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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Subject:

**APPROVAL OF QUALIFICATIONS, AND GUIDANCE ON
THE CLASSIFICATION OF COURSES**

**Circular Number:
2006/24**

**Date of Issue:
30 November 2006**

Audience:

- Principals and Boards of Governors of all grant-aided post-primary schools and special schools with secondary departments;
- Education and Library Boards;
- Further and Higher Education Colleges;
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools;
- Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education;
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta; and
- Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment.

Summary of Contents:

This Circular is concerned with the approval of qualifications for which pupils in grant-aided schools may be prepared. It also provides guidance on the classification of courses as general or applied to assist with preparations for the introduction of the Entitlement Framework.

Enquiries:

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

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Governor Awareness:
Essential

Status of Contents:
For information,
and action by schools

Related Documents:
Circular 2005/18
Circular 2006/20

Superseded Documents:
Circular 2005/5

DE Website:
This circular is available on
<http://www.deni.gov.uk>

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INTRODUCTION

1. The purpose of this circular is to update, and substantially expand, the list of approved courses and associated qualifications for which schools may enter their pupils as part of their secondary education. This circular takes account of the changed context being brought about by the current education reforms, including the revised, and less prescriptive, statutory curriculum and the introduction of the Entitlement Framework. The combined effect of these will be to increase flexibility and choice for both schools and pupils. From Key Stage 4 onwards, pupils will be able to choose from a wider range of courses, including those offered in a Further Education setting and/or by other Training Providers.

LEGISLATIVE POSITION

2. Under the provisions of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 (the 1998 Order), the Department must approve all courses leading to an external qualification provided for pupils in grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland. In addition, under the provisions of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 (the 2006 Order) the Department is required to issue:
 - a) a list of courses appearing to the Department to be wholly or mainly general (academic) courses; and
 - b) a list of courses appearing to the Department to be wholly or mainly applied (professional/technical or vocational) courses.
3. Previous Approval of Qualifications circulars were written with reference to the statutory Programmes of Study. The 2006 Order provides for the introduction of a revised curriculum from the beginning of the 2006/07 academic year, and the discontinuation of statutory Programmes of Study. It also provides for the introduction of the Entitlement Framework which aims to secure access to a wider range of courses for all pupils. The Entitlement Framework will be given statutory effect progressively from September 2007 and will, ultimately, require schools to provide access to at least 24 courses for pupils at Key Stage 4, and 27 courses for pupils post-16, with a mix of general and applied courses. Further information about the Entitlement Framework has been provided in DE Circulars 2005/18 and 2006/20.
4. The annual Approval of Qualifications circular will, from now on, serve two purposes. Firstly, it will make clear which courses are approved, for Key Stage 4 pupils and for post-16 pupils registered at schools in Northern Ireland. Secondly, it will guide schools as to the classification of courses as general or applied for the purpose of meeting the requirements of the Entitlement Framework.

APPROVAL OF COURSES : KEY STAGE 4

5. The revised curriculum requirements for Key Stage 4 being introduced by the 2006 Order are summarised in Appendix 1. In general, the revised curriculum will give schools the flexibility to tailor the curriculum more fully to meet the needs of pupils, and much greater freedom to determine the courses they offer. As a result, the Key Stage 4 Flexibility initiative, under

which schools could seek the selective disapplication of elements of the curriculum, is no longer necessary and has been phased out.

6. The legislative changes mean that with effect from the 2006/07 school year:
 - The former curriculum structure and associated programmes of study cease to have statutory effect;
 - Schools are required to offer at least one approved course related to each area of learning;
 - Pupils who are already embarked on public examination courses may continue to be taught the content of those courses.

The 'minimum content' in relation to Learning for Life and Work, and Physical Education, will not take effect immediately but will be phased in for year 11 pupils in 2007/08 and for year 12 pupils in 2008/09.

7. If it is intended that a course should count towards the specified minimum number of 24 courses on offer to Key Stage 4 pupils in order to meet the requirements of the Entitlement Framework, that course must be:
 - Accredited on the National Database of Accredited Qualifications (NDAQ) – see paragraph 11 for further information; and
 - Listed as general or applied by Department – see Appendix 2 for an initial listing, which has also been placed on Department's website. If an accredited course is not listed in the circular, further guidance on its classification may be obtained by contacting the Department, and the list maintained on the Department's website will be updated as necessary.
8. Schools are at liberty to offer other courses, whether they are accredited on the NDAQ or not, but these will be classified as enrichment activity and will not count towards the number of courses necessary to meet the requirements of the Entitlement Framework.

APPROVAL OF COURSES : POST-16

9. Similar approval arrangements apply in the case of post-16 pupils registered at a school. If it is intended that a course should count towards the specified minimum number of 27 courses on offer to post-16 pupils in order to meet the requirements of the Entitlement Framework, that course must be:
 - Accredited on the National Database of Accredited Qualifications (NDAQ) – see paragraph 11 for further information; and
 - Listed as general or applied by Department – see Appendix 3 for an initial listing, which has also been placed on Department's website. If an accredited course is not listed in the circular, further guidance on its classification may be obtained by contacting the Department, and the list maintained on the Department's website will be updated as necessary.

10. Schools are at liberty to offer other courses, whether they are accredited on the NDAQ or not, but these will be classified as enrichment activity and will not count towards the number of courses necessary to meet the requirements of the Entitlement Framework.

THE NATIONAL DATABASE OF ACCREDITED QUALIFICATIONS

11. The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) sets out the levels at which qualifications can be recognised. It helps learners make informed decisions on the qualifications they want to pursue, by comparing the levels of different qualifications and identifying clear progression routes to their chosen career. Only qualifications that have been accredited by the Regulatory Authorities are included in the NQF.
12. The National Database of Accredited Qualifications (NDAQ) lists all accredited qualifications in the NQF, and is administered jointly by the Regulatory Authorities for qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
13. This database is currently known to users as 'Openquals' and is located at www.openquals.org.uk. It contains details of over 5,000 accredited qualifications and is in the process of being modified to increase the number of search options available and to include information linking qualifications to selected occupations. The NDAQ is updated on an ongoing basis as qualifications are developed and accredited.
14. Schools should familiarise themselves with the NDAQ as this is a useful tool to assist with identifying courses that are accredited, and for informing advice to pupils on qualifications that relate to various occupations.
15. However, not all courses accredited on the NDAQ will score towards meeting the target 24/27 number of courses associated with the Entitlement Framework. For that purpose, courses must appear on the approved lists maintained by the Department of Education.

CLASSIFICATION OF COURSES AS GENERAL OR APPLIED

16. The classification of courses as general or applied for the purpose of meeting the Entitlement Framework has been based on expanded versions of the definitions provided in the initial Entitlement Framework guidance.

A course is a period of study, based on one specification, which leads to a qualification accredited within the National Qualifications Framework. The content of the course should be distinct in that it is not replicated in any other course(s) offered as part of a school's provision.

A course should be further defined, at Levels 1 and 2, as consisting, normally, of at least 160 guided learning hours (the equivalent of a GCSE), and at Level 3 as consisting, normally, of at least 320 guided learning hours (the equivalent of a GCE).

A general course is one in which knowledge, understanding and skills are developed within a subject-specific context.

A general course should be further defined as one which requires the demonstration of knowledge and understanding mainly through the application of cognitive skills such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation. General courses are normally assessed through written and/or oral examinations, although some may require an element of practical demonstration.

An applied course is one in which subject knowledge, understanding and skills are developed in relation to a work context.

An applied course should be further defined as one which requires the demonstration of knowledge, understanding and skills which are relevant to a particular occupation or general occupational area. Applied courses are normally assessed through the demonstration of appropriate (practical) skills which may be supported by written and/or oral presentation.

17. With the assistance of the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), these definitions have been referenced to the specifications of courses known to be in common usage at Key Stage 4 (Appendix 2) and post-16 (Appendix 3) level in schools in Northern Ireland. Advice on the classification of courses has also been taken from the Education and Training Inspectorate and the Department for Employment and Learning.
18. Courses are listed according to the relevant Area of Learning and classified as either general or applied.
19. In addition to the qualifications listed in Appendix 2, the Department will approve any qualification from which approval has been withdrawn, provided the pupils undertaking the relevant course have previously entered the examination, and are undertaking the course only for the purpose of enabling them to re-enter the examination.
20. These lists build upon the illustrative list published in the initial Entitlement Framework guidance, and they will be expanded over time. If a school wishes to offer a course accredited on NDAQ, with the intention that it should score towards its 24/27 curriculum offer, and that course is not listed in this approvals circular, further guidance on the classification of that course should be sought from the Department.
21. As further classifications are made, the Department will update the courses listed in Appendices 2 and 3 on its website, so that all schools can access the most up to date and comprehensive information available.
22. Accredited courses which are not approved by the Department for the purpose of meeting the target number of courses associated with the Entitlement Framework may still be offered by schools as enrichment activity, and the value of this as part of a pupil's overall education is recognised within the Entitlement Framework.

23. Examples of enrichment activity under the Entitlement Framework are:

- GCSE short courses, because they do not comply with the minimum number of guided learning hours stated at paragraph 16; and
- non-GCSE awards, such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, Youth awards and Enterprise schemes, First Aid Schemes, road safety/traffic education schemes, and sports qualifications awarded by national sports associations.

WORKING TOWARDS ACHIEVING THE TARGET NUMBER OF COURSES

24. If a school has stated in its prospectus that it is offering access to a particular course, there will be an expectation of that access being provided, even if it is only for one pupil. Schools are reminded that the 2006 Order extended the responsibilities of Curriculum Appeals Tribunals to include the provision of courses under the Entitlement Framework when this becomes a statutory requirement. While schools should seek to respond to demands for access to courses from pupils, it should be noted that there is no requirement on schools to offer a particular course simply because a pupil has asked for it. In considering the courses to which access should be offered for the purposes of the Entitlement Framework, schools should take account of the needs of all the pupils in the school, as well as the financial and other resource implications of providing those courses.

25. Courses that have a number of variants associated with them should be counted by schools as one course on offer to pupils. Examples would be:

- Courses with associated modules or units, such as Occupational Studies. For example, a school offering Occupational Studies course, but with pupils sampling different units such as Carpentry and Joinery or Plumbing;
- Courses leading to qualifications at different levels of the same subject specification, for example, Level 1 NVQ in Hairdressing and Level 2 NVQ in Hairdressing;
- Courses that are available for delivery either as single or double awards, for example, GCSE Science; and
- GCE courses at AS and A2 level in the same subject area.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

26. The 2006 Order re-enacts the requirement that the curriculum for every grant-aided school should include provision for Religious Education for all registered pupils at the school and the Department has specified a core syllabus, which has recently been revised for introduction in September 2007. In cases where the syllabus associated with a preferred RE qualification does not fully cover the core syllabus requirements, schools should arrange additional provision to ensure that the full core syllabus requirements are met.

ENQUIRIES

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

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lorraine Finlay". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial 'L'.

LORRAINE FINLAY
14-19 Team

KEY STAGE 4 CURRICULUM REQUIREMENTS

The revised curriculum for Key Stage 4 will comprise

- Religious education
- The following areas of learning
 - Language and Literacy
 - Mathematics and numeracy
 - Modern Languages
 - The arts
 - Environment and society
 - Science and technology
 - Learning for life and work, including the contributory elements of employability, local and global citizenship, and personal development
 - Physical education

Under the Entitlement Framework, schools will be required to provide access to at least one course from each area of learning listed above.

The curriculum must also ensure that, wholly or mainly through the teaching of the minimum content of the areas of learning and religious education, pupils develop:

- the following cross-curricular skills:
 - Communication;
 - Using mathematics; and
 - Using information and communications technology.
- other skills to be specified by the Department, e.g. thinking skills and personal capabilities (including managing information, thinking, problem solving and decision making, being creative, working with others and self management).

The minimum content will be specified for two areas of learning:

- Learning for life and work; and
- Physical education

The minimum content, which will be specified in due course, is the legal minimum that schools will have to teach, setting out the knowledge, understanding and skills that pupils should acquire.