Evaluation: The Curriculum Hubs in the six colleges of Further Education in Northern Ireland

A review of the work undertaken to progress the Development and implementation of the Curriculum Hubs in the six colleges of Further Education in Northern Ireland

March 2022

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Introduction

The [Further Education Means Success Strategy](#), published in 2016 by the Department for the Economy (DfE), set out 21 policy commitments, delivered through eight key projects. Project One focuses on 'Curriculum Content and Delivery' across the Further Education (FE) sector and a key aspect of this project was the designation, development and implementation of Curriculum Hubs (Hubs) in each of the six colleges of FE in Northern Ireland (NI).

The Curriculum Hub concept has involved the designation of a lead college, following a competitive process, as the Hub, in a selected priority and growth sector occupational area, according to the following timeline:

Phase 1, Mar 2018: (Pilot)	Digital Information Technology (Belfast Metropolitan College[1]) Engineering & Advanced Manufacturing (South West College)
Phase 2, Dec 2018:	Construction (South Eastern Regional College) Health & Social Care (North West Regional College) Life Sciences (Southern Regional College)
Phase 3, Feb 2019:	Entrepreneurship (Northern Regional College) Hospitality & Tourism (Belfast Met)

The lead college is required to collaborate with the other five colleges and the aim is to provide a high quality, current, responsive provision and service for learners, employers and other key stakeholders throughout NI. The aim is to provide a consistent approach to the delivery of the respective occupational area across the FE sector using the collective experience and expertise of the six colleges working together. The initiative also provides the FE sector with an opportunity to review its curriculum delivery in line with the regularly updated findings of the evolving operating environment, new strategies and the NI Skills Barometer, to ensure that the sector is aligned with the region's economic needs.

The Hub model was first implemented in 2018 and since then a number of significant changes to the FE sector operating environment flowing from the *FE Means Success Strategy* have occurred, including the introduction of the updated college development planning model, the sector corporate plan and the new planning and performance model.

The DfE commissioned the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to provide an independent evaluation of the work undertaken by the six FE colleges to progress the development and implementation of the Curriculum Hubs.

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[1] Hereafter abbreviated to Belfast Met.

Review objectives

The overarching aim of the evaluation is to determine to what extent:

The strategic vision for the Curriculum Hubs is working, transformative and having a measurable impact.

The objectives of the evaluation are to determine to what extent:

1. the Hubs are well-led and managed;

2. a well-developed, relevant, collaborative and responsive curriculum is evolving, with clear progression pathways for learners and clear evidence of future-proofing;

3. collaborative approaches are being developed to deliver bespoke/ specialist education and training programmes for all learners including adult returners and existing employees, to meet learner and evolving business and industry needs;

4. the Hubs are economically engaged with and responsive to industry and business needs; and

5. the continuous professional learning (CPL) of staff is evolving and being embedded.

Main findings

Objective 1: Leadership and management

The work of the Hubs is aligned to the development of key strategic and economic drivers such as DfE's draft NI Skills Strategy and various curriculum policy initiatives that are on-going or imminent and as part of the planning for recovery and transition across the colleges as an outworking of the Covid-19 pandemic (the pandemic).

All of the colleges have submitted Hub action plans to DfE which detail the ongoing work undertaken by them to meet their objectives. An effective process is in place with the colleges submitting regular reviews of the plans, with a RAG status, to DfE's Curriculum Hub Oversight Group. The group meets on a quarterly basis to enable each of the Hub Managers to report progress against their respective action plans and share any key learning messages or identify issues that they are experiencing.

The Hub action plans should be further developed to: capture more effectively the impact of the work of the respective Hub on the quality of the provision and on the outcomes for learners across the colleges; recognise the achievements to date; and, more formally capture the employer voice.

There are well-embedded Quality Improvement Planning (QIP) processes across the colleges. However, in the majority of colleges, within their QIP process, there is no evaluation of the impact of the work of the Hubs on their provision. In all of the colleges, this should be developed to include all aspects of their involvement in the Hubs, not just for the occupational area for which they are the lead.

All of the Hub managers lead and manage the Hubs effectively. They are dedicated and committed to their role and are supported well by their own lead college staff and senior management. However different management structures are in place across the Hubs. As a consequence, the inability of more junior staff to take decisions can, at times, slow down decision-making or the implementation of actions needed to take forward the work of a Hub.

The management teams of the colleges are committed to the operation and ongoing development of the Hubs. This includes the integration of the work of the Hub with other key college services such as the Design Innovation for Assisted Living (DIAL) centre in health and social care[2]; the significant investment in dedicated specialist equipment or accommodation, for example, the Belfast Met live digital studio as part of the digital IT Hub and the automation and project-based learning (PBL) centre as part of the engineering and advanced manufacturing Hub[3]. There has also been the identification by the colleges of the potential to develop curriculum Hubs in other priority and growth sector occupational areas, for example, business and management, transportation, hydrogen fuel technology and creativity and innovation.

> As a result of the South West College's leadership of the engineering and advanced manufacturing Hub, the college senior management team have invested in the re-purposing of the STEM Centre in the Dungannon campus to specialise in project-based learning, automation, robotics and cyber security. This decision was informed by lessons learned by Hub partners on national and international visits to other colleges. While the physical manufacturing stations will be based in Dungannon, all of the colleges will have access through cloud-based simulations and online resources. Links have also been established with the digital IT Hub to increase collaboration in overlapping areas of interest, including cyber security.

As a consequence of skills shortages, the recruitment of new lecturers and the retention of existing ones, in a number of current Hub areas, such as construction, IT, engineering and hospitality, is an issue and a challenge for the colleges at present. This is a risk to the sustainability of the work of the Hubs.

A clear governance structure has been put in place by DfE; three groups are tasked with the oversight and management of the Hubs across the colleges. The first two, the College Curriculum Hub Group and the Curriculum Hub Oversight Group have been proactive in the development of the Hubs across the various priority and growth sector occupational areas to date. There is, however, a disconnect in the function of the third group, the Strategic Governance Group, in implementing the accountability arrangements in place for the Hubs as specified in its terms of reference. The roles and responsibilities of this group, as well as the frequency of its meetings should be addressed going forward.

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[2] North West Regional College
[3] South West College

In the wider sense of governance, the colleges have identified the need to develop a process to allow college governors involved in Hub work to meet and engage with their peers from across the colleges.

During the evaluation, reference was made by a number of employers and stakeholders to the sectoral partnership fora developed by DfE, in addition to those formed by the college Hubs. The evaluation has highlighted that clarification is required regarding the work and role of the various sectoral bodies, to avoid duplication and to differentiate between the remit of the Hubs and any other working groups or bodies at an operational or strategic level.

Summary: The main points under Objective 1 are summarised below.

- There is effective management of the designated Curriculum Hubs across the colleges, including the development of detailed action plans to underpin the work undertaken by them to meet the Hub objectives.

- The Hub action plans should be further developed to capture more effectively the impact of the work of the respective Hub on the quality of the provision and on the outcomes for learners across the colleges.

- There is a disconnect in the function of the Strategic Governance Group in implementing the accountability arrangements in place for the Hubs as specified in its terms of reference.

- Clarification is required regarding the work and role of the various sectoral bodies, to avoid duplication and to differentiate between the remit of the Hubs and any other working groups or bodies at an operational or strategic level.

Objective 2: Curriculum

The Colleges have undertaken significant work across the designated Curriculum Hub related to: curriculum review; the review and adaptation of learning and assessment strategies; the development of contemporary careers information; and, the development and sharing of resources. College recruitment is being adversely impacted by demographic changes, in addition to increasing numbers of learners enrolling on full time higher education courses. This has been a consequence of decisions associated with A-level grading and universities offering unconditional places prior to results being issued, as well as an increased number of places allocated to universities. In addition, the pandemic has caused variability in the pace of development of the traineeships programme across the designated curriculum areas.

The colleges have recognised the need to support learners to overcome gaps in their learning as a result of the pandemic; there are learners who have experienced a range of social and emotional challenges, including lack of motivation and confidence.

Learners reported that their experiences of the Hubs in the colleges were positive, that their levels of skills and confidence have increased as a result of their training and they have received high levels of support from lecturers. They also mentioned the value their employers place on the qualifications and skills they develop through participation on their courses.

The work of the Hubs has identified a range of relevant progression pathways for learners across all of the designated curriculum areas and these have been translated into a series of clear and easy-to-read progression pathway charts. Input from employers and key stakeholders has informed the work, including the identification of skills gaps and development of new qualifications, to ensure that the curriculum meets the needs of industry.

Numerous examples of effective curriculum development and practice exist across the curriculum areas.

In health and social care, a detailed review of the curriculum has been carried out resulting in the formation of sub-groups focusing on core curriculum areas, which meet the learning and progression needs of the learners, employers and the sector. The health and social care teams, in each of the colleges, have worked collaboratively through the Hub to adapt learning and assessment strategies and agree mitigation processes as a result of the pandemic.

> The Design Innovation for Assisted Living (DIAL) centre is a health innovation Hub, set within the North West Regional College, integrating education, business and health and social care within a state of the art facility. Through effective stakeholder collaboration, the Hub aims to impact positively on health and wellbeing, adopting key principles such as prevention, active ageing, e-health, community based living, independence and dignity and acts as a focal point for the development and sharing of an innovative and relevant curriculum offer. It provides a high quality simulated learning environment in which to prepare health and social care learners for work in emerging roles. Through cross-curricular masterclasses and workshops, learners work in a multi-disciplinary way and are immersed in thinking innovatively to identify and address unmet need, with an emphasis placed on home care, client enablement and self-management and the use of digital skills to support digital health solutions. DIAL also supports the potential economic development of industry and commercial companies in areas such as digital, housing and engineering through product research, innovation, design and showcasing.

In entrepreneurship, the Hub has been instrumental in supporting a collaborative approach by the colleges to the development of progression pathways in entrepreneurship at levels 2, 3 and 4.

The ongoing development of the cross-sector PBL competition by the Northern Regional College, through the Curriculum Hub for entrepreneurship, has raised the profile of entrepreneurship and the benefits of this approach in promoting learning and skills development across all of the colleges. The opportunities provided for professional dialogue generated through the work of the entrepreneurship Hub has been a catalyst for a more structured approach to the implementation and development of PBL across the colleges, commensurate with each college's progress in embedding PBL and entrepreneurship within their curriculum planning. Learners report positively on their experiences in PBL and the cross-sector competition, resulting in opportunities for them to: work as team members; develop their communication and interpersonal skills; improve their levels of confidence; and overall employability skills; and, for some learners providing ongoing opportunities to develop further their innovative ideas and for others to get involved in international projects.

In engineering and advanced manufacturing there has been a review and streamlining of the complex engineering curriculum offer across levels 2 to 6, aimed at determining commonality, reducing duplication and identifying important new areas for development to ensure, as far as possible, that the curriculum meets the current and future needs of industry. Productive work has been carried out by the colleges on new areas such as *railway* and *print and packaging* resulting in innovative apprenticeship pathways being developed for employers. A comprehensive risk-rating of the curriculum has also identified very clearly the strengths and expertise held in each college and also identifies appropriate areas for further development.

In construction, significant curriculum developments have taken place through collaborative working by staff across the colleges, including the revision of the traineeship in carpentry and joinery, with further revisions in electrical and plumbing planned. Action has also been taken to address skills deficits in a number of occupational areas including the introduction of a level 3 apprenticeship framework in *fire and security* and the development of a programme for *automatic entrance systems* to support the emerging needs of the employers. Planned ongoing curriculum developments include level 5 qualifications in green technology and retrofitting developments[4].

In life sciences, the learners particularly highlighted the relevance of the curriculum, the opportunities to develop their practical skills, the support they receive to secure work placements and prepare for competitions, the opportunities for them to retrain in science and their improved levels of confidence, competence and resilience. In entrepreneurship, learners interviewed from three of the colleges were very positive about their experiences in PBL and the cross-sector competition, resulting in opportunities for them to: work as team members; develop their communication and interpersonal skills; improve their levels of confidence and overall employability skills; and, have ongoing opportunities to get involved in international projects. Learners

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[4] Retrofitting is the addition of new technology or features to older systems, for example the improving of existing buildings with energy efficiency equipment.

from the Belfast Met have engaged through PBL with learners in the USA. In engineering and advanced manufacturing, the learners were very positive about their experiences, in particular they valued the experience of working in industry while learning and the opportunities to gain recognised qualifications that should help them progress in their career.

In hospitality and tourism, the Hub has worked hard to develop a common curriculum resulting in approved qualifications at level 2 and level 3, for example *commis chef* and *production chef* and further work is on-going to launch new level 3 frameworks in September 2022. It has also successfully led in the development of a new foundation degree in hospitality and tourism, with five of the six colleges actively included in the consortium.

> A "Hospitality and Tourism Recovery Programme", identified by industry representatives, was introduced by Belfast Met through the hospitality and tourism Hub and delivered by all six colleges, to support management and staff across the sector as they moved through the pandemic restrictions and into recovery. The programme included a "Management Skills Spotlight Series" of four webinars to support managers to build skills, gain knowledge and share experiences facilitated by guest speakers, industry representatives and college lecturing staff; an online leadership and management programme to support managers gain skills in leadership, motivation, team dynamics and communication, with the opportunity to undertake a leadership and management qualification at level 3; and a series of "Technical Skills" masterclasses to provide a range of online skills-based learning sessions to support managers and/or their staff in specialist, bespoke skill areas, for example, "Using Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) Technologies for Tourism Businesses" and a "Chocolatier Workshop". Employers reported that their staff benefitted greatly through participation on the programme citing, in particular, improved morale and higher levels of confidence.

While the remit of the Hubs is to lead all developments of new curriculum opportunities in conjunction with the other colleges, there have been a small number of instances where colleges have identified and developed programmes of study outside of the Hub structure; for example, the development of qualifications for a local or niche purpose or for specialist provision. It is important that innovation in curriculum development such as this is not constrained and is allowed to continue to meet specific need, albeit in a controlled and appropriately monitored manner.

Summary: The main points under Objective 2 are summarised below.

- There is positive feedback from learners about the impact of the work of the Hubs and the value their employers place on the qualifications and skills they develop through participation.

- The colleges are working hard and successfully or with some success to advance the Hub concept, particularly in the review and development of the curriculum and the identification of relevant progression pathways for learners.

Objective 3: Collaborative approaches

The collaborative work of staff across the Hubs has supported well the development of a broad range of high quality learning and teaching resources, including exemplar assignments, schemes of work and sample material, which are highly valued by lecturing staff across the designated curriculum areas. The resources have been developed using a range of online applications and are shared through the dedicated online platforms that have been set up in each of the Hubs. A key outworking is the strengthening of communication and development of high levels of engagement and collaboration between relevant staff across the college Hubs. Staff report that they value the peer support and professional development that they receive, that the lead colleges are open and transparent and keep them informed and involved in curriculum developments, professional learning events and other ongoing developments, mainly through the dedicated Hub online platforms.

> Southern Regional College, as lead for the life sciences Hub, has worked collaboratively with the other five colleges to develop resources for the Regulated Qualifications Framework Level 3 Applied Sciences qualification. The units have been distributed across the colleges to match the particular skills and expertise of staff who are developing resources for them. The resources are shared using a Microsoft Teams site, accessible across the colleges for both Hub members and college teams. This efficient process of developing new resources for a new qualification demonstrates how the Hub has developed a culture of trust and sharing across the colleges in the area of life sciences, with most (approximately 80%) of the proposed units completed to date.

Across the Hubs, the effective collaborative working partnerships developed have also supported the development of positive working relationships with awarding bodies, leading to one centralised point of contact regarding the development of new qualifications.

In the construction, life sciences and entrepreneurship Hubs, a collaborative approach has been taken by staff across the colleges, in conjunction with universities, employers and other key stakeholders, to identify and develop clear progression pathways for learners from level 2 to level 5. In construction, the development of sector partnerships has led to the sharing of effective practice with other curriculum areas and across other curriculum Hubs; through involvement with stakeholder forums, the Hub manager provides a good oversight of sectoral and industry needs to inform effectively the work of the Hub. In life sciences, the appropriate link to the work of the DfE's life sciences sector partnership forum, through the Hub manager's secretariat role, also provides the college with an oversight of the work and key issues pertaining to both the forum and the Hub.

In digital IT, the Hub staff have clearly mapped out the entry points and identified clear progression pathways for learners from levels 1 to 6. The progression of learners into work has been supported through a partnership programme with the Royal Air Force to develop a range of wider skills, including team working and self-confidence. The

effective sector partnerships developed have been used to review the needs of the sector, plan activities and to raise awareness of training opportunities going forward. Membership includes larger IT companies, the public sector and higher education representatives. A key success of the Hub, to date, has been the development of new *cybersecurity* and *digital forensics* qualifications at level 3, to meet the needs of employers in the sector. A partnership has been established with the Open University to provide a new shorter higher education progression pathway, consisting of a two-year plus one-year top-up to degree level 6 articulation, for learners on the two-year foundation degree programme in computing/software engineering.

In hospitality and tourism, the Hub is leading conversations with higher education institutions to address gaps at levels 4 and 5 for culinary arts. Due to a number of factors, but particularly the pandemic and its impact on the hospitality and tourism industries, there has been no active participation with a formal sector partnership in hospitality and tourism over the past two years. The partnership has been relaunched, however, with the identification of three working groups in hospitality culinary, hospitality front of house and tourism, events and aviation. Good work has also been carried out by the Hub to develop a wider collaborative network through partnership and membership of key stakeholder groups which represents all of the FE sector, for example, the NI Tourism Alliance (NITA), Hospitality and Tourism Skills (HATS) and Springboard where the Hub manager also sits on the advisory board. The Hub is also working hard to raise standards across colleges through participation in competitions and this needs to be resourced adequately in each college. Very good links have been established with the Salon Culinaire Director for IFEX and local finals of Futurechef competitions are being hosted in colleges, which in turn promotes the industry to teachers and pupils from post-primary schools.

> Springboard is a charitable organisation that champions the hospitality and tourism industry, promoting it to young people in schools, the unemployed and people living in poverty as a rewarding and worthwhile education and career pathway. The Curriculum Hub for hospitality and tourism has identified the valuable role that Springboard plays in attracting young people into education and fully supports the hospitality and tourism programmes provided to schools and the wider community. Furthermore, the Curriculum Hub manager plays an active role representing the FE sector as a member of the NI Springboard Advisory Forum which consists of a wide range of local stakeholders, employers and celebrity chefs who meet monthly to promote, advise and steer Springboard activities at a local and regional level, forging links with education providers such as teachers and careers services and employers from the wider hospitality and tourism sectors to secure and provide the future pipeline of talent into the sector.

All of the colleges have appointed a WorldSkills educator, as part of WorldSkills UK's new Centre of Excellence. They have been assigned to almost all of the designated Hub areas with the aim of developing high standards of skills training and building upon the colleges' previous involvement and successes in national, European and international WorldSkills competitions. In engineering and advanced manufacturing, for example, the role of WorldSkills competitions has been recognised by the Hub as an opportunity to develop high levels of skills in new areas such as automation and robotics through mentoring, cross-college working and collaboration.

Summary: The main points under Objective 3 are summarised below.

- The strengthening of communication and high levels of engagement between relevant staff from across the colleges is productive, including through the shared use of digital platforms to support collaborative working in the development of a broad range of high quality learning and teaching resources.

- Collaborative approaches have been taken by staff across the colleges, in conjunction with universities, employers and other key stakeholders, to identify and develop clear progression pathways for learners.

Objective 4: Economic engagement

The lead colleges are the main conduit for the development of links and partnerships, gathering intelligence on economic trends and local, national and international practice, including taking cognisance of the NI Skills Barometer and other government priorities to inform and direct the work of the Hub. There is a key role for the Hubs in supporting inward investment and DfE's emerging international strategy, although it is recognised that the pandemic has had a significant impact on the development of international engagement work.

In construction, engineering and advanced manufacturing, health and social care, life sciences, digital IT and hospitality and tourism the Hubs have played a pivotal role in the development and production of high quality bulletins and e-zines by DfE's Careers Service Occupational Information Unit. The bulletins have the potential to encourage new entrants and go some way to address the issue of falling applications. They provide careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) through clearly presented key fact infographics about the industry, video testimonials and short biographies from prior learners, as well as information on courses and links to further information. The utilisation of these bulletins by DfE's Careers Service, could support well a communication strategy to ensure schools, parents, teachers, young people and employers are better informed about the significant potential of the FE sector to provide a specialist contemporary curriculum with excellent progression pathways to upskill and reskill the future workforce.

Increasing the number of people choosing IT as a career has been a key focus and success of the digital IT Hub given the growth of the local industry and the opportunities within it. A wide range of initiatives have been used or connected through the work of the Hub to attract new entrants including: Belfast IT Girls to attract females; BringITOn, Coder DoJo and Capture the Flag to engage young people; Your Child Their Future to raise awareness among parents and use of the Assured Skills and Flexible Skills programmes to facilitate individuals to reskill for the IT industry. The Hub has also created three interactive, informative and engaging careers publications for different career pathways in IT and are currently working on a fourth.

Across the Hubs effective links and partnerships have been established with a wide range of employers, industry bodies, awarding organisations and other key stakeholders to support their collective economic engagement strategies. The Hubs have continued to build further on the good work already done across the FE sector to support high levels of economic engagement with industry.

In life sciences, for example, the well-developed links and relationships with larger employers have had a positive impact on the development of higher level provision. The employers have also been consulted about the selection of optional units on level 2 and 3 programmes and on the opportunities for learners to undertake work placements.

The effective work undertaken through the Hub with employers and sector and awarding bodies in construction has identified skills gaps that need to be addressed and has supported the development and implementation of contemporary construction technologies and practices.

In health and social care, there has been effective collaboration with industry and key stakeholders including the health and social care regulatory authority, to inform better the transformation of service provision and to identify and meet emerging curricular needs, such as dementia awareness and end of life care, as well as the development of relevant, contemporary online programmes to better meet the needs of industry, unpaid carers and the wider community. The positive feedback from the sector representatives interviewed about the work of the Hub reflects the high quality engagement, effective communication and strong collegial working to: support caring services and professions allied to medicine across the private, independent and public sectors; and, inform curriculum planning and the development of associated career progression pathways. This includes the development and growth of national and international links and partnerships to support the on-going work of the Hub, which has continued throughout the pandemic, for example, the Global Health webinar organised and delivered in association with St Petersburg College in Florida.

In digital IT, economic engagement has led to the development of a wide range of interventions to meet industry needs through the DfE's Assured Skills, Flexible Skills and Future Skills programmes and the provision of recognised vendor qualifications. The Hub has also identified appropriate priorities going forward including developing cybersecurity in schools, the international exchange of good practice, artificial intelligence (AI) including industrial AI in conjunction with the engineering and advanced manufacturing Hub and the development of the traineeship programme.

In engineering and advanced manufacturing, a highly effective sector partnership has been established which is well-led, meets regularly, is well attended and has had a positive impact. The work of the Hub has built upon existing good links with industry, nurturing and developing a strong intelligence network through a broad range of employers, with an effective geographic spread across NI. The employers spoke very positively about the benefits of membership, including: the opportunity to input into the design of curriculum content and qualification frameworks which they feel is valued and that their voices are listened to; the networking opportunities which can lead to, for example, new supply chains/suppliers being identified; and the ability to benchmark and improve their training through positive engagement with each other and the

colleges. Employer feedback suggests that as a result of the work of the Hub they are more aware of the provision available across the six colleges and the opportunities this presents to improve their own business. The sector partnership has also informed opportunities for future growth as well as challenges such as the impact of climate change regulation and policies, developments in automation and gaps in the groups' knowledge and experience. This information has been used to widen membership through connecting with other employers, sourcing new programmes, identifying CPL needs and to inform future action planning.

The pace at which the Hubs are developing their role as co-ordinators of specialist providers for industry and businesses across the sectors, in the development of a sector wide client record management system for example, is slower than expected and should be addressed going forward. Any existing processes in place across the colleges, or any systems currently in place or developed by DfE, that would support the Hubs should be utilised.

Summary: The main points under Objective 4 are summarised below.

- The high levels of economic engagement across the colleges through the formation of appropriate sector partnerships that builds further on the good practice already established by the FE sector.

- The strategic role and profile of the Hubs needs to be raised, particularly in promoting and attracting inward investment along with the continued development and utilisation of contemporary careers information, advice and guidance for learners and parents.

- The pace at which the Hubs are developing their role as co-ordinators of specialist providers for industry and businesses across the sectors is slower than expected and should be addressed going forward.

Objective 5: Continuous professional learning

Good opportunities are provided for staff, across the designated Hub areas, to engage in professional dialogue and undertake relevant CPL. Across the Hubs skills audits have been carried out to support the effective provision of relevant CPL, much of which has been delivered through online webinars and training sessions since the onset of the pandemic.

Staff in the South Eastern Regional College (SERC) have developed an innovative Microsoft Teams site for the learners on construction programmes. In one repository, the site embeds all the relevant digital platforms including: the virtual learning environment; the learners' digital portfolios of evidence, a facility to share evidence for external quality assurance which also includes a link for parents and guardians; and a bespoke tracker where all staff can record the learners' progress in the development of their transversal skills. This resource has been showcased across the construction Hub and also with the managers of the engineering and advanced manufacturing and the digital IT Hubs.

In the entrepreneurship Hub, for example, there is good evidence of developments in digital delivery, the use of a shared learning platform and associated resources to support the enhancement and focus on entrepreneurship across the colleges. In digital IT, additional support is provided for staff across the colleges through a series of online workshops to share expertise and develop skills in the delivery of a common curriculum at level 3.

In health and social care, opportunities have been provided for staff across the colleges, as well as industry practitioners, to undertake relevant CPL in areas such as counselling skills and mental health awareness and to showcase technology enhanced learning tools in order to support and improve the delivery of online and blended learning. In life sciences there has been a focus on the development of skills related to the use of industry standard, specialist equipment.

The engineering and advanced manufacturing Hub has sourced appropriate training for staff across the colleges in areas such as automation, artificial Intelligence, robotics and welding. The colleges are also appropriately investing in upskilling lecturers in current industrial practice and for knowledge transfer to employers. In construction, a number of relevant professional learning opportunities have been provided for staff through the work of the Hub including advanced surveying technology, computer numerical control training, Microsoft Teams training, Sketch-up training and PassivHaus training.

In digital IT, the lead and partner colleges have benefited significantly from joint professional learning in areas identified as a high priority for development through economic and employer engagement, for example, Python programming, cybersecurity and data analytics. Hub members also valued the opportunity to undertake vendor certified qualifications and opportunities to network and share experience and best practice.

In construction, digital IT and hospitality and tourism, lecturers across the colleges have participated in qualification workshops to ensure that a standardised approach is applied in the roll out of the new Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF). Further professional development, such as seafood masterclasses, is also being planned for lecturing staff in hospitality and tourism.

Going forward, there is a need to develop the provision of cross-sector CPL in areas such as the development and assessment of transversal skills[5] and in the pedagogy for PBL. In addition, upskilling is needed for lecturers, across the Hubs, in new and emerging technologies in order to meet the needs of the draft Skills Strategy for NI, to ensure that the Hubs remain contemporary in terms of skills development and meeting industry needs.

The current processes for developing and approving bids for the professional development for staff, by both DfE and the colleges, are not as efficient as they could be and, at times, have resulted in delays in the provision of training; they need to be reviewed and improved.

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[5] Skills that are typically considered as not specifically related to a particular job, task, academic discipline or area of knowledge and that can be used in a wide variety of situations and work settings (for example, organisational skills) - UNESCO

Summary: The main points under Objective 5 are summarised below.

- Good opportunities have been provided for staff to undertake relevant, contemporary CPL.

- The provision for continuing cross-sector CPL, upskilling staff to meet the needs of the draft Skills Strategy for NI and reviewing the processes used to approve funding for CPL across the Hubs are priorities for improvement.

Conclusion

The strategic vision for the Curriculum Hubs is working.

The colleges are working collaboratively, in the context of the pandemic, to develop Hub provision across the designated areas. While they are at different stages of development, in line with their starting points, it is clear that they are led and managed effectively, that good progression has been made in the review and standardisation of curriculum. Consequently, there are clear progression pathways for learners and staff across the curriculum areas have worked together to develop high quality resources, engage in professional dialogue and undertake relevant CPL that will support staff and learners going forward. The recruitment of new lecturers, as well as the retention of existing ones, is an ongoing challenge for the colleges at present and a risk to the sustainability of the work of the Hubs.

The strategic vision for the Curriculum Hubs is transformative.

Collaborative work has been established across the colleges which has resulted in: high levels of engagement and the sharing of new ideas and good practice, which is informed well by the research of relevant policies, economic intelligence, improved stakeholder links and engagement and international best practice. There is evidence, from the examples of effective practice identified across the Hubs that it is transformative and can have a significant impact on the quality of provision across the FE sector in NI.

The strategic vision for the Curriculum Hubs is having a measurable impact.

Good work has been done in forming sector partnerships with industry, employers and other key stakeholders to support economic engagement and build on the good work already done by the FE sector in this area. This includes the development of programmes to re-skill or up-skill employees, the use of Government skills funds to develop and deliver bespoke training programmes and the provision of professional qualifications to support industry and employees, particularly on their path to recovery, transition and continuity in learning as the outworking of the pandemic continues to unfold.

However, challenges remain for the colleges including the need to: raise the profile of the Hubs; co-ordinate and report more effectively on levels of economic engagement, particularly in promoting and attracting inward investment; and develop further the international dimension that has been adversely impacted by the pandemic.

Appendix A: Methodology and evidence base

In advance of the evaluation ETI met with DfE officials to develop the terms of reference and also met with the quality managers across the colleges to plan the format of the visits aligned to the review objectives.

The evaluation visits to the six colleges took place during October and November 2021 and were carried out on a hybrid approach (on-site and virtual). Each college was visited by a small team lead by a Reporting Inspector (RI) and at least one specialist inspector for the Curriculum Hub area being evaluated.

The visits to each college took place over two days, with oral feedback provided at the end of day two to the senior leader(s) and governors, Hub managers and relevant staff and representatives from the DfE's FE Delivery, Quality and International teams; the feedback highlighted key findings and any areas for focus for the colleges going forward.

During the review ETI teams engaged in discussion with the seven Hub Managers, 27 senior managers and 43 middle managers across the colleges, four representatives from the colleges' governing bodies, 84 college staff and 39 other stakeholders, including representatives from relevant sectoral bodies, advisory fora, awarding organisations and employers. Focus groups were held across the designated Curriculum Hubs areas with 73 learners interviewed in total. A professional dialogue also took place with members of the DfE's Curriculum Hub Oversight Group and the Strategic Governance Group as part of the evaluation.

A short report letter, outlining the main findings and areas to focus on going forward, was produced for issue to each of the lead colleges and the DfE. ETI also provided oral feedback through an executive summary of findings to DfE officials.

This more detailed overview report for publication provides the main findings, including an evaluation on the impact of the strategic vision for the development and implementation of the Hubs across the FE colleges.

Appendix B: Reporting terms used by the Education and Training Inspectorate

Quantitative terms

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%