



Structures of Education and Training Systems in Europe

United Kingdom – Northern Ireland

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STRUCTURES OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEMS IN EUROPE

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EURYBASE database (<http://www.eurydice.org>), the Cedefop database
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and the website of the European Training Foundation (<http://www.etf.europa.eu/>)

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INTRODUCTION: GENERAL POLICY CONTEXT

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 historic Irish province of Ulster in the north-east of Ireland. It was created as a distinct subdivision of the United Kingdom in 1921, under the Government of Ireland Act, 1920.

Northern Ireland has a devolved government within the United Kingdom. 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. In 2002, the Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended due to the political situation, and the UK Secretary of State assumed responsibility for all areas including education. Power was restored to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2007, and, since then, the Assembly has once again been able to legislate in devolved areas such as education.

The United Kingdom does not have a written constitution setting out the fundamental principles from which the rights and responsibilities of citizens are derived. However, the Human Rights Act (1998), which applies to all parts of the UK, incorporates into law nearly all the rights contained in the European Convention on Human Rights and gives citizens a clear legal statement of their basic rights and fundamental freedoms. With regard to education, the Act states that nobody should be denied the right to education. Parents also have the right to ensure that their religious or philosophical beliefs are respected when public bodies provide education or teaching to their children. In addition, under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, public authorities – including education authorities – are required to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity. This applies to equality of opportunity between: persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation; men and women generally; persons with a disability and persons without; and persons with dependants and persons without.

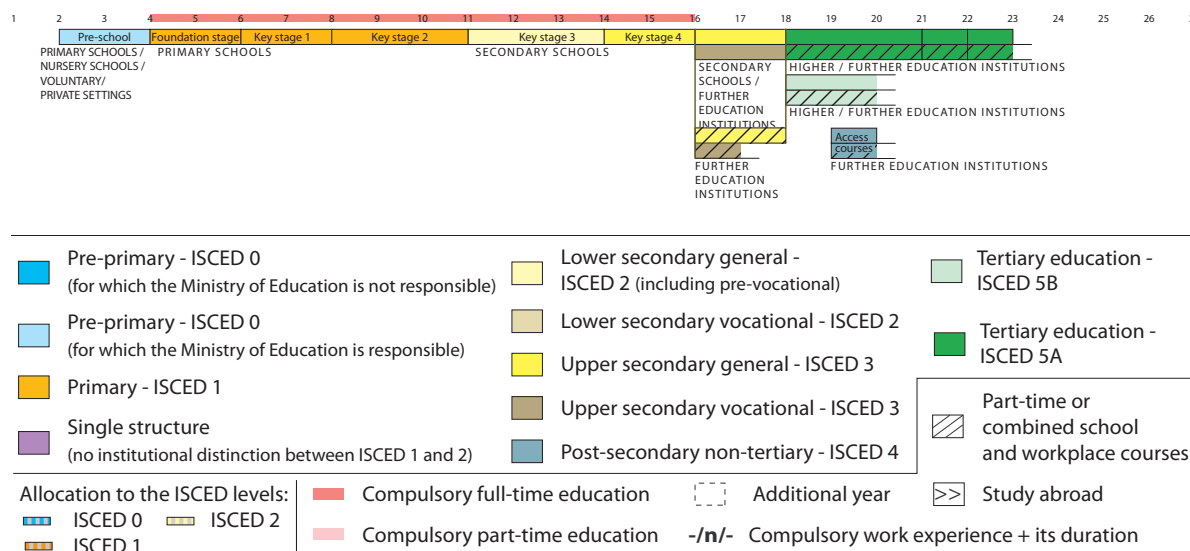
The legislative framework for the compulsory school system in Northern Ireland consists of the many Education Orders made between 1986 and the present as follows: The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986; The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1987; The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989; The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1993; The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1995; The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996; The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997; The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998; The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003; The Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005; and The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 defines compulsory education and its underlying principles and the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 provides the framework for the revised school curriculum and assessment arrangements.

The legislative framework for further education is set out in the Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. Higher education is defined in the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. There is further discussion of legislation relating to each educational phase in the relevant chapters of this publication.

In mid-2008, the population of Northern Ireland was estimated at 1,775,000. English remains the official language; however, Irish is known to varying degrees by around 10 per cent of the population. In 1998, the UK Government declared that commitments made in the Council of Europe Charter for Regional and Minority Languages would apply to Irish. In addition, following the Belfast agreement in the same year, the DE established a council for Irish-medium education (IME); *Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta*, and a development trust fund. Irish-medium provision is currently delivered through Irish-medium schools and through Irish-medium units within English-medium schools.

1. INITIAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING: ORGANISATION, FUNDING AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

1.1 Organisation of the initial education and training system



ISCED 0 covers pre-primary education. Participation at this level is not compulsory, but publicly-funded provision is available for children aged between two and four (compulsory school age). The Department of Education aims to provide a pre-school place for every child in their immediate pre-primary year (three- to four-years-old) whose parents want one.

ISCED 1 covers primary education for children aged between four and 11. Primary education is divided into three phases: the foundation stage (ages four to six), key stage 1 (ages six to eight), and key stage 2 (ages eight to 11). At primary school children follow a general programme of education as set out in the Northern Ireland Curriculum.

ISCED 2 covers lower secondary education for students aged between 11 and 14. During this phase, known as key stage 3, students follow a general programme of education as set out in the Northern Ireland Curriculum. Education at this level is provided in grammar and secondary schools, which are known collectively as post-primary schools.

ISCED 3 covers upper secondary education for students aged between 14 and 16. This phase is known as key stage 4 and is generally provided in the same school in which pupils complete the ISCED 2 phase of their education. At this stage, students select specific programmes of study which lead to a number of nationally recognised qualifications normally taken at 16. These can be in vocational subjects, or, more commonly, in general subjects. Compulsory school ends at 16.

ISCED 3 also covers post-compulsory secondary education, which lasts either for two years (ages 16 to 18) or for three years (ages 16 to 19). Students at this stage are also assessed by means of external qualifications. They may choose between general (academic) and vocational subjects or courses, or take a mixture of the two. They can remain in school, or they can transfer to a college of further and higher education. These colleges offer a balance of general and vocational subjects, and, currently schools tend to offer a larger number of general subjects. A wide range of general and vocational qualifications at ISCED 3 are also available to learners of all ages. The six colleges of further and higher education are major providers to post-compulsory learners.

ISCED 4 applies to one very specific programme – the access course. Access courses are provided by colleges of further and higher education and are aimed at mature students wishing to gain entry to higher education. They are designed and taught to meet the needs of adult learners.

ISCED 5 and 6 cover higher education, which includes bachelors degrees, masters degrees and doctorates as well as a number of shorter vocationally oriented programmes. Higher education is provided in Northern Ireland's two universities, the Open University (which operates UK-wide), two university colleges and six colleges of further and higher education.

1.2 Distribution of responsibilities

Education in Northern Ireland is administered at both central and local level. Public education in schools (ISCED 0 to 3) is administered centrally by the Department of Education (DE). The DE is assisted in this task by a number of non-departmental public bodies including the five Education and Library Boards (ELBs) which administer education at local level. Further and higher education is administered centrally by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL).

Educational administration is currently the subject of widespread reform and modernisation. A new Education and Skills Authority (ESA) is being established which 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 (CCMS), the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), and the Youth Council (see 1.2). The ESA will also provide teacher support and be the single employing authority for all teaching and non-teaching staff in grant-aided schools. The DE will continue to direct education policy and strategy, but some of its operational functions will transfer to the ESA. A bill to establish the ESA is currently before the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the new arrangements are expected to take effect in 2010.

Distribution of responsibilities for education in schools (ISCED 0 to 3)

The following central and local bodies are currently responsible for administering education provided in schools at ISCED levels 0 to 3:

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. It is responsible for pre-school, primary, post-primary and special education; the promotion of community relations in and between schools; and teacher education and salaries.

The DE also monitors and evaluates the quality of pastoral care, teaching, learning, youth provision and teacher education through the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), which operates within the Department (see section 1.4).

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.

NB: Some of the DE's operational functions will shortly transfer to the Education and Skills Authority (see introduction to 1.2).

Currently, the **Council for Catholic-Maintained Schools (CCMS)** co-ordinates the Catholic-maintained school system in Northern Ireland (see 4.1 for information on categories of schools). It employs teachers; works to rationalise school provision in the Catholic-maintained sector; advises boards of governors on admissions criteria and curriculum delivery; ensures provision for students with special educational needs; and draws up schemes for exclusions. 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.

NB: The responsibilities of the CCMS will transfer shortly to the Education and Skills Authority (see introduction).

The Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) is a non-departmental public body which reports to and is funded by the DE. It currently has a statutory responsibility to: keep under review all aspects of the curriculum, examinations and assessment; conduct and moderate examinations and assessment; publish and distribute information on the curriculum, assessment, examinations and external qualifications; consult stakeholders on proposed changes to legislation in these areas; and advise policymakers. CCEA also develops guidance and teaching materials for pre-school children; develops educational technology and multi-media 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 Ofqual, 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 see 4.4).

NB: Most of the responsibilities of the CCEA will transfer shortly to the Education and Skills Authority (see introduction).

Northern Ireland shares a common system of external qualifications with England and Wales (for full details, see section 4.4). These qualifications are normally taken between the ages of 16 and 18 (at ISCED 3) and are provided by independent organisations 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. 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, should have support from the relevant sector skills council or similar organisation, and they should conform to national occupational standards (see 7.2).

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 in Northern Ireland must register with the GTCNI. The Council maintains a register of teachers and their publication *Teaching: the Reflective Profession*ⁱ 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

and each one consists of 35 members who are appointed by the Minister for the contribution they can make based on their interests, knowledge and experience.

ELBs are currently responsible for the administration of pre-school, 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 (see 4.1 for information on categories of schools in Northern Ireland).

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.

NB: The responsibilities of the ELBs will transfer shortly to the Education and Skills Authority (see introduction).

The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) 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 (LMS) 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 Education and Library Board. Grant-maintained integrated and voluntary grammar schools receive their share of funding directly from the Department of Education (DE). For further information on categories of schools see sections 3.1 and 4.1, and for more information on school funding see 1.3.

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 (for information on categories of schools see section 3.1 or 4.1). Governor categories include: parent governors; teacher governors; ELB representatives; DE representatives; representatives of the Protestant church authorities; representatives of the trustees; and foundation governors. The principal (headteacher) 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. As a 'critical friend', the board provides support, advice and information. It also ensures accountability by monitoring and evaluating school effectiveness, and receiving reports from the principal on the school's performance. The board, in turn, answers for its actions to parents and the wider community, and is required by law to prepare a governors' annual report.

School principals (headteachers) are responsible for the internal organisation, 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 organisation;

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.

Parents have a responsibility to ensure that children of compulsory school age receive an efficient full-time education suitable to their age, ability and aptitude, and to any special educational needs (SEN) they may have. In addition, parents may put themselves forward to serve as school governors.

Many schools have school councils in which **pupils**, often representing individual year groups, can make an active contribution to the school environment and ethos.

Distribution of responsibilities for the further education and skills sector

The further education sector provides education to students aged between 14 and 19 at ISCED 3 (see section 4), to adult learners undertaking access to higher education courses at ISCED 4 (see section 5), and to adults who may be undertaking basic skills courses at ISCED 1 or general and vocational qualifications at ISCED 3 (see section 7 and 4).

The main responsibilities of the **Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland (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.

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.

The further education sector has recently been restructured. In 2007, the 16 colleges of further and higher education were merged into six larger area-based colleges in order to facilitate a more coordinated and more collaborative approach across the sector.

CCEA, Ofqual and awarding bodies have responsibilities with regard to provision of further and adult education and training. For more information on the nature of these responsibilities, see the schools section above.

See also section 7.2.

Distribution of responsibilities for higher education

The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) is responsible for higher education in Northern Ireland (ISCED levels 5 and 6) including higher education provision delivered in further education colleges. Although the UK Government, advised by DEL, controls the right to award degrees and to use the title 'university', in other matters, such as degree structure, degree titles, programme development and quality assurance, the sector has a long tradition of autonomy. Each institution has a governing body or council responsible for ensuring effective management and for planning future development. The representative bodies – Universities UK (UUK) and GuildHE – and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), an independent body, work with the sector on a UK-wide basis.

1.3 Financing

In Northern Ireland, public education institutions (from pre-primary to higher education level) are funded either by the Department of Education (DE), or by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). However some categories of primary and post-primary schools (see 3.1 or 4.1) receive this funding via the Education and Library Boards (ELBs).

The DE is responsible for allocating funds to schools and the Youth Service. Publicly-funded schools in Northern Ireland are referred to as grant-aided schools. DEL is responsible for the funding of further and higher education.

Funding of pre-school providers (ISCED 0)

Statutory nursery schools and units attached to primary schools are funded in the same way as other primary and secondary schools (see below).

The Government is expanding and developing publicly-funded early years education by cooperation with the private and voluntary sectors (see 2.1). Voluntary and private providers of early years education in these sectors may be funded on a per place basis to provide pre-school education for three- and four-year-olds in their immediate pre-school year. To receive this funding, they must be inspected regularly by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and meet the required quality standards.

Funding of primary (ISCED 1) and post-primary schools (ISCED 2 and 3)

The recurrent (revenue) costs of schools are fully funded by the DE, either directly or through the ELBs. There are three sources of recurrent funding available: resources covering expenditure for services that are delivered centrally through the ELBs (eg home to school transport, school meals, curriculum advisory and support services, and school library services); centrally held funds which schools can request when the need arises (e.g. replacement teacher cover, contingency and curriculum reserve funds, along with various initiatives which may be implemented, either by the DE or individual ELBs); and Local Management of Schools (LMS) funding which is delegated funding allocated to individual school budgets (see 1.2). Since the start of the 2005/06 financial year, LMS funding has been allocated to schools according to a common funding formula, which is responsive to factors such as pupil numbers and their ages, the size of premises and pupil and social need.

Schools are also able to attract additional grants from specific initiatives and raise funds through voluntary contributions. They may not charge for tuition, books and stationery, but they are able to invite parents to make voluntary contributions for some activities. Voluntary grammar schools are able to charge capital fees of up to a maximum of £140 per year.

Management of the schools' estate is the overall responsibility of the DE in conjunction with the ELBs. The DE is directly responsible for overseeing, planning and funding capital works in schools in the voluntary maintained, voluntary grammar, Irish-medium and grant maintained integrated sectors (see 3.1 and 4.1 for further information). ELBs have responsibility for capital works in the controlled sector. Grant-aid for capital works in schools for which the DE is responsible is paid directly to school authorities by the Department. However, as the ELBs are responsible for controlled schools, the DE allocates funding for these schools directly to the ELBs.

Funding of further education and skills sector

Colleges of further and higher education (which provide full- and part-time education for adults, as well as for school-leavers between the ages of 16 and 19) are funded directly – in terms of both recurrent and capital funding – by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL).

Colleges' main recurrent funding was previously provided through a Further Education Funding Formula, based on a measurement of student activity and achievement called a 'Student Powered Unit of Resource' (SPUR). Although this SPUR funding model is still used to provide funding for higher education provided in further education institutions, since 2007/08, a new further education funding model has been in use. This is based on planned rather than historic provision and has three elements: **College Development Plans**, setting out each college's intended provision for the coming year which form the basis for negotiation between colleges and DEL and, when agreed, determine funding allocations; **bilateral processes** through which DEL agrees with each college the final amount and the types of provision to be funded; and **the Funded Learning Units (FLU) Distributive Mechanism** which converts actual and planned provision into Funded Learning Units (FLUs) in order to inform College Development Plans and the bilateral processes, and to determine funding allocations.

Funding is also provided to colleges, learners, employers and other social partners through a number of special initiative 'earmarked' budgets, which are designed to widen access, increase participation, address skills shortages and align provision with DEL's key strategic objectives. However, adult learners often take up education and training opportunities on a voluntary basis and pay for it themselves. The same is also true of employers, who are usually responsible for funding and determining their own training provision.

Funding of higher education (ISCED 5 and 6)

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) receive their funding from a variety of public and private sources, including student tuition fees, with the largest proportion provided by Government. Because of the relatively small size of the higher education sector in Northern Ireland, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) not only has responsibility for securing funding but also, in contrast to arrangements in other parts of the UK, disburses funds directly to institutions. DEL broadly follows the methodology used by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to allocate funds to the English HEIs. Funding for teaching takes account of the number of students and the subjects they study. It also includes factors that recognise the additional costs of recruiting and supporting students from areas with low participation in higher education, disabled students and part-time students. Recurrent research funding in Northern Ireland is distributed by reference to quality, as assessed by performance in the most recent Research Assessment Exercise, and volume of activity. Funding for teaching is combined with funding for research infrastructure into a block grant, which institutions are free to spend according to their own priorities. The direct costs of specific research projects are funded not by DEL but by the seven Research Councils, operating on a UK-wide basis. Research Council funds are awarded on the basis of applications made by individual researchers, which are subject to independent, expert peer review.

DEL also disburses funding for higher education provision delivered in the further education colleges. Since academic year 2008/09 funding of this HE in FE is through the further education **Funded Learning Units (FLU) Distributive Mechanism** as detailed above.

1.4 Quality assurance

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), a division within the Department of Education (DE), provides inspection services for the DE and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). 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 (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 (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 to widen the range of people involved in the inspection process to include Associate Assessors and lay members (see below – inspection arrangements).

Inspection arrangements for institutions providing education at ISCED 0 to 4

The *Common Framework for Inspection* ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾, first published in 2004 and updated in 2008, forms the basis for inspection of organisations in all phases and sectors excluding higher education. Organisations inspected according to this framework include: pre-school centres; primary, post-primary and special schools; alternative education provision; independent schools for the purpose of registration; colleges of further and higher education; supplier (training) organisations; the youth and community sector; and initial teacher education organisations.

This section outlines general inspection arrangements for organisations in all sectors as set out in the *Common Framework for Inspection*. More specific arrangements by educational phase or sector are detailed in Appendix 8 of the Framework itself.

The ETI is required to inspect organisations every seven years, although, in practice, inspections occur more frequently. Primary and post-primary schools are given four weeks' written notice of inspection, and further education colleges are given eight weeks' written notice. Inspection teams consist of two or more inspectors under the leadership of a reporting inspector, assisted by a deputy reporting inspector. Some teams include Associate Assessors (AA) or lay members. An AA is an education professional with expertise in a particular area of education or training. They contribute to areas within their professional expertise. A lay member receives no payment and represents the views of the public in areas such as home-school links and school ethos. They have no involvement in the evaluation of teaching and learning.

The inspection team is essentially tasked with:

- Making and communicating an objective, professional evaluation of the quality of learning and teaching, including the standards achieved by learners;
- Evaluating the quality and effectiveness of the leadership and management of the organisation being inspected;
- Supporting this professional evaluation with evidence, based mainly on observation.

To meet these objectives, the inspection team ask the following questions: How well do learners achieve? What is the quality of teaching, training, learning and assessment? How well are learners cared for, guided and supported? and What is the quality of leadership and management? Inspectors collect evidence for evaluation by:

- Observing the quality of learning, teaching and interaction in the educational setting;
- Talking with learners about their educational and pastoral experiences;
- Taking account of the attitude and motivation of the learners and the quality of their spoken responses;
- Examining samples of learners' work, including written and practical work;
- Scrutinising the available quantitative and qualitative data to assist evaluation of standards and outcomes; and

- Talking with others involved with the life and work of the organisation, for example, parents and governors.

A report is published for each organisation inspected outlining the main strengths and areas for improvement in the institution as a whole, or in an aspect of its provision. Organisations are graded as follows: Outstanding; Very good; Good; Satisfactory; Inadequate; Unsatisfactory. Some institutions may require a follow-up inspection (FUI). FUIs usually take place at least a year after the inspection report has been published and assess progress made in addressing the main issues identified in the report.

Self-evaluation in institutions providing education at ISCED 0 to 4

Publicly funded schools, colleges and supplier (training) organisations in Northern Ireland have a high level of autonomy. The school, college or supplier (training) organisation through its Board of Governors and principal, is responsible for its own quality assurance, generally referred to as 'self-assessment' or 'self-evaluation'.

Although there is no statutory requirement for organisations to conduct formal self-evaluation, the ETI strongly recommends that all education and training providers and suppliers monitor the quality of their provision in order to sustain improvements in the long-term. The ETI produces guidance documents to help organisations in all phases of education to evaluate their work, recognise strengths and identify areas for improvement.

Information from self-evaluation usually feeds into the external inspection of organisations, particularly in relation to the effectiveness of the leadership team. The process of self-evaluation is underpinned by the collection and analysis of data which enables organisations to set targets for improvement and this data also feeds in to the external inspection process.

The importance of self-evaluation in schools is further emphasised in 'Every school a good school: a policy for school improvement' ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾, published by the DE in April 2009. The core of the policy is self-evaluation leading to sustained self improvement, and the emphasis is on supporting schools in doing what they do best to bring about improvement.

The policy also sets out a Formal Intervention Process for schools evaluated by ETI as inadequate or unsatisfactory. The expectation is that schools entering the process will, with a programme of support, take action to address the areas for improvement and make sufficient progress to exit the process. However, if a school does not make sufficient progress after two years then further action will be taken. Depending on circumstances, this might include restructuring of leadership and management, a 'fresh start', merger with a more successful school or closure. The over-riding concern is to safeguard the education of pupils at the school.

In January 2007, DEL published 'Success through excellence: a quality improvement strategy for the further education and training system in Northern Ireland' ^(iv). This strategy provides a framework for targeting performance that is of poor quality or which, whilst satisfactory, is not improving.

The strategy aims to create a further education and training system which is responsive to the needs of learners, employers and the wider community; is committed to continuous self-improvement through embedded and rigorous self-evaluation and improvement planning; and is able to access easily a coherent framework of support and guidance that focuses on self-improvement, high quality leadership and management and continuing professional development.

At an operational level, the strategy seeks to enhance the quality of DEL-funded further education and training programmes by ensuring that lessons are drawn from external inspection and addressed appropriately and coherently. It also seeks to ensure that support and capacity building activities,

aimed at improving performance, are provided in an appropriate way; and that poor quality provision is addressed effectively.

Inspection arrangements in the independent school sector

There are 18 independent schools in Northern Ireland. The Education (NI) Order 1986, as amended by the Education (NI) Order 1996, defines an independent school as: 'a school at which full-time education is provided for pupils of compulsory school age (whether or not such education is also provided for pupils under or over that age), not being a grant-aided school'.

Independent schools are required to be registered with the Department of Education (DE), and they are inspected around once every five years by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) which advises the DE about the schools' fitness to be registered. They are also subject to general arrangements for ETI inspection as outlined in 'The Common Framework for Inspection'.

Quality assurance of the education system as a whole

In order to monitor standards across the school system, schools are required to report the results of teacher assessment to the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) at the following key stages and in the following subjects:

- At the end of key stage 1 (ISCED 1 – ages 7 to 8): Language and Literacy (English and/or Irish as appropriate in Irish-medium schools) and Mathematics and Numeracy;
- At the end of key stage 2 (ISCED 1 – ages 10 to 11): Language and Literacy (English and/or Irish as appropriate in Irish-medium schools) and Mathematics and Numeracy;
- At the end of key stage 3 (ISCED 2 – ages 13 to 14): Language and Literacy (English and/or Irish as appropriate in Irish-medium schools) and Mathematics and Numeracy.

Standards are also monitored by scrutinising the results of public examinations, normally taken during ISCED 3 (see section 4.4). However, national performance tables showing the achievements of students in public examinations and in specified vocational qualifications are no longer published

In addition, Northern Ireland takes part in international studies of student attainment such as those organised by the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

There is also quality assurance of educational administration and provision at local and central level. To evaluate quality of provision in a particular area, district inspectors (DI) lead centrally-programmed inspections and surveys. Area Board Co-ordinators lead teams of inspectors working within a particular Education and Library Board to assess provision within that Board's area.

At central level, the Education Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly advises and assists the Minister for Education on matters within her responsibility as a Minister. The committee has a consultative role and scrutinises and assists with DE policy development, playing a key role in the consideration of legislation. The Employment and Learning Committee performs a similar function in respect to the work carried out by DEL.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) supports the Northern Ireland Assembly in its task of holding central and local government departments and their agencies to account for their use of public money. It also provides support to Northern Ireland public sector bodies in their pursuit of improved financial reporting, value for money, and efforts to combat public sector fraud.

Quality assurance of higher education

Academic standards for programmes at ISCED 5 and ISCED 6 are established and maintained by higher education institutions themselves using shared quality assurance approaches and structures.

These include the universal use of external examiners, a standard set of indicators and other reports, and by the activities of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). The QAA is an independent body, funded by subscriptions from all UK higher education institutions and through contracts with the higher education funding bodies. The QAA conducts peer-review based audits and reviews of higher education institutions with the opportunity for subject-based review as the need arises. Reviews are carried out using a variety of methods depending on the country and type of institution. The accuracy and adequacy of quality-related information published by the higher education institutions is also reviewed. Standards in professional areas are assured by the relevant professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

From academic year 2008/09 onwards DEL has engaged the Quality Assurance Agency to quality assure higher education provision delivered in the Northern Ireland colleges of further and higher education.

2. PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION

Education at ISCED 0 is known as pre-primary education. The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, defines pre-primary education as: education provided for a child (whether at school or any other premises) at any time after he/she has attained the age of 2 and before he/she has reached compulsory school age (4 years), other than in the reception class of a primary school.

Participation in pre-primary education is not a statutory requirement, but through the 1998 pre-school Education Expansion Programme, the Department of Education has set a target to provide one year of pre-primary education for every child whose parents want it. Since 2003/04, free places have been available for children in their immediate pre-primary year. This expansion of the sector acknowledges the fact that good pre-school education prepares children for school and helps them to learn more quickly – particularly children with special needs or from disadvantaged backgrounds. It also gives parents the opportunity to work or undertake study or training.

Publicly-funded pre-primary places are available in a range of settings including: nursery schools; nursery classes and units in primary schools; and voluntary and private playgroups. Education and Library Boards (ELBs) have overall responsibility for pre-primary provision at local level. They are expected to submit a Pre-school Education Development Plan to the Department of Education detailing how they provide pre-school 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 pre-school provision and promotion of good practice.

2.1 Admission

Education and Library Boards must publish the arrangements for the admission of children to pre-primary education at each provider in their area. Parents express, in order of preference, the schools or classes which they wish their children to attend. Providers have to comply with parental preference as far as their enrolment numbers allow, and they must publish criteria detailing how admissions decisions will be made in cases where applications exceed the number of places available. DE guidance recommends that all grant-aided (publicly-funded) nursery schools and classes prioritise the oldest children in the immediate pre-primary year; children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds; and children with special educational needs.

2.2 Organisation of time, groups and venue

Most free pre-primary places are available for 2.5 hours a day, five days a week, 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, and part-time as at least 2.5 hours per day. 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 for three- to four-year-olds.

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. They must also arrange support from a suitably qualified teacher or early years professional. All pre-school settings are also expected to ensure that there are at least eight children in teaching groups in the immediate pre-primary year (three to four years of age), regardless of whether the place is government funded.

2.3 Curriculum

Although there is no centrally-prescribed curriculum for pre-school education in Northern Ireland, providers receiving government funding are expected to follow curriculum guidance issued by the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). This guidance was revised in 2006 to provide for progression to the new foundation stage (the first two years of primary education, children aged four to six). The overarching aim of the guidance is to provide a holistic curriculum, based on opportunities for learning through play, across the following areas: creative/aesthetic development; personal, social and emotional development; physical development and movement; language development; early mathematical experiences; early experiences in science and technology; and knowledge and appreciation of the environment. Providers are also expected to use ICT resources to enhance children's learning.

2.4 Assessment

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.

2.5 Teachers

All teachers employed in grant-aided nursery schools or nursery classes in Northern Ireland 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 (ITE) course. ITE courses are provided by the five higher education institutions (HEIs), in partnership with schools.

Intending pre-primary 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 (BEd (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.

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 in their publication, *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 HEIs.

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 HEIs. 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.

Qualified nursery assistants usually need to hold a relevant child care qualification such as: CACHE Level 3 Diploma in Child Care and Education; a BTEC National Diploma in Children's Care, Learning

and Development; or an NVQ Level 3 in Children's Care, Learning and Development (for general information on these qualifications see section 4.4). These qualifications are normally undertaken within the workplace, with part-time study in a further education college (see 4.1).

The DE approves the following qualifications for early years specialists: NVQ level 4 in Early Years Care and Education; bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Studies; the Diploma in Early Childhood Studies; the HND in Early Childhood Studies; and the Bachelor of Education degree for early years specialists. In addition, they should have at least two years' prior experience in a leadership role in a pre-school centre.

3. PRIMARY EDUCATION

Education at ISCED 1 is known as primary education. The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 defines primary education as catering for children aged between four and 11. Children attain compulsory school age depending on when their fourth birthday is: for example, children who turn four between September 1st 2008 and July 1st 2009 begin primary school in September 2009. Children who turn four between July 2nd 2009 and August 31st 2009, begin school in September 2010.

The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 divides primary education into three stages: the foundation stage (for pupils aged four to six), key stage 1 (for pupils aged six to eight), and key stage 2 (for pupils aged eight to 11).

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;
- Prepare such pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life by equipping them with appropriate knowledge, understanding and skills.

Publicly-funded schools in Northern Ireland are known as grant-aided schools. The main categories of grant-aided primary schools are:

- **Controlled schools**, which educate mainly Protestant children and are owned and funded by their Education and Library Board (ELB);
- **Controlled integrated schools**, owned and funded by the ELB, which educate Catholics and Protestants together;
- **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);
- **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 and are not discussed further in this section.

Grant-aided (publicly-funded) schools cannot charge for education provided wholly or mainly within school hours (excluding midday breaks). 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. Schools may not charge for the cost of materials, books, and any other equipment. They may charge for activities that fall outside the above categories, but should have a policy which sets out cases in which they charge for them. Schools may ask parents for a voluntary contribution to school funds, but they must make it clear to parents that their child will not be deprived of any educational opportunity offered to the other children should they be unable or unwilling to contribute.

ELBs provide assistance with transport arrangements (e.g. ELB vehicles or free public transport passes) for pupils enrolled at a school more than two miles from their home, who have been

unsuccessful in obtaining a place in a grant-aided school nearer home. They also provide free school meals, and subsidies for school uniforms for children from low-income families.

3.1 Admission

Parents have the right to express a preference concerning the primary school their child attends. Schools must comply with this preference if their enrolment numbers have not been reached, and provided that, in years 1 to 4, the statutory class size limit of 30 pupils has not been exceeded. Schools have to publish the criteria which will be used if they are over-subscribed, such as the distance of pupils' homes from the school. Admissions criteria are drawn up by the Board of Governors of a school and may take into account any representations made by the local Education and Library Board (ELB) responsible for the management of the school, or if it is a Catholic school, representations made by the Council for Catholic-Maintained Schools (CCMS).

By law, all schools in Northern Ireland must be open to all children regardless of their religious persuasion. This policy is known as 'open enrolment'.

Pupils may not be academically selected for entry to primary school.

3.2 Organisation of time, groups and venue

In Northern Ireland, pupils under eight are required to attend school for a minimum of three hours each day. Those over eight 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 a.m. and 3.30/4.00 p.m., 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.

Schools are required to be in operation for 200 days a year, although they are closed to children when teachers are on annual training and development days (five days), school development days (five days), or optional closing days (five days). The school year runs from September 1st to June 30th and is divided in to three terms. There is a long summer break of around eight weeks, with shorter breaks of around ten days at Christmas and Easter and two-day breaks in October and February.

Under the Class Sizes in Primary Schools Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999, all classes in the foundation stage (ages four to six) and key stage 1 (ages six to eight) 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. A teacher usually stays with a class for one school year, and at the end of each year, pupils normally progress to the next class. Some primary schools teach children in groups according to their ability in certain subjects, such as mathematics or English, and teach all other subjects in mixed ability classes. Primary schools are usually co-educational.

3.3 Curriculum

The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 provided the legislative framework for the introduction of the revised curriculum framework which began to be implemented in 2007 and will be fully implemented by 2010. The revised Northern Ireland Primary Curriculum is managed by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). The CCEA is a non-departmental public body which reports to the Department of Education in Northern Ireland (DE). DE has overall responsibility for the primary school curriculum. Education and Library Boards are responsible for giving curriculum advice and support to schools, and the Board of Governors is responsible for curriculum delivery in each school.

The revised primary curriculum has an increased emphasis on skills and personal and social development and is less prescriptive than the previous curriculum. It sets out minimum content for each area of learning rather than specifying in detail topics which should be covered. In the foundation stage, key stage 1 and key stage 2 (children aged four to 11 years), there are six areas of learning: the arts (including art and design, and music and drama); language and literacy (including speaking, listening, reading and writing); mathematics and numeracy (including numbers, measure and shape); personal development and mutual understanding (including personal understanding and health); physical education; and the world around us (including history, geography, science and technology). The areas of learning are set out separately, but teachers are expected to integrate learning across the six areas and encourage children to make relevant connections between topics they are studying. Religious education (RE) remains a statutory requirement at all key stage.

There are also cross-curricular skills which underpin the revised curriculum; these are: communication; using mathematics; and using ICT. In addition, the development of 'Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities' encourages children to think critically and creatively, and to develop personal and interpersonal skills. Schools are also free to develop their own elements of the curriculum in order to express their particular ethos, and to meet pupils' individual needs and circumstances.

Teaching methods and learning materials are usually decided by the class teachers, in consultation with the head teacher and subject leaders – they are not centrally prescribed. 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.

3.4 Assessment, progression and certification

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 standardised 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.

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 subjects. 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.

3.5 Guidance and counselling

There are no services offering vocational guidance to primary school pupils.

In the curriculum, the area of learning 'Personal development and mutual understanding' aims to provide pupils with the skills, attitudes and values necessary for independent living, informed decision-making and responsible action throughout their lives.

3.6 Teachers

All teachers employed in grant-aided nursery schools or nursery classes in Northern Ireland 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 (ITE) course. ITE courses are provided by the five higher education institutions (HEIs), in partnership with schools.

Intending pre-primary 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 (BEd (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 the curriculum guidance, pedagogical and educational theory, and practical teaching skills.

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 in their publication, *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 HEIs.

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 HEIs. 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.

4. SECONDARY EDUCATION

ISCED 2 covers lower secondary education at key stage 3 (ages 11 to 14, school years 8, 9 and 10), and ISCED 3 covers upper secondary education at key stage 4 (ages 14 to 16, school years 11 and 12). Compulsory education ends at age 16. A pupil who reaches the age of 16 on or between 1 September and 1 July in the same school year, can leave school on 30 June in that school year. A pupil who reaches the age of 16 between 2 July and 31 August in the same year, cannot leave school until 30 June in the next calendar year.

ISCED 3 also covers post-compulsory upper secondary education which normally lasts for two years (ages 16 to 18, years 13 and 14).

Secondary education in schools

Secondary education in schools is generally referred to as post-primary education. Schools provide post-primary education at both compulsory and post-compulsory level. The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 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.

Publicly-funded schools in Northern Ireland are known as grant-aided schools. The main legal categories of grant-aided post-primary schools are:

- **Controlled schools**, which educate mainly Protestant students and are owned and funded by the local Education and Library Board (ELB);
- **Controlled integrated schools**, owned and funded by the ELB, which educate Catholics and Protestants together;
- **Catholic maintained schools**, owned by the Catholic Church, funded by the ELB and the Department of Education (DE), which educate mainly Catholics;
- **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 **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.

Post-primary schools provide education for pupils aged 11 to 16 or 11 to 18+. At key stages 3 and 4, they offer general/academic education as set out in the Northern Ireland revised curriculum (see 4.3); and at key stage 4 and post-16, they provide external qualifications in general subjects along with some courses in vocational/applied subjects (see 4.4). Currently, the Entitlement Framework is being introduced which aims to guarantee all post-primary pupils aged between 14 and 19 a wider, more balanced choice of learning opportunities. By 2013 post-primary schools will be required to offer their students a minimum number of general/academic and vocational courses, if necessary, in collaboration with another school, further education college, or other provider (see 4.3).

No charge may be made for education provided wholly or mainly within school hours (excluding midday breaks) for pupils 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. In addition, charges may not be made for the cost of materials, books, instruments or any other equipment. Schools may charge for activities that fall outside the above categories, but should have a policy which sets out cases in which they charge for activities. Schools may ask parents for a voluntary contribution to school funds, but they must make it clear to them that their child will not be deprived of any educational opportunity offered to the other children should they be unwilling to

contribute. Students from lower income families are entitled to Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) which encourage 16- to 19-year-olds to stay in full-time education beyond the end of compulsory schooling. ELBs also provide free school meals and subsidies for school uniforms for students from low-income families.

ELBs provide assistance with transport arrangements (e.g. ELB vehicles or free public transport passes) for pupils enrolled at a school more than two miles from their home, who have been unsuccessful in obtaining a place in a grant-aided school nearer home. In addition, ELBs provide a Boarding Allowance for the very small number of pupils who can only obtain a suitable education by residing away from home (in practice, this is largely restricted to post-primary education for young people on Rathlin Island, where there is no post-primary provision and pupils reside on the mainland during the week). ELBs also provide free school meals, and subsidies for school uniforms for children from low-income families.

Post-compulsory secondary education in further education colleges

At 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 recognised qualifications. These courses may be general, vocational or job-specific (see 4.4). 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 from lower income families are entitled to Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) which encourage 16- to 19-year-olds to stay in full-time education beyond the end of compulsory schooling.

4.1 Admission

Compulsory secondary education

Pupils transfer to secondary education at 11. A post-primary school must admit pupils up to its approved admissions number as determined by the Department of Education (DE), based on its capacity to accommodate pupils. If a school is over-subscribed, it must decide which pupils to admit by publishing admissions criteria (such as the location of the pupil's home in relation to the school, or the presence in the school of an older sibling). The criteria, which are drawn up by the school's board of governors, must be published in order of priority. When drawing up criteria, governors may take into account the views of the Education and Library Boards responsible for the school's management, or, if it is a Catholic school, those of the Council for Catholic-Maintained Schools. In addition, the law requires that all schools in Northern Ireland must be open to all children regardless of religious persuasion. This policy is known as 'open enrolment'.

Traditionally, there has been a selective system of post-primary education. The DE no longer supports academic selection of post-primary pupils. In November 2008, the last cohort of 11-year-olds took centrally-provided 'transfer tests' to determine whether they would attend a selective post-primary school in September 2009. The DE no longer provides these tests, and does not recommend that post-primary schools select pupils on the basis of academic ability, although this is not prohibited. In practice, many schools are continuing to select pupils on the basis of academic ability and are making arrangements to set their own entrance tests. For example, during the academic year 2009-2010, a number of schools will be setting examinations in English and mathematics which are being managed by an independent body.

Post-compulsory secondary education

Entry requirements to post-compulsory education and training programmes are set by the individual school, college or employer. In most cases specific grades and/or subjects at GCSE (or in other approved qualifications) are required. Programmes for students who have not attained GCSE level qualifications by the end of compulsory education are also available (see 4.4).

4.2 Organisation of time, groups and venue

Compulsory secondary education

Schools are required to be in operation for 200 days a year, although they are closed to students when teachers are on annual training and development days (five days), school development days (five days), or optional closing days (five days). The school year runs from September 1st to June 30th and is divided into three terms. There is a long summer break of around eight weeks, with shorter breaks of around ten days at Christmas and Easter and two-day breaks in October and February.

Pupils of secondary school age 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 a.m. and 3.30/4.00 p.m., 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 taught in classes with pupils of the same age and are organised 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 organisational 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.

For most subjects, there are no regulations regarding the maximum number of students in a secondary school class. However, there is legislation in place to ensure that for practical subjects, such as science and physical education, students are taught in groups of no more than 20.

Post-compulsory secondary education

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 pupils. 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.

Post-compulsory education is also provided in colleges of further and higher education. Students attend for three terms per year, with holidays at Christmas, Easter and in the summer. However, there is considerable variation in the way in which courses are organised. 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.

4.3 Curriculum

Compulsory secondary education

The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 provided the legislative framework for the introduction of the revised curriculum framework which began to be implemented in 2007. The revised Northern

Ireland Secondary Curriculum is managed by the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). The CCEA is a non-departmental public body which reports to the Department of Education, Northern Ireland (DE). The DE has overall responsibility for the school curriculum. Education and Library Boards are responsible for giving curriculum advice and support to schools, and the Board of Governors is responsible for ensuring that the curriculum is delivered in each school.

At key stage 3 and key stage 4 (ages 11 to 14 and 14 to 16 respectively), the revised curriculum includes eight general areas of learning: the arts (including music, art and design, and drama); language and literacy (including English and media education); environment and society (including geography and history); modern languages; mathematics and numeracy (including financial capability); physical education; science and technology; and religious education. Students must also study 'Learning for life and work' which comprises education for employability, local and global citizenship, personal development and home economics. 'Developing skills and capabilities' includes the development of skills in areas such as problem-solving and working with others. In addition, the cross-curricular skills: communication, using mathematics, and using ICT should be covered across the areas of learning. All these areas of learning and the skills are statutory at key stage 3.

The previous curriculum also had areas of learning with contributory subjects, but the revised curriculum has been designed to increase flexibility by setting out minimum requirements in each area of learning. In addition, the curriculum area 'learning for life and work' is a new feature of the revised curriculum.

The time allocated to each curriculum subject is not prescribed by law, and there is no statutory guidance on teaching methods and materials. However, extensive non-statutory guidance is available to support schools and teachers in implementing the curriculum. Teaching methods are decided by the teacher, in consultation with senior teachers. Each teacher is also responsible for planning lessons and drawing up schemes of work in accordance with the curriculum's statutory requirements. Learning materials, including textbooks, are also selected by the teaching staff in each school – they are not centrally prescribed.

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 recognised qualifications taken at the end of the key stage (aged 16) (see section 4.4). External qualifications, provided for pupils of compulsory school age in grant-aided schools, must be approved by the 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.

Post-compulsory secondary education

The Northern Ireland curriculum does not apply to post-compulsory education (students aged 16 to 18+). Students choose from a wide range of courses available in schools and further education colleges and through open and distance learning. The content of courses for nationally recognised qualifications is determined by the awarding body. All external qualifications must be approved by DE who are advised by the CCEA. Pupils in post-compulsory education in both schools and further education colleges can take either vocational or academic courses or a combination of both. Due to the implementation of the Entitlement Framework (see above), an increasing range of vocational (or 'applied') subject options and courses are becoming available for students aged 14 to 19 studying at school. Details of the full range of academic and vocational courses available at this level are given in section 4.4.

Post-compulsory level teachers and instructors are free to choose their own teaching methods and materials unless they are specifically prescribed by awarding bodies to meet the particular requirements of an examination specification.

4.4 Assessment, progression and certification

Compulsory education – key stage 3

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 pupils 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 (Northern Ireland) 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 are required to 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 Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (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. Pupils 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.

Compulsory education – key stage 4

At the end of compulsory education, after two years of study in key stage 4, young people are assessed by means of external qualifications. By far the most common qualification taken is the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education), but schools are now offering an increasing number of vocational/applied courses.

GCSEs are examinations in single subjects, and students typically take between 5 and 10. They are available in a wide range of general (academic) subjects, and in a small number of vocational subjects. A GCSE qualification in a vocational subject is equivalent in size to two general GCSEs. Not all GCSEs are assessed in the same way, but in most subjects the final grade is awarded based partly on controlled assessment, partly on examination. The results are reported on an eight point scale from A* to G. Students receive a certificate listing the subjects taken, and the grade awarded in each. Students who fail to reach the minimum standard for grade G, receive a U grade and are not awarded a certificate. GCSEs enable progression to further (post-compulsory) education, training or employment.

Occupational Studies qualifications are available at three levels in 11 occupational areas including hairdressing and beauty therapy and engineering. They are rooted in practical and occupational contexts and are designed to be accessible to learners of all abilities. Units within the qualification are assessed through a mixture of assessment methods which mirror those used for the award of the National Vocational Qualification (see below). Occupational Studies qualifications enable progression to further (post-compulsory) education, training or employment.

Entry-level qualifications are available to key stage 4 students who are not ready to take GCSEs, but they can also be taken by 16- to 19-year-olds and adults (indeed, all the compulsory and post-compulsory qualifications described in this section can be taken by adults and post-16 students). They are available in general subjects, vocational subjects such as hairdressing and retail, and in skills required for life and employment. They can be taken at three different levels. The qualifications are made up of a number of units which are separately assessed through a combination of tests, assignments and tasks which can be written, oral or practical. A certificate is awarded on successful completion of all units. Entry-level qualifications prepare students for GCSEs and higher-level vocational qualifications.

Currently, external qualifications are regulated by the CCEA and approved by the Department of Education (DE). However, the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator (Ofqual – see England 1.2.) regulates NVQs in Northern Ireland.

National performance tables showing the achievements of students in GCSE examinations and in specified vocational qualifications are no longer published.

Schools are required to report to parents of key stage 4 students providing a formative record of progress and achievement (including extra-curricular achievements), and the results of any public examinations taken.

Throughout compulsory secondary 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.

Post-compulsory education

Post-compulsory upper secondary education typically lasts for 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 vocational subjects or courses, 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. The objective of the Entitlement Framework is to achieve greater balance between the proportion of general and vocational subjects offered in schools (see 4.3 for more details).

A-levels are single-subject examinations which may be studied in any combination and are traditionally the required qualification for entry to higher education. They are available in a wide range of general/academic subjects and in applied subjects including engineering and travel and tourism. 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. A-level assessment varies from subject to subject, but generally it involves a mixture of written examinations, coursework and practical assessments. Results are reported on a five point scale from A to E (an A* will also be awarded from 2010). Successful students receive a certificate listing the subjects taken, and the grade awarded in each. Students who fail to reach the minimum standard for grade E, receive a U grade and are not awarded a certificate. A-levels are preparation for employment or higher education.

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.

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) enable students as well as employees who have left full-time education to gain recognised qualifications for specific occupations. They recognise 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.

BTECs (Business and Technical Education Council) and OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and Royal Society of Arts) Nationals are also designed for study in occupational areas such as horticulture. They involve a mixture of theoretical and practical work and are available at 3 levels (BTEC Firsts are available for students aged 14 to 16 in compulsory education). They are assessed, either by teachers or an external examiner, through a range of assignments, case studies, a portfolio of evidence and practical activities. They enable progression to employment or higher level vocational courses.

Apprenticeships are available in a broad range of professional and technical areas including computer science and construction. They can be taken by anyone over 16, and learning takes place both in the workplace and with a local learning provider. In September 2009, **Programme Led Apprenticeships** were introduced as an intervention measure to assist those school leavers who have not been in a position to secure an apprenticeship with an employer. Learning in all apprenticeship programmes can encompass an NVQ, key skills and a Technical Certificate which provides knowledge underpinning the occupation in question. They last between one and three years and apprentices can progress to employment or higher education.

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.

National performance tables showing the achievements of students in public examinations and in specified vocational qualifications are not published.

Under the provisions of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, the Department of Education, Northern Ireland (DE) 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 (DEL). Qualifications delivered by schools are regulated by the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). However the

Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator (Ofqual) regulates all NVQs in Northern Ireland (see 1.2) 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.
- 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 will be placed on the QCF by the end of 2010 and it is expected that academic qualifications will also in the future be placed on the QCF; until that time, the NQF remains the framework for all academic qualifications. The QCF will therefore provide the organising structure for all qualifications available in schools, including general qualifications, but to date the focus has been on vocational qualifications.

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.

Ofqual, the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QDCA) and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment in Northern Ireland (CCEA) have completed the process of referencing the QCF to the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF), which is being established to make qualifications more readable across boundaries. A report for all UK countries showing that the reference process has been completed will be submitted to the European Commission at the end of 2009.

As the QCF aims to be responsive to the needs of individual learners, it is guided by the principle that learners should not be required to 're-learn' something which they already know, understand or can

do. Therefore, it promotes **Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)**, which allows individuals to claim credit for achievements that have not previously been certificated.

Units in the QCF are based on learning outcomes and assessment criteria which make explicit the standard required for the successful completion of the unit. They exclude explicit reference to the method of assessment; this means that all units within all qualifications can be achieved through RPL.

The regulatory arrangements for the QCF place obligations on awarding organisations and centres to offer RPL where appropriate to learners, and awarding organisations need to ensure that overall assessment arrangements can support an RPL offer. The Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency in England has produced guidance on RPL within the QCF for all relevant organisations and continues to work with them to ensure that RPL is an increasingly widely available assessment option for learners seeking recognition of their achievements in QCF.

4.5 Guidance and counselling

The revised Northern Ireland curriculum includes an area of learning called 'learning for life and work'. This is a statutory part of the curriculum at key stage 3 (11- to 14-year-olds) and key stage 4 (14 to 16-year-olds). The aim of this specific area is to ensure that all young people develop the personal qualities, skills, knowledge, understanding and attitudes which will give them a strong foundation for life and work. It incorporates 'Employability', which has four dimensions: work in the local and global economy; career management; enterprise and entrepreneurship; and skills and capabilities for work. Coverage of this area of learning can be supplemented by learning across the curriculum and also by special days or events when the normal timetable is suspended.

The Careers Service in Northern Ireland currently provides an all-age information, advice and guidance service to help young people and adults make informed choices about their future career paths. Careers advisors from the Careers Service deliver careers information, advice and guidance in schools as well as in Job Centres, Jobs and Benefits Offices and Careers Offices across Northern Ireland. Services provided to schools by the Careers Service Northern Ireland include class talks, group sessions, one-to-one interviews, psychometric assessment, labour market information and attendance at parents' evenings and careers events.

The Careers Service is currently being reformed. In January 2009, the Minister of Education and the Minister for Employment and Learning launched a new careers advice strategy. One aim of the strategy is to improve access to careers information by developing the Careers Service website as an information hub. One of the main reasons for improving careers education is the introduction of the new 'Entitlement Framework', which will provide 14- to 19-year-olds with access to a broader range of both academic and vocational courses (see 4.3).

4.6 Teachers and trainers

Secondary school teachers

All teachers employed in grant-aided post-primary schools in Northern Ireland 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 (ITE) course. ITE courses are provided by the five higher education institutions (HEIs), in partnership with schools.

Usually, intending post-primary teachers follow a consecutive model of teacher training. 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 the curriculum guidance, pedagogical and educational theory, and practical teaching

skills. Less commonly, secondary school teachers follow a concurrent model of teacher training to teach subjects such as design and technology and business studies. The concurrent model consists of four years study leading to a bachelor's honours degree in education (BEd (Hons)).

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 in their publication *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 & Library Boards (ELBs) through their Curriculum Advisory Support Service (CASS) take the lead in induction, in partnership with schools and the HEIs.

Beyond induction, emphasis is placed on early professional development (EPD) and continuing professional development (CPD), collaborative practice and school improvement. Schools take the lead in the EPD stage, in partnership with each ELB's CASS and the HEIs. The CASS also provides CPD to schools. In addition, schools are free to secure CPD from within their own delegated resources. Each school determines its own CPD needs depending on the requirements set out in their school development plan.

Further education teachers

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 has now 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 will be known as the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) (Further Education). The implementation and delivery arrangements for the new qualification are being piloted from November 2009 for a two year period.

5. POST-SECONDARY NON-TERTIARY EDUCATION

ISCED 4 applies to one very specific programme – the access course. Access courses are provided by further education colleges and are aimed at mature students wishing to gain entry to higher education. They are designed and taught to meet the needs of adult learners.

As access courses are part of the Government's strategy to widen participation in higher education (HE), they are targeted at under-represented groups such as the unemployed; minority ethnic groups; women returning to education; disabled learners; and those from socio-economic backgrounds which do not commonly participate in higher education.

5.1 Admission

Access courses have no formal entry requirements and are aimed at adults aged 19+ who have few, if any, formal qualifications.

5.2 Organisation of time, groups and venue

Access courses typically last for one year full-time or between one and two years part-time. One year courses involve up to 16 hours of study per week in college, in addition to private study outside classes.

5.3 Curriculum

There are many different access courses available and they are designed and developed with the support of higher education institutions. Some programmes may be general, but most are discipline-related and cover a range of academic and vocational subjects. Access courses usually include the following elements: subject modules or units; key skills in information technology, numeracy and communication; study skills; and tutorial support.

5.4 Assessment, progression and certification

Assessment is usually by a combination of coursework and examination, and most courses allow students to accumulate credit towards the Access to Higher Education certificate as they progress through the course.

5.5 Guidance and counselling

See section 4.5.

5.6 Teachers and trainers

See section 4.6.

6. TERTIARY EDUCATION

The description of the structure and organisation of higher education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is in section 6 of the national description for England.

7. CONTINUING EDUCATION AND TRAINING

7.1 Policy and legislative framework

Provision aimed at adults returning to learning is governed by the same legislative framework as provision for school-leavers. The Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 defines further education as full-time and part-time education (other than higher education) for those over compulsory school age (aged 16+). Lifelong learning in Northern Ireland usually refers to learning which takes place after a young person has finished formal education and training. Further education therefore encompasses learning at different ISCED levels (ISCED 1 for basic skills, ISCED 3 for the full range of external qualifications, and ISCED 4 for access courses), and can be aimed at both school-leavers and adult returners. It specifically excludes learning at ISCED 5 and 6 (even where this is provided by a further education institution).

The further education sector continues to be at the heart of lifelong learning in order to strengthen economic and workforce development, to enhance social cohesion and to enhance individuals' skills and learning. Under this broad aim, the three main objectives for colleges of further and higher education are:

- to be a key driver of local, sub-regional and regional economic and workforce development;
- to be an active agent for social cohesion; and
- to be a major promoter of lifelong learning.

Therefore, provision for adult learners has a particular focus on up-skilling the workforce and increasing the employability of the economically inactive. In February 2006, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) published *Success through Skills: The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland*.^v This aims to allow people to acquire more and better skills; raise the skills levels of the whole workforce; and help deliver high productivity and increased competitiveness. The strategy sets out how DEL will implement these plans in partnership with employers and their representative bodies; as well as with individuals and trade unions; training and education providers; the community and voluntary sector; and other government departments.

Traditionally, participation in further education beyond compulsory school age has been a matter for the individual. Training provision has also been 'voluntary' on the part of employers. There is little legal obligation for employers to train staff, except where licensing of organisations or individuals is a requirement. Within the construction industry however, firms pay training levies. Training levies finance the activities of the training board of this industry, and share the cost of training more evenly between employers.

Unemployed people who have been claiming Jobseeker's Allowance for a certain period of time (six months or more for 16 to 24-year-olds, and 18 months or more for 25- to 50-year-olds) are required to participate in work experience, training and help with essential skills in order to find new employment (see 7.4 for details of specific programmes). Any adult who wishes to develop basic skills (literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology), is entitled to study for Essential Skills qualifications free of charge (see 7.4).

Informal and non-formal learning is acknowledged by NVQs (see also 4.4), formal vocational qualifications which take account of prior experience and learning in their assessment arrangements in a process called accreditation of prior learning (APL). Typically, this is through a portfolio of evidence of prior learning, indicating the level and areas of expertise. Informal and non-formal learning is also acknowledged (but not actually certified) in the selection process for further and higher education, or in order to help unemployed adults back in to work by identifying skills obtained through previous

employment. In addition, new guidelines have been developed for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) within the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) which is currently being implemented in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. For more details on the QCF and RPL, see section 4.4.

7.2 Distribution of responsibilities

Central bodies

The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) is responsible for policy, strategic development and financing of the learning and skills sector in Northern Ireland. It sponsors initiatives and schemes to encourage adult learning (see section 7.4), and provides support to all statutory further education (FE) providers such as colleges and a small number of non-statutory FE providers.

DEL collaborates with other administrations and their respective regulatory authorities in other parts of the UK to support the development of the National Occupational Standards (statements of the skills, knowledge and understanding needed in employment) as the basis for high quality vocational qualifications and to ensure the establishment of a coherent and well-regulated framework of national qualifications (see 4.4). General and vocational qualifications are developed by private companies known as awarding bodies which are subject to regulation by the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). The CCEA is the main regulatory authority for qualifications in Northern Ireland, but the regulation of vocational qualifications falls within the remit of Ofqual (see 1.2).

The Learning and Skills Development Agency, Northern Ireland (LSDA NI) develops quality improvement and staff development programmes for the further education and skills sector that support specific government initiatives through research, training and consultancy, and by supplying services direct to schools, colleges of further and higher education, and training organisations.

Providers

Programmes aimed at adult learners (including general, vocational and leisure courses) are provided by six area-based further and higher education colleges. These colleges also provide programmes for school leavers (section 4) and access courses (section 5). For information on the organisation and management of further education colleges see 1.2.

DEL also supports the non-statutory Ulster People's College and the Workers' Educational Association which provide community and personal development programmes. Provision purchased by DEL under these arrangements is in line with the Department's strategic aims, and is of a vocational nature, primarily developing learners' employability. The Department's strategy document *FE Means Business*^(vi) underlines the importance of collaboration and partnership between the statutory FE sector and voluntary and community organisations in bringing FE provision to a wider cross-section of the community.

Employers and their representative bodies

All UK governments have placed increasing importance on up-skilling the workforce which has strengthened the role of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs). SSCs are state-sponsored employer-led organisations that cover specific economic sectors across the UK. There are currently twenty five of them and they have four main objectives: to reduce skills gaps and shortages; to improve productivity; to boost the skills of their sector workforces; and to improve learning supply. They do this by contributing to the development of National Occupational Standards, being involved in the design and approval of Apprenticeship Frameworks (see section 4.4), brokering Sector Skills Agreements (strategic action plans detailing the skills shortages and gaps in each industry, and providing direction on how they can be addressed), and creating qualifications strategies. They are also playing an increasingly important role in the definition and quality assurance of qualifications. The umbrella

organisation, the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils, supports the work of the SSCs and builds their performance capacity and profile. The SSCs are managed and funded by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES). The UKCES advises the UK governments on skills provision. The Northern Ireland Employment and Skills Advisor sits on the Commission and reports to the Minister for Employment and Learning.

In addition, there are also 13 Sector Training Councils in Northern Ireland which are also independent employer representative bodies. Their role is to: articulate the skills, education and training needs of their sectors in the short and longer term; advise on training standards required for those sectors; and work with DEL and the corresponding SSCs to ensure that those training needs and standards are met. In order to increase the availability of required skills to priority sectors, DEL also supports the activities of three advisory groups: the ICT Future Skills Action Group, the Hospitality and Tourism Future Skills Action Group, and the Financial Services Future Skills Action Group.

To support skills development at local level, Workforce Development Forums (WDFs) have been established by DEL in cooperation with employers, district councils and other interested parties. There is one in each of the six FE college areas, and they are chaired by prominent local business figures. Their role is to identify local skills training needs and to articulate a strategic response, making use of existing resources. Much of the identified training can be delivered in colleges of further and higher education, but WDFs also have links with private training providers.

Generally, provision and funding of work-based training is a matter left to individual employers, and they contract a large number of private training providers to deliver specified training programmes (e.g. courses in human resource development and qualifications in particular occupational areas). Employers also provide in-house training. In-house trainers may work for the employer and provide training full-time or undertake training activities alongside their other duties. However, one of the objectives of the *Success Through Skills* strategy (see 7.1) is to raise the skills levels of the whole workforce, and as a result DEL provides funding and support to employers to identify and respond to their training needs. An example of this support is **Management Analysis and Planning (MAP)**, a programme open to small and medium-sized enterprises (10 to 250 employees). This involves a business consultant investigating and reporting on the strengths and weaknesses, areas for development and skills gaps of the management and leadership of an enterprise. This report then forms the basis of a training and development plan. DEL meets the cost of the business analysis and provides further funding (on a 40 % basis) towards development activities arising from the training and development plan. Further information about specific DEL-sponsored workforce training programmes is given in 7.5.

In addition, employers may receive state subsidies to cover training and recruitment costs to participate in programmes such as Steps to Work, which aim to help the unemployed and economically inactive back into work.

7.3 Financing

For more information on funding of the further education and skills sector see section 1.3.

7.4 Programmes and providers

Qualifications designed for young people at school and recent school-leavers are generally approved as suitable for learners of any age. These qualifications are offered to adult learners by further education colleges (see section 4.4). For example, they typically offer a range of A levels (single subject qualifications designed for 18-year-olds studying full-time), to adults who may wish to take just one or two subjects on a part-time basis. Colleges also offer qualifications designed specifically for older learners, such as access courses (see section 5).

Further and higher education colleges also offer adults a vast range of **recreational courses**, which do not always lead to a qualification. These may include arts subjects (e.g. painting and photography); crafts (e.g. pottery and jewellery design); health and well-being courses (e.g. physical exercise and stress management); humanities and foreign languages courses; personal development; and ICT.

Some programmes are aimed specifically at **the unemployed and those at risk of social exclusion**. A key element of the Department for Employment and Learning's (DEL) *Success Through Skills* strategy (see 7.1), is the provision of **Essential Skills** courses. These are available free-of-charge to any adult who has difficulty with literacy, numeracy and computer skills. There are three separate courses: communication, covering reading, writing, speaking and listening; application of number; and ICT, which involves developing practical computer skills for use in the workplace and for personal need. Essential Skills courses are developed by the CCEA, and are nationally recognised qualifications at a range of different levels. They are assessed using a variety of methods including written and oral tasks, portfolios of evidence and computer-based tasks.

DEL's **Steps to Work** programme targets people receiving state unemployment and incapacity/income support benefits and is also available to the economically inactive on a voluntary basis. It helps them to move back into employment through a wide range of development opportunities which can be tailored to their individual needs. These could include work placements; training; help with developing the skills needed to search for a job; and opportunities to obtain a work-related qualification.

The **Bridge to Employment** programme provides customised training to equip the long-term unemployed with the skills to compete for new employment on an equal basis with others. In addition, **Pathways to Work** (for sick and disabled people) and **Progress2Work** (for those recovering from alcohol and drug addictions, the homeless and ex-offenders) are programmes delivered by specialist support workers who will support participants in finding employment either directly or via training and educational opportunities.

The Ulster People's College (see 1.2) typically caters for adult learners with few, if any, formal qualifications who are nevertheless active within their community. They run courses to provide them with the skills they need to take effective action to achieve positive change within their communities. Courses include Community Leadership; Women's Leadership; Fundraising; and Committee Skills. Many of these courses lead to accredited qualifications provided by the National Open College Network, a credit-based awarding body in the UK.

Training for the employees is also provided through the Success through Skills strategy which aims to improve the skills of the workforce at all levels (see also 7.2). DEL offers at least partial funding for a range of training opportunities, from Essential Skills provision, to developing management and leadership skills. Specific programmes for managers and those aspiring to management include:

- **The Management and Leadership Development Programme** – this offers a wide range of training opportunities to help employers meet the development needs of managers and leaders at all levels. These approved management and leadership courses are provided by private business consultancies such as PricewaterhouseCoopers.
- **INTRO-to-Management Programme** – develops the skills of new trainee graduate managers with off-the-job classroom training; on-the-job experience of conducting a business improvement project; and the opportunity to complete a professional management diploma.
- **The Meridian Programme** – delivered by Common Purpose, enables participants from a range of sectors to explore and work through real-life leadership challenges.

- **Leaders for Tomorrow Programme** – DEL funds a small number of middle to senior managers to undertake a short period of study at Harvard University, and to meet with public, private, and voluntary sector leaders from across Ireland during a 3-day Leadership in Action Programme. The aim is to help them develop the strategic leadership skills to operate effectively in the international context.

7.5 Quality assurance

Institutions in the statutory further education sector are inspected by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) in accordance with the Common Framework for Inspection. The ETI also inspect training organisations. See section 1.4 for further details.

7.6 Guidance and counselling

The Careers Service in Northern Ireland currently provides an all-age information, advice and guidance service to help young people and adults make informed choices about their future career paths. Careers advisors from the Careers Service deliver careers information, advice and guidance in Job Centres, Jobs and Benefits Offices and Careers Offices across Northern Ireland. In addition, the Careers Service has a website with interactive features and multi-media resources that enable job-seekers to explore the range of careers available.

Guidance and support is offered to the unemployed and others at risk of social exclusion through programmes such as Steps to Work (see 7.4). Participants in these programmes are allocated personal advisers or support workers who provide them with information, advice and guidance (IAG) on obtaining new skills and finding employment. These programmes are funded by the Department of Employment and Learning (DEL).

The Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA) is a local, independent, not-for-profit service which aims to advise adults of learning opportunities available throughout Northern Ireland. Their IAG service is particularly geared towards adults who are planning a career change, or who need advice following redundancy or a career break.

7.7 Teachers and trainers

For information on initial training and professional development requirements for teachers and trainers see section 4.6.

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Council for Catholic Maintained Schools – <http://www.onlineccms.com>

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Department of Education, Northern Ireland – <http://www.deni.gov.uk>

Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland – <http://www.delni.gov.uk>

Edexcel – <http://www.edexcel.com/Pages/home.aspx>

Education and Skills Authority – <http://www.esani.org.uk>

Education and Training Inspectorate – <http://www.etini.gov.uk>

General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland – <http://www.gtcni.org.uk>

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Learning and Skills Development Agency, Northern Ireland – <http://www.lsdani.org.uk>

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