

Background

For many years principals and staff in Integrated schools have been asked questions like, ‘What exactly is different about your school?’ or ‘What can you offer my child that is different to every other school?’ Often the difference has been hard to define. Between 2005 and 2007 Dr Claire McGlynn from Queen’s University carried out a substantial piece of research within the sector. It emerged that Integrated schools sometimes took very different approaches to delivering Integrated Education. However, there were two common themes which emerged from discussions with principals:

- The desire for clarity in regard to the ‘definition’ of Integrated Education;
- Identification of ways in which a school could demonstrate its Integrated ethos.

The first point resulted in a comprehensive review of the NICIE Statement of Principles (2008). The second point resulted in the development of the ‘Excellence in Integrated Education Award (EIEA)’. Since then, 30 schools have gained their EIEA, with a third of those also having renewed their Award at least once.

What is the Excellence in Integrated Education Award?

What it means to be an Integrated school is now legally defined by the Integrated Education Act (2022), and is about being **INTENTIONAL** across every aspect of school ethos and practice in educating together to the highest standards children of different abilities, backgrounds, cultures and beliefs.

The EIEA is first and foremost a self-evaluation tool for schools which sits alongside and complements Department of Education policy such as ‘*Every School A Good School*’, the Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) Policy and the Education and Training Inspectorate’s ‘*Empowering Improvement – New Framework for Inspection*’ (2024).

Founded on the NICIE Statement of Principles,

Equality

Faith & Values

Parental
Involvement

Social
Responsibility

and connected to the four key characteristics of a successful school,



the EIEA audit tool provides a structure through which schools can review, develop and strengthen their approach to delivering high-quality education within an Integrated setting. This is then endorsed by an external assessment process, carried out by members of the NICIE EIEA assessment team.

What benefit does the EIEA have for a school?

‘EIEA accreditation provides an opportunity for schools to show parents, and the wider school community, the ‘added value’ offered to their pupils through Integrated Education. It also celebrates and endorses good practice, and creates a shared identity for Integrated schools.’ (School Principal)

- It recognises, develops and promotes quality Integrated Education, a prerequisite of which is high academic standards.
- It can be used as a self-evaluation and self-improvement tool to guide the Integration section of the School Development Plan.
- It creates an opportunity for schools to revisit and renew their Integrated vision and mission.
- It encourages and supports schools to embed an anti-bias approach across all areas of school life.
- It provides an opportunity for schools to show parents/carers, and the wider school community, the ‘value added’ offered to pupils.
- It endorses and celebrates excellent Integrated practice.
- It contributes to creating a shared identity for Integrated schools.

The EIE Award Process

The timeframe for the EIEA process is flexible. Experience of schools to date indicates that it is likely to be between 18 months and 3 years. Evidence for assessment should be gathered throughout the process.

1. Initial Contact and Support

- If a school is interested in exploring the possibility of working towards their EIEA, they can talk with their support officer about this and/or contact Mary Potter directly.
- This will be followed by an initial meeting involving the Principal, Integration Co-ordinator and/or other key staff, along with the school’s support officer and Mary Potter, to talk through the EIEA process and any particular questions arising.

- NICIE advises that an ‘Integration in Practice’ Group, or equivalent, is formed, representative of the whole school community.

2. Auditing

- Use of the EIEA audit tool (see detailed information below) as *a whole school process* for self-evaluation.
- Identify existing good practice and begin to gather evidence for assessment.
- Identify areas for development, particularly the key aspects on which you wish to work as part of your Award process and which can be linked into the School Development Plan.

3. Working on Areas for Development

- Once areas for development have been identified, an action plan can be developed and implemented.
- Support may be available from NICIE staff and Associates, as appropriate.
- Using the EIEA audit tool, progress should be reviewed at different points, as identified within the action plan.
- It is not essential for areas for development to be completely achieved before assessment – for example, some aspects may always be an ongoing work in progress. However, it is important to be able to demonstrate the steps which have been taken, how effective these have been and further actions which are planned.
- Alongside identified areas for development, the process must include:
 - staff development sessions on ‘Integrated Ethos’ and ‘Anti-Bias Approaches to Education’, and
 - an ‘EIEA/Integrated Ethos’ session for Governors.

NICIE also recommends that an Integrated ethos session(s) is facilitated for parents.

4. Application for Assessment

- Once the school feels close to being ready to go forward for assessment, they should communicate this in writing to Mary Potter (mary.potter@nicie.org.uk), who will work with them to set up the assessment process.

5. Assessment

➤ EIEA portfolio of evidence

EIEA evidence can be submitted online or on two pen drives (one for each assessor). The EIEA online folder can be divided into four sub-folders with one linked to each of the NICIE Principles and using that section of the audit tool as an index for the related evidence. Within a folder, if the same piece of evidence links to more than one question, it is sufficient to cross-reference rather than including it multiple times.

Where assessors are accessing evidence via online sharing, it is important that the school sets this as ‘Read only’, so that files cannot be deleted or edited by mistake.

Schools also need to ensure that all relevant consents have been obtained for inclusion of photographs of children, etc., in line with the school’s policies and procedures.

Too much evidence can be overwhelming for the assessors! Evidence folders should include samples of evidence in connection with each audit tool indicator, but this does not need to be exhaustive. If there is anything which they do not feel is sufficiently evidenced, this can be explored further and evidenced through the assessment visits.

➤ **First Assessment Visit (Half-day):**

- The two assessors assigned to the school will meet with the Principal and other key staff (e.g. Integration Co-ordinator) to gain an overview of the school's EIEA process and to plan for the second assessment visit.
- This is an opportunity for (1) the school to talk with the assessors about what the school would like to share/what experiences they would like the assessors to have on the assessment day, and for (2) the assessors to talk about what they would like to do and who they would like to meet with on the assessment day.
- This is also an opportunity for assessors to familiarise themselves with the school, if they have not been there before.
- If the EIEA portfolio of evidence has been shared online with the assessors in advance of this visit, they can take this opportunity to clarify aspects of the evidence and request further evidence if necessary. If not, they should ensure access to the EIEA portfolio of evidence at this meeting.

➤ **Second Assessment Visit (Full day):**

- Assessors will be eager to experience an 'ordinary' day in the life of the school. For example, if it is a day when assembly usually takes place, assessors are likely to attend, but there is no need to put on special events or performances. Assessors are looking to see how Integration is woven into the fabric of the school community and its day-to-day life, not just how it is presented on special occasions.
- Assessors will visit classes and will want to meet with groups of pupils/students, parents, teaching and support staff, and governors. You may also want them to speak to members of the community where these links have been referred to in the evidence.
- Anything else that the school and the assessors have agreed between them in planning the full assessment day.

6. Achievement of Award

'The EIEA has meant that we really feel we have been recognised and encouraged for the progress that has been embedded!' (School Principal)

➤ **What happens after the full assessment day?**

- Assessors write a report (which is likely to include recommendations for further development) and make a recommendation to NICIE.
- A final decision on the Award is made by NICIE, ratified by the NICIE Board of Directors.

- NICIE provides feedback to the school.
- The EIE Award is presented, ideally at a special school or NICIE event.

➤ **What happens if we do not achieve our Award on our first full assessment day?**

The EIEA is not a pass/fail assessment. However, if assessors feel that:

- (a) there has not been sufficient evidence presented and experienced; or
- (b) that the areas for development identified are too significant,

the school will not receive its Award after the first full assessment day.

Feedback from the assessors will be discussed by assessors and relevant NICIE staff as soon as possible, and specific actions/areas of focus identified. A meeting will be arranged with the school Principal (and Integration Co-ordinator) to discuss the feedback and next steps.

These next steps could include:

- Gathering of additional evidence to present to assessors;
- Specific areas of focus identified and an action plan put in place, including a timeframe for a follow-up assessment visit;
- Feedback to and/or a meeting with the wider team of staff and governors to affirm the existing excellent practice, explain the assessors' decision and outline next steps.

The NICIE EIEA Co-ordinator and the school's NICIE support officer will work with and support the school through this process.

Ideally, the follow up assessment will not be more than 6 months after the original assessment. This assessment visit will only focus on the areas for development/evidence identified as needing further work, and will not be a full 're-assessment' of all aspects of the Award.

The EIE Award Audit Tool

The EIEA audit tool has a number of potential uses, including:

- Carrying out an initial self-evaluation at the start of the Award process;
- As an overview/index, outlining how evidence links to particular statements within each section of the school's Award portfolio;
- Monitoring and evaluation of work on areas for development or other identified 'gaps' as the Award process develops;
- As a final checklist before applying for assessment;
- Ongoing self-evaluation in relation to Integration, including after the Award has been achieved.

'We use the EIEA self-evaluating document on a three-year cyclical basis as part of our whole school evaluation. It is an invaluable document to assist the staff to focus on and evaluate our Integrated ethos and practice which affects everything we do in this school.' (School Principal)

Some practical points to note:

- The format of the tool does mean that **one piece of evidence can be relevant to more than one section or question**. However, it is important also to note that some statements are nuanced to explore the different aspects of what excellence looks like, for example, at the whole school level, in the classroom context or in the experience of individual pupils/students.
- **The auditing process is most effective if consultation and involvement are as wide as possible**. For example, some schools have used pupil/student and parent surveys, whole staff team development days, sessions for governors, etc. to ensure that everyone's perspective is heard. This can also help to ensure that examples of good practice are not missed and are shared more widely across the whole school community.
- As well as recognising the overarching Principles and commitment to Integration, **it is important to make the tool work for you within your own specific context**: Grant-Maintained or Controlled Integrated school; geographical and community setting; etc. Assessors will be interested to hear about your school's particular journey and learning.

For how long is the Award current and how do we renew it?

Once a school gains the Award, it is current for five years. At this point, a school will need to apply to re-new their Award. It will be important to demonstrate development and progression over the period since the Award was originally achieved, paying attention to any recommendations made in the previous report.

When the five years has passed, the school can retain the EIEA logo on its website, etc. if it is actively working towards Award renewal. Any recommendations around areas for development in the previous EIEA Report can form part of the renewal action plan.

For further information, please speak to your school's NICIE support officer or contact:

Mary Potter

NICIE Development Officer

Tel No: +44 (0)28 9694420

Mob: +44 (0) 77 61044344

Email: mary.potter@nicie.org.uk



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