Evaluation of Curriculum Planning at level 3 in the North West Regional College

February 2020

ETI: Promoting Improvement in the Interest of all Learners

Contents

1.   CONTEXT

During the academic year 2019/20, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) was commissioned by the Department for the Economy (Department) to evaluate the effectiveness of curriculum planning at level 3 in the further education (FE) provision across the six regional FE colleges.

The evaluation in the North West Regional College took place in February 2020 and included the six Tier 1 areas of: art, media and publishing[1]; engineering and manufacturing technologies; health, public services and care; hospitality and tourism; information and communication technology (ICT); and retail and commercial enterprises[2]. The provision for preparation for life and work was also evaluated.

At the time of the evaluation, 3,518[3] students were enrolled on level 3 FE provision in the college; of these, 972 students were enrolled on full-time courses in the areas being evaluated (51% of the total full-time enrolments) and 841 students were enrolled on part-time courses in the areas being evaluated (49% of the total part-time enrolments). The college also delivers a range of level 3 ApprenticeshipsNI programmes[4] at level 3, but these were not included in this evaluation.

2.   KEY FINDINGS

The following is a summary of the key findings for the college.

Range and content of the learning programmes
- The college provides a broad range of well-designed level 3 programmes, which are appropriately targeted at developing and raising the professional and technical skills of those entering or already working in the local labour market, including in economically important areas, and of those wishing to progress to higher level programmes.

- At the time of the evaluation, level 3 enrolments accounted for just over one-third (36%) of the college's total student enrolment; 1,801 students were enrolled on full-time courses and 1,717 on part-time courses. Just over one-half of the FE level 3 enrolments are from the highest socio-economic deprivation quintiles, namely one and two, and slightly over one-half of them are male. Around 38% of the level 3 enrolments are in STEM-related areas. Notably, just over one-quarter (26%) of them are enrolled in health and social care programmes, which is the college's curriculum hub[5] area.

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[1] Music and performing arts was the evaluation sample in this college.
[2] Hairdressing and barbering was the evaluation sample in the college.
[3] All data used for the evaluation and presented in this report has been supplied and verified by the college.
[4] The Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI programmes in the North West Regional College were inspected in November 2017. and the published report can be accessed on the ETI website at:
https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/training-for-success-and-apprenticeshipsni-in-the-north-west-regional-college_0.pdf .
[5] The designation, development and implementation of curriculum hubs was one of the policy commitments of the FE Means Success Strategy (2016), namely to establish a "Lead College" in each economically important sectoral area.   The "Lead College" should link with other colleges in order to develop teaching and curriculum excellence, improve sectoral knowledge and increase employer engagement.

- Enrolments to full-time provision have declined steadily, by around 16%, over the last three years. By contrast, over the same period, part-time enrolments have increased by around 15%. The college reports that increasing competition from local post-primary schools is adversely impacting the sustainability of some of the full-time provision, with the evidence showing a reducing college Entitlement Framework footprint with more pupils staying on in school. In economically important areas such as construction, engineering, ICT and science, it is concerning that full-time enrolments have reduced by almost one-fifth (19%) over the past three years. In contrast, however, enrolments to music and performing arts are increasing, largely owing to the college's distinctive, industry-relevant and high quality provision in this professional and technical area. The increasing level of competition across the post-16 educational provision in the region, creating a lot of duplicated courses and associated resources, represents poor value for money; additionally, it constrains the college's capacity for continued curriculum development to meet more fully the technical educational and training needs of current and emerging industries, and by implication the associated outcomes of the Programme for Government for Northern Ireland.

- The content of the learning programmes offered is mostly matched well to the needs of the students, providing them with well-targeted preparation for future employment opportunities or progression to higher education or training. In a majority of the areas evaluated, the close working partnerships with employers and sectorial bodies inform to very good effect the design and content of the curriculum, resulting in innovative and highly-relevant learning programmes that take account of the current and future skills needs of industry. In a minority of the areas evaluated, curriculum planning and development is overly static and not responsive enough to the dynamic and diverse needs of local and regional employers.

- Most of the full-time provision comprises a combination of 90-credit or foundation diplomas, diploma and extended diplomas[6], or equivalent qualifications[7]. This provides the students with choice and flexibility, enabling them to enrol on the most appropriate programme, matched to their prior educational achievement and career progression aspirations and entry requirements. Going forward, the college needs to monitor closely the progression rates from the 90-credit or foundation diplomas to the extended diplomas to ensure that all of the students are fulfilling to their potential.

Employability, enterprise and work-ready skills

- Most of the students have very good opportunities to develop their employability, enterprise and work-readiness skills. Through the college's well-resourced in-house Careers Academy, they have easy and flexible access to a varied range of relevant personal development workshops and initiatives. In addition, they are provided with relevant opportunities to develop further their employability skills through: work-experience placements; participation in the Erasmus + programme of international visits; access to visiting speakers; industry visits; simulated occupational practice; regular public music performances; involvement in skills competitions; and specialist optional study units. Going forward, the college needs to monitor more closely the work-experience provision, particularly the level of take-up by the students; it is important that all full-time students have adequate opportunities to experience relevant workplace settings to further develop and enhance a well-rounded set of skills.

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[6] For the those students who successfully complete a one year 90-credit diploma or foundation diploma, only one further year is required to complete an extended diploma.
[7] Most of the full-time qualifications are awarded by Pearson (BTEC) or City and Guilds (NVQ/diploma).

- Across a majority of the areas evaluated, project-based learning is highly valued by the curriculum teams. As a result, innovative and highly relevant industry projects are planned well and executed to very good effect to provide the students with excellent opportunities to develop their creativity, teamwork and problem-solving skills. As a consequence, they are able to develop and apply their technical, employability and enterprise skills in a holistic and meaningful manner. In hospitality and catering, for example, the students, engage effectively with the college's specialist Food Innovation Centre where they develop enterprise skills in product innovation and development, food labelling and shelf-life analysis, enabling them to create new food products which they promote and sell across the college campus.

- In a minority of areas, however, project-based learning is at an early stage of development; existing opportunities within the curriculum to incorporate project-based learning activities in order to broaden and enhance the students' learning experiences are not yet sufficiently realised and the students in these areas miss out on valuable learning and broader skills enhancement opportunities.

Literacy, numeracy and digital skills

- It is a noteworthy strength of the level 3 provision in the college that approximately one-half of those full-time students who successfully achieve a level 2 qualification in literacy and numeracy achieve a GCSE qualification at grade C or better. In contrast, however, too many of the full-time students leave or complete their level 3 programme without also attaining a level 2 qualification in literacy, numeracy or ICT. This critical gap in their qualification profile has the potential to impact adversely on the progression opportunities and pathways available to them. The achievement rates for those students who do enrol on the essential skills qualifications of literacy, numeracy and ICT at level 2 are also too low. Consequently, there is an urgent need for the college to review the essential skills provision, including the co-ordination, timetabling and tracking and monitoring arrangements to ensure a much better uptake of the qualifications by those level 3 students who need them along with increased achievement rates in literacy, numeracy and ICT.

- Across the areas evaluated, the students have good opportunities to develop occupationally-related literacy and numeracy skills to at least a functional level and, for example, they can: make presentations to a range of audiences; discuss and negotiate within teams; write technical reports; and apply basic numeracy skills to complete professional and technical tasks. In more technical areas, where attainment of higher level mathematics is required for progression to higher education, appropriate advanced mathematics units are integral to the students' learning programme. The college also recognises the significant variance in the students' mathematical competence and confidence, and as result provides a very accessible drop-in learning support hub in order to assist them to overcome barriers in the development of their numeracy skills. The students report very positively about this drop-in facility, particularly in boosting their confidence prior to formal assessments.

- Across most of the areas evaluated, the students are provided with very good opportunities to develop appropriate industry-relevant digital skills; these include the use of computer-aided-design, 3D printing, digital music production, application of paperless technology and good levels of experience in the use of technology-driven assisted living. As a consequence, most of the students become confident users of key digital applications relevant to their professional and technical area and employment progression opportunities. While the college is creative in enabling some of the students to experience first-hand, and learn more about the range of bespoke digital technology deployed across other occupational areas, further work is needed to share and implement this good practice more fully across all of the professional and technical programmes.

Learning outcomes and progression

- The standards of the students' work are consistently good or better. They develop a sound understanding of a broad range of relevant professional and technical concepts, principles and skills which they can adapt and apply confidently to different contexts and practical applications. Most of them also develop well their wider skills and personal capabilities; they can, for example: work collaboratively in teams to solve problems; communicate effectively within a range of contexts; take responsibility for their own learning and progress; and demonstrate good self-advocacy skills.

- In a majority of the areas evaluated, the standards attained by most of the students are very good or outstanding; through a more extensive mix of effective learning and teaching strategies, alongside well-planned industry-related practical learning experiences, the students thrive, often exceeding their own expectations in acquiring skills that are contemporary and aligned with industry practice.

- Student retention rates[8], based mostly on in-year data[9], over the last three years, are consistently very good, ranging from 80% to 89%. Over the same period, achievement rates for those students who complete their programme range from good (83%) to outstanding (94%), and are mostly good. Progression rates to either higher education or employment are mostly outstanding at over 90%, with most of the students progressing to higher education. For students on two-year programmes of study, for accuracy, robustness and transparency, the college needs to record, collate and evaluate the performance of these students across the entirety of the learning programme.

Range and quality of the learning experiences

- The quality of the learning and teaching is mostly good or better, with two-thirds of the lessons observed being very good or better. In the most effective practice, the lessons are characterised by well-planned, purposeful, practical learning tasks that engage the students and promote high levels of independent learning, creative thinking and problem-solving. Information and learning technology (ILT) is mostly used to good effect to support and enhance the learning; this includes effective use of software applications that promote collaborative and discursive activities to deepen learning and understanding and increase levels of engagement.

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[8] Student retention, achievement and progression rates are only for the Tier 1 areas included in the evaluation sample.
[9] In-year retention, achievement and progression rates are based on the number of students who remain and complete their targeted qualification in each discrete academic year of their programme of study.

- In a majority of the areas evaluated, there is a very well-considered balance of theory work and practical skills development. The students benefit from a well-targeted range of practical skills development that are aligned closely with industrial or professional practice. Industry standard workshops, salons, kitchens and sound studios enable the students to experience a realistic working environment where they can use contemporary equipment and technology. It is notable, where a greater range of practical learning opportunities are carefully integrated within the students' learning experiences, they engage more purposefully in their learning with increasing levels of curiosity, self-confidence and occupational competence. In addition, the lecturers' industry-standard expertise and experience, often as current practitioners, are integral to the purposeful learning ethos and authenticity of the provision, and underpins the successful learning.

- On a few occasions, the range of the learning of approaches deployed are too assessment-led and as result there are only limited opportunities for the students to engage more in exploratory work, problem-solving and practical skills development.

Care, welfare and safeguarding

- The quality and impact of the care and welfare provision is a significant strength of the work of the college. The well-targeted and sustained investment in student welfare and support has enabled the provision of extensive student services to ensure that all of the students are supported in order to fulfil to their potential, irrespective of their background or starting point. A multi-skilled team of professionally-qualified advisers, coaches and support staff provide appropriately tailored, individualised support for students as they progress through their programmes. This includes, for example, qualified staff to assess quickly the additional learning needs of students and ensure that the required intervention and support is provided in a timely manner.

- The students' union is well-organised and very active, with representatives from each class providing the students with an effective voice by which to provide feedback to middle and senior leaders. The class representatives are well-supported by a member of staff and are provided with appropriate training to support them in their advocacy role. The feedback received through the students' union is valued by senior leaders; there is clear evidence of meaningful changes being made as a result of the feedback. These changes include: free student cards; changes to the menu and prices in the students' canteen; free access to sporting and other activities; and significantly reduced all-day car parking fees for students.

- The students largely benefit from a weekly tutorial system, through which they are kept well informed of their progress in their professional and technical qualification. Going forward, there is a need for further development and standardisation of the tutorial process, in particular to include a more robust and impactful tracking system in order to monitor and evaluate the students' progress across all aspects of their programme; this should include their progress in the essential skills and impact of participation in work-experience placements and other activities.

- Nearly all of the students who completed the confidential online questionnaire prior to the evaluation were positive about their experiences in the college. They reported that their course was meeting their needs and found the pre-enrolment, information, advice and guidance useful. A minority reported that they did not have access to good facilities to relax in. In the focus groups, the students reported that they felt well supported by the college staff; had good access to the college's student support services when required; and felt safe in the college.

- The college, at all levels, works hard and to very good effect to establish and maintain a positive and affirming learning environment where diversity and tolerance is promoted and highly valued. Relationships between the staff and students, and amongst the students, are consistently characterised with high levels of co-operation, mutual respect, inclusivity and support.

- On the basis of the evidence provided during the evaluation, the arrangements for safeguarding young people and adults at risk reflect current legislation and practice.

Careers education, information, advice and guidance

- The college's in-house Careers Academy is well-resourced and highly effective; this was also recognised through a recent Beacon Award. The academy provides a broad range of services in order to support the students in making well-informed careers and progression choices at key transition points. The academy's advice staff are conveniently located and well-utilised by the students across each of the college's main campuses. A notable strength of the academy is that the staff are appropriately qualified in this specialist advice area and strive to provide impartial and independent careers information, advice and guidance to the students. This includes: vocationally-relevant information and advice; individual guidance when they are making higher education applications; tailored assistance when preparing a CV; and interview preparation workshops, including realistic multiple mini-assessment training for university interviews.

- Effective careers advice is also well-embedded in nearly all of the professional and technical programmes evaluated, with good use being made of a range of employer talks and industry visits, along with lecturers' industrial expertise and experiences in order to underpin the well-informed careers education provided by the vocational staff. Consequently, across the college the careers provision is valued highly by the students and nearly all of them report that they are well-informed about the range of progression routes available to them, such as employment options or higher education, including higher level apprenticeship opportunities available locally and regionally.

Collaborative arrangements with other educational providers

- The college is proactive in establishing positive relationships with local post-primary schools in order to provide a range of Entitlement Framework options across all levels, including at level 3. Despite a range of challenges, recruitment at level 3 to Entitlement Framework collaborative provision is being sustained at relatively viable levels in the college, although there is a slight downward trend. Notably, retention and achievement rates across the school partnership programmes are high and in line with students' predicted achievement levels.

- In 2019/20, 260 post-primary pupils were enrolled in the professional and technical areas of health and social care (33%), science (26%), engineering (15%), construction (18%) and drama (7%). While there is strong recruitment to health and social care and the applied sciences, going forward, however, there is a need to continue to monitor school partnership enrolments to ensure the curriculum needs of key stage 5 pupils in the North West region are being meet to best effect, particularly in STEM-related areas.

Employer links (economic engagement)

- The college is effective in establishing productive links and partnerships with a broad range of economic stakeholders, particularly with employers. A dedicated business support centre within the college works strategically and to good effect to build and foster agile relationships with the local district councils, employers and other key industry stakeholders. As a result, a number of innovative and bespoke training programmes have been provided by the college in response to emerging identified labour market skills gaps. These include skills academies for local software technology, agri-food and fin-tech employers. As a consequence of this work, curriculum planning across a majority of the professional and technical areas has been enhanced and is now more sensitive to the needs of industry and how to plan to meet them.

- Highly effective employer engagement is also clearly evident in a majority of the Tier 1 areas evaluated. In these areas, the curriculum planning takes very good account holistically of the professional and technical and the wider personal skills needs development of the students, in order to prepare well-rounded, flexible and adaptable prospective employees. Further curriculum development work is needed, however, in a minority of the Tier 1 areas to ensure that the curriculum planning is more responsive to the current and emerging needs of industry, in order to continue to build high-value curriculum pathways and increasingly better outcomes for the students.

Learning resources

- The quality of the college's facilities and learning resources range from good to outstanding. In a majority of the areas evaluated, the range of specialist equipment is outstanding and used to very good effect to support the students develop contemporary skills at industry-standard. In the curriculum hub for health and social care, for example, a new cutting-edge facility provides students, including those from other disciplines, with access to current industry-standard facilities and contemporary digital technology, which is used to provide and enhance assisted living. Similarly, in most of the other areas, the learning environment mirrors closely industry practice, providing the students with very good opportunities to become competent users of industry equipment and technology. These include professional standard performance theatres, kitchens, restaurants and hair salons. In a small number of areas, the specialist resources, although to industry-standard, are located and organised in an overly fragmented manner, resulting in restricted opportunities for the students to engage fully in high quality, impactful project-based learning.

- A well-considered complement of lecturers and support professionals, with appropriate experience and high levels of expertise, work hard, and mostly to very good effect, to provide a well-targeted curriculum offer and promote a positive and affirming learning environment.

Quality improvement planning to sustain improvement

- The self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes are mostly well-embedded across the college, well-understood and used largely to good effect by staff at all levels. While the self-evaluation key findings mostly identify accurately the high-level key strengths and areas for improvement, the self-evaluation process is at times overly bureaucratic and the available data is not used robustly enough to identify and address gaps or emerging trends in, for example, student outcomes such as in the essential skills.

- Although the whole-college quality improvement plan prioritises a number of key strategic and operational issues, including those identified through this evaluation, there is a noticeable disconnect between the high-level issues and those identified at professional and technical level. Going forward, curriculum teams need to review the effectiveness of their quality improvement planning process to ensure that demonstrable improvement actions are well-targeted, monitored effectively, impactful and sustained.

Strategic and middle management

- A clear strategic vision along with high levels of commitment and ambition, at all levels, underpins to good effect the work of the college in providing a largely coherent curriculum with relevant, well-considered learning programmes. The college is responsive to local and regional Government priorities, including the need to support social cohesion and economic growth. The governing body and senior leaders are committed to providing well-targeted, prioritised levels of investment in key curriculum areas in order to meet the educational and training needs of the local community, including the challenge of meeting the needs of a large number of students from diverse and often disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

- Across a majority of the areas evaluated, there is strong evidence of highly effective leadership and management; curriculum managers work strategically and collaboratively with employers and other stakeholders in order to plan a cohesive range of learning programmes that meet effectively the needs of the students and local employers. In the best practice, the curriculum teams are visionary, ambitious and strive for excellence in the quality and relevance of the curriculum and the associated learning opportunities they provide for young people.

- In contrast, however, across a significant minority of the areas evaluated, there is a need for greater coherence and sharper clarity of purpose in the curriculum planning process, to ensure that the learning programmes are better targeted to the needs of the students and aligned more closely to needs of local industry. This is particularly true for the essential skills provision, where the oversight by leadership and management, at all levels, is not effective enough.

3.   EXAMPLES OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

The following examples of effective practice were identified during the evaluation of the level 3 curriculum in the North West Regional College.

1. **Hairdressing and Barbering: embedding impactful project-based learning within the hairdressing programme to develop the students' transversal skills.**

   The curriculum team has worked enthusiastically and tirelessly over an extended period of time to grow the provision and also to promote highly effective, integrated project-based learning themes, including 'live' projects in the hairdressing and barbering curriculum. A well-embedded collaboration across the curriculum team supports dynamic project-based learning delivery and is a key strength of the provision. This includes the use of 'live' projects to support outstanding learning and industry-relevant skills development.

   The students are provided with an outstanding range of learning opportunities and experiences, focusing on industry-relevant themes to develop their creativity, employability and enterprise skills. High levels of engagement in aspirational cross-campus, regional and international competition work enhances further the quality of the students' learning experiences and depth of skills acquisition and application. Contemporary learning and teaching strategies are used very effectively in promoting high levels of student engagement and enable excellent practical and transversal skills development. The excellent quality of the students' learning and work is also reflected in the achievement of 2019 regional winner in the World Skills competition.

   Well-planned special events such as 'Movember' and the college show 'Barber Bash' showcase the high quality of the students' learning and levels of engagement and motivation. Having completed a six-week project 'Creative Glamour' using a themed approach (Bridal/Hair and Make-up/Avant Garde), the students very successfully presented a night of glamour and entertainment; they showcased their talents with three highly impactful catwalk looks, demonstrating outstanding work and higher level (level 4) skills development. The students develop further their customer service skills in the college's Open Salons, where they engage well with real clients.

2. **Music and Performing Arts: integrating realistic industry-based learning opportunities for enhanced development of the students' professional music performance skills**.

   A dynamic review of college's music and performance arts (MAPA) programmes has transformed the curriculum, resulting in provision aligned closely with the contemporary music and performance arts industry. Students benefit immensely from the excellent flexibility of choice offered by the professionally-orientated awarding body (Rock School London) which offers an extensive range of performance and technical career-focused units.

   Real-world, industry-based learning is a core element of the provision, enabling students to develop a broad, transversal skillset relevant for career progression. High quality learning and teaching experiences are delivered by skilled practitioners from within the creative arts industries, and the students engage proficiently with contemporary digital technology and demonstrate high levels of creativity, confidence and independence. Over the last three years, almost all of the students were retained on their learning programmes, and most achieved their target qualification and progressed to higher programmes.

Authentic opportunities to develop employability, enterprise and work-ready skills are embedded purposefully within the MAPA programmes. The students regularly create, market and profit from their original work, including through local and nationwide public platforms such as festivals and regular gigs, with MAPA adopted as their brand name.

3. **Health, public services and care: investment in industry-standard health and social care training facilities in order to equip students with contemporary skills for employment opportunities.**

The college's Design Innovation Assisted Living (DIAL) centre is a contemporary health innovation hub with a focus on promoting innovative solutions to support living. DIAL provides a unique space to integrate education, business and the health and social care sectors within a state of the art facility. The aim of the facility is to focus the work of the college as the sector-wide curriculum hub for health and social care, improve stakeholder collaboration and impact positively on health and wellbeing more widely; the work is underpinned by key principles such as prevention, active ageing, e-health, community-based living, independence and dignity.

DIAL provides a high quality simulated learning environment for health and social care students, preparing them for work in emerging roles, with a greater emphasis on home care, client enablement and self-management, and the use of digital skills to support digital health solutions. Through cross-curricular masterclasses and workshops, the students are being well-prepared to work in a multi-disciplinary way and are immersed in thinking innovatively to identify and address unmet need to deliver the transformation of health and social care services.

DIAL marks a substantial investment by the college and the Department for the Economy, reflecting a priority to upskill the health and social care workforce, while also supporting the economic potential of other industry sectors such as digital, housing, engineering and commercial services through product research, innovation and showcasing.

4. AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Going forward, the college needs to:

- improve the leadership and management oversight of the essential skills provision for literacy, numeracy and ICT in order to significantly increase student uptake and the achievement of level 2 qualifications, which are currently too low;

- work collaboratively with other colleges, schools and key stakeholders, at all levels, to address urgently the steadily declining full-time level 3 enrolments, particularly in economically important areas, and to ensure that the vocational provision at post-16 optimises the further education opportunities for young people to develop highly-relevant professional and technical skills and knowledge, and personal capabilities, that contribute to the economic outcomes of the Programme for Government for Northern Ireland;

- ensure that the quality improvement planning process, including the systematic and effective use of data, is more consistently impactful in promoting sustained improvement, and also enables better sharing of existing highly-effective practice in curriculum planning more widely across the college's provision; and

- enhance further the student tutorial system and ensure a more consistent line of sight to workplace learning opportunities for all of the full-time students.

Quantitative terms used by ETI

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75%-90%
A majority	-	50%-74%
A significant minority	-	30%-49%
A minority	-	10%-29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

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