Background Quality Report: Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers
(May 2019)

Dimension	Assessment by the author
Introduction	***Context for the quality report.***
	The Department of Education (DE) adheres to the UK Statistics Authority Code of Practice for Statistics and the National Statistician's guidance on quality. This document provides a summary of how the following School Leavers National Statistics publication adheres to the code in terms of quality: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/school-leavers Information on the qualifications and destinations of pupils leaving grant aided post primary schools in Northern Ireland is collected annually from schools in Northern Ireland. This data collection exercise takes place in November/December following the end of the academic year and includes all qualifications obtained by the pupil on leaving the school system along with their main destination. The main purpose of collecting this data is to create a statistical base to inform a wide range of policy areas aimed at raising standards and tackling underachievement. The data are also used in the development, implementation and monitoring of policies, in particular the Literacy and Numeracy strategy, school improvement programmes and relevant Departmental milestones. Data from the School Leavers Survey are also used to monitor progress against two key indicators in the draft Programme for Government (PfG) 2016-2021. The collection of data is facilitated by C2k, who are responsible for the provision of ICT systems in schools. Each school submits electronic returns to the Department at an individual pupil level. When the data are returned to the Department, statisticians are responsible for processing and validating this information. This process is the main responsibility of one Assistant Statistician with input from one Deputy Principal Statistician. A detailed statistical bulletin based on final data is released in May.
Relevance	***The degree to which the statistical product meets user needs in both coverage and content.***
	Relevant users within DE are consulted annually about what data are collated, including any additional information to be collected or any data that is no longer required. This ensures that data meets the key users' needs. Any additional data items collected through the school Census process are also included in the School Leavers data. In addition to this, feedback is welcomed from customers outside DE/EA via the feedback section on our website (there is a link to this in our statistical bulletin). Contact details are also provided for the relevant statistician, should a member of the public wish to offer any feedback directly or request further analysis of data.

	In liaising and engaging with other users, there are very rarely circumstances where necessary information is not collected. In these situations, consideration is made to collecting requested data in the future if it is practical and cost-effective to do so.
Accuracy and Reliability	*The proximity between an estimate and the unknown true value.*
	Coverage of the data is 100%. As the data collected are from an administrative source and are used for schools' management information purposes, there is a basis to assume that it is within the school's benefit that the data supplied is as accurate and reliable as possible. Schools obtain information from parents by means of a data collection form, which is then keyed into the SIMS system administered by C2k. These data follow the pupil throughout their school career and can be amended when necessary. Schools also receive examination results and manually enter the main destination of the school leaver where this information is made available to them. There is a small percentage of leavers (2.8%) from whom the destination information is unavailable. Given that some of these data are input manually, there is a possibility of data entry error. Where possible, validation checks are incorporated in the SIMS module in an attempt to mitigate against common mistakes. However, statisticians will also carry out a detailed validation process including confirming each individual pupil who presents as leaving with no GCSEs or equivalent qualifications does not have these qualifications.
Timeliness and Punctuality	*Timeliness refers to the time gap between publication and the reference period. Punctuality refers to the gap between planned and actual publication dates.*
	Data are requested in November following the end of the academic year. One file contains destination data and pupil characteristics while the other two files contain examination information. Data validation takes place throughout January to April and the publication is prepared, checked and released in May. Given the workload to process and thoroughly validate the data to the standard required, there is no scope to release data any sooner. The 2002/03 data were not released as there was an issue with software in schools. This resulted in insufficient available time for validation of returns. See link for more information.
Accessibility and Clarity	*Accessibility is the ease with which users are able to access the data, also reflecting the format in which the data are available and the availability of supporting information. Clarity refers to the quality and sufficiency of the metadata, illustrations and accompanying advice.*
	Data tables are available both within the publication and as Excel and OpenDocument Spreadsheet files. These data tables include commonly used and requested data, examples of which include: qualifications by free school meal entitlement, religion of pupils, newcomer pupils, special educational needs (SEN) and ethnicity. Previous years' data is included on the website also, so time series analysis is accessible.

	Key statistics broken down by various geographies are also available via the NINIS website. Metadata explaining the process and all key terms is appended to these tables. If data is not available online, users are invited to request specific data via email. These data requests are routinely answered within 15 working days. All data available is provided, the only exception being any figures deemed sensitive which are suppressed to avoid the potential identification of individual pupils.
Coherence and Comparability	***Coherence is the degree to which data that are derived from different sources or methods, but refer to the same topic, are similar. Comparability is the degree to which data can be compared over time and domain.***
	All data is obtained directly from schools, thus guaranteeing coherence of the data. The variables collected have been largely stable over the last ten years, and the methods used to collect data are the same, so data is comparable over time. As education is a devolved issue the other UK administrations often have different approaches or different policies underlying data that is collected, for example, qualifications included in key indicators, free school meal entitlement criteria, the process to designating pupils as having special educational needs, etc, differ across the regions. This means that making direct comparisons can be difficult.
Trade-offs between Output Quality Components	***Trade-offs are the extent to which different aspects of quality are balanced against each other.***
	The main trade-off is timeliness against accuracy. The process is carried out by one Assistant Statistician with input from one Deputy Principal Statistician thus there are limited resources available for validation. This results in data being available in May. Accuracy is not compromised to meet these deadlines, particularly because these data are the source for monitoring PfG targets as well as monitoring of progress towards Departmental targets. A detailed range of validation checks are conducted prior to data being made available, and this list of validation checks is reviewed on an annual basis and is amended depending on user needs and common errors.
Assessment of User Needs and Perceptions	***The processes for finding out about users and uses, and their views on the statistical products.***
	The content of the data collection is defined by the Department's information needs. The relevance of this is checked each year when key users across DE are consulted for additions and amendments for the following year. DE statisticians also meet several times per year with policy officials, ETI, school principals and other groups of interested officials. An additional forum in which we participate is the

	C2k Liaison Group which captures formal feedback from C2k help teams (and indirectly schools) about the experiences of schools in providing census data.
	Users of the data are surveyed annually via the NISRA Customer Satisfaction Survey. It is not possible to break down the results of the survey to those that specifically used qualifications/destination data; however, the satisfaction levels across NISRA as a whole are very high. There is scope for any comments raised in the survey to be fed back to the team that manages the School Leavers dataset to take onboard for improvements going forward.
	Users are invited in the statistical bulletins to provide feedback on the publication and to request further information if required.
Performance, Cost and Respondent Burden	***The effectiveness, efficiency and economy of the statistical output.***
	As the infrastructure to collect the data already exists, and schools need to generate much of this data for their own management information purposes, the annual operational cost is minimal year on year.
	Respondent burden is measured via a sample survey of schools making data returns. It found that the compliance costs for all schools in 2013/14 is estimated to cost around £37,000 of school staff's time.
Confidentiality, Transparency and Security	***The procedures and policy used to ensure sound confidentiality, security and transparent practices.***
	Given the potentially sensitive nature of the pupil level data collected, confidentiality is something that is taken very seriously. Data is transferred securely via the school's SIMS system to a secure web exchange. The data are then downloaded from the web exchange to a secure server, which only statistical staff has access to. After processing, datasets are anonymised so individual pupils are not identified.
	Sensitive data relating to individual pupils, or to small numbers of pupils, are not published or released externally. In this instance, sensitive data are considered as religion, ethnicity, free school meal entitlement, special educational needs details, newcomer details, certain groups of qualifications, etc. For this data, figures that are less than five are generally suppressed, and an adjacent figure in a column or row in any table with a total is counter-suppressed to avoid the potential identification of individual pupils. However, consideration is given to balancing provision of information against the risk of potential disclosive information.