Evaluation of Curriculum Planning at level 3 in the South West College

February 2020

ETI: Promoting Improvement in the Interest of all Learners

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The Education and Training Inspectorate
Promoting Improvement

Providing inspection services for:

Department of Education
Department for the Economy
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CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE
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Contents

1. CONTEXT

During the 2019/20 academic year, 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 South West College took place in February 2020 and included the six Tier 1 areas of: business administration, finance and law; construction, planning and the built environment; engineering and manufacturing technologies; health, public services and care; hospitality and tourism[1]; and science and mathematics. The provision for preparation for life and work was also evaluated.

At the time of the evaluation, 2,055[2] students were enrolled on FE level 3 programmes in the college; 1,903 full-time and 982 part-time students. In terms of the areas sampled for the evaluation, 481 students were enrolled on full-time courses in the areas being evaluated (44% of the total full-time enrolments) and 92 students were enrolled on part-time courses (10% of the total part-time enrolments). The college also delivers a range of level 3 ApprenticeshipsNI programmes[3] at level 3, but these were not included in this evaluation.

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

2. KEY FINDINGS

Range and content of the learning programmes

- The level 3 further education provision represents approximately 25% of the total college enrolments. It is concerning that enrolments, at the time of the evaluation, were low in most of the key economically important areas across the three main campuses, including: construction (46 full-time, 6 part-time); engineering (68 full-time, 8 part-time), hospitality (20 full-time, 33 part-time); travel and tourism (28 full-time, 0 part-time); and science (86 full-time, 0 part-time). The number of part-time enrolments in health and social care was also low.

- The college also runs a substantive and high quality work-based learning provision. ApprenticeshipsNI at level 3 comprise a majority of that provision and just under 800 level 3 apprentices were enrolled with the college at the time of the evaluation; most of these apprentices were enrolled in economically important areas such as electrotechnical, engineering and motor vehicle. The construction numbers are overly low in both the further education and apprenticeship provision, something that needs to be addressed by the college.

- Curriculum planning and development is well led strategically and mostly very responsive to local and regional economic needs. In engineering and construction, for example, well-established links with local employers and the industry advisory board inform well the college's planning of course content and structure. In a few of the curriculum areas, however, such as health and social care, there is a need to broaden the curriculum offer to meet better the needs of local employers and the wider skills needs of the region.

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[1] Hospitality and Catering is a subset of the Tier 1 area of retail and commercial enterprises, and travel and tourism is a subset of the Tier 1 area of leisure, travel and tourism. These economically important professional and technical areas were evaluated jointly at the request of the Department for the Economy for the purposes of the evaluation.

[2] All data used for the evaluation and presented in this report has been supplied and verified by the college.

[3] The Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI programmes in the South West College were inspected in October 2018 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-provision-in-the-south-west-college.pdf

- Across all of the professional and technical areas evaluated, the full-time programmes are designed appropriately to enable students to enrol on a programme that is matched well to their learning needs and career progression aspirations; this includes 90-credit diplomas and extended diplomas[4]. Going forward, the college needs to monitor the progression rate from the year 1 90-credit diploma to the year 2 extended diploma, to ensure the progression needs of all of the students are being fully met.

- The evidence shows that the college attracts just under one-half (48%) of its students from areas of high social deprivation and disadvantage, deprivation quintiles 1 and 2, but that it works extremely hard, and with success, to meet the diverse and often complex needs of these students. The college has a clear vision for social inclusion and is highly committed to developing accessible learning programmes that enable progression pathways from level 1 through to level 6, irrespective of the students' entry point or socio-economic barriers to education. Strategically, the college recognises the gateway that participation and attainment at level 3 provides to further progression in education, training or employment for these particular students. As a result, a wide range of level 3 programmes are offered across the college's three main campuses; on occasions, it is noteworthy that the provision is maintained despite low enrolments.

- While the level 3 enrolments have remained mostly stable over the last three years, the college reports significantly increased competition at post-16 from local schools, with some post-primary schools offering duplicate but non-collaborative vocational provision. In addition, the low and declining level of enrolments limits the college's capacity to offer specialist pathways within some Tier 1 areas; in construction, for example, the specialist pathways are limited to civil engineering, and provision such as this is difficult to re-establish when it drops from the curriculum offer. The evaluation also identified that a significant proportion of the students enrolled on some of the full-time programmes included in the sample, upwards of three-quarters on some of them, had already completed part or full qualifications at level 3 in the post-primary sector. This duplication of vocational provision by the post-primary schools along with the substantive numbers who had already been funded for level 3 provision prior to coming to the college represents a concerning value for money issue and associated opportunity cost for the education system as a whole.

Employability, enterprise and work-ready skills

- Across all of the Tier 1 areas evaluated, the course content is relevant, well-balanced and contemporary, providing the students with the necessary technical skills and knowledge to enable them to progress to higher education or to employment. A well-considered additional range of enrichment modules develops well their key employability skills. A strength of the work of the college is the high level of work-readiness of the students completing level 3 programmes; most students develop many of the softer skills that are valued by employers, including good time management, team working and completing work on time. More of them, however, would benefit from structured and challenging work-experience opportunities and a broader range of work placements.

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[4] 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

- Most of the students have good opportunities to develop their employability, enterprise and work-ready skills. These skills are developed in various ways depending on the programme of study, including: project-based learning, internal college projects, work-experience opportunities, the use of realistic working environments, industrial visits and skills competitions. Further work is required in some curriculum areas to ensure the students develop and apply higher-level oral presentation skills, including an awareness of audience and the use of presentation equipment and techniques to better effect.

- The strategic approach by management to embed project-based learning across the college remains at early stage of development and implementation. While there are examples where it is used well to develop the students' personal skills and capabilities, there is variation across the programmes and opportunities exist, going forward, to further develop project-based learning activities across more programmes. This should include further collaborative planning between enterprise and curriculum teams, and industry, in the design of real-life projects.

- The college provides very good opportunities across most of the Tier 1 areas for the students to develop professional and technical skills and wider employability skills through the Erasmus+ programme, with well-planned international work placements across an extensive range of countries. Just under 800 level 3 students have participated on this programme over the past three years.

Literacy, numeracy and digital skills

- Too many students are leaving level 3 programmes without a level 2 qualification in literacy, numeracy or ICT/digital technology. In addition, only small numbers engage in the repeat GCSE English and mathematics provision, which potentially rules them out from progression to some higher education courses. The achievement rates in the essential skills of literacy and numeracy at level 2 are too low, impacting adversely on the capability of these students to perform at the higher levels in their professional and technical work. Where higher level mathematics is required for students to progress to higher education, this is provided as part of their learning programme.

- In two-thirds of the programme areas evaluated, the students have good opportunities to develop appropriate industry-standard digital skills through the use of computer-aided-design, modern surveying techniques, financial software and data logging equipment. In a few of the Tier 1 areas, more needs to be done to further embed a broader range of digital skills, beyond those acquired through the dated ICT essential skill. The majority of the students have good opportunities to develop relevant digital skills through their professional and technical work.

Learning outcomes and progression

- The standards of the students' work in the sample of Tier 1 areas evaluated are mostly very good; the students develop a clear understanding of key concepts and principles which they are able to apply confidently to different contexts. They are able to problem solve, work well in teams and take responsibility for their own learning.

- For the purposes of the evaluation, the college reported most of the retention, achievement and progression data on an in-year[5] basis, including for two-year programmes. This leads to higher reported outcomes and can mask disparities in two-year retention and achievement data. Retention[6] rates are mostly good or better, but there is some variation; they range from 73% in health and social care to 90% or over in science, construction, business and hospitality and tourism. Achievement rates are mostly good and progression rates by students who have completed successfully to higher education or employment are largely outstanding. For students on two-year programmes of study, for accuracy, robustness and transparency, the college needs to consistently 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 teaching and learning observed was good or better; of the sessions observed, 48% of them were evaluated as very good or outstanding. One-half of the sessions observed were good overall, but with some areas for improvement which the college needs to work on. The most effective sessions were characterised by: effective planning; high expectations leading to high levels of learner engagement; a good range of well-planned activities to promote effective learning; effective use of information and learning technology (ILT) to enhance and enliven the learning; and a good balance of practical and theory work which improves student engagement.

- In light of the potential roll-out of the review of qualifications and assessment, the college needs to re-consider its approaches to learning and teaching, to ensure that they are meeting the needs of the learners in potentially revised assessment conditions.

Care, welfare and safeguarding

- The provision for care and welfare is a key strength of the work of the college. Relationships between staff and students are highly respectful, positive and supportive. The students report that they are well supported and have access to a very good range of information and support services. Mentors provide highly effective longitudinal support for those students identified as being in need as they progress through their studies and into work or further and higher education.

- The students are provided with a weekly tutorial, which is used mostly well by tutors to keep them informed of their progress, particularly in their professional and technical units, and to address any support or development needs. An online system is in place to flag any issues that the students may have, including attendance, and other matters that may impact on their progress; this initiates the student support process when appropriate. It is timely, however, to review the tutorial process and associated data tracking systems to more formally and expansively include the progress the students are making in the broader aspects of their learning programme, including their essential skills, work placement experiences, enterprise skills acquisition and the impact of project-based learning opportunities.

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[5] 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.
[6] Student retention, achievement and progression rates are only for the Tier 1 areas included in the evaluation sample.

- Nearly all the students who completed the confidential online questionnaire prior to the evaluation were largely positive about their experiences in the college. They reported that they found their course interesting, challenging and relevant to their career aspirations and that they had been given good feedback on how to improve their work. A minority reported that they disagreed that they had good facilities to relax in the college. The students reported in the focus groups that they felt well supported by all the staff, with high levels of mutual respect and that the support services were effective. They also reported that they felt safe in the college.

- 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

- Nearly all of the students were well-informed about progression pathway routes, including employment and higher education programmes such as the higher level apprenticeship opportunities. Careers advice is mostly well-embedded into the curricular programmes, including within the tutorial process. Many of the specialist lecturing staff have good levels of expertise, along with relevant industry experience and knowledge, which they use well to advise the students on career pathways and goals. In applied science, for example, the students entering with a combination of prior academic and vocational qualifications had a clear line of sight to appropriate higher education programmes at level 4. In this curriculum area, the students benefited from a varied range of contact with employers, often organised by the STEM Centre, including site visits, guest speakers and international work-experience opportunities.

- The dedicated careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) staff are centrally located and are easily accessible on each of the main campuses; they are well-qualified and offer sound independent and impartial advice and guidance. They provide a good range of support to the students, including guidance when making UCAS applications, assistance with preparing CVs, arranging mock interviews and guidance around the testing process for entry to some higher education medical courses. Going forward, however, the provision needs to be more formalised with better use being made of individual student career plans.

Collaborative arrangements with other educational providers

- The college has a long tradition of constructive, well-established links and effective working relationships with a range of post-primary schools across the college's three main catchment areas. Nevertheless, the senior leaders and governors report significant concerns around the numbers of pupils accessing provision through the Entitlement Framework; they report significant variation and trend differences across the area learning communities with which they collaborate. The college is working proactively to address this issue and is currently in the process of developing an innovative pilot programme, outside the scope of the Entitlement Framework, with three post-primary schools to support the education and progression needs of the pupils at key stages 3 and 4.

- Over the past three years, the number of post-primary pupils at key stage 5 undertaking level 3 qualifications in the college has remained relatively steady, with provision offered across a wide range of subjects, appropriately including a good range of STEM. It is a concern, however, that the number of post-primary schools collaborating with the college continues to decrease each year. The number of key stage 4 pupils undertaking programmes at level 2, such as occupational studies or other qualifications as alternatives to GCSEs, has been in decline over the past three years. In one campus, the number of post-primary pupils undertaking these qualifications will cease entirely from the beginning of the next academic year.

- Overall, during the past five years, the number of post-primary pupils enrolling across the college has reduced notably, by approximately 1,000 pupils. The evidence is clear that this decline is impacting adversely on enrolments to full-time level 3 vocational programmes in the college, across a range of professional and technical areas. It has also impacted on staffing models, although the college strategically and successfully seeks and implements funding streams from other projects and initiatives to good effect.

- The decline in post-primary pupils enrolling on programmes in the college represents a serious and urgent policy issue to be addressed between the Departments of Education and the Economy. It is equally disappointing and concerning that a college with an innovative, flexible, STEM-focused and employer-facing curriculum, underpinned by substantive capacity and investment in the highest quality, contemporary education and training infrastructure, is faced with an overly competitive market for young people in which it finds itself at a distinct competitive disadvantage. This is detrimental to the wider career and progression needs and interests of the young people in the broad catchment area of the South West College.

Employer links (economic engagement)

- The development and maintenance of extensive links and partnerships with employers, industry bodies and other key external stakeholders, at local, regional, national and international level are a key feature of the work of the college. These are used to good effect across most of the professional and technical areas evaluated to support curriculum development and delivery, and to improve the employability skills of the students. The Erasmus+ programme, for example, has been used well to support work-experience placements and work-based learning opportunities for the students in a wide range of areas. More needs to be done, however, in a small number of the professional and technical areas to improve links with employers in order to broaden the curriculum offer and develop more work-related learning opportunities for the students.

- The work of the business development unit also provides good opportunities for staff to engage with industry, develop innovative practices, benefit from cutting-edge continuing professional development and further inform curriculum development planning. This enables staff to keep up-to-date with current industry practices and equipment. Through the STEM centre and other initiatives, the unit is beginning to link better with the college's EPIC programme to underpin and expand appropriately the rollout and impact of employer-facing project-based learning techniques. Employers and industry representatives spoken to as part of the evaluation acknowledged and value the good work of the college in supporting innovation and knowledge transfer.

Learning resources

- The college estate, equipment and infrastructure is state of the art; it is extremely well-maintained and highly respected and valued by the students. It will improve further when the creative, innovative and very environmentally-friendly Enniskillen campus comes on stream (September, 2020). Across a majority of the Tier 1 areas, the overall quality of the learning resources is largely outstanding; the students have access to facilities, specialist equipment, staff expertise and technology that is to industry-standard. The workshops, laboratories and catering kitchens reflect high-quality realistic working environments. This is underpinned by high levels of well-targeted and discerning investment, augmented well with sector-leading innovation centres such the CREST, STEM, INNOTEC and IDEAS centres. The levels of investment do not span all of the curriculum areas and there is a need to review the levels of investment in a few of the Tier 1 areas, for example, in health and social care.

- There have been high levels of well thought through investment in digital learning platforms; the evidence from the evaluation shows that these are used by staff and students to good effect to enhance and support the learning, including self-directed learning. There is an appropriate ongoing investment and focus in developing the digital capacity of the lecturers to enhance their digital skillsets to get best use of the digital learning platforms/facilities. Through its development work in digital skills over the past number of years, including virtual learning days and weeks, the college is well-placed to largely run its expansive curriculum virtually if required as the result of adverse weather or other unforeseen circumstances.

Quality improvement planning to sustain improvement

- The self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes are well-embedded across the college, including at course-team level, and have an appropriate focus on improving the quality of learning and teaching. A comprehensive and detailed review of the previous quality improvement plan has been carried out. This informs well the current quality improvement plan, which sets out a range of carefully considered areas for development, with appropriate SMART, detailed targets against which progress can be measured. The quality improvement plan, however, is too detailed and overly operational in nature; the college should consider revising and reducing the content of the plan to include only the absolute key priority areas requiring further improvement.

- High-level data is mostly well used well to inform the quality improvement planning process and it is noteworthy that the college is able to provide a three-year trend of retention, achievement and success data on a course-by-course basis, and over the two-year duration of courses, which is important in accurately reflecting on key performance indicators. The analysis and use by course teams of a broad swathe of data, including relevant internal and external benchmarks by which to evaluate performance, is currently underexploited. The use and analysis of data, at all levels, to inform and support on-going improvement in performance across the college, however, has been identified appropriately by senior leaders as a key priority for further improvement.

- The summary of key findings for each of the professional and technical areas are mostly sound and of a good or better quality. There is a need, however, in a number of the professional and technical areas evaluated, to: use more evaluative language in their evaluations; identify more clearly the key issues and the associated actions needed to deliver improvement to the required level; improve the use and analysis of data, including benchmarks where possible; and comment more evaluatively on the standards of work achieved by the students.

Strategic and middle management

- The college is well-managed at both strategic and operational levels. Senior leaders have a good awareness of key government policies and priorities and are well-informed about the local and regional industry and economic needs. This has helped to inform the college's key strategic priorities and enables the senior leaders to identify clearly the key risks and challenges to the college going forward. Data is also used well to benchmark the performance of the college across the sector and also internally against key performance indicators. Leadership and management of the professional and technical areas evaluated, strategically and operationally, is also strong and effective.

- The college has recently been restructured to better support the delivery of a more cohesive and integrated curriculum provision that is economically relevant and offers a range of appropriate career progression pathways for the students, particularly in STEM-related areas. Senior and middle leaders, along with course teams, are adjusting well to their new roles, responsibilities and reporting structures. While early days, the consultative approach taken to the revised management structure has garnered to good effect the support of leaders, managers and staff at all levels, and is embedding well.

- The governing body is well-informed about the work of the college; members have developed good working relationships and are supportive of management and staff. The governors spoken to during the evaluation report that their engagement with staff is done in a collaborative manner, but with appropriate levels of challenge; they commented particularly on the commitment by senior and middle leaders and staff to improving performance and supporting social inclusion in the best interests of the current and potential students, and the local and regional employers.

- The college prioritises, with good levels of investment, support and encouragement, the continuous professional development of staff. This includes part-time staff, some of whom are funded to complete certificate in teaching or post-graduate certificate in further and higher education qualifications. Staff are also able to enhance their skills and broaden industrial experience through the college's bespoke lecturers into industry scheme, which is valued by them. The curriculum areas evaluated are characterised by high levels of staff expertise, experience and qualifications; many of the lecturers bring contemporary industrial experience and skills that are used well to broaden the learning and teaching.

- The governors, senior and middle leaders report increasing challenges in the recruitment and retention of key staff with contemporary skills, qualifications, knowledge and experience; this is particularly evident in some of the STEM-related economically important areas where there is significant demand, with enhanced salaries, from the private-sector.

3.   EXAMPLES OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

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

1. **Construction, planning and the built environment: the development of links with industry to support curriculum development.**

   The highly effective, sector-leading industry advisory board makes a significant contribution to the work of the college. It provides an effective forum through which employers can input into curriculum development planning, ensuring that the programmes reflect current initiatives in the industry, and their medium and longer-term skills requirements. It also provides a supportive environment through which the members of the forum and college staff can learn from each other and also from expert guest speakers about innovations in design, technology and construction processes.

2. **Business administration, finance and law: integrating innovative learning opportunities for enhanced development of the students' employability and transversal skills.**

   The business curriculum delivers a broad and well-planned range of high quality learning experiences to promote and support successful learning. Across the curriculum area, the learning and teaching strategies used are innovative, promote creative thinking and knowledge development and are tailored appropriately to meet the support needs of the students. Realistic learning experiences such as industry visits and the implementation of bespoke projects and project-based learning activities, such as the development of an innovative board game and events such as the BREXIT debate, support relevant and progressive learning and the development of the students' employability skills, and are well-supported by key business sectors. Access to the college's innovation centres on each campus is a key strength of the curriculum delivery and these are used to very good effect to support the development of the students' wider skills of teamwork, leadership, communication and problem-solving, and improve their levels of confidence and independence.

3. **Engineering and manufacturing technologies: well-targeted course enhancements to provide the full-time students with a range of additional employer-focused occupational skills and short qualifications.**

   A well-designed curriculum provides the full-time students with a broad range of learning experiences that reflect employment opportunities with local engineering manufacturing companies. Industrial scale training equipment in key areas, such as crushing and screening, allows the students to explore and apply their knowledge and understanding of hydraulics and automated control to real-life scenarios. The students also benefit from a range of practical skills workshops, often incorporating short additional qualifications in highly-relevant areas of computer-aided-design, CNC machining, PLC control and welding fabrication. Consequently, the students' learning experiences are authentic and align well to engineering technician roles in industry. They are inspired to learn and develop a broad range of practical skills that are highly valued by engineering employers, and also provide them with a secure platform upon which to develop higher order engineering design and problem-solving capabilities. As a result, the students develop a well-rounded range of technical and employability skills, underpinning outstanding progression rates to higher education, higher level apprenticeships and employment in the engineering industry.

4. **Leadership and management: supporting effective curriculum planning and delivery through the provision of high quality resources.**

   The revised college structure better supports the delivery of a more cohesive and integrated curriculum provision that is economically relevant and offers a range of appropriate career progression pathways for the students across the college, particularly in STEM-related areas. This is underpinned by high levels of well-targeted and discerning investment in the college estate, equipment and infrastructure which are state of the art, extremely well-maintained and highly respected and valued by the staff and students. Students largely have access to facilities, specialist equipment, staff expertise and technology that is to industry-standard, with workshops, laboratories and catering kitchens that reflect high-quality realistic working environments. The range of facilities is also augmented well with sector-leading innovation centres such the CREST, STEM, INNOTEC and IDEAS centres.

4.   AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Going forward, the college needs to:

- review the essential skills provision for those students who have joined without a level 2 qualification in literacy or numeracy, to ensure that they all complete the required essential skills at an appropriate level and in a timely manner. This needs to include a more effective analysis of the available data to monitor attendance in the essential skills lessons, the levels being targeted by the students and the progress being made. The current attainment levels in the essential skills are too low and need to be improved.

- review the curriculum offer and the number of student registrations in a number of the professional and technical areas, including key areas such as construction and health and social care;

- further develop curriculum planning in a small number of professional and technical areas to ensure there is a more cohesive approach to learning and development across the units and various aspects of the provision. This includes continued development of the project-based learning provision, more consistent work-experience opportunities and better integration of enterprise skills development;

- work collaboratively with the other colleges and key stakeholders at the highest strategic levels, including government departments, employer bodies, councils, and governing bodies, to improve the quantity and quality of the enrolments across level 3 provision, and ensure the educational and training provision in the region is coherent and meeting to best effect the economic needs of the area and its young people. There should be particular focus on building more effective, collaborative working with post-primary schools, to reduce the current levels of competition and ensure young people access the best possible pathways that are available to them post-16;

- continue to monitor closely the quality of the learning and teaching to ensure high quality learning experiences are improved further and sustained; and

- further develop the opportunities for the students to benefit from, on a more consistent manner, project-based learning opportunities.

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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