An Evaluation of the Step Up Project

in the Further Education Colleges in Northern Ireland

April 2025

Education and
Training Inspectorate
Empowering Improvement

Contents

Throughout this report, where text is accompanied by an asterisk *, this indicates that additional information can be found in Appendix 2: Notes.

Introduction

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) was commissioned by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to undertake an evaluation of the Step Up Project (the project) in the six further education colleges (the colleges). The purpose of the evaluation was to determine the extent the colleges' provision for the project is supporting learners build their confidence in involvement in education, training and/or employment, in line with DfE's vision for the economy and lifelong learning. The Terms of Reference for the evaluation are set out in Appendix 1.

Background

The Step Up Project, funded by New Deal for Northern Ireland, was established in 2023 as a collaborative initiative between the Department for the Economy (DfE), the colleges, and key partners including the Department for Communities (DfC), Invest NI, and the Northern Ireland Office (NIO). The project was developed to support individuals who are economically inactive or face significant barriers to education, skills training, and employment. It aims to improve engagement and progression outcomes for five priority learner groups* currently under-represented in education and training. These include individuals with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN), care-experienced young people, individuals not in education, employment, or training, the unemployed and economically inactive, and individuals in sectors with gender imbalances.

The project is delivered through three key strands*:

- College Connect+;

- Disability Access Route to Education and Employment (DARE); and

- Women Returners Access Programme (WRAP);

each tailored to meet the needs of different learner groups.

The colleges were given autonomy to adapt delivery based on local priorities, using a flexible, mentor-led model to address learner barriers and support progression*.

The project is aligned strategically with several Northern Ireland government policies, including DfE's economic vision and the Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland*.

Methodology

To assess the extent to which the project is supporting learners within the priority groups to re-engage with education, achieve and progress, ETI carried out evaluation visits* to each of the six colleges during October 2024. Inspectors observed 58 learning, teaching and training sessions and met and spoke with: 239 learners; a small number of parents; 45 college staff; and 37 staff of external stakeholders. The inspectors also reviewed relevant documentation, individual learner development plans, learners' work, child and adult protection policies and procedures, key data, and learner testimonials.

Key Findings

Strategic planning

- The project aligns well with each college's strategic vision, helping to fill gaps in provision and increase access to entry-level programmes that encourage progression. The planning and delivery of the project in each college is supporting DfE's economic and social inclusion vision to create good jobs, raise productivity, and promote regional balance.

- The colleges are fulfilling the key objectives of the project. Across all the colleges, the learners within the priority cohorts are building their confidence in engaging with education. Five of the six colleges almost met or exceeded DfE's target of 70% for learner progression to employment or further education and training.

- The colleges' effective collaboration with statutory, voluntary, and private sector organisations has expanded community-based learning and created more opportunities for learners to engage with education across rural and urban areas.

- The colleges monitor, evaluate and review the provision continuously using labour market intelligence to align the project with the needs of the economy and the associated skills gaps in key economic sectors.

Structure and implementation

- A key factor in the successful implementation of the project is the flexibility DfE gave the colleges to develop bespoke provision to meet the needs of the learners within their region.

- The profile of learners recruited across the colleges and project strands aligns with the overall objectives of the project. The right people are on the right programmes.

Quality of learning, teaching, training and support

- Across the colleges, learning, teaching and training are enabling successful outcomes. Effective sessions are characterised by mutually respectful relationships with dedicated lecturers who understand learners' needs and provide high levels of support and positive reinforcement.

- A key strength of the project, and what differentiates it from other funded programmes, is the provision for high-quality mentor support across all the colleges. Structured approaches for planning, identifying, reviewing, and addressing learners' individual needs are well established. Mentors foster very positive relationships with the learners, providing tailored programme development and learning support where necessary.

Learner progression and outcomes

- In year 1 of the project, recruitment and retention were high. Two colleges exceeded the DfE recruitment target, while the remaining four achieved between 86% and 93% of the target. Across all the colleges, learner retention rates exceeded 90%.

- Five of the six colleges almost met or exceeded the department's target for progression to employment and FE or training of at least 70% of their learners, while one was significantly lower at 47%.

- The colleges have evaluated the effectiveness of the first year of the project through internal self-evaluation and quality improvement processes, using these findings to implement appropriate changes and improvements.

- The use of the common Individual Development Plan (IDP) template is inconsistent; high-quality practices are not always captured, and learner targets and progress are not always recorded effectively. There is a need for greater sharing of best practices in IDP use across the colleges and partner organisations to ensure a more standardised approach to tracking learner progress and setting improvement targets.

- For 16 to 24-year-olds engaged in longer programmes, gaps exist between the completion of the project and their entry into mainstream college programmes. This is preventing some learners from building on the positive experiences gained on the project, as the transition is delayed and may impact overall learner progression.

- Consideration should be given to providing additional learning support in classrooms, particularly in practical sessions, to further assist lecturing staff to support more effectively learners' skills development.

- The transversal skills questionnaire is overly bureaucratic and would benefit from simplification to provide clearer insights into how individual learner progress is tracked and assessed.

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 for all learners on the project align with the current guidance. All of the learners in focus groups report that they feel safe in the colleges and are well cared for and supported.

Main Findings

Strategic vision and planning

The project aligns well with each college's overall strategic vision and supports effectively their dual mandate of economic and skills development, while promoting social inclusion. The project's planning is also aligned closely with DfE's agenda to promote lifelong learning, create good jobs, raise productivity, and promote regional balance. The project fills a crucial gap in access to suitable provision, particularly in rural areas, and has been welcomed as a valuable addition to the curriculum across colleges, receiving strong support from staff at all levels.

Despite tight turnaround times in the first year of the project, effective planning by the colleges has played a key role in the successful implementation and development of the project. The colleges' existing social inclusion curriculum, which now includes the project, has helped the colleges to increase support for individuals furthest from the labour market, particularly those with low or no formal qualifications.

The project provides learners with opportunities to engage in a range of programmes tailored to their specific needs and mitigates barriers to education, training, and employment. The project is particularly effective in widening access and increasing participation in occupational skills development, especially for under-represented groups.

As an entry-level provision, the project removes many barriers to accessing education. It introduces learners to the college environment, improving participation and progression. The project offers a fresh opportunity for learners who have had challenging educational experiences, helping them re-engage positively with learning and begin a progression pathway.

For 16- to 24-year-olds engaged in longer programmes, there may be intervals of inactivity in their learning between the completion of the project and entry into mainstream college programmes at the beginning of the next academic year. This is preventing some learners from building on the positive experiences gained on the project as transition is delayed and potentially impacts overall learner progression.

Implementation and impact of the project

While all the colleges deliver the three overarching strands of the project, the content varies appropriately across the sector to reflect individual learner needs and local context. The colleges have been proactive in recruiting and deploying staff experienced in social inclusion programmes, which has contributed positively to the high quality of the provision. It is recognised that not all learners will undertake a formal qualification as part of the provision. Instead, learners are recruited and placed on the most appropriate strand in line with their abilities, interests and goals.

The flexibility of the project has enabled the colleges to develop distinct and responsive content within each strand and incorporate elements such as:

- college specialist facilities, such as innovation centres and vocational training for tasters like crafting and women's DIY;

- community-based delivery of essential skills, including numeracy and literacy; and

- participation in welfare support initiatives such as food banks and health and well-being activities.

All learners receive mentorship support, a key feature of the project. High-quality structured mentoring is instrumental in supporting ongoing learner engagement and successful progression. The mentorship model varies across the colleges and includes individual and group support, tailored to the needs of learners.

Mentors provide holistic support for the learners; classes cover contemporary themes, focusing on health, well-being, and keeping safe, enabling learners to make better-informed life choices.

Interventions provided by the colleges to address the wide range of barriers to progression include: supplying work-ready kits, covering travel expenses, offering childcare support where possible, allocating additional training time, and facilitating confidence-building and personal development activities.

The project is designed to take account of learners' individual starting points, offering a personalised route to progression. The colleges offer a broad provision which includes essential skills training at various levels, vocational tasters and qualifications up to Level 3, including short courses, and opportunities for work through confidence-building activities and leisure opportunities, while also enhancing employability skills and enterprise awareness.

A wide range of bespoke interventions is delivered to priority cohorts, addressing significant barriers in literacy, numeracy, and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills. In all the colleges, learners have access to a range of short, accredited and non-accredited programmes, which have improved their employability and supported them to progress directly into employment. For example, some industry-focused qualifications offered through the programme have led directly to employment, including:

- Certificate of Professional Competence (CPC) for drivers – of 12 participants, 11 achieved certification, and 10 secured employment; and

- Construction Skills Register (CSR) card for the building trade – of 10 participants, nine achieved certification, and all secured employment.

In one of the colleges, discussions with the College Connect learners highlighted the benefits of engaging in vocational sampling across various professional and technical areas, which provided them with information, guidance, and support to make better informed career and training decisions. The other colleges should consider using this approach to enhance further their provision.

The project staff across the colleges are dedicated, compassionate, and committed to ensuring that all learners receive flexible, tailored, and wraparound support. This strong ethos supports learners to access appropriate provision, build self-esteem, and develop a sense of inclusion by forming new friendships. Mentors and teaching staff have a clear understanding of the complex challenges and barriers faced by the project's learners.

As part of the colleges' student population, learners on the project can access additional support services, including counselling, careers advice, and learning support. In all colleges, newcomers can access English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses to develop functional English skills.

In most of the colleges, the project is embedded within community education teams, facilitating effective collaboration with community, voluntary, and statutory organisations. This collaboration enhances the college provision and strengthens mentoring and training support. In one college, effective collaborative working relationships have been established with six partner organisations to support the delivery of the project on the college's behalf. This model of delivery is widening access for the learners and enabling the college to reach those that find it more challenging to engage with education or training because of for example, geographical location and transport issues, or lack of confidence.

The project has contributed significantly to expanding community learning provision by strengthening external links and establishing new priorities with statutory, voluntary, and private sector organisations, such as health and social care trusts, schools, GP surgeries, primary schools, and housing associations. The project has played a key role in targeting areas of high deprivation and extending outreach to hard-to-reach individuals dealing with social and economic challenges such as deprivation, housing issues, and community conflict.

An example of how this targeted approach is creating re-engagement with education and promoting inter-generational learning support is where a partnership with a local primary school is supporting women struggling to help their children with homework. The long-term goal is to build confidence and encourage these women to progress into further education.

The well-being and care of learners and staff are prioritised. The colleges promote an inclusive, supportive ethos, with excellent relationships between staff and learners. Feedback from learners during evaluation visits indicates high levels of satisfaction with the project. Learners enjoy learning in an inclusive environment and report feeling safe, respected, and well-supported. Many described the project as a "lifeline," particularly for those struggling with mental health challenges, confidence issues, and social isolation.

The learning environments across the colleges are fit for purpose and of a generally good or better standard. Professional and technical programmes are well-equipped with industry-standard resources, and digital technology such as interactive whiteboards and specialised software, all of which are used effectively to enhance learning.

Learning, teaching, and training

Across the colleges, almost all learning, teaching, and training sessions were characterised by effective planning, ensuring successful learning outcomes. Learners on the project benefit from highly supportive and affirming learning experiences, delivered sensitively by dedicated lecturers who tailor their approach to meet individual needs. Access to high-quality resources and facilities enables learners to develop new skills, build self-confidence, and enhance their capability and resilience in managing their own learning and progression. As a result, almost all learners are making good progress in developing their skills, knowledge, and interpersonal abilities.

Providing additional learning support in classrooms, particularly during practical sessions, should be prioritised to further assist the lecturing staff and maximise learner success. Overall, learners are progressing well, increasing their confidence and self-esteem, and successfully achieving the individual targets set at the start of their programme.

In one college, a partner organisation provided work experience placements, which supported successfully development of learners' personal, social, and employability skills. In another college, the learners participating in a level 1 hospitality project developed high-standard front-of-house service skills by working alongside level 2 learners in practical activities.

Managing learner progress and associated targets

The capacity to collate and report data related to the project varies across the colleges. Most of the colleges continue to develop their systems and processes, while one has a well-developed system for data collection and analysis. Another college has a robust system to track and monitor learner progress, including post-project outcomes. Analysis of available data indicates that the colleges are on track to meet the targets set by DfE.

In Year 1 of the programme, two colleges exceeded the DfE recruitment target, while the remaining four achieved between 86% and 93% of the target. Across all the colleges, learner retention rates exceeded 90%, with progression rates to employment and FE or training ranging from 47% to 80%. Most of the colleges achieved positive progression for at least 75% of learners.

At the time of the evaluation visit, October 2024, recruitment for year 2 of the project ranged from 37% to 89% of the target, with four colleges already exceeding 75% of their recruitment goal.

Quality of Individual Development Plans and learner support services

All learners undergo an initial assessment to determine their needs and how best these needs can be met, leading to the creation of an Individual Development Plans (IDP). The use of IDPs to support learner development and progression is inconsistent across the colleges. The target setting is too vague, making it difficult

for learners to use IDPs effectively for self-reflection and progress tracking. The plans would benefit from greater detail on learners' individual needs, clearer identification of appropriate strategies, and well-defined targets against which progress can be measured more accurately.

The structure of the common IDP template is preventing it from working as an impactful document. Across the colleges, staff work alongside learners to develop their IDPs, but there is considerable variation in the timing of this process. In some of the colleges, IDPs are completed too early, before staff and learners have had time to establish a rapport. In one college, mentors complete IDPs once learners are well integrated into their programme and their needs, interests, and aspirations are better understood. This is a more effective approach to accurate target setting.

The transversal skills questionnaire is overly bureaucratic and would benefit from simplification to provide clearer insights into how individual learner progress is tracked and assessed. A more streamlined approach would better demonstrate the impact of the programme on learners' overall development of transversal skills.

Across the colleges, including where the programme is delivered through partner organisations, there is a need to share best practices in IDP use to ensure a more consistent approach to tracking learner progress and setting meaningful, ongoing improvement targets.

Arrangements for 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 for all learners on the project align with the current guidance. All of the learners in focus groups report that they feel safe in the colleges and are well cared for and supported.

Examples of highly effective practice

i.   As a result of effective self-evaluation during year 1 of the programme, one college has extended its well-structured learner case conferencing approach to include learners from the Step Up Project. The staff have tailored the case conferencing process to give extended time for discussion for the Step Up learners and introduced additional bi-monthly reviews. This has resulted in a holistic and constructive review of each learner's strengths and barriers to learning and progression. Through discussion and collaboration, the staff who engage with the learners, including lecturers (professional and technical, and essential skills), the mentors, and learning support staff meet to review each learner's progress and, where appropriate, to identify and put in place bespoke interventions to meet the learner's individual needs.

ii. The effective working relationships established between one college and a diverse range of partner organisations to deliver the project within a community-based setting, including the extensive links and partnerships, across the greater Belfast area, which provide more learners with greater access to a wider learner support network. This social delivery model is attracting and retaining learners on the project who would not have the confidence to enrol on programmes delivered on a college campus. The community-based classes are a successful stepping stone to the next stage of learning.

iii.   The effective collaborative working with a wide range of community-based groups in one college has resulted in improved access to accredited and non-accredited provision across a wider geographical area. The smaller class sizes, more viable under this model, are much preferred by the learners, thus increasing their access to, and engagement with, learning and skills development.

iv.   Learners on the Omagh WRAP strand of the Step Up project have set up the Women's Hub Omagh (WHO) community group, with a focus on "Women Supporting Women". With the help and support of their mentor and local council the learners participated in training to help them understand how to run a community group. They then formed a committee, opened a bank account and adopted positions on the committee such as chairperson and secretary, resulting in increased self-confidence and new leadership skills. The group continues to provide a range of opportunities for other women in need of support to come together to offer social, creative and wellbeing workshops.

v.   The sampling opportunities across 20 different vocational areas with 18 of these having clear progression routes to education or employment and are aligned to labour market need, for example, in the areas of business, catering, childcare, coding, digital media, holistic therapies, joinery, plumbing and retail.

Conclusion

The Step Up Project provides a valuable introduction and a first step into further education for learners within the priority cohorts, improving their self-confidence and raising aspirations accordingly. The provision aligns well with the overall aims of the project, effectively targeting learners with a disability, including those with SEN; care-experienced young people; those not in employment, education, or training; the unemployed and economically inactive; and professional and technical areas with clear gender imbalances.

Data provided by the colleges demonstrates that they are monitoring progress effectively, and most are on track this year to achieve the targets set by DfE in relation to recruitment and progression.

The Step Up Project is a valuable addition to the curriculum, filling a gap in further education sector provision for priority groups and those supporting them in the community. The project's positive impact is contributing effectively to both the colleges' and DfE's strategic objectives but, most importantly, is improving the quality of life and life chances of individual learners at most risk of marginalisation and sustained economic inactivity. Concerningly, the evaluation has identified that there are learners on the College Connect + strand who have not completed statutory education for the required number of years prior to beginning the programme and/or were not given the opportunity to sit public examinations in the schools in which they were registered. The project, therefore, provided them with the vital opportunity to re-engage with education, achieve, progress and fulfil their potential in society.

In moving forward to facilitate the continued high-quality provision of the project, the Department for the Economy should consider the following:

- the continuation of the Step Up Project and commit to extending it over a longer period to support better planning, securing, and embedding of provision;

- aligning the programme with the colleges' academic year to ensure smoother learner transitions into full-time and part-time courses;

- expand access to short, accredited programmes to enhance employability skills and support direct progression into employment; and

- review, with the colleges, the key principles and format of the Individual Development Plan (IDP) to better capture short-term learner targets and track progress more effectively.

Appendix 1: Terms of Reference

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) was commissioned by DfE to evaluate the implementation and impact of the Step Up Project. The key objectives of the evaluation were:

i.   to what extent the provision in the further education colleges for the Step-up Project is impacting learners within the project's priority cohorts, to build their confidence in involvement in education, and, in particular, to enable them to progress to further education, training and/or employment; and

ii.   the extent the Step-Up Project is supporting the Minister's economic vision for good jobs, productivity and regional balance and, DfE's vision of Lifelong learning.

To evaluate the extent of the impact of the provision on learners within the priority cohorts, the evaluation will include the following:

- the effectiveness of the colleges' strategic vision and planning to realise the overall aims of the project;

- the range and effectiveness of the bespoke interventions in place to meet the varied needs of the learners across the priority cohorts, including any links and partnerships established with the community and voluntary sector to support delivery;

- the level and patterns of progression of the learners, across the priority cohorts, to further education, training and/or employment;

- the quality of the learning, teaching and training to meet the varied needs of the learners across the priority cohorts;

- the quality of the learners' Individual Development Plans, including the range and nature of support, information and guidance services in place to enable them to achieve their targeted learning outcome and progress to the next stage;

- identifying examples of more effective practice and, any actions to address less effective practice, across the strands of the project; and

- the effectiveness of the arrangements for child and adult protection.

Appendix 2: Notes

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five priority learner groups*
The Step Up Project targets five priority groups identified as being under-represented in education, training, and employment:

1. Individuals with disabilities, including those with special educational needs (SEN).

2. Care-experienced young people, many of whom have limited prior engagement with formal education.

3. Individuals not in education, employment, or training.

4. Unemployed and economically inactive adults, often disengaged from formal learning or work for extended periods.

5. Individuals in professional and technical sectors with gender imbalances, supporting greater equality of access and opportunity.

These groups face a range of barriers, including low prior attainment, health challenges, caring responsibilities, or lack of confidence, which the project is designed to address.

key strands*
The project is delivered through three key strands, each designed to respond to the specific needs of the target groups:

- DARE (Disability Access Route to Education and Employment)
  Supports individuals with disabilities and/or SEN to access and progress through education or into employment.

- College Connect+/College Connect 24+:
  - College Connect+ serves 16–24-year-olds who are not in education, employment or training.

  - College Connect 24+ supports learners aged 25 and above who are not in education, employment or training.

- WRAP (Women Returners Access Programme)
  Focuses on economically inactive and unemployed women returning to education or training, helping to build confidence and employability through flexible, supportive learning experiences.

support progression*
FE colleges were given the autonomy to shape their delivery model based on local need and learner profiles. Core delivery principles include:

- Mentor-led support: Each learner is supported by a dedicated mentor, offering guidance, encouragement, and practical help throughout the programme.

- Flexible provision: Courses and interventions are designed to be accessible, varied, and responsive to learner availability and pace.

- Community partnerships: Delivery is strengthened through collaboration with community, voluntary, and statutory organisations.

- Progression pathways: Each strand is designed to enable progression to further education, training, employment, or volunteering.

Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland*
The Step Up Project is underpinned by several key Northern Ireland policy frameworks, which collectively promote social inclusion, skills development, and regional economic growth:

Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland, which aims to close skills gaps and improve employability among disadvantaged groups.

evaluation visits*
The evaluation teams undertook visits to each of the six colleges over a period of three days. The visits included: discussions with learners, key staff delivering the programmes, senior managers; stakeholders and parents. The teams conducted observations of lessons and mentoring sessions.

Prior to the evaluation visits the the ETI also met with representatives from DfE and the colleges and provided an evaluation briefing meeting for the colleges.

At the end of the evaluation visit in each college, oral feedback was provided to the college and representatives from DfE on the key findings and areas for further action.

During the evaluation, inspectors spoke to:

- 239 learners – 199 through focus group meetings and 40 in informal discussions;

- 127 college staff, at all levels; and

- 45 stakeholders and a small number of parents.

Fifty-eight learning, teaching and training sessions were observed across 27 sites.

The evaluation team also scrutinised a wide range of documentation, and a range of data, pertaining to the project across the colleges.

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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