Key features of the education system

Overall responsibility


However, in June 2018, Northern Ireland is in the midst of a period of political uncertainty. The Northern Ireland Assembly is not sitting and there are no executive ministers. Efforts to form an Executive continue. Updates on the situation will be posted to the UK Government’s Northern Ireland political stability [11] document collection.

Parental responsibility

Parents are responsible for ensuring that a child of compulsory school age (4 to 16) receives efficient full-time education suitable to their age, ability and aptitude, and to any special educational needs [12] they may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise. Although education is compulsory, school is not, and parents may educate their child at home without seeking approval.

The Education Authority [13] is responsible for enforcing school attendance by investigating cases where a child is not receiving education at school or home.

Governance and accountability

Reforms in the 1980s and 1990s changed the balance of responsibilities for publicly funded education outside of higher education [10]. Schools became more autonomous as responsibility for staffing and budgets was delegated to each school’s board of governors [14], and the governing bodies of further education colleges [9] were incorporated as autonomous bodies. More recent reforms have streamlined some structures; for example, in 2015, the Education Authority (EA) [13], with operational responsibilities for ensuring effective primary and secondary education, replaced five Education and Library Boards.

Schools are expected to raise standards through self-evaluation and target-setting based on pupil performance data, combined with inspection by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) [15], part of the Department of Education. The ETI inspects both schools and further education colleges using the Inspection and Self-evaluation Framework (ISEF) [16] and reports are published. Providers may be subject to intervention if important areas for improvement exist.
Historically, the education system has reflected traditional religious divides in society, with different historic ownership arrangements for publicly funded schools. These include controlled schools owned by the state, Catholic maintained schools and formally integrated schools, which aim to achieve equal numbers of pupils from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds, the two main religious traditions. There are also around 30 Irish-medium schools. The Department of Education has a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated and Irish-medium education.

School curriculum

The school curriculum is framed by broad aims to promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils and to prepare them for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life. The Northern Ireland curriculum was introduced under The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, aiming to give pupils a broad and balanced curriculum and setting standards for pupil attainment. Now revised by provisions in The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, the curriculum specifies areas of learning, cross-curricular skills (communication, using mathematics, using ICT), and thinking skills and personal capabilities. Religious education (RE) is a compulsory element. Teaching hours for individual subjects are not prescribed (except for RE).

Pupils are organised into year groups according to their age. Grade repetition is not typical.

Qualifications

From age 14, the curriculum is framed by external qualifications, provided by independent awarding organisations and regulated by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). Qualifications are assigned levels of difficulty on the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF), and provide a structure for progression from school to adult learning.

Qualifications have undergone considerable reform since 2013, with the aim of allowing them to reflect the needs of Northern Ireland education policy and the economy.

Higher education autonomy

Higher education institutions are private bodies that, subject to their degree-awarding powers, are free to design programmes and awards and to determine the conditions on which they are awarded. There is no system for the accreditation of higher education institutions, but their capability to manage their own quality and standards is assessed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education as the definitive reference point.

There has been a shift from direct public funding for teaching to tuition fees backed by public loans, with a new fee regime introduced in 2006.

Research infrastructure is supported by block grant funding, allocated on the basis of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), while grants are awarded for specific research projects and programmes.

Stages of the education system

Full-time education is compulsory from the term following a child’s 4th birthday until they turn 16.

ISCED 0

For children aged 2 to 3, there is targeted publicly-funded provision. Part-time pre-school education,
in accordance with curricular guidance [31], is available free of charge to parents of children from age 3. Settings include nursery schools [32], nursery classes and units in primary schools, and voluntary and privately run playgroups.

**ISCED 1**

Children start school in September if they have reached the age of four by the previous 1 July, which is the earliest compulsory school starting date in the UK, and one of the earliest in Europe.

Primary education consists of the Foundation Stage [33] for ages 4 to 6, Key Stage [34] 1 for ages 6 to 8 and Key Stage 2 for ages 8 to 11.

At the end of Key Stages 1 and 2, statutory assessment requirements apply to cross-curricular skills. Teachers’ judgments are supported by assessment tasks and a system of external moderation. These assessments do not influence pupil progression.

At the end of primary education, parents may elect for their children to take a transfer test, focusing on English and maths, for admission to academically selective schools.

**ISCED 2**

Key Stage 3 is for ages 11 to 14. It is provided in post-primary schools [35] catering for students from 11 to 16 or 18/19. These are divided into grammar schools [36] (the majority of which are academically selective) and non-grammar schools.

At the end of Key Stage 3, statutory assessment requirements apply in each area of learning and each cross-curricular skill. Teachers’ judgments are supported by assessment tasks and a system of external moderation. These assessments do not influence student progression.

**ISCED 4**

**Key Stage 4**

Pupils normally continue at the same school for Key Stage 4, which is the final phase of compulsory full-time education for ages 14 to 16.

The entitlement framework [37] guarantees all pupils access to a minimum number of courses at Key Stage 4 and post-16 and a balance of general and applied subjects.

Attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 is measured mainly through GCSEs [38], although vocational qualifications may be offered alongside these.

These qualifications are important for student progression or transition to the labour market and school accountability.

**16 to 18/19**

At age 16, young people may continue at the same school in the sixth form [39]; transfer to another school sixth form; or study in one of six regional further education (FE) colleges [9]. Study programmes can contain a mix of general and vocational qualifications and FE colleges, which operate across 40 community campuses, typically offer a wider range of professional and technical options. Most academic routes lead to three A Levels [40] (Level 3 [41] qualifications). These qualifications are important for student progression or transition to the labour market and school/college
Young people may also start an apprenticeship. These work-based training programmes, which are open to all aged 16+ who are not in full-time education, can be completed at different qualification levels. Training for success programmes or traineeships are also available to help young people to progress to apprenticeships or further education.

**Adult learning**

Adult learning includes apprenticeships and provision to raise achievement in basic skills, focusing mainly on English and maths qualifications. Most publicly funded programmes lead to a regulated qualification on the RQF. Other programmes encourage the hardest-to-reach adults back to learning and employment.

**ISCED 5, 6, 7, 8**

Programmes are structured on a five-level framework, which aligns with the five highest RQF levels and with three cycles of bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral studies. The framework includes short programmes, e.g. foundation degrees and postgraduate certificates.

Programmes are offered by higher education institutions (HEIs), FE colleges and alternative providers. Institutions determine their own admissions policies and wide variations in terms of competition for places exist. A Levels are the most common entry qualification to bachelor programmes, but other qualifications may be accepted. Well-established routes, such as Access programmes, exist for mature learners who lack formal qualifications.

**Structure of the national education system**


Source: Eurydice 2018/19

Article last reviewed June 2018.