration of courses vary, as does the mode of study which may be full-time, part-time, day-release or block-release. Students in post-compulsory education in both schools and FE colleges can take either vocational or academic courses or a combination of both. Due to the implementation of the Entitlement Framework, an increasing range of vocational (or 'applied') subject options and courses are becoming available for students aged 14 to 19 studying at school. Schools are required to report to parents of post-16 students providing a formative record of progress and achievement (including extra-curricular achievements), and the results of any public examinations taken. (*Ibid.*).

There has been a general upward trend in the proportion of students achieving two or more 'A' levels as their highest qualification having increased by some 12 percentage points over the period 1996/97 to 2006/07. The proportion of students achieving lower grade GCSE's as their highest qualification has decreased by eight percentage points over the same period. The number of students achieving no qualifications fell to less than 4% in 2006/07 representing just under 1,000 school leavers.

According to the Department of Education, in 2011/12 there were 146,747 students in post-primary education (years 8 to 14), of whom 84,193 in secondary (non grammar) schools and 62,554 students in grammar schools. In the same year, there were 216 post-primary schools, of which 148 were secondary schools and 68 were grammar schools. The number of full-time equivalent teachers was 5,899 in secondary schools and 4,009 in grammar schools.

Assessing learning achievement nationwide

Inspections are carried out by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). The ETI is the sole body with responsibility to inspect and report on the quality of education and training. There is no system of contracting out school inspections as in England and Wales. ETI inspectors inspect and report on all grant-aided schools, independent schools, further education colleges, teacher education institutions, the support services of the Education and Library Boards, training organizations, and the youth service. Inspection of schools normally takes place at least once every five to seven years. School self-evaluation is seen as an essential part of the process of school



improvement. The prime responsibility for institutional self-evaluation lies with the Board of Governors and head teacher of each individual school.

In 2003, ETI launched a range of materials to support schools in the process of self-evaluation leading to self-improvement. According to the Chief Inspector's Report 2004-2006, "Standards of preschool education are good or better in well over half of all centres and continue to improve. There are particular improvements in the increasingly high quality of the teaching, and the better opportunities for learning related to early science and for outdoor play. [...] The good quality of the pastoral care and child protection arrangements provide a caring and supportive climate in nearly all primary schools. The schools have sustained the good attainments in English and mathematics of all children at key stage 1 and have improved the mathematics attainments of pupils at key stage 2. [...] In post-primary education, there are significant strengths in the overall quality and effectiveness of provision in over 10% of the schools inspected, with strengths outweighing weaknesses in a further 57%. It is a concern that in over 30% weaknesses in the overall provision outweigh strengths. [...] In the majority of colleges, the standards achieved by students on externally accredited awards are satisfactory or better. A key challenge is to ensure that the requirements of course specifications are interpreted broadly enough to include essential transferable skills and competences. In almost all colleges inspected, the success and progression rates are good or better for those who complete their course of study. The success rate for learners following an essential skills course is consistently low. Retention rates within and across the colleges and courses remain variable."

Northern Ireland has taken part in international studies of student attainment such as those organized by the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). It also participated in the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS 2003).

In Northern Ireland, 107 schools involving 2,278 students participated in PISA 2006. Northern Ireland's performance was broadly in line with rest of the UK and outperformed the OECD average in science and Wales with respect to reading. Northern Ireland was outperformed by Scotland with respect to mathematics. The Republic of Ireland out-performed Northern Ireland with regard to reading. Northern Ireland's performance across the range of abilities shows high scores amongst the top performing students but the lowest scores amongst the poorer performing students on all three measures. Northern Ireland scores for lowest percentile fall below the OECD average on all three measures. Northern Ireland also records the widest range of scores across all three measures and all are in excess of the OECD average. The generally high range and spread of attainment reflects the presence of a considerable gap between the highest and lowest performing students. The authors of the Northern Ireland report pointed to Northern Ireland having the widest gap out of all of the individual OECD participant countries with respect to science and only seven countries reporting a wider gap with regard to reading. Differentials between male and female students in Northern Ireland are not so prevalent compared to elsewhere in the UK or the Republic of Ireland. The out-performance of girls over boys with respect to reading attainment occurred in all PISA 2006 participating countries. The gap in Northern Ireland was not so pronounced as many other countries.



A total of 87 schools and 2,197 students participated in PISA 2009. The mean score for reading in Northern Ireland was slightly above the OECD average. This difference was not statistically significant. Of the nine countries with higher mean scores (where the difference was statistically significant), six are members of the OECD. Thirteen OECD countries had mean scores significantly lower than Northern Ireland. The mean score for mathematics in Northern Ireland was not significantly different from the OECD average. Of the 20 countries with higher mean scores (where the difference was statistically significant), 13 were members of the OECD. Seven OECD countries had mean scores significantly lower than Northern Ireland. Boys performed significantly better than girls in mathematics. This was a common pattern internationally, with more than half the PISA countries showing a similar difference. Ten countries had mean scores for science that were significantly higher than that of Northern Ireland. In 12 countries (including the Republic of Ireland) the difference in mean scores to that in Northern Ireland was not statistically significant. Forty-two countries had mean scores that were significantly lower than Northern Ireland. The mean score for science in Northern Ireland was higher than the OECD average. This difference was statistically significant. Northern Ireland had a high proportion of pupils at the top levels of science attainment, compared to other PISA countries. Only six countries had a higher proportion at the highest level. Northern Ireland's spread of attainment in science was wider than the OECD average. As well as high achievers, Northern Ireland had a substantial number of low-scoring pupils, although these were fewer than the OECD average. There were no significant differences between the performance of boys and girls. (NFER, 2010).

Teaching staff

All teachers employed in grant-aided nursery schools or nursery classes and grant-aided schools must have qualifications approved by the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI). Such qualifications – which grant ‘eligibility to teach’ – are normally achieved by completing an initial teacher education programme provided by the five higher education institutions in partnership with schools. Prospective teachers can follow either a concurrent or consecutive model of teacher training. The concurrent model consists of four years' study leading to a bachelor's honours degree in education (B.Ed. Hons.). The consecutive model consists of three or four years of study to obtain a first degree, followed by one year of professional teacher training leading to the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). The PGCE covers curriculum guidance, pedagogical and educational theory, and practical teaching skills.

Traditionally, PGCE programmes are designed to prepare student teachers to teach a specialist curriculum subject at secondary level, and applicants would normally be expected to hold a degree in which at least 50 % of the content is related to the subject to be taught. PGCE programmes for primary teaching are now also available. The concurrent model of training involves a four-year programme organized in an integrated pattern, comprising a mixture of higher education subject studies, theoretical classes and practical teaching activities (at least 32 weeks' practical teaching experience in the classroom) throughout the period of study. Most programmes following the concurrent model are for primary teaching, but there are also some programmes for secondary level teaching specializing in a limited range of subjects: business studies, religious studies, technology and design, mathematics,



science. Consecutive courses leading to the PGCE must include at least 18 weeks (for prospective primary teachers) or 24 weeks (for secondary teachers) of classroom-based experience.

Further education teachers who do not have an initial teacher training qualification on appointment must hold an approved qualification such as a university degree or a vocational qualification in the subject they wish to teach. Following an evaluation of the teacher education programme in Further Education in 2006, the Department of Education has revised the existing Postgraduate Certificate in Further and Higher Education in order to meet the needs of the 14-19 agenda and facilitate the transfer of teachers' skills across the post-primary education sector. The revised qualification is known as the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) (Further Education). The qualification is underpinned by the Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) professional standards for teachers and takes two years to complete. Higher education institutions provide training for their teaching staff, especially those new to the profession. This is not mandatory, although individual institutions may choose to make it a contractual requirement. Programmes, e.g. the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PGCHE), are accredited by the Higher Education Academy, an independent organization funded by grants from the four UK higher education funding bodies, subscriptions from higher education institutions, and grant and contract income for specific initiatives.

After the award of 'eligibility to teach' status, beginning teachers must apply for and obtain their first teaching post. Once in post they must successfully complete an induction period of (normally) one year. The requirements and competences expected of beginning teachers during the induction period are set out by the GTCNI (*Teaching: the Reflective Profession*). Induction involves mentoring and professional development activities, and is informed by the Career Entry Profile, which is completed at the end of initial teacher education, and outlines the strengths of the beginning teacher and areas for further development. The five Education and Library Boards (ELBs) through their Curriculum Advisory Support Service (CASS) take the lead in induction, in partnership with schools and the higher education institutions. Beyond induction, emphasis is placed on early professional development (EPD) and continuing professional development (CPD), collaborative practice and school improvement. Schools can take the lead in the EPD stage, in partnership with each ELB's CASS and the higher education institutions. The CASS also provides CPD to schools. Schools are also free to secure CPD from within their own delegated resources. Each school determines its own CPD needs depending on the requirements set out in its school development plan. There is no legal minimum requirement stated for the length of time to be spent on continuing professional development. Participation depends on the professional needs of the teacher concerned and the availability of the resources in the school to meet them. It can range from a few hours to several days and sometimes full- or part-time studies over an extended period, in preparation for nationally recognized qualifications. Courses may be held during school hours, in 'twilight' sessions after school or at weekends or during holidays. (Eurydice, 2011; Eurydice, CEDEFOP & ETF, 2009/10).

Policy concerning teachers' pay and conditions is the responsibility of the Department of Education. Agreement on teachers' pay and conditions of service is reached through the Teachers' Salaries and Conditions of Service Committee



(Schools) which comprises the employing authorities/employer representatives, the Department of Education and the five recognized teachers' unions. Teachers are not civil servants, but employees of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs), the Council for Catholic-Maintained Schools, or of the governing body of the maintained school (other than Catholic-maintained schools), the voluntary grammar school or the grant-maintained integrated school in which they work.

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*For more detailed and updated information consult EURYDICE, the information
network on national education systems and policies in Europe:*
http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/index_en.php

*For updated links, consult the Web page of the International Bureau of Education of
UNESCO: <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/links.htm>*