

The Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of an Evaluation of the Provision and Outcomes for Essential Skills in the South Eastern Regional College

February 2011

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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%

All the statistics in this report have been supplied by the South Eastern Regional College.

Grading System

The Education and Training Inspectorate use the following performance levels in reports:

Performance Level
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

PART ONE: SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 In November 2010, the Department for Employment and Learning (the Department) requested the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) to carry out an evaluation of the provision for the essential skills in the South Eastern Regional College. The evaluation considered the quality of provision and outcomes in relation to the essential skills of information and communication technology (ICT), literacy and numeracy. The purpose was to evaluate the effectiveness of the essential skills provision across the South Eastern Regional College in providing a high quality learning experience, which best meets the learners' individual needs.

1.2 A team of five inspectors observed a total of 35 lessons across the college's four campuses; 13 in literacy and eleven each in numeracy and ICT. The sample of lessons observed included the full-time further education, work-based learning and part-time adult provision. Extended discussions were also held with a wide range of senior managers, including the Principal, and the Director for Curriculum and Information Services. Three focus groups for the essential skills lecturers were held in the Lisburn, Downpatrick and Newtownards campuses and, in total, 23 of them attended. The inspection team also examined samples of the learners' work, electronic and paper-based attendance registers, lecturers' schemes of work and lesson plans, and group and individual learning plans. In addition, a large number of individual learners were spoken to in the lessons observed. The college's self-evaluation reports and quality improvement plans for the individual essentials skills, and other relevant documentation were also scrutinised by the inspection team.

1.3 At the time of the evaluation, a total of 6,186 learners were enrolled on all three of the essential skills. This represents an increase of 123% from September 2007, although a significant proportion of this increase is a result of the full introduction of ICT as a third essential skill in September 2009. At the start of this academic year, just under 3,500 learners were taking an essential skill in literacy and/or numeracy, with over 2,600 learners enrolled for ICT.

1.4 During the evaluation, the senior managers of the college reported that there had been ongoing correspondence with one of the lecturers' unions regarding the essential skills provision across the college.

1.5 In the focus groups attended by the essential skills lecturing staff, it was reported by them that the change management process for the essential skills, initiated by the college's senior management team, had not been well enough planned or implemented. Specifically, the lecturers reported a lack of adequate, quality consultation and expressed considerable frustration and confusion around the revised arrangements and requirements for the provision of the essential skills. While the staff reported that they understood the need for the college to deliver an efficient and effective use of the available resources, they also stated that the current ongoing process has not been underpinned by robust or coherent arrangements for monitoring, review and evaluation.

2. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

2.1 The quality of the essential skills provision in the South Eastern Regional College is inadequate; the areas for improvement outweigh the strengths in the provision. The evaluation has identified significant areas for improvement in leadership and management and in the quality of provision for learning which need to be addressed urgently if the college is to meet effectively the needs of all of the learners. The Inspectorate will monitor and report publicly on the college's progress in addressing the areas for improvement, over a 12-18 month period.

2.2 The main strengths are:

- the good or better quality of teaching and learning in the majority of the lessons observed;
- the good leadership and management of the essential skill of ICT; and
- the good initial assessment processes.

2.3 The main areas for improvement are:

- the lack of a clear strategy for the provision of the essential skills across the college;
- the inadequate leadership and management of the essential skills of literacy and numeracy; and
- the inadequate arrangements for the quality assurance of the essential skills provision.

PART TWO: OVERALL QUALITY OF PROVISION

3. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

3.1 The overall quality of the leadership and management of the essential skills provision in the South Eastern Regional College is inadequate. While the college is dealing with large numbers of learners with essential skills needs, the current arrangements for leading, managing and quality assuring the provision for the essential skills, in particular literacy and numeracy, are not effective, and the needs of all of the learners are not being met adequately. The focus and approach taken by the senior managers is not sufficiently learner-centred, and this is detrimental to the learning needs of too many of the learners.

3.2 The arrangements for the enrolment and allocation of the learners to their essential skills classes are not effective enough. As a result, the high number of learners in some classes, together with the wide range of abilities, too often militates against the provision of consistently good learning experiences for them. For example, in more than one-third of the numeracy classes there are learners working towards more than two adjacent levels of the essential skill; in a few of the classes there are learners working towards more than three levels. This is not conducive to effective lesson planning which meets the needs of all of the learners, and is resulting in insufficient support for the less able, and conversely, inadequate levels of pace and challenge for the more able. Furthermore, it is inappropriate that in over one-fifth of the timetabled literacy classes there are learners following at least three adjacent levels of the essential skill.

3.3 Since September 2010, the college's essential skills policy on class sizes is not aligned with the Department's Operational Guidelines for the essentials skills (circular number FE 06/09). As a consequence, the numbers of learners in the essential skills classes vary greatly. While learner needs are clearly and accurately identified through the initial assessment process, the monitoring of the class sizes and the often disparate range of levels in them has not been sufficiently effective, nor has enough action been taken to address these imbalances across the classes.

3.4 The senior managers report that, since September 2010, a process of change management has been implemented across the college with regard to the provision for the essential skills. However, there is no clear and effective strategy for the development and improvement of the provision for the essential skills of literacy and numeracy. While the overall aim of the change management process is to improve the outcomes and efficiency of the essential skills provision, the management of it has significant areas for improvement, including: the insufficient and irregular consultation and communication with staff regarding the rationale and outworking of the changes; the lack of consistent actions by the middle and senior managers to 'normalise' the classes in terms of class size and range of levels, as identified through the initial assessment process; the delays in devising accurate and validated electronic registers for the essential skills classes; and insufficient monitoring and evaluation of the impact of the changes on the staff and learners.

3.5 The decision, for example, to reduce the time allocation for the Training for Success learners was taken without a clear strategic rationale. This is compounded by the fact that there are a number of classes with a mix of Training for Success and further education learners, from different vocational backgrounds, who now attend for differing periods of time within the same class. This is leading to increased pressures and demands on lecturing staff, and an unnecessary disruption to learning.

3.6 A significant minority of the learners spoken to by the Inspectors, reported reservations about the quality of the essential skills timetabling and class allocation process, which takes place in the early part of the academic year. For example, the essential skills classes are not included in the printed timetables provided to them when they commence their individual programmes.

3.7 The essential skill of ICT is effectively led and managed. The Head of School for Computing and ICT, ably supported by the two assistant heads of school, have dealt effectively with a huge increase in the number of enrolments in the essential skill of ICT, from 298 learners in 2008/09, to 2475 learners in 2009/10 and 2646 learners in 2010/11. Communication between management and staff is good, there are regular meetings, sharing of practice and collaborative planning and development of resources. The monitoring of all aspects of the provision is regular and effective. The tracking and record-keeping is rigorous and good use is made of the learning platform to store and share learning resources, underpin the good administration of the essential skill, support the increasing contextualisation of ICT within the vocational content and to support staff and learners. This good practice needs to be shared more widely across the other essential skill areas.

3.8 The cross-college arrangements for the quality assurance of the provision for the essential skills are inadequate; the systems have failed to identify or address the issues associated with the change management process. In numeracy, for example, the poor attendance, the wide range of abilities in too many of the classes and the undue variation in the quality of the learning experiences provided for the learners have not been identified by the quality assurance process and consequently appropriate action to effect improvement has not been taken. In addition, the self-evaluation and quality improvement planning process for all of the essential skills provision is fragmented, with separate self-evaluation and quality improvement plans spread across the three Schools, where there is essential skills provision. Consequently, it is difficult for the senior managers to have a coherent and accurate overview of the quality of the essential skills provision across the college.

3.9 Across the essential skills, the lecturers are qualified to the level required to teach essential skills and they are committed to addressing the essentials skills needs of their learners.

4. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

4.1 The majority of learners are well-motivated and engage positively in their learning. The standards of a majority of the learners' work are satisfactory or better. In a small number of the lessons observed, there were instances of poor behaviour which impedes the learning and progress being made by the learners. These classes were characterised by a wide range of ability levels and the lecturers often find it extremely challenging to meet the needs of all of the learners. As a result, some of the learners, particularly those in need of additional support, are disengaging from their essential skills learning.

4.2 In the essential skill of ICT, the staff provide good support and development to those learners initially assessed as below level 1, through an entry-level online ICT basics qualification. They complete this prior to progressing to level 1 and the learners, in particular the adult learners, acquire good foundation ICT skills which prepares them well for level 1 work. In 2009/10, the first year of the full roll-out of the essential skill of ICT, the rate of retention was satisfactory at 73% and the success rate of the learners was modest at 64%. More needs to be done by the ICT staff to further analyse the data across the campuses and levels, to identify more clearly the trends in key performance indicators, and take appropriate actions for improvement.

4.3 Based on data provided by the college, over the past three years the overall rate of retention in the essential skills of literacy and numeracy was satisfactory at 79%. The success rate was modest at 61%. In addition, it is a concern that, during the evaluation, the overall attendance rate of the learners in the lessons observed was overly variable.

5. QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING

5.1 The quality of teaching and learning was good or better in the majority (71%) of the lessons observed; in the remaining lessons there were important shortcomings. In the best practice, there is effective planning to meet the needs of individual and smaller groups of learners, well-sequenced lessons and a good variety in the teaching and learning strategies used and in the range of activities provided for the learners. The lecturers use relevant contexts and there is good use of information and learning technology (ILT) to enhance their learning experiences. The lessons with important shortcomings were characterised by lack of pace and challenge, whole-class teaching in spite of the wide range of abilities, poor quality learning resources and missed opportunities to enhance learning through a better use of ILT.

5.2 Across the essential skills, there are good arrangements for the initial assessment of the learners' prior skills and knowledge of literacy, numeracy and ICT, which are applied effectively and consistently by the staff. A range of tools, including commercial tests as well as in depth diagnostic assessments developed by the college staff, are used appropriately. Despite this good level of knowledge on the existing skills levels of the learners, this information is not used effectively by middle and senior managers to plan the provision for essential skills which best meet their individual needs.

5.3 The college additional support system, SERC Extra, has focused more rigorously on the non-attendance of learners in their essential skills classes, which is timely and appropriate. While there is some lack of clarity among the lecturers around the referral process, and in particular who takes responsibility for it, the staff in SERC Extra have started to collate the referrals for those learners who have not been attending essential skills lessons for some time. Action is being taken by the SERC Extra staff to make contact with these learners and to provide them with additional essential skills classes in the next term. More needs to be done, however, to analyse the available information to determine the trends in non-attendance, particularly across the various programmes, and more importantly the underlying reasons for non-attendance.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 The quality of the essential skills provision in the South Eastern Regional College is inadequate; the areas for improvement outweigh the strengths in the provision. The evaluation has identified significant areas for improvement in leadership and management and in the quality of provision for learning which need to be addressed urgently if the college is to meet effectively the needs of all of the learners. The Inspectorate will monitor and report on the college's progress in addressing the areas for improvement, over a 12-18 month period.

PART THREE

7. KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

7.1 In order to improve the quality of the essential skills provision, the college leadership needs to:

- establish more effective arrangements which ensure that learners are enrolled and timetabled in essential skill classes that best meet their individual needs;
- improve the college-wide quality assurance of the essential skills provision;
- improve the leadership and management of the essential skills provision, at all levels, including more effective communication and consultation with the essentials skills lecturers; and
- implement more efficient and rigorous systems to collect, collate and interpret accurate data.

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