

# An evaluation of the Traineeship Programme

in Northern Ireland's Further  
Education Colleges

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Education and  
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Empowering Improvement

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Throughout this report, where text is accompanied by an asterisk, this indicates that additional information can be found in Appendix 1: Notes

All data used for the evaluation and presented in this report has been supplied and verified by the colleges at the time of the evaluation.

## Introduction

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) was commissioned by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to evaluate the Traineeship Programme across Northern Ireland's six further education colleges (colleges). The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the extent to which the Traineeship Programme is realising the strategic vision and aims of "Generating our Success: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Youth Training" (Strategy)\* and DfE's economic vision of facilitating access to good jobs. The Terms of Reference for the evaluation are set out in Appendix 2.

## Policy context and implementation

The Traineeship Programme, developed by the colleges in response to the then Department for Employment and Learning's (DEL - now known as the Department for the Economy) Strategy for Youth Training (2015), aims to equip learners with broad-based professional and technical skills and knowledge through a new Level 2 vocational education and training programme.

The key objectives underpinning a new Level 2 vocational education and training programme, as set out in the Strategy's vision, are that the programme will be:

- a key part of the wider education and skills landscape, matched to the needs of young people, employers and the wider economy;
- provide a high-quality parallel route to the traditional academic pathway, with opportunities for professional education and training to facilitate progression to sustained employment, an apprenticeship or further education;
- be centred on the career aspirations and needs of young people, offering an innovative and engaging curriculum, and will be a conduit to support their ongoing career development;
- promote active employer-engagement, through designing its content and delivery to support the development of well-qualified and skilled workforce that can facilitate business and economic growth; and
- be recognised both nationally and internationally by employers, further and higher education providers, young people, parents and guardians, for its quality, flexibility and relevance.

Consequently, Traineeships, in line with the Strategy's Policy Commitment 3 were developed by the colleges to provide broad-based baccalaureate-style professional and technical awards at Level 2, intended to equate to a minimum of five GCSEs at grades A\* to C, including English and mathematics qualifications at Level 2. Additional occupational-specific qualifications, tailored to industry sector requirements, may also be included within Traineeship awards.

Following a period of development, piloting and reviewing\* possible curricular solutions for a new Level 2 vocational education and training programme, the Traineeship Programme was launched in 2021/2022. The programme commenced with 50 Traineeships offered across all the colleges in ten vocational areas. Since then, the number of Traineeships has expanded to 110, offered in 46 broad vocational areas. Just over half (52%) of the Traineeships are one-year programmes, with the remainder being two-year programmes. The two-year Traineeships are typically aligned to the professional and technical areas associated with traditional apprenticeships.

The curriculum provision underpinning the Traineeship Programme aims to provide learners with a broad-based professional and technical learning programme, across a range of vocational areas, to ensure that they have the relevant knowledge and skills at Level 2 that can help them access employment opportunities or progress to study at a higher level.

The colleges also offer an additional curricular pathway for learners to achieve vocational qualifications at Level 2 but with literacy and/or numeracy qualifications at Level 1 rather than at Level 2. At the time of the evaluation this was known as the Introductory Phase of a Traineeship. This additional pathway widens access to Level 2 vocational provision, especially to accommodate learners with low levels of prior attainment in GCSEs English and mathematics.

Learner enrolments to Traineeships have increased steadily from 659 in the first year (2021/2022) to 3,417 in 2024/25. At the time of the evaluation, 3,417 learners were enrolled across all the colleges, with 2,360 (69%) on a Traineeship and, 1,057 (31%) on an Introductory Phase of the Traineeship for those learners who did not meet the minimum entry requirements for a Traineeship. Learners on the Introductory Phase were targeting the Level 2 vocational qualifications associated with a Traineeship along with essential skills qualifications in literacy and/or numeracy at Level 1 (classified in this report as a “Traineeship with Level 1 essential skills”).

The Traineeships are offered to learners aged 16 and above. In 2023/2024, most learners enrolled were aged 18 years or under (89%), with a small number aged 19 to 24 years (9%) or 25 years and over (2%).

## Evaluation methodology

Over the period from November 2024 to January 2025, ETI conducted evaluation visits to all six colleges. Inspectors observed learning, teaching and training and engaged with learners, college staff, parents, employers and other key stakeholders. They reviewed relevant documentation, learners’ work, child and adult protection policies and procedures, and key performance data. Learners were given the opportunity to complete a confidential online questionnaire prior to the evaluation visits.

Along with this overall sector-wide evaluation report of the Traineeship Programme, college-specific evaluations of each college’s Traineeship Programme are also available on ETI’s [website](#).

# Summary

## Key findings

### Curriculum and skills development

- The Traineeship offer across the colleges includes a broad range of vocational subject areas, reflecting the professional and technical learning and skills development needs of the learners and the wider economy. A good range of high-quality learning resources and specialist accommodation, which are often to industry standards, supports the delivery of the associated curriculum to recognised occupational standards.
- The learners are provided with good opportunities to develop their digital skills; various approaches provide them with a wide range of digital learning experiences, including the use of proprietary software packages associated with their professional and technical area and employment opportunities.
- There is a significant variation in the arrangements for the assessment of transversal skills; a more cohesive approach needs to be adopted across the colleges to ensure consistency of practice.
- The Introductory Phase of a Traineeship lacks sufficient clarity in its distinctiveness, purpose and associated programme design, limiting its effectiveness in meeting the additional or diverse needs of learners. This provision does not align completely with the policy intent of the Strategy for Youth Training.

### Learner progression and outcomes

- The Traineeship qualifications, although they can be attained at Level 2, when combined with Level 2 essential skills do not equate to a minimum of five GCSEs at grades A\* to C, as envisaged in the Strategy for Youth Training. It is therefore important that all learners and stakeholders are informed that Traineeship awards with Level 2 essential skills qualifications in literacy and numeracy do not combine to equate to five GCSEs, including English and mathematics, at grades A\* to C. Learners should, however, continue to be made aware of the recognised career progression pathways from Traineeships to the next stages of education, training or employment.
- The overall outcomes\* for both the one- and two-year Traineeships over the period 2021/22 to 2023/24, are too low. Of the 1,128 learners who started a two-year programme, only 22% achieved all their Traineeship qualifications at Level 2. Similarly, of the 769 learners who started a one-year programme, only 29% achieved the same.
- Of the 1,897 learners who started either a one- or two-year Traineeship Programme, 39% completed and progressed to a higher-level education or training programme, with a further 20% gaining employment on completion of their Traineeship.

## Quality of learning, teaching and training

- The vocational teaching and training sessions observed were mostly effective in developing the learners' professional and technical skills and knowledge to a good or better standard. Deployment of effective project-based learning (PBL) approaches enhanced the learners' opportunities to acquire and apply holistically the occupational and transversal skills necessary for the workplace.
- In contrast, the quality of the learning and teaching for essential skills is not effective enough in just over one-quarter of the lessons observed.
- Staff across the colleges are suitably qualified with professional and technical expertise and experience in their vocational areas and are provided with good opportunities to undertake a range of relevant professional learning to support and underpin the aims of the Traineeship Programme.

## Delivery of essential skills and GCSEs English and mathematics

- Achievement rates for essential skills, particularly in numeracy, are too low, which impacts negatively on the overall outcomes of Traineeships. The overall outcomes, which are similar across the one- and two-year programmes, for the reporting period 2021/22-2023/24, at Level 2, are: literacy at 42% and numeracy at 15%.
- The level at which learners study essential skills needs to be better informed by each learner's prior attainment and the outcomes of the initial and diagnostic assessments. Too many learners who enrol on a Traineeship with a grade D in GCSE English and/or mathematics are studying at Level 1 in the respective essential skills.
- The uptake of GCSE English and/or mathematics is very low. In addition, access to this provision is mainly through twilight or evening classes, which often does not suit the learners.

## Work placement and employer engagement

- The well-established employer engagement across all the colleges has not resulted consistently in a sufficient number of work placement opportunities for learners, which are crucial for supporting them to develop practical occupational skills associated with their vocational qualifications and enhance their career progression opportunities.
- Almost one-quarter (24%) of the learners on the two-year Traineeship transferred to the Level 2 ApprenticeshipsNI programme during the period of their Traineeship, which is notably different from the one-year Traineeship at less than 5%.

## Careers, support and guidance

- Almost all the learners reported positively about their experiences on the Traineeship Programme, acknowledging the strong learner support services, access to high-quality learning resources, industry-standard training facilities, and the relevant career guidance available to them. Most learners value the professional and technical skills they are developing and are aware of the vocational pathways available to them beyond their Traineeship.
- Almost all of the parents, employers, and stakeholders who met with inspectors provided positive feedback about the Traineeship Programme, noting the additional learner support, high-quality learning resources, and progression opportunities for learners.
- It is a notable challenge that a significant minority of the learners entering the Traineeship Programme, including the Introductory Phase, present with low levels of academic achievement, including low attainment in English and mathematics, and often face complex barriers to learning and progression. More needs to be done to meet better the complex learning support and progression needs of these learners.

## Collaboration and continuous improvement

- There is a strong commitment and high levels of collaboration from curriculum leaders and staff across all the colleges to the ongoing development of the Traineeship Programme and the associated policy commitments within the Strategy for Youth Training. Together, they share a vision of the key role the Traineeship Programme plays in supporting post-16 learners to acquire relevant professional and technical skills and knowledge, address any literacy and numeracy needs, build their digital and transversal skills and foster a commitment to lifelong learning.
- An overarching data tracking and monitoring system across the colleges has been developed recently but is not yet being used well enough for sector-wide analysis to inform self-evaluation and future improvement planning. At the time of the evaluation, the data management and reporting system, which has the potential to drive improvement at sector level, was managed solely by a single designated college.

## Child and adult protection

- At the time of the evaluation, the evidence provided by all of the colleges demonstrates that the arrangements for child and adult protection align with current guidance.

## Areas for action

- Establish appropriate recruitment criteria to ensure all learners meet the required entry requirements to Traineeships in line with the demands of the Traineeship Programme.

- Address urgently the causes of the low rates of learner retention and achievement, particularly in the essential skills provision.
- Ensure all learners and stakeholders are informed that Traineeship qualifications when combined with Level 2 essential skills in literacy and numeracy do not equate to five GCSEs, including English and mathematics, at grades A\* to C. Also, continue to make learners aware of the recognised progression pathways from Traineeships to the next stages of education, training or employment.
- Integrate better the development and assessment of the learners' transversal skills within and across all aspects of the Traineeship Programme.
- Improve the quality of the provision for the development of the learners' literacy and numeracy skills, including better access to and increased uptake of GCSE English and mathematics provision, particularly for those learners who enrol on the Traineeship Programme with a grade D in GCSE English and/or mathematics.
- Increase the work placement opportunities for learners so they can apply their learning and build sustainable career progression pathways, particularly to apprenticeships at Level 2 and beyond.

## Background Information

### Traineeship Programme structure\*

A Traineeship contains the following key components:

- a Level 2 vocational qualification in a professional and technical area;
- Level 2 essential skills in literacy and numeracy qualifications or General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) at grades A\* to C in English and mathematics;
- transversal skills development (including digital skills) at Level 2;
- work placement/work-based learning (which must be vocationally relevant);
- vocational skills development; and
- additional qualifications deemed necessary for work within a sector, for example, health and safety, manual handling, first aid, or construction skills register (CSR) training.

A Traineeship provides learners with a non-employment training pathway in a chosen professional and technical occupational area while also facilitating a seamless transition, at any point, to an employed apprenticeship training pathway or vice versa if an apprentice becomes unemployed. Alternatively, those learners who achieve the pre-requisite qualifications provided within a Traineeship can progress to a Level 3 further education programme.

On entry to a Traineeship, learners should normally have obtained the minimum entrance requirement of a Level 1 profile (four GCSEs at grades D to G) together with any enhanced entry requirements for literacy and numeracy. Learners who do not meet the entry criteria may be enrolled on an Introductory Phase of a Traineeship; they target the Traineeship Level 2 vocational qualifications along with essential skills qualifications in literacy and/or numeracy at Level 1.

## **Evaluation evidence base**

ETI conducted evaluation visits to all six colleges. Inspectors observed 163 learning, teaching, and training sessions, engaged with 451 learners through focus groups and informal discussions, and met with 473 college staff, 11 parents, 64 employers, and 15 other key stakeholders. They also reviewed relevant documentation, learners' work, child and adult protection policies and procedures, and key data. In addition, just over one-half of the learners (59%) responded to an online confidential questionnaire.

Across the colleges, Traineeships in the professional and technical areas of barbering, beauty therapy, business administration, carpentry and joinery, children's care, learning and development (CCLD), construction studies, creative and digital media, engineering, floor and wall tiling, hairdressing, health and social care, information technology, motor vehicle maintenance and repair, plumbing, and professional chef were evaluated. Each college visit also included an evaluation of the provision for essential skills, the work placement component, the development of learners' transversal and digital skills, and the arrangements for child and adult protection.

## **Views of learners, parents, employers and stakeholders**

Learners across the colleges had the opportunity to complete a confidential online questionnaire prior to the evaluation, and 2006 (59%) responses were received, with 166 learners providing additional written comments.

Almost all of the learners indicated that: they found the colleges' induction processes useful in preparing them for their Traineeship; assessments are well-planned and conducted regularly, and they are well-informed of their progress across all aspects of their learning and are given useful feedback on how to improve their work; they are provided with clear guidance and rules around acceptable and unacceptable behaviours when learning; staff in the colleges care about their progress and wellbeing; they enjoy their programme; and overall their programme is preparing them well for the next steps in their careers.

While a significant minority (35%) of the learners' written comments were positive, highlighting the high levels of support and encouragement they receive from the lecturers, the remainder identified some concerns. These concerns included: difficulties accessing relevant work experience placements; the need for more industry visits and guest speakers; poor quality Wi-Fi in some college areas; and improved access to relaxation areas in several colleges.

Most of the learners that the inspectors met with in focus group meetings and informally during classroom visits reported that they: had access to very good quality resources and equipment; understood the need to develop their transversal and digital skills; were motivated because they were well-informed about their progress; were having a better learning experience than when at school; and were aware of their next steps for career progression. Almost all of them reported that they felt safe in the college and knew who to go to if they had a worry or concern.

Almost all of the employers spoken to in focus groups had a positive relationship with the colleges and reported that there were good channels of communication. Most reported that the work placement element of a Traineeship is highly beneficial as it enables the learner to experience valuable real-world experience.

A small number of employers did, however, suggest that some learners would benefit more from a longer work placement period rather than a single day per week, to better support their skills development. In construction, for example, employers reported that a longer period in the workplace would help consolidate the learners' occupational skills.

The parents who met with inspectors were very positive about the provision for the Traineeship Programme and the impact it is having on their young people's learning and personal development. They reported that their young people benefited from being in college and/or on a work placement, and the caring and supportive college staff have impacted their lives, including the development of their confidence, eagerness to learn, self-esteem, and the development of their employability skills.

## **Main Findings**

### **Curriculum and skills development**

There is a strong commitment from curriculum leaders and staff across all the colleges to the ongoing development of the Traineeship Programme, in line with the associated policy commitments outlined in the Strategy for Youth Training. Together, they share a vision of the key role that the Traineeship Programme plays in supporting post-16 learners acquire relevant professional and technical skills and knowledge, address any literacy and numeracy needs, build their digital and transversal skills and foster a commitment to lifelong learning. Apart from a very small number of Level 2 programmes for learners with additional support needs, most of the colleges have now transitioned their full-time Level 2 provision entirely to Traineeships.

Across the colleges, prospective learners have access to Traineeships across a broad range of professional and technical areas. The Traineeships have been designed by the colleges in conjunction with employers, sectoral partnerships\*, Curriculum Hubs\* and other key stakeholders, to meet the professional and technical skills and knowledge development needs of learners and support the skills needs of the economy. Learners are provided with opportunities to develop the required knowledge and occupational, employability and transversal skills needed to prepare them for future employment or progression to, for example, apprenticeship programmes or Level 3 further education courses.

Through a process of curriculum reform by the colleges, the need to develop new vocational qualifications at Level 2 was identified. A range of new, combined knowledge and competence-based, vocational qualifications was developed through a two-staged process of reform of existing curricula and the introduction of new supporting qualifications. To facilitate a seamless transition between Traineeships and Level 2 apprenticeship programmes, many of the new vocational Traineeship qualifications have been included in the corresponding Level 2 ApprenticeshipsNI qualification frameworks.

The development and implementation of the new Level 2 vocational qualifications has, however, raised some concerns, particularly among employers and industry representatives, around the replacement of traditional industry-recognised qualifications, the currency and portability of the new qualifications and, at times, whether the learners have developed all the required knowledge and skills to allow them to progress, for example, from a Traineeship or Level 2 apprenticeship to a Level 3 apprenticeship. This is particularly pertinent where a learner progressing to an apprenticeship will be required to undertake a qualification from a different awarding body; for example, in professional and technical areas such as carpentry and joinery, motor vehicle maintenance and repair, and plumbing. It is therefore important that the colleges and DfE continue to review the curricula within the Traineeship Programme to ensure that it meets effectively the progression needs of all learners.

Practical vocational training, work placement/simulated work-based learning, project-based learning (PBL), and inter-campus or external skills competitions support well the development of the learners' transversal skills and provide opportunities for them to record and collate assessment evidence that occurs naturally from these activities. Learners spoken to during the evaluation were generally positive about the development of their transversal skills and understood why they needed to be developed. There is, however, significant variation in the arrangements for the assessment of transversal skills. In some instances, there is duplication in the evidence being collated for the transversal skills qualification and the evidence collated for the learners' vocational qualification and other components of their Traineeship. A more cohesive approach needs to be adopted across the colleges to ensure consistency of practice. On the IT Traineeship, for example, the colleges' Curriculum Hub for IT has worked closely with the awarding organisation to develop a pilot process whereby the assessment evidence required for the vocational qualification and the transversal skills qualification is mapped and integrated, with one source of evidence collected and one external quality assurance process for both qualifications.

Learners across the sample of Traineeships evaluated are provided with good opportunities to develop their digital skills. These include: the use of e-portfolio systems to submit a range of evidence in different formats; using an electronic platform and app to communicate with lecturers; maintaining an online booking and electronic point of sale system for customers; using computer-aided design software to develop detailed drawings; and using a range of proprietary software packages to complete work. In one college, all the learners complete a Level 2 "Being safe and responsible online" unit, which supports them effectively in the safe use of technology.

The Introductory Phase of a Traineeship lacks sufficient clarity in its distinctiveness, purpose and associated programme design, limiting its effectiveness in meeting the additional or diverse needs of the learners. This provision does not align completely with the policy intent of the Strategy for Youth Training for a new Level 2 vocational education and training programme. While the Introductory Phase provides learners with the opportunity to prepare for progression to a Level 2 Traineeship within their period of study, inspection evidence shows that not all of the learners progress well enough to achieve the Level 2 Traineeship qualifications in line with Policy Commitment 3 of the Strategy.

## **Learner progression and outcomes**

A sector-wide overarching data management and reporting system has been developed recently but has not yet been used sufficiently to enable meaningful analysis across the colleges. The colleges have individual data tracking and monitoring systems in place to inform college self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes. However, their early stage of engagement with the sector-wide data means that these self-evaluation and improvement processes are not yet fully informed or effective enough at a sector level. At the time of the evaluation, the sector-wide data management and reporting system, which has the potential to drive improvement at sector level, was managed solely by a single designated college.

Most of the learners demonstrate good or better standards of vocational practical and written work. At times, it is beyond the level and standard normally observed at Level 2 and includes the development of extended written pieces, good quality presentations, good or better occupational skills, and competent use of computer programming languages. There is evidence of effective feedback by the lecturers to support ongoing progression in their learning and development.

Across the colleges, the focus on the enhancement of the learners' experiences through participation in competitions at local, regional, national, and international levels also raises the standard of work achieved by them, instils a sense of pride in their work, and improves their engagement and motivation. In 2023, two learners undertaking the Traineeship in Vehicle Body Paint Repair were medallists in the NI regional heats of the UK SkillBuild competition.

### **Notable practice example**

In one college, the CCLD room provides a large, well-resourced and well-used space, divided into learning areas for practical and classroom/theory learning. The practical part of the room is laid out with tabletop toys, sand, water trays etc. Learners are able to explore, practise and discuss the use of a wide range of child-centred activities on all aspects of child development.

The Traineeship Programme provides learners with good access to Level 2 vocational qualifications, with recognised career progression pathways within specific professional and technical areas, including seamless transfer to Level 2 apprenticeships. They also provide them with access to Level 2 essential skills qualification or GCSEs in English and/or mathematics to enhance their literacy and

numeracy skills and progression opportunities, although the Level 2 essential skills qualifications are not the same as GCSE qualifications in English or mathematics at grades A\* to C. Consequently, the Traineeship qualifications when combined with Level 2 essential skills in literacy and numeracy do not equate to five GCSEs, including English and mathematics, at grades A\* to C as envisaged in the Strategy for Youth Training. It is therefore important that all learners and stakeholders are informed that Traineeships when combined with Level 2 essential skills in literacy and numeracy do not equate to five GCSEs, including English and mathematics, at grades A\* to C. Learners should, however, continue to be made aware of the recognised career progression pathways from Traineeships to the next stages of education, training or employment.

The outcomes for both the one- and two-year Traineeships over the period 2021/22 to 2023/24, are too low. Of the 1,128 learners who started a two-year programme, only 22% achieved all their Traineeship qualifications at Level 2. Similarly, of the 769 learners who started a one-year programme, only 29% achieved the same.

The combined effect of the low retention\* (54%) and achievement\* (61%) rates on the two-year Traineeships contributes to the very low overall outcomes, resulting in just 22% of the 1,128 learners who started a two-year programme achieving a Traineeship, with a further 11% achieving a Traineeship with Level 1 essential skills. An additional 14% of the learners achieved only their Level 2 vocational qualification; as a result, just under one-half (47%) of the 1,128 learners achieved at least a Level 2 vocational qualification, but this is also too low. Of the 1,128 learners, only one in five (21%) of them completed and progressed to a higher-level education or training programme, with a further 27% gaining employment on completion of their Traineeship.

Similarly on the one-year Traineeships, the combined effect of the retention (83%) and achievement (63%) rates also contributes to the low overall outcomes, resulting in 29% of the 769 learners who started a one-year programme achieving a Traineeship, with a further 23% achieving a Traineeship with Level 1 essential skills. An additional 21% of the learners achieved only their Level 2 vocational qualification; as a result, just under three-quarters (74%) of the 769 learners achieved at least a Level 2 vocational qualification. Of the 769 learners, almost two-thirds (64%) completed and progressed to a higher-level education or training programme, with a further 11% gaining employment on completion of their Traineeship.

Achievement rates for essential skills, particularly in numeracy, are too low, which impacts negatively on the overall outcomes of the Traineeship Programme. The overall outcomes, which are similar across the one- and two-year programmes, for the reporting period 2021/22 to 2023/24, at Level 2 are: literacy at 42% and numeracy at 15%.

Overall, over the period 2021/22 to 2023/24, of the 1,897 learners who started the Traineeship Programme, just 25% achieved a Traineeship. Of the 1,897 learners, 39% of them completed and progressed to a higher-level education or training programme, with a further 20% gaining employment on completion of their Traineeship. These outcomes demonstrate that while progression pathways exist and are being accessed by learners, the drop-off rate of around a third from the number started, combined with the very low achievement in essentials skills underscores the need for greater coherence in recruitment, improved learner readiness and higher quality programme delivery.

## Quality of learning, teaching and training

The vocational teaching and training sessions observed were mostly effective in developing the learners' professional and technical skills and knowledge. In the most effective practice, the sessions were well-planned and included: standardised planning across college campuses; active learning and teaching strategies; a well-balanced range of practical and theory tasks used skilfully to develop the learners' skills and knowledge; effective use of information learning technology (ILT) to engage learners; and opportunities for learners to work independently, in pairs and in small groups. The relationships between the lecturers and learners were mostly positive and affirming, and the tracking of learner progress was systematic, with regular review points to inform target setting. Learning support assistants supported well those learners with additional support needs.

In contrast, the quality of the learning and teaching for essential skills was not effective enough in just over one-quarter of the lessons observed. The planning was overly generic with limited differentiation; lessons were too task driven and low level; the pace of learning was too slow and mostly lecturer-led; and there were poor levels of engagement by the learners.

The level at which learners study in essential skills needs to be better informed by each learner's prior attainment and the outcomes of the initial and diagnostic assessments; this information should be reflected in the time allocated for the essential skills provision.

Across the colleges, PBL is well-integrated as a key pedagogical tool to embed and consolidate learning. Learners are provided with good opportunities to participate in a range of PBL activities which support well the enhancement of their occupational and transversal skills and also their personal and social development.

Across the colleges, the learners have access to high-quality learning, teaching and training resources. The accommodation, equipment and resources are of a high quality, often to industry standards, and are used effectively to support learners achieve occupational skills to a recognised occupational standard.

### **Notable practice example**

"Developing practical solutions to allergens in the catering industry."

Learners are challenged to collaborate, in small groups, to develop recipes that can be produced in an industrial kitchen, are cost effective and suitable for customers with a food allergy or intolerance. Learners develop critical thinking skills while researching, investigating, developing, and trialing recipes, deciding on, producing final dishes, and receiving industry professional feedback on their work. In addition, this project-based learning activity resulted in the learners compiling a gluten free recipe book.

The lecturers are suitably qualified with vocational expertise and experience to support the delivery of an economically relevant and skills focused curriculum. They also report that they are provided with good opportunities to undertake a range of continuous professional learning, as required. Various structures and mechanisms are in place, across the colleges, to support staff, including: the use of an advanced practitioner team to support staff develop their practice; the implementation of a training needs analysis process to help to identify and address staff development and professional learning needs; drop-in clinics for staff; and regular newsletters highlighting effective pedagogical practice. Good opportunities also exist for staff across the sector to undertake professional learning aligned to the Traineeship Programme in areas such as PBL, transversal skills, and supporting learners with additional needs.

The colleges report that they have difficulty recruiting lecturers in a number of professional and technical areas, including plumbing and carpentry and joinery, as well as essential skills tutors, which is impacting the delivery of Traineeships across the colleges. This reported shortage of staff is potentially a key issue for training and education across the further education sector and for the implementation of government policy initiatives.

### **Delivery of essential skills and GCSEs English and mathematics**

Almost all of the learners have a good awareness of the essential skills training as an integral component of a Traineeship and have a clear understanding of the importance of literacy and numeracy qualifications in supporting their progression opportunities. A range of management structures and delivery models are in place across the colleges. These include fast track, semesterised, and long and thin whole-year provision. Appropriate arrangements are in place for initial and diagnostic assessment. However, the outcomes of these assessments need to be better evaluated across the colleges, particularly whether learners can achieve at Level 2 across the duration of their Traineeship and the potential impact this may have on their overall achievement and progression upon completion. Too many learners who enrol on a Traineeship with a grade D in GCSE and/or mathematics are studying at Level 1 in the respective essential skills. These learners should be given the opportunity to undertake essential skills at Level 2, or the GCSE qualification, as soon as possible. Uptake of the GCSEs English and mathematics is very low. In addition, access to this provision is mainly through twilight or evening classes which often does not suit the learners.

#### **Notable practice example**

In one college, a Numeracy in Early Years project is an innovative intervention strategy to support the learners' understanding of the use of mathematical language in foundation or early years learning. The planning is detailed, informed appropriately by learner voice, and is focused sharply on the learners' individual needs.

In a number of the colleges, learners on Traineeships in some professional and technical areas, such as carpentry and joinery, are offered the opportunity to undertake the essential skill of information and communications technology (ICT) to support and enable seamless transfer to and from the ApprenticeshipsNI programme, and to support the development of their digital skills. In one college, all eligible learners are offered the ICT essential skills. A Level 2 qualification in ICT is not currently a component of a Traineeship and can be added as an additional qualification. It will be important, though, for the colleges that offer the ICT essential skills to only some learners to have a clear rationale to support this decision, in the interests of equity. Equally, colleges should consider the appropriateness of adding another qualification to the curriculum for those learners who are at risk of not achieving Level 2 in literacy and/or numeracy.

## **Work placement and employer engagement**

Across almost all of the colleges, effective links have been established with a wide range of employers to support the ongoing development of the Traineeship Programme and to provide work placement opportunities for learners. In one college, the establishment of an Industrial Advisory Board, comprising a wide range of stakeholders such as contractors, local councils, architects, professional bodies, and academics, informs the curriculum well and ensures it is matched to industry's skills needs.

Links with employers have also helped to support learner transfer or progression to the ApprenticeshipsNI programme; in the period from 2021 to 2024, 16% of learners transferred to apprenticeship programmes. Almost 25% of the learners on two-year Traineeships transferred to the ApprenticeshipsNI programme during the period of their Traineeship, which is notably different from one-year Traineeships at less than 5%. There is a need for continued focus on high-quality employer engagement to optimise the opportunities afforded by the common curriculum between Traineeships and Level 2 apprenticeships, facilitating a more seamless learner transfer to apprenticeships, in line with learners' career progression plans.

In one college, the use of construction skills champions to support the practical skills development of the learners in construction has been particularly impactful in supporting them progress to employment and/or apprenticeships.

The current curriculum model for the Traineeship allows for a range of work placement arrangements to support the development of the learners' occupational skills. These include day release, block release, in-house placement in realistic working environments (RWE) such as college hair and beauty salons and restaurant kitchens, simulated work-based learning, and the delivery of PBL. There is evidence from the colleges that better opportunities exist for learners on two-year Traineeships to source work placements in traditional areas such as brickwork, carpentry and joinery, plumbing, motor vehicle maintenance and repair, and engineering, rather than for those on one-year Traineeships where their progression pathways are more oriented to Level 3 further education programmes.

### **Notable practice example**

One college's Design Innovation Assisted Living (DIAL) centre provides excellent opportunities for simulated practice aimed at developing the learners' empathy and values, as well as their practical knowledge and skills. The college staff deliver most of their practical skills development sessions in the DIAL centre through the use of effective team-teaching approaches, project-based, scenario focused learning and role play, blending well the development of the learners' care values, underpinning knowledge and practical skills.

In professional and technical areas where there are challenges in providing appropriate placements, the colleges have been innovative in providing simulated work placements and realistic working environment opportunities. The well-established employer engagement, across all the colleges has, however, not consistently resulted in a sufficient number of work placement opportunities for learners, which are crucial for supporting them in gaining the practical occupational skills associated with their Traineeship and to enhance their career progression opportunities. Additionally, the use of guest speakers and industrial/site visits varies across the Traineeships; as a result, not all learners have access to real-world career insights and industry exposure.

In a small number of professional and technical areas, such as CCLD, there is a requirement for work placement hours beyond that specified for the Traineeship Programme, and this is supported and resourced well by the colleges.

### **Careers, support and guidance**

Across the colleges, to support learner progression, learners can develop wider employability skills through a range of enrichment activities. These include careers workshops on interview techniques and curriculum vitae building; additional occupationally specific qualifications such as Level 2 food safety and allergen awareness, paediatric first aid and construction skills register; specialised training such as building personal resilience and the appropriate use of social media; and participation in skills competitions such as SkillBuild. In one college IT learners participated in a three-day online workshop with a major local software company completing a real-life IT project.

Support is provided to learners by college careers teams and their lecturers at various stages of their Traineeships, for example, pre-enrolment advice sessions at the application stage, during induction, careers academies, and ongoing throughout their programmes. At times, where individual course teams are responsible for the arrangements for the learners' careers provision, including liaison with the college's careers team, there can be a lack of consistency or standardisation of the careers team's engagement with learners across Traineeships, resulting in an inequity in learner experience; this needs to be monitored closely across the colleges.

Most of the learners spoken to reported that they valued the skills and competencies that they were enabled to develop and were aware of the vocational pathways available to them after completing their Traineeships, for example, Level 3 further education programmes, apprenticeships, foundation degrees and higher-level apprenticeships.

### **Notable practice example**

In one college a highly effective mock interview process took place with year one and two learners in carpentry and joinery. A realistic formal interview was carried out for an apprentice position in a company, with appropriate feedback given to candidates. The learners spoken to found it very useful in preparing them for future job application processes.

Across the colleges, a range of processes are in place to support the learners' health and wellbeing, their personal and social development, and to ensure an inclusive, caring and non-threatening learning environment. The wraparound learner support services include support hubs being available on all campuses, quiet spaces in libraries, student support coaches and access to a wide range of in-person and online information on careers, finance and other support options.

Many of the learners on the Traineeship Programme present with low levels of academic achievement, including low levels of prior attainment in English and mathematics, and often face complex barriers to learning and progression. Across the colleges, the percentage of learners availing of learner support services ranges from 17% to 31%. This includes for issues such as caring responsibilities at home, the financial implications of full-time study and mental and physical health conditions, which can result in some learners leaving their Traineeship early. Therefore, more needs to be done to meet better the complex learning support and progression needs of these learners.

## **Collaboration and continuous improvement**

There is a high level of commitment from management teams and staff across the colleges to working collaboratively at sector level in the best interests of the learners and in the development of the Traineeship Programme. This is evidenced by the cross-sector leadership roles undertaken by staff at the senior level in the College Principals' Group, the Curriculum Directors' Group and the Quality Managers' Group; one college principal leads the strategic planning group for the sector. In addition, college staff have undertaken lead roles in the occupational area working groups across the sector, and the careers sector group, which further reinforces collaborative approaches, sharing of practice and access to staff training across the colleges.

Extensive collaboration exists with industry, sectoral bodies, Curriculum Hubs, and other key stakeholders, which has supported the development of the Traineeship Programme across the colleges. The work of the sector's Curriculum Hubs, both within the lead college and across the sector, and the associated sectoral partnerships have been instrumental in supporting the ongoing development of Traineeships across the colleges.

## **Child and adult protection**

At the time of the evaluation, the evidence provided by all of the colleges demonstrates that their arrangements for child and adult protection align to the current guidance.

## Conclusion

Overall, extensive development work has been carried out by the colleges in collaboration with a wide range of key stakeholders to support the roll-out of the Traineeship Programme and to provide learning pathways for a diverse range of learners.

This development work includes provision of an Introductory Phase for learners not yet ready for the Traineeship Programme. While this Introductory Phase provides an opportunity for the learners to prepare for progression to a full Level 2 Traineeship within their period of study, inspection evidence shows that not all of the learners progress well enough to achieve all the Level 2 Traineeship qualifications in line with Policy Commitment 3 of the Youth Training Strategy. It is therefore important that the colleges and DfE monitor and review how well this provision is meeting the overall policy intent of the Strategy.

There remains a strong commitment across the further education sector to the ongoing development and implementation of suitable provision that meets more effectively the wide range of learners enrolling on a Traineeship. At present, however, the Traineeship Programme is not meeting fully enough the needs of all the learners. Overall outcomes for the Traineeship Programme are much too low, and an urgent review of the programme is needed to address the causes of the low retention and achievement rates, including the impact of revised recruitment criteria on retention, achievement and progression rates, and the low achievement rate in the essential skills provision.

The areas for action identified in this report should be addressed urgently by the colleges and DfE, including the development of a robust improvement plan with associated monitoring and reporting systems to evaluate the impact of the actions taken.

ETI will carry out follow-on activity to this report, within 18 months, to evaluate the impact of the actions taken to improve the quality of the Traineeship Programme's provision for learners and the outcomes they achieve.

# Appendix 1: Notes

## Page 1

### **Strategy\***

Generating our Success: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Youth Training, Department for Employment and Learning. (June 2015)

## Page 2

### **reviewing\***

As part of the review process, ETI provided evaluative feedback as set out in the following report:

An evaluation of the Youth Training pilot programmes at level 2 and the ApprenticeshipsNI pilot programmes at level 3 provided by the six colleges of further education in Northern Ireland

## Page 3

### **overall outcomes\***

- Learners currently enrolled (3,417) on a one- or two-year Traineeship Programme are not included in the outcomes data.
- Leavers who transferred to the ApprenticeshipsNI programme during their Traineeship Programme are not included in the outcomes data.

## Page 6

### **Traineeship Programme Structure\***

Based on the blueprint (version 3.8) for Traineeship Programme structure and delivery, current at the time of the evaluation.

## Page 8

### **sectoral partnerships\***

Sectoral Partnerships - Department for the Economy

### **curriculum hubs\***

Each of the six local colleges are designated lead colleges for an occupational area or theme. 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.

## Page 11

### **retention\***

This is the proportion of the learners who remained on their learning programme.

### **achievement\***

This is proportion of those who remained on their programme who achieved their targeted qualifications.

## Appendix 2: Terms of Reference

The **key objectives** of the evaluation are:

- To identify specific priorities for Traineeship Programme development to support closer alignment with the strategic vision and aims outlined in "Generating our Success: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Youth Training" (June 2015) and the Departmental Vision; access to good jobs.
- To inform continuous improvement of the Traineeship Programme, including identification of impactful practice, to ensure fitness for purpose of level 2 provision for 16 to 19-year-old learners, particularly to meet effectively their learning and development needs to enable them to progress to employment and/or further education or training.

To evaluate the extent the Traineeship Programme is realising the strategic vision and aims of "Generating our Success: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Youth Training" and the Departmental Vision; access to good jobs, the evaluation will include the following:

### **Curriculum and Skill Development**

- The extent to which the Traineeship Programme, along with the Introductory Phase, offers a broad and balanced curriculum, including literacy and numeracy qualifications, that prepares learners for employment or further study while developing vocational, employability and transversal skills.

### **Learner Progression and Outcomes**

- The extent to which the learners progress at an appropriate pace through the Traineeship Programme to achieve a level 2 vocational diploma qualification along with level 2 literacy and numeracy qualifications.

### **Quality of Learning, Teaching and Training**

- The quality of learning, teaching and training, including initial assessment; additional learning support and preparation for work experience placement.

### **Delivery of GCSEs English and/or mathematics**

- The extent to which the colleges plan and deliver GCSE English and/or mathematics, to best meet the literacy and numeracy needs of the learners and optimise their progression opportunities.

## **Work Placement and Employer Engagement**

- The quality of employer engagement, links and partnership with relevant stakeholders to support the aims and delivery of the Traineeship Programme, particularly work placement opportunities and/or simulated workplace activities, and their impact on the holistic development of the learners.

## **Careers Support and Guidance**

- The quality of the Careers Education Information Advice and Guidance provided to learners and its effectiveness in supporting their career aspirations and progression, including eligibility to access the Introductory Phase of a Traineeship Programme.

## **Collaboration and Continuous Improvement**

- The impact of collaboration and sharing of best practice across the colleges in implementing continuous quality improvement to the programme, including monitoring challenges and adapting curriculum planning to deliver against the vision and aims of the Traineeship Programme.

## **Child and Adult Protection**

- Evaluate the effectiveness of the arrangements for child and adult protection and wider safeguarding in each college.

## Appendix 3: 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% |

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