

Chapter 6

System evaluation

The Department of Education operates within a system of accountability and needs to demonstrate progress towards specified targets set for the school system. The major approach to collecting evidence on the school system is via a system of annual data collection from schools. Pupil outcomes are important measures for system performance. At the post-primary level these are aggregated from pupil qualifications at the end of compulsory schooling and at the primary level from teacher assessments against national standards. From 2012/13, teachers assess pupils' cross-curricular skills against new learning standards (Levels of Progression), which are designed to provide valid measures against the Northern Ireland curriculum. To ensure reliability of the measures, a new moderation system is being introduced. Information from external school evaluation, research and international assessments also inform school system evaluation.

This chapter looks at system evaluation within the evaluation and assessment framework in Northern Ireland. System evaluation refers to approaches to monitor and evaluate the performance of local school systems, as well as the education system as a whole. The main aims of system evaluation are to provide accountability information to the public and to improve educational processes and outcomes.

Context and features

Goals for the school system

Goals are set for the school system at different levels. First, there are overall goals set by the government that frame general expectations and ambitions for the school system. The Programme for Government (Northern Ireland Executive, 2011) highlights key goals within two priority areas: growing the economy, and tackling disadvantage. These include specific targets for the school system: to increase the overall proportion of young people achieving the expected qualification level, as measured by those achieving five General Certificates in Secondary Education (GCSEs) at A* to C or equivalent including English GCSE and Mathematics GCSE, and to increase qualification levels for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds by the time they leave school. Second, these government-wide goals translate into two overarching goals for the Department of Education:

- *Raising standards for all* – through high quality teaching and learning, ensuring that all young people enjoy and do well in their education and that their progress is assessed and their attainment recognised, including through qualifications.
- *Closing the performance gap, increasing equity and equality* – addressing the underachievement that exists in the education system; ensuring that young people who face barriers or who are at risk of social exclusion are supported to achieve to their full potential; and ensuring that the education service is planned effectively on an area basis to provide pupils with full access to the curriculum and Entitlement Framework.

Third, there are specific goals and targets set within specific policies (for an example, see below).

Responsibilities for system evaluation

The Department of Education takes overall responsibility for education system evaluation. As outlined above, the Department of Education operates within a system of accountability and needs to demonstrate progress towards specified targets set for the school system. The Department is also responsible for monitoring the effectiveness of its policies. For example, the policy on literacy and numeracy (*Count, Read: Succeed*) specified the Department of Education's responsibility in monitoring the success of this strategy and progress towards the set targets (DENI, 2011, paragraph 3.15), the Department is responsible for:

- ensuring this strategy is clearly communicated to schools and other stakeholders;
- ensuring that there is a policy framework that supports improvement;
- setting literacy and numeracy targets for the performance of the education system and monitoring progress;

- monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of this strategy;
- accounting for the progress that the education sector makes towards achieving targets for literacy and numeracy.

The Department of Education is held to account on the progress of its policy implementation by the Education Committee at the Northern Ireland Assembly, which undertakes a scrutiny, policy development and consultation role with respect to the Department and plays a key role in the consideration and development of legislation. As for all public services, the Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee may also review or evaluate areas under the Department of Education's responsibility.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) within the Department of Education conducts external evaluations of schools on a cyclical basis. The ETI is responsible for reporting to the Department of Education and through it to the Assembly on general levels of school quality in Northern Ireland. It may conduct specific thematic evaluations in areas of policy priority. See Chapter 5 for an in depth presentation of the ETI's responsibility for the external evaluation of individual schools.

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) contributes in various ways to system evaluation. The CCEA is responsible for continually reviewing all aspects of the curriculum, examinations, and assessment for publicly funded schools and for providing advice to the Department of Education in these areas. In relation to system evaluation, this means: reporting information on the curriculum and system-level results in assessments and examinations, conducting research and development, moderating relevant qualification and assessments, and undertaking public consultations on proposed legislation in these areas. The responsibility for moderation of national assessment is augmented in the new approach to compulsory teacher reporting on student achievement at the end of Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 (see Box 6.1).

The Statistics and Research Team within the Department of Education compiles key data on the school system and reports indicators in a series of statistical press releases. The Statistics and Research Team is responsible for the validation and general quality control of centrally collected statistics and prepares reporting guidelines for schools to aid their task in completing annual statistical returns. As part of this, the Classroom 2000 (C2k) electronic platform has been developed. Schools make use of this for pupil assessment and school self-evaluation activities (see Chapters 3 and 5) and there are constant concerns to adapt this better to support school reporting needs.

Procedures to collect evidence on the education system

The major approach to collecting evidence on the education system is via a system of annual data collection from schools. Schools are asked to report aggregate and pupil level information in key areas of policy interest, including student outcomes at key stages and in the major examinations in Years 12 and 14. Other information is collected via external school evaluations, specific research activities and participation in international surveys.

There are three major groups of reference standards used for system evaluation:

1. Student learning objectives: For Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 these are enshrined in the Levels of Progression. Other OECD systems using learning progressions include Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands and Norway (OECD, 2013).
2. Inspection framework: The framework and quality indicators used in the external evaluation of schools (see Chapter 5 for more details).

3. Goals and targets set within specific policies.

Annual data collections

Schools complete a compliancy reporting exercise and return school data to the Department of Education. This includes key information on pupil enrolment including: number of pupils with different classifications of special educational needs; those entitled to free school meals; those who are newcomers; ethnic category (white, excluding Irish Travellers; other); religion (Protestant, Catholic, Other religion); number of teachers; and key stage performance information (see below). Pupil attendance data were collected for the first time in the 2008 census.

The Department of Education also collects performance information on an annual basis from post-primary schools. These collections are known as the Summary of Annual Examination Results (SAER) and the School Leavers Survey (SLS).¹ For the SAER, schools are expected to report information on the number of female, male and total pupils achieving specified performance indicators for Year 12 (i.e. achievements in GCSEs or equivalents) and Year 14 pupils (i.e. achievements in General Certificate of Education Advanced Level, “A Level” or equivalents). The SLS collects the qualifications and destinations of all pupils leaving mainstream post-primary schools receiving public funding (grant aided).

Regarding the GCSE data, schools are also requested to report information on individual pupils who are not included in the return and one of the following reasons for pupil ineligibility: death; serious illness or pregnancy; transfer to another school or emigration; pupil is in a special unit approved by the Department of Education; pupil has a statement of special educational needs; pupil has entered into a special scheme for behavioural reasons; serious welfare issues (with evidence that the school has taken significant steps to resolve these); and withdrawal from the school with parent/guardian consent.

School information systems

Each grant-aided (publicly funded) school in Northern Ireland has access to the Classroom 2000 (C2k) school reporting system. Not only is this the basis for annual compliancy reporting to the Department of Education, but it can be used by schools for self-evaluation activities. School information in C2k forms a critical information base for external school evaluations. For example, during post-primary inspections, inspectors can have access to data on: attendance; suspension/expulsions; social deprivation; headline examination performance; individual subject performance; and performance of individual classes in subject examinations (see Chapter 5).

Student performance information from national assessments

Performance at primary level

Although central computer-based assessments are offered to primary schools, pupil results in these tests are not collected centrally and do not feed into system evaluation. However, aggregate information is collected directly from schools on how their students perform at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2, and this is further aggregated to provide measures at the system level. Teachers are expected to assess their pupils’ achievement against national benchmarks for the end of Key Stages 1 and 2. Such information has been collected from schools since 1996/97, although the reference standards have

changed over that time period. The system had been based on a set of national benchmarks known as “Levels of Attainment” and had operated within a voluntary system of moderation of teacher assessments. In primary schools, the previous benchmarks related to student performance in Language and Literacy (English and/or Irish, as appropriate) and Mathematics and numeracy. However, the national benchmarks have changed: from 2012/13 onwards, teachers assess pupils against Levels of Progression. These have been designed to better fit the 2007 knowledge and skills based curriculum (see Chapter 3). Information is collected from schools on pupil performance in the cross-curricular skills of Communication and Using mathematics, which provide system information to monitor literacy and numeracy, respectively. To ensure reliability of the measures, a new moderation system is being introduced (Box 6.1).

Box 6.1 Introducing a system to moderate teacher assessment at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3

Schools in Northern Ireland report aggregate measures of teacher assessments of pupil performance against national benchmarks at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. For many years, this was conducted within a system of voluntary moderation. At primary level, schools could use centrally developed assessment tasks to aid their judgement and could request external moderation by the CCEA, and at post-primary level, schools could choose to administer tests developed and marked by the CCEA. However, experience has revealed a tension between this “fully delegated assessment model” and the use of pupil performance information to provide a measure of system accountability: “there will be differences, real or perceived, in how individual schools and teachers interpret assessment” (DENI, 2013).

From 2012/13 a new mandatory system of moderation is being introduced with the aim to build greater confidence in the consistency of reported standards across the school system. The new system of moderation is being introduced for Key Stage 3 assessments in 2012/13 and for Key Stages 1 and 2 assessments in 2013/14. Initially, schools will be moderated on one or more of the cross-curricular skills during the first two or three years, but once the new approach is embedded, moderation will take place within a three year rolling programme. This new approach will be monitored and evaluated by the CCEA.

A twofold approach to moderation: Quality assurance and quality control

Quality assurance at the school level

There should be a planned, whole-school approach to ensure that relevant staff collaborate, understand the Northern Ireland standards and build confidence in the assessment process.

To prepare for implementation of quality assurance at the school level, the CCEA provided a specific training programme comprising: awareness raising for school principals and senior managers (autumn 2010); face-to-face training for staff with assessment responsibilities (spring 2011); and detailed system-wide training in school clusters (summer 2011 to May 2012). The CCEA also provides assessment support materials and regularly updates an online resource for schools with exemplars of assessment tasks and pupil work. The CCEA also engages teachers to perform the external quality control, as described below, and provides specific training to these teacher moderators.

External quality control of school’s moderation standards

The CCEA verifies that schools are applying internally agreed standards and intervenes and provides support to schools demonstrating a lack of consistency in the accuracy of teacher assessments of pupils against the Levels of Progression.

Box 6.1 Introducing a system to moderate teacher assessment at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 (continued)

During each school year, teachers will compile a portfolio for each pupil containing examples of work illustrating the assessed level. In March 2013, schools being moderated submitted to the CCEA a complete list of pupils in the relevant year (Years 4 and 7 in primary schools, Year 10 in post-primary schools) along with the proposed teacher assessment against the Levels of Progress for each pupil. The CCEA randomly selected pupils and contacted the school to request portfolios for those pupils by a certain date. The CCEA requested portfolios for between 10 and 17 pupils, according to the total number of pupils being assessed in the school.

Moderators within the CCEA reviewed all portfolios and sent written feedback to each school. The CCEA recruits teachers to work as moderators and train teachers to moderate school portfolios and to provide feedback. Feedback either stated that the teacher assessments were in line with the expected standards or indicated that adjustments were required. Where adjustments were required, schools were expected to adjust the teacher assessments and resubmit these to the CCEA by the end of the school year. Schools that have been required to make adjustments would be subject to re-moderation the following year.

Subsequent to the OECD review, the Department of Education advises that from 2013/14 some changes have been made to the moderation process in light of comments from teachers following their experiences in the first year of the new arrangements.

Source: DENI (2013), OECD Reviews on Evaluation and Assessment Frameworks for Improving School Outcomes: Country Background Report for Northern Ireland, Department of Education Northern Ireland, Bangor.

Performance at post-primary level

The introduction of Levels of Progression similarly impacts the collection of system level measures of pupil performance at Key Stage 3. The previous benchmarks related to English, mathematics and science. From 2012/13 on, schools will report aggregate information on pupil performance in the cross-curricular skills of Communication and Using mathematics. Moderation of teacher assessment at Key Stage 3 has been introduced in 2012/13 (see Box 6.1).

As stated above, student qualifications achieved at the end of compulsory schooling (GCSEs or equivalent qualifications), as well as in non-compulsory schooling (A levels or equivalent qualifications), are used as key performance measures in system evaluation. GCSE and A levels may be developed by different examination boards within the United Kingdom. The CCEA holds around 70% of the market share in GCSEs and around 73% in A levels (DENI, 2013). All of these examinations fit within an agreed National Qualifications Framework for the United Kingdom.

Student performance information from international assessments

Performance at primary level

Northern Ireland significantly strengthened its evidence base on how the system performs internationally with its participation, for the first time, in the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement's (IEA) assessments in 2011. Specifically, these were the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

(TIMSS) and the Progress in International Literacy Study (PIRLS) that assess pupils in Year 6 (ages 9-10). Northern Ireland did not choose to participate in the TIMSS assessment at post-primary level for ages 13-14. These results are fully comparable internationally as they met sampling requirements after including replacement schools.

Performance at post-primary level

The United Kingdom has participated in the OECD's Programme for International Assessment (PISA) since its inception in 2000, and for subsequent rounds in 2003, 2006, 2009 and 2012. Results are reported for Northern Ireland in the OECD 2009, 2006 and 2003 initial results publications.

Information on quality of schooling gathered via external school evaluation

The Education and Training Inspectorate conducts three major types of external school evaluation: individual school inspections, area inspections, and thematic evaluations. These evaluations provide valuable evidence on quality within and across the school system.

Commissioned research

The Department of Education commissions research on specific aspects of the school system. Typically, calls for research proposals are issued every two years. For example, there is a periodic survey on bullying in the form of a standardised questionnaire to pupils, and more recently to teaching and non-teaching staff. A survey has been administered to a representative sample of 60 primary and 60 post-primary schools in 2002, 2007 and 2011. These result in final research reports presenting results and analysing the policy implications. Access to research findings is provided on the Department of Education's website, presenting findings from Department funded research studies, international assessments and other research.²

Reporting of system evaluation results

Information that is submitted via the annual school data collections (SAER and SLS) is compiled and reported by the Department of Education. The Department of Education website provides a platform where users can find all relevant information on the school system. For example, if users search for statistics via the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) website, they are directed to the Department of Education website.³ The major results from the SAER and SLS are reported in a series of statistical bulletins. These present aggregate results and do not present information on individual schools. Results are reported for individual schools on the Schools+ Database accessible via the Department of Education website (see Chapter 5 for more details).

In addition, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) presents data from the SLS up until 2011/12 in an interactive map that allows users to select key aggregate data for different Education and Library Boards, Local Government Districts and wards. This is part of the Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service.⁴

The CCEA reports overall statistics for system performance at each key stage of education on its website.⁵ The reporting format is clear and straightforward.

Every two years a summary report is produced by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) drawing on information from school inspections carried out over the preceding two-year period. The most recent report was published in October 2012.⁶

The ETI also publishes reports on particular themes that have been identified as a priority for policy. Examples of themes include special education schools, the use of virtual learning environments and a review of the implementation of the revised curriculum (DENI, 2013).

Strengths

School system evaluation is positioned within the wider government expectations for accountability

A key recommendation coming out of the OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education is to situate school system evaluation in the broader context of public sector performance requirements (OECD, 2013). When Ministries and other bodies with specific responsibilities for system evaluation need to show accountability for their performance, this stimulates demand for procedures to monitor progress in the school system and, where necessary, to establish adequate systems to collect evidence on progress. This is particularly the case in systems where high level targets are set by the government related to productivity, competition or general economic and social improvement.

In Northern Ireland, school system evaluation is positioned within the wider public service management culture of target setting and accountability. This is linked to high-level goals set by the government to grow the economy and tackle disadvantage, and translated into concrete targets by the Department of Education (see above). The Department of Education has set targets focused on the performance of school leavers in public examinations. These are, therefore, both linked to student assessment and to school evaluation, as the aggregate performance of pupils in public examinations is used as a school performance measure. The school improvement policy *Every School a Good School* (ESaGS) (DENI, 2009) includes targets for the period 2008-2011, and the literacy and numeracy strategy (*Count, Read: Succeed*) sets out longer-term targets for 2020 with key milestone targets. The 2008-2011 targets were established as a way to hold the Department of Education accountable for its school improvement policy. The longer-term targets aim to introduce the ambition to see sustained improvements over a longer period (DENI, 2011, paragraph 8.6).

Specific goals to improve equity in the school system

The available evidence on the school system in Northern Ireland indicates key concerns for equity (see Chapter 1). The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) voiced strong expectations for “an approach to target setting which will communicate a clear message around which schools can mobilise resources in tackling underachievement in literacy and numeracy.” (DENI, 2011, paragraph 8.3). Linked to the wider government strategy to tackle disadvantage, the Department of Education has set specific targets for improvement in key outcomes for pupils entitled to free school meals. One of two overarching goals for the Department of Education is to increase equity and equality and to close the performance gap (see above). This sets important references for system evaluation and communicates the importance of addressing the significant equity challenges. Importantly, the overarching goal is much broader than a focus on demonstrated improvements in qualifications among pupils entitled to free school meals. There is a goal to examine the effectiveness of support and area planning mechanisms that promote greater equity of opportunity for pupils and young people. There have also

been developments in statistical reporting, with the 2010/11 statistics on school leaver destinations for the first time showing information for young people with special educational needs.

A concern to develop valid measures to evaluate system progress

The Levels of Progression are designed to allow a more valid assessment of student progress against the knowledge and skills based curriculum. In turn, the Department of Education aims to collect measures to evaluate the system that are adequately aligned to the curriculum. At Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 the new approach aims to collect system measures that are based on teacher professional judgements on their pupils' level of progression. While many OECD systems have reformed curricula to promote a complex integration of knowledge, skills, attitudes and key competencies or "21st century skills" such as creativity and problem solving, the OECD review revealed a limited use of innovative assessment approaches and a prominence of traditional knowledge and skills testing (OECD, 2013). Policy in Northern Ireland seeks to address precisely these challenges with a focus on teacher professional assessment of pupils and assessment for learning. The proposal to collect teacher assessments of pupils against the centrally set Levels of Progression as a measure of system evaluation, therefore, should provide a rounded and more valid measure. In turn, the policy to provide primary schools with a diagnostic assessment tool can help support teachers in assessing their pupils' progress. The compilation of portfolios comprising examples of pupil work better supports the assessment of more complex achievement than traditional closed-ended testing formats (Looney, 2011).

The new moderation process holds strong potential to build teacher capacity in student summative assessment

A concern to ensure reliability of teacher assessments at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 has led to the introduction of a mandatory moderation system (Box 6.1). The OECD review team sees strong potential for the moderation system to promote and build teacher capacity and confidence in student assessment against the Levels of Progression, and indeed to further embed this assessment approach in schools (see also Chapter 3). This will also provide a more reliable and valid measure for system accountability.

The absence of a moderation system has posed challenges to the reliability of system measures in other OECD review countries. Notably, in the Slovak Republic where there is a low level of trust among educators and the general public in grades awarded by teachers, particularly in the use of these for academic selection at ages 11, 14 or 15 (Shewbridge et al., forthcoming). Official evaluations by the Slovak State Inspectorate reveal great inconsistencies among teacher grading, with large discrepancies among different schools offering primary education. The introduction of a national test at one of the main transition points (age 14) has seen a new policing role for the State Schools Inspectorate in ensuring the integrity of test administration at the school level, where serious concerns were reported in the early years of test administration. This has not addressed a need to build teacher capacity in assessing students against the revised competency-based curriculum. In Sweden, there is, in general, a higher level of trust in the professionalism of educators, but an increasing level of competition among schools (Nusche et al., 2011). A series of reviews of teacher grading conducted by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate identified a degree of variation among schools in teacher assessment judgements. Swedish schools already have developed a culture of internal quality assurance and systematic collaboration among teachers within schools, and in many cases

among schools. In this context, the OECD review team identified the need to introduce an external moderation procedure along the lines of the new one being currently implemented in Northern Ireland. It is expected to increase the reliability of the system level measures, while at the same time preserving the focus on teacher professionalism and the aim to provide a more valid measure. Crucially, it is seen as a way to further promote teacher capacity in assessing pupils against the national curriculum.

International measures on outcomes at primary and post-primary levels

Comparative data from international assessment programmes provide a frame of reference that “assists countries in identifying their strengths and weaknesses, provides them with an opportunity for a better understanding of their own system, and offers ideas for further research and policy development” (Tamassia and Adams, 2009). Such international assessments are specifically designed to provide reliable measures of performance at the system level, they do not seek to measure individual student performance. Alongside national qualitative measures coming from external school evaluation, these international measures are fit for purpose in providing information for system evaluation.

The participation for the first time of Northern Ireland in the IEA’s TIMSS and PIRLS studies has provided internationally comparable information on pupil performance at the primary level. This is a significant addition to information for system evaluation, particularly as there has been concern on the reliability of pupil performance measures used at the primary level in Northern Ireland (see below). As such, there is internationally comparative performance information available to policy makers and the wider public at both the primary and post-primary levels. These provide useful information for system evaluation and can generate public debate on key issues in schooling. The collection of student background information during OECD’s PISA also allows an examination of equity within the school system from an international perspective.

An approach to better mobilise evidence on the school system for policy making

Accountability is a major purpose of system evaluation in Northern Ireland. The wider government context, the target setting culture, and the strong public expectation to access information on schooling, all promote and demand an information-rich environment. With the proliferation of official statistics and evaluation reports, many OECD systems have struggled to make these useful for policy making. The availability of evidence and a policy of transparency in reporting this creates a wealth of information that can seem daunting to policy makers, and, in the worst case scenario, can be misunderstood or erroneously interpreted (OECD, 2013). The OECD review team identified in Northern Ireland a clear recognition of this challenge and several initiatives to better mobilise evidence for policy making.

Making statistics more accessible and interpretable

Policy officials within the Department of Education have a close working relationship with statistical officers in the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). Policy officials and statisticians identify areas for further analysis to better underpin the design of further policy interventions (DENI, 2013, p. 33; backed up by interviews during the OECD review). There is also an established series of “statistical press releases” that seek to complement the reporting of tabular or graphic raw statistics. They include definitions and interpretational text to make the results more easily digestible, while at the

same time presenting cautions and caveats on limitations to the statistics (see Box 6.2). These illustrate the application of best international practice on statistical reporting to pay adequate concern to accessibility and interpretability of the reported data (OECD, 2012).

Box 6.2 Making statistical evidence more responsive to policy needs

The Department of Education’s Statistics and Research Team (which includes professional statistical staff seconded from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency) has progressively organised its structure and services around different major users and demands for education statistics. For example, the team includes a specific section that lends support to the Education and Training Inspectorate. The team provides regular focused briefings for policy makers and identifies developing trends. In addition to increased requests from policy colleagues to provide an evidence base for the development and monitoring of education policies, The team answers requests for data from researchers, members of the public, the media and the Northern Ireland Assembly. The team provides a number of statistical press releases. These comply with the United Kingdom Statistics Authority Code of Practice, which specifies a number of reporting guidelines, including that statistics are well explained and readily accessible. As such, each statistical release includes sufficient commentary to enable users to meaningfully interpret the information. These usually take the form of a few introductory lines, major bullet points of key results and graphics showing trends and then the full set of results in tables. See for example: www.deni.gov.uk/year_12_and_year_14_examination_performance_at_post_primary_schools_201112_2.pdf.

Fitting the results of external school evaluation to system priorities

The biennial report by the Chief Inspector is a well-established source of information to inform system improvement. The most recent edition (ETI, 2012) presents evaluation results against three major priorities for the system in Northern Ireland: achieving value, learning skills, and transforming communities. These themes aim to address the key issues in education and training in Northern Ireland, such as: “the links between good public value and high achievements and standards for all learners; the need for learners to acquire and develop the skills which will help them address the many personal, social and economic challenges they face to enable them to compete in a global economy; and, the aspiration for education to transform the lives of individuals and communities for the better” (ETI, 2012, p.5).

This presentation renders the findings from external school evaluation immediately more accessible for policy makers. The report goes on to present major findings at sector level (e.g. primary, post-primary), which also provides easy reference on key facts and an overview of performance and major challenges in each sector. With this approach, the report also allows a good understanding of relative priorities among the different educational sectors. The ETI organises conferences for school principals to disseminate the key findings in each Chief Inspector’s Report and is open to attending events organised by stakeholders to discuss key inspection findings, e.g. a conference in early 2013 for the National Association of Headteachers.

Many stakeholders use the results of system evaluation

System evaluation results are used to inform policy making within the Department of Education. For example, system evaluation results were used to develop the *Every School a Good School* policy (DENI, 2013). The Department of Education uses information to

evaluate initiatives, such as the literacy and numeracy strategies and school improvement programmes, as well as to review progress towards targets. The Education and Training Inspectorate uses system information to facilitate the school inspection process, including as part of risk assessment and monitoring the progress of schools under the Formal Intervention Process. Other accountability uses include monitoring by the Northern Ireland Assembly, using the information within audit processes, and providing key information to the general public on the quality of schooling in Northern Ireland. Schools make use of system information in their self-evaluation activities.

A concern to collect qualitative information on the school system

Northern Ireland is one of the OECD systems with an established mechanism for external school evaluation. As well as providing key information on the quality of individual schools, the evidence collected during external school evaluations can provide useful qualitative information on the school system as a whole. In Northern Ireland, there are also periodic surveys conducted by researchers in priority areas for the school system, e.g. bullying, which involves the collection of feedback from teachers and students. The participation of Northern Ireland in the present OECD review represents a commitment to evaluative studies on an international level. Indeed, the participation in international assessments at the primary and post-primary levels provides insight as to how pupil perceptions in Northern Ireland compare to those of other pupils internationally, and to how school principal reports on key aspects of schooling compare internationally.

Challenges

Building trust and a system-wide understanding of the new measures for system evaluation

The collection of aggregate measures of pupils against the Levels of Progression at the end of Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 from schools will provide new measures for system evaluation. The new mandatory system of moderation being introduced aims to ensure a high degree of reliability in these measures across schools. However, the OECD review team sees a significant challenge in building trust in the new measures. The legacy of the previous reporting of information by schools for accountability purposes, but within a system of voluntary moderation, is a widespread distrust among educators of the reliability of the previous “attainment level” measures (see also Chapter 3). The use of non-moderated pupil assessment data for system accountability created a tension in the perceived credibility and reliability of the reported results. Representatives from post-primary schools reported a wide variation among primary schools in the reliability of teacher assessments of pupils’ attainment levels and it is common practice to administer diagnostic tests at the start of post-primary schooling. There is therefore an urgent need to build confidence in the new measures by engaging educators sufficiently in the proposed moderation system.

The introduction of a new assessment system at the primary level will necessarily lead to a “break in series” of comparable performance measures on pupil outcomes. This presents a challenge in communicating to the wider public that changes in the reported measures may not necessarily indicate real improvement or decline in school system performance. On the basis of comparability studies conducted by the CCEA, it is expected that the new Levels of Progression are more demanding and that the new measures will likely show a drop in aggregate pupil attainment (DENI, 2013). This will

entail communication challenges to allow meaningful interpretation of trends over time. In particular, an inadequate communication strategy runs the risk of real or perceived political or other, misuse of the results, which will increase the tension on educator engagement in the new moderation system. The OECD review team envisages particular sensitivity around the use of these new measures in the context of school accountability. These measures provide important information for the Education and Training Inspectorate's assessment of risk as part of external school evaluation. For example, schools being inspected over the coming years may be concerned about the interpretation of any reported differences in the performance measures. In particular, this will add challenges to schools currently in the Formal Intervention Process that need to demonstrate improvements. Any perception that there is a degree of inconsistency in the official use of the measures or misinterpretation of the results would pose a significant challenge to embedding the new moderation process.

Minimising the reporting burden on schools in providing information for system evaluation

In the wider policy environment in Northern Ireland, there are clear expectations for accountability in public services and for demonstrated improvements towards agreed central targets. In this context, the absence of specific national instruments to collect measures of pupil outcomes for system evaluation places additional demands on schools. The results of individual student summative assessment are aggregated to provide measures for school and system accountability. In the case of measures of individual student achievement at the end of Key Stage 4 and in non-compulsory schooling, this requires schools to report aggregate information in the annual school performance return. However, for Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 schools need to report aggregate teacher assessment of pupil outcomes in literacy and numeracy against the Levels of Progression. The moderation system is designed to flow from classroom practice, that is, teachers would compile evidence of pupils' regular work. Certainly in the initial years of implementing the new moderation system, the reporting process at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 may require additional effort for teachers as they better understand the nature of the system. There has already been industrial action related to workload issues (see Chapter 3).

Performance targets use a narrow set of measures

Several systems make use of targets as they allow a more straightforward interpretation of information from education system evaluation procedures (Scheerens et al., 2012). The key measures to monitor progress of the school system in Northern Ireland remain student outcomes in final examinations at the end of secondary schooling (both GCSEs and A levels). Within the context of the target setting culture of the public sector service management approach, the major targets driving the evaluation of the school system are limited in scope. The broader evidence base on the school system is not integrated into the overall evaluation approach. The use of student achievement information is a valid outcome measure. However, outcomes cannot be simply attributed to government actions or processes, as other factors outside the government's control are frequently involved (OECD, 2009). This implies that the assessment of performance against outcome targets can usually be done only generally.

In this light, a narrow set of measures may heighten the interpretational concerns around progress towards targets. During the OECD review, representatives of the business community expressed a preference for a broad set of measures going beyond academic outcomes. Although the official policy in Northern Ireland is to use these

targets to assess progress in the school system as a whole, the publication of unofficial league tables in the media continues to present these as measures of school success. A CBI report on the United Kingdom as a whole is critical of the five A*-C grade GCSE target as it “is little more than a scoring standard for government to measure schools” (CBI, 2012, p.54). There is similarly a concern to build credibility in performance targets. A 2006 report from the Audit Office identified the frequent adjustment of literacy and numeracy targets. This led to a call by the Public Accounts Committee to maintain a consistent approach to target setting (DENI, 2011, p.53). However, this related to a downward adjustment of targets and the Department of Education subsequently upwardly revised its targets in March 2011 as part of the *Count, Read: Succeed* policy (DENI, 2011).

Ensuring adequate reporting on equity goals

The inclusion of specific system targets to improve the performance of socially deprived pupils is a signal of increased political focus on equity goals. With this more prominent focus, some stakeholders voiced concern on the adequacy of reporting systems to measure equity. As an indicator for social deprivation, the Department of Education uses the percentage of students entitled to free school meals (DENI, 2013, p.29). This is conveniently collected in the school census return. The Department of Education defends this measure as being current and highly correlated with a multiple deprivation measure (DENI, 2013). However, the OECD review team heard some criticisms on whether this measure adequately reflects deprivation. This perception is a risk to the credibility of system evaluation and school evaluation approaches. A number of stakeholders consider that the Department of Education does not take account of the context in which schools operate and identify the need for a measure of contextual value added to accompany school performance measures (DENI, 2013, p.34). This also provides challenges to external school evaluation and school self-evaluation activities (see Chapter 5).

Aligning reporting systems adequately to reflect system changes and priorities

The Department of Education is currently implementing many changes to the organisation and provision of schooling opportunities to young people. Clearly, this presents strategic challenges in system-level reporting and will concern the reporting of all central data. The OECD review has noted the current efforts to provide more valid measures of system performance at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. A typical challenge when implementing a new assessment system is the “reporting lag”. For example, among the OECD review countries, Luxembourg is introducing a new “competencies-based curriculum” with an aim to encourage a focus on the progression of pupil development. However, the national reporting systems still reflect the traditional approach with a focus on the structure of the school system and performance in different school types (Shewbridge et al., 2012). In Northern Ireland, the changes in governance structures with the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority will need to be adequately reflected in reporting systems. The OECD review team notes that the current reporting systems present a fragmented structure, with aggregate data reported by management/administrative types (Education and Library Boards, Council for Catholic Management of Schools), academic selectivity, etc. (see Chapter 1).

While Northern Ireland is one of ten OECD systems that maps existing information against identified priorities for the education system, other systems are more strategic in anticipating future needs for the reporting system (Table 6.1).

Table 6.1 Indicators of a strategic approach to education system evaluation in OECD countries (2012)

A plan to prioritise further collection of information and a mapping of existing information against education system priorities	Australia; Czech Republic; Hungary; Israel; Netherlands; Slovak Republic
A mapping of existing information against education system priorities	France; Iceland; Ireland; Northern Ireland (UK)
A plan to prioritise further collection of information	Belgium (French and Flemish Communities); Chile; Finland; Slovenia; Spain
Neither	Austria; Denmark; Italy; Korea; Luxembourg; Mexico; New Zealand; Norway; Poland; Sweden

Note: Canada – all provinces/territories either have a mapping in place or plan the prioritisation of information collection. The table should be interpreted as providing broad indications only, and not strict comparability across countries.

Source: OECD (2013), *Synergies for Better Learning: An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment*, OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education, OECD Publishing. doi: [10.1787/9789264190658-en](https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264190658-en)

Policy options

System evaluation is an important component of Northern Ireland’s evaluation and assessment framework. The reporting and communication of system-level information promotes public awareness of equity goals and an understanding of the priorities for schooling in Northern Ireland overall. There is a great deal of information available to policy makers to evaluate the system. The following policy options recognise this and mainly focus on aspects of reporting, communication and use of results:

- further mobilise evidence to give an overall evaluation of the school system based on a broad set of goals;
- raise the profile of equity goals and research and communicate ways to more effectively monitor these;
- prioritise clear communication on the nature and purpose of the new system-level measures;
- develop a strategy to more effectively monitor the progress of student learning throughout the system;
- secure capacity for system evaluation;
- consider ways to incorporate parental voice in system evaluation.

Further mobilise evidence to give an overall evaluation of the school system based on a broad set of goals

Northern Ireland is an information-rich school system. There is also a commitment to use evidence in policy making and to ensure that there are high-quality measures of school outcomes. However, it is not always possible to devise indicators and measures of good quality across all the objectives of the education system (OECD, 2013). As outlined above, the dominant measures are those used in performance targets, which have been set to support the key strategy to focus efforts on improving literacy and numeracy. However, there is much more system-level information available to help assess the

overarching goals for the Department of Education. Indeed, much of this is already reported in the ETI's biennial Chief Inspector's Report. The OECD review team sees room to better integrate the results of external school evaluation to monitor a broader set of system goals. While the results from a two year period of individual school evaluations are not statistically representative of the school system in Northern Ireland in that period, they do present key evidence that complements the existing performance targets. Evidence from external school evaluations will not provide answers on progress in the overall system from year to year, but further analysis of these findings over a number of years can provide more authoritative evidence on the school system.

Raise the profile of equity goals and research ways to more effectively monitor and report on these

Across OECD countries, the data of interest for analysing equity at the system level include: student socio-economic background (often measured by their parents' education level and occupation); student first language and whether this is different from the language of instruction; student place of birth; and information on any special educational needs. However, the relative importance of these factors will vary from system to system. Often such information is drawn from Labour Force Surveys, as well as the regular population census, and may also be collected via the administration of questionnaires to students during national assessments. Not all countries systematically collect information at the individual student level (Czech Republic, France, Iceland, Ireland, Portugal and Sweden). Northern Ireland has a specific measure at the individual pupil level: entitlement to free school meals. Among the OECD review countries, Portugal also collects information from publicly funded schools on whether or not students receive free school meals and assistance for special educational needs, but also on the profession of the students' parents (Santiago et al., 2012).

During the OECD review, some stakeholders raised concerns over the validity of the Free School Meal Entitlement measure. This measure is used as it is current, highly correlated with the multiple deprivation measure, and available via the annual school census return (DENI, 2013). Such a measure should be more valid than a measure drawn from survey data, but the OECD review team lacks research into the advantage and disadvantages of the use of this measure in Northern Ireland. In Australia, the lack of individual student information has been flagged as a concern in potentially undermining conclusions about the impact of socio-economic factors on school outcomes over time (Santiago et al., 2011). Research has pointed to the risks of using an area-based measure of socio-economic status to estimate an individual's socio-economic status (Marks et al., 2000).

Conducting similar research in Northern Ireland would provide an evidence base for further developing or better defending the current measure. This may help to counter the perception among some stakeholders that the Free School Meal Entitlement measure is not adequate (DENI, 2013). Greater transparency in this area is critical given the high level goals for school and system improvement. Schools provide detailed reports on the qualifications and destinations of individual pupils as part of the annual School Leavers Survey. Examples of the information collected include special educational needs, whether the pupil is in care, and the residential postcode of each school leaver.

Given the priority of equity in the government's programme of work, a more prominent and focused reporting on this is recommended. A simple approach could be to have a dedicated space on the Department of Education's website that provides an easy

overview of all system-level information on equity. There are, for example, several Departmental research briefings with rich information, but users need to navigate through each specific year and cannot readily find research related to pupils with special educational needs, boys, pupils in deprived areas, etc.

As identified in Chapter 5, there is also room to better align existing reporting on school performance. The Schools+ Database includes benchmarks for post-primary schools on selective or non-selective schools, but not for free school meal entitlement. Whereas the ETI reports on individual school inspections include free school meal entitlement as the major benchmark. System-level statistical circulars include information on free school meal entitlement bands, although these are not consistently reported in school level reporting.

Prioritise clear communication on the nature and purpose of the new system-level measures

As outlined in Chapter 3, the OECD review team recommends that the Department of Education communicates the primary purpose of the end of Key Stage assessments is to be formative and summative at the pupil level, that is, to inform the subsequent learning of the individual pupil and to report levels of pupil progress to pupils and parents. The decision to collect information in discrete areas (i.e. the cross-curricular skills of Communication and Using mathematics) of pupil assessment at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 is taken within a wider context of requirements for performance information for accountability. The OECD review has highlighted across systems the importance of communicating the purpose of assessment. This is ever more important when the results are used within an accountability system. An in depth review of accountability systems and related literature in the United States identified the need for communication about the accountability system's results and limitations to schools, school providers and the general public as one of seven core components in a well-designed and effective accountability system (Perie and Park, 2007). Part of this communication includes regular evaluation and review of the system and feedback on the extent to which it supports high-quality instruction. This highlights the importance of establishing a long-term communication strategy in Northern Ireland that draws on feedback from evaluation activities conducted by the CCEA, and feedback from key stakeholders. The promotion of best practice examples could perhaps be identified via external school evaluations conducted by the ETI.

The OECD review team understands that the decision to not centrally collect results from the computer-based assessments in primary schools (which were mandatory at the time of the OECD review) was to avoid an over-reliance on the results of these diagnostic assessments in accountability, and to favour more rounded teacher assessments of pupil learning progress. This aims to protect the integrity and use of the computer-based assessments for diagnostic purposes as part of instructional activities at the school level, and indicates a recognition of the literature that identifies the potential risks of using a high stakes test-based accountability system. For an overview of literature on the importance of maximising test validity by ensuring a use of test results that is fit for purpose see Rosenkvist (2010) and Morris (2011). The OECD review team questions to what extent such policy reflection on trade-offs and mitigating risks within an established accountability context is known to the wider public. A related point is the lack of official communication channel with parents (see above).

Develop a strategy to more effectively monitor the progress of student learning throughout the system

Changing the assessment approach to better match Northern Ireland's knowledge and skills based curriculum will require significant commitment to building assessment capacity. The approach to school system evaluation can help to promote this and to build capacity. The introduction of a moderation process to ensure reliability in system-level measures is a strategy that aims to both promote capacity development and the credibility of the new assessment approach. This also holds great potential to more effectively monitor the progress of student learning across Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. However, the OECD review team sees room to go further in promoting a more effective monitoring of student learning progress.

First, as recommended in Chapter 3, there is currently a loss of information on pupil progress at the stage of transition from primary to post-primary schooling. To promote the continuity of assessment approaches and sharing of information, there may be quick and efficient ways to capitalise on the potential of C2k school-based information systems to share information across primary and post-primary sectors. At a minimum, these would include pupils' assessed level of progression at end of Key Stages 1 and 2.

Second, there is room to develop a more systematic longitudinal research strategy. The OECD review team notes that the data collected for the School Leavers Survey include a Unique Pupil Reference Number.⁷ However, Northern Ireland is one of the OECD systems reporting that no longitudinal data are available (OECD, 2013). Since 1996, New Zealand has introduced a unique student identifier (the National Student Number, NSN). This can be used for longitudinal research studies. However, student privacy must be respected. This unique identifier facilitates the management and sharing of information about students across the education sector in a way that protects their privacy (Nusche et al., 2012). At the level of the Ministry of Education, almost all data collection from schools is set up to enable longitudinal analysis, using the NSN as a link. The existence of a widely applied unique identifier covering both schooling and the tertiary sector is a key strength of system monitoring in New Zealand. The NSN can be used by authorised users for the following five purposes: monitoring and ensuring a student's enrolment and attendance; ensuring education providers and students receive appropriate resourcing; statistical purposes; research purposes; and ensuring that students' educational records are accurately maintained. Among other things, the NSN is applied for reporting purposes by education agencies, analysis of student assessment data over time, moving data between software applications, and issuing documentation students need to present to other schools or education providers.

Third, there is room to conduct further analysis on available information across the different levels of education and going into the labour market. The Education and Training Inspectorate has a unique position within Northern Ireland's policy arena as it evaluates the quality of the educational experience for young children before compulsory schooling, throughout schooling and through to further and higher education. There is also the evaluation of prisons and community services. This presents a unique insight to cross-departmental challenges and priorities and can be used as a vehicle to identify priorities for further research. In turn, research results can feed more effectively into the biennial Chief Inspector's Report. The Northern Ireland Education Research Forum could play a pivotal role in deepening analysis across the schooling, further and higher education and labour market sectors. It brings together the Departments of Education and

Employment and Learning, as well as the ETI and representatives from higher education institutions.

Secure capacity for system evaluation

System evaluation is an important component of Northern Ireland’s evaluation and assessment framework and will play a key role in promoting and establishing the prominence of new assessment approaches and organisational structures. These changes will entail significant work for statistical and reporting services.

There will need to be a regular review of the new moderation process to assess demands on capacity at the school level and centrally in the CCEA. In tandem with the recommended school evaluation approach to trust schools with demonstrated capacity to improve, the OECD review team sees merit in considering an accreditation programme, whereby schools that have demonstrated consistency in initial verifications earn an accredited status and are trusted to conduct moderation processes. There would be a periodic reaccreditation process and school internal quality assurance processes for key stage assessment could be evaluated as part of external school evaluations.

Within the CCEA, there is already significant capacity for the development of tasks and other student assessment items. The OECD review team supports going further with the provision of exemplar tasks and pupil work at the central level to support the implementation of assessment against the Levels of Progression (Chapter 3). In terms of system evaluation, it will be important to continue to build this capacity centrally and to adequately engage educators in a collaborative approach to improving the assessment arrangements. With this assessment capacity, it would be prudent to review the CCEA’s role in providing diagnostic assessments to schools. The existing procurement barriers have caused difficulty for educators at the school level in conducting their pupil assessment and school self-evaluation activities. Schools need to be assured of a testing system that can support their assessment of a pupil progression throughout the primary level. Given that the CCEA holds 70% of the market share of GCSEs administered in Northern Ireland, it would be advisable to review the interest among schools in using a CCEA developed diagnostic test at the primary-school level.

The OECD review found that in some countries, demands placed on external school evaluation bodies, in terms of providing information for system evaluation, impact on their capacity to undertake individual school evaluations (OECD, 2013). While the inclusion of information from the ETI in system evaluation is a considerable strength, due consideration should be given to ensuring that this is well balanced with priorities in school evaluation. The OECD review team recommend that the ETI establish a research and analysis capacity (Chapter 5). This may well strengthen the ETI’s capacity to further mobilise school evaluation evidence for system level analysis.

The OECD review team recommends that the Department of Education continues to ensure and strengthen the focus on research and analysis more generally.

Consider ways to incorporate parental voice in system evaluation

The OECD review team noted the processes at the school level to gain feedback from pupils on their learning (Chapter 3). However, Northern Ireland lacks a consultation platform for parents to provide input into system evaluation and policy development. While parents are given the opportunity to comment on their child’s school during the external school evaluation process, there is no mechanism to ensure representational

feedback on key policy developments. This seems pertinent given the observed gulf between official policy and parental expectations in key areas (see for example the discussion of unregulated transfer tests in Chapter 3). The OECD review team recommends that the Department of Education considers supporting the establishment of a consultation platform for parents, an established practice in many OECD systems. Periodic parental surveys are also useful for seeking feedback and are currently administered to parents in fourteen OECD systems (OECD, 2013). For example, Australia has developed a new national survey on school quality that schools will administer to students, teachers and parents and the results of which will be presented in annual school reporting. Questions relating to key policy debates could usefully be included in NISRA's Omnibus Survey – Education Module, an annual sample survey that has included 20 education-related questions since 2008.

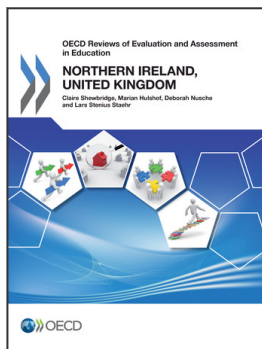
Notes

1. See examples of information requested from schools: www.deni.gov.uk/index/facts-and-figures-new/education-statistics/content-pupilqualifications/school_performance/statistics_and_research_-_statistics_on_education-summary_of_annual_examination_results_documentation.htm
2. See: www.deni.gov.uk/index/facts-and-figures-new/32_statistics_and_research-research_pg.htm
3. See: www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/default.asp6.htm
4. All interactive education statistics can be accessed via the following link: www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/Theme.aspx
5. See: www.ccea.org.uk/statistics/
6. The report can be accessed at the following link: www.etini.gov.uk/index/support-material/support-material-general-documents-non-phase-related/the-chief-inspectors-report/ci-report-2012.pdf
7. See “School Leavers Survey Procedural Guidance, Appendix A”: www.deni.gov.uk/school_leavers2013.pdf

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