

Belfast Metropolitan College: Evaluation of the effectiveness of the curriculum provision at level 3 in supporting economic and social development

March 2023



Providing Inspection services for:
Department of Education
Department for the Economy
and other commissioning Departments



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Introduction

An evaluation of the effectiveness of curriculum planning at level 3 took place across four of the six colleges of further education (FE) in Northern Ireland (NI) (the colleges) from **February 2020 to March 2020***; with the advent of the pandemic, the evaluations in Belfast Metropolitan College (Belfast Met) and Northern Regional College could not be undertaken. Additionally, an evaluation of the work undertaken by the colleges to progress the development and implementation of the [Curriculum Hubs](#) was published in March 2022.

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

During the academic year 2022/23, to complete and build on the previous evaluation work, the Department for the Economy (DfE) commissioned the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to evaluate, in Belfast Met, the effectiveness of the curriculum provision at level 3, including the ApprenticeshipsNI 2021 programme, and the extent to which it was supporting economic and social development.

The evaluation visit to Belfast Met took place in March 2023. At the time of the visit, further education lecturers were mandated by their unions to participate in legitimate industrial action related to pay. As a result, there was an incomplete evaluation evidence base, with no observations of learning and teaching (the evidence base is set out in full in Appendix B).

Prior to the evaluation visit, in February 2023, ETI completed a desk-based scrutiny of the college's Quality Improvement Planning **submission***. On the basis of the information provided at that time, there was sufficient evidence that the college was planning effectively for learning and quality improvement.

The evaluation included a focus on the professional and technical (P&T) areas (from the classified (Tier 1) sector subject areas) of engineering and health and social care, as well as the provision for the essential skills and preparation for life and work. The effectiveness of the college's arrangements for safeguarding learners was included in the evaluation. In this report, learners denote level 3 FE students and apprentices on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme at level 3 unless otherwise specified.

Aim of the evaluation

The aim of the evaluation visit was to determine to what extent:

The curriculum provision at level 3, including the ApprenticeshipsNI programme, is supporting economic and social development.

The objectives of the evaluation visit were to determine to what extent:

1. the curriculum is well-conceived, well planned and inclusive, with clear progression pathways to meet the needs of learners, business and industry;

2. the delivery of the curriculum is well-led and managed, complemented by appropriate professional learning for staff;
3. collaborative delivery approaches are widening access and meeting the needs of learners, business and industry;
4. the views and ideas of the learners, staff, business and industry representatives are informing ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness and responsiveness of the curriculum in meeting current and emerging needs; and
5. there is effective practice and innovative learning.

Context

Belfast Met operates from four main campuses in the greater Belfast area: Titanic, Millfield, Castlereagh and E3 Springvale. The college recruits level 3 learners from across the eleven council areas, with the majority recruited from the greater Belfast area and the surrounding catchment areas of Antrim and Newtownabbey, Ards and North Down, and Lisburn and Castlereagh (all data used for the evaluation and presented in this report has been supplied and verified by Belfast Met at the time of the evaluation).

At the time of the evaluation visit, 5,680 learners were enrolled on level 3 provision in the college, which accounted for just over one-quarter of the whole college provision; 2,252 (40%) were full-time and 3,428 (60%) were part-time. In the period from 2019/20 to 2021/22, at level 3 the FE enrolments declined by 21% overall, however, enrolments to the ApprenticeshipsNI programme increased by 35%.

Just over one-half (53%) of the level 3 learners registered as male; 46% were aged 16 to 18, and approximately 43% were enrolled in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) related areas. Almost all (91%) of the apprentices enrolled registered as male. Sixty-four percent of the apprentices were aged 19 to 25 and approximately 69% of them were in STEM related areas.

In the P&T areas sampled, from 2019/20 to 2021/22, full-time level 3 enrolments in health and social care, including the entitlement framework provision, declined by 14% and part-time by 12%. In engineering, full-time level 3 enrolments increased by 10%, however, part-time level 3 provision declined by 27%. At the time of the visit, 238 students were enrolled on full-time FE courses; 127 in engineering and 111 in health and social care. One hundred and eighty-six students were enrolled on part-time FE courses; 58 in engineering and 128 in health and social care. Overall, 662 apprentices were enrolled on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme, across a range of level 3 apprenticeships. Of these, 63 apprentices were in engineering and none in health and social care, as there was no apprenticeship provision in this P&T area at the time of the evaluation visit.

Almost all of the learners enrolled on a level 3 programme, who do not have at least a grade C in General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) English, GCSE mathematics or a level 2 qualification in information and communications technology (ICT), literacy or numeracy, are appropriately enrolled on an essential skills course. At the time of the evaluation, there were 396 level 3 enrolments in the essential skills; 339 FE students and 57 apprentices. ICT accounted for 184 (46%) of the enrolments, literacy 59 (15%) and numeracy 153 (39%).

On level 3 programmes, 20% of full-time and 13% of part-time FE learners, and 6% of apprentices had declared a disability or a specific learning difficulty.

Views of the learners

A small number of students and apprentices responded to the evaluation's online learner questionnaire (142), representing less than five percent of the level 3 learners enrolled at the time the evaluation visit was completed. The majority of this small number of respondents were positive about their learning experiences. They indicated that: their course was interesting and challenging; they were informed well about their progress and given useful feedback; staff care about their progress and well-being; they feel safe and secure in the college; and overall that their course is preparing them well for the next steps in their careers.

Inspectors met with learners (72) in focus group meetings. Most of these learners are clear about the progression opportunities to higher education and employment. They report that they enjoy and benefit from a wide range of learning experiences including peer to peer support, discussion groups, group work and industry relevant activities. They feel well supported by staff and value both the enrichment opportunities and student support services, including physical resources such as the availability of laptops and the study facilities in the library.

Key findings

The following key findings are based on the evidence made available at the time of the evaluation visit. Due to the industrial action, the evidence base does not include any observations of learning and teaching.

Strategic delivery

- Belfast Met's vision is to be: "the college of choice for learners, the employer of choice for talent, and the partner of choice for employers and business." The vision is underpinned by the core values of Collaboration, Ambition, Respect and Excellence (CARE). The college's three-year strategic plan (2021 to 2024) defines its purpose as equipping learners, driving innovation, and transforming lives, which aligns well to DfE's policy drivers of economic and social development.

- Managers have a clear, learner-centred commitment to realising the college vision. The P&T areas sampled are strategically well-led. Overall, informed by the well-defined governance and accountability arrangements, there is effective leadership and management of the level 3 provision.
- Overall, staffing requirements are planned carefully in line with the college's regular curriculum review processes. There were 246 full-time (68%) and 112 (32%) part-time staff involved in the delivery of the level 3 provision at the time of the evaluation. The complement of lecturers and support professionals for the level 3 provision includes experienced staff with appropriate industrial and pedagogic experience and high levels of expertise; a number are current industry practitioners. For example, in health and social care, lecturers are occupationally experienced and come from a diverse range of professional backgrounds with expertise in areas such as general nursing, biomedical science and mental health.
- The staff who inspectors met with across the provision articulated a clear commitment to providing positive and successful experiences for all the learners through ongoing improvement.
- There are clear workforce challenges for the sector generally, and these are being experienced by the college. For example, provision in the economically important curriculum area of engineering has been restricted by low staffing levels and recruitment issues over an extended period, which is now reaching a critical point. The ability of the college to meet demand, despite regular engagement with small/medium engineering employers, is now limited by the low staffing levels. In health and social care, challenges with the recruitment and retention of staff with the relevant professional skills and competences are also being managed to maintain the range of provision. The college has also identified that, due to the staffing complement, a challenge is its capacity to maintain the promotion of the learner support service, implement preventative strategies and manage one-to-one wellbeing emotional support plans.
- A notable strength of the essential skills provision is the clear staffing structure, with well-defined lines of responsibility and accountability. Senior and middle leaders of the essential skills team are members of several sectoral strategic and operational groups. This collaboration within the sector and with other partners enables the college team to inform well delivery within the college, as well as having an influence on policy, informed by practitioner and learner perspectives.
- Curriculum design across the college is strategic, informed by key DfE policies and programmes (to include the roll-out of the DfE level 3 Advanced Technical programme pilot, the implementation of which is currently paused across the sector by DfE), as well as effective collaboration with representatives of higher education, employers, industry and other key stakeholders such as, the health and social care trusts, the FE curriculum hubs and sector partnerships.

- The engineering curriculum is well-informed by effective and strategic partnerships, which include employer representatives from a range of engineering industries. The curriculum planning is focused on providing courses that will support employment opportunities in emerging technologies such as the decarbonisation of maritime transport, offshore energy and green hydrogen technologies. Additionally, planning is in place to use existing female learners as role models to encourage others to take up study or an apprenticeship in this P&T area.
- The engineering team has identified appropriately key physical resources necessary to deliver high quality relevant training and has been successful in obtaining investment to support the delivery of the curriculum, including rapid prototyping, materials testing, and fabrication and welding facilities.
- Elements of the engineering provision are fragmented across college departments, particularly for electrical and electronic engineering, which should be an integral part of advanced manufacturing, automation and maintenance. This fragmentation is limiting negatively holistic planning and curriculum design and development, and is an area for inclusion in the college's quality improvement planning.
- In health and social care, curriculum development is informed by collaboration with a range of stakeholders including the health and social care trusts and the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC). The college is also represented to very good effect on the cross-college collaboration forum and the curriculum hub for health and social care. The strategic engagement by college staff ensures that they are kept well-informed on key policies and initiatives, which inform well the curriculum planning process which benefits the learners.
- In information technology (IT), extensive links have been established with a wide range of employers and industry stakeholders through the work of the digital IT Hub. Through effective employer engagement, the college has developed a contemporary IT apprenticeship provision at level 3, aligned well to the mainstream level 3 FE provision. The overall IT provision is contemporary, reflects industry needs and technological developments, and offers learners a range of relevant higher education progression pathways.
- In addition to the P&T areas sampled, effective curriculum planning and design was also evidenced in areas such as creative technologies, esports, fashion design, **FinTech***, and hospitality. Features in these areas again included the contemporary curriculum offer, with clearly identified progression pathways, staff with relevant industry experience and expertise, industry standard technologies and resources and effective collaboration with a range of key stakeholders.

- There is well-considered and effective engagement with an extensive range of external stakeholders and partners, including employers and industry, to support economic engagement. For example, business development staff have worked in partnership with the school of health, wellbeing and inclusion to deliver a range of skills interventions post-pandemic through the Skill-Up programme. Staff in the childcare department worked closely with a range of partners to deliver a number of short online skill intervention programmes, including at level 3, to address skill gaps in the sector which have resulted in 141 qualifications being successfully delivered. As a consequence, staff have been upskilled as part of their job roles which enhances their opportunities for progression in the sector.
- The college is engaging actively with the post-primary and special schools in the four area learning communities (ALCs) in Belfast. The number of learners involved in the college's entitlement framework provision has declined by 33% over the past five years. The college staff, however, reported increased engagement with the schools in the ALCs during the last 18 to 24 months, essential to strengthening existing collaborative approaches and to help encourage a much closer integration between education and training, and to support delivery of the [Framework](#) to transform 14-19 education and training provision. At the time of the evaluation visit, the college's entitlement framework provision at level 3 involved small numbers across ten schools (of which five are special schools, with provision also made for delivery of entry level qualifications), with delivery at level 3 in the P&T areas sampled (36 learners in engineering; 104 learners in health and social care) and across creative media (17 learners) and uniform protective services (19 learners).
- The well-established collaborative health and social care entitlement framework provision with two post-primary schools, is in high demand by young people progressing to study at post-16 in this P&T area. The engineering entitlement framework provision is small and involves just one post-primary school; it is always oversubscribed. The school reported that it is effective and valued by pupils and parents, due to the learning experiences and successful outcomes. Due to the staffing capacity constraints, it is concerning that it is not possible currently for the college to facilitate any further provision in this economically important area, despite expressions of interest by other post-primary schools in the ALCs.
- The P&T areas sampled in the evaluation visit, and others observed during the evaluation, are very well resourced. The accommodation is of a high quality with a significant investment by the college in contemporary industry-standard equipment and resources, across the level 3 provision.
- In childcare and health and social care, learners benefit from delivery in a college setting with high quality simulated vocational skills suites comprising a mock hospital, nursing home, and supported living environments including instant feedback robotic models. These have been resourced to mirror real-life working environments, supporting learners' transition to placement and the world of work.

- The quality of the accommodation across the college is monitored and reviewed regularly to ensure standards reflect the needs of the industry, as well as meeting the needs of all learners, including those with additional learning and support needs.
- Through its dual remit of economic engagement and social inclusion, the college is committed to the development of sustainability across the curriculum, notably the green economy and the concepts and trends that are impacting the labour market and society. At the time of the evaluation visit, a group of learners from a wide range of professional and technical areas, including at level 3, were participating on a sustainable enterprise training in action project in Belgium. The learners were engaged in project-based learning projects, activities with university learners, and undertaking vocational sampling days with relevant employers. They were also able to achieve the OCN level 2 award in innovation and enterprise in practice.

The curriculum provision

- The level 3 provision across the college and in the P&T areas sampled is contemporary and aligned closely to key DfE strategies, supporting well economic and social development. There is ongoing engagement with employers through open days to facilitate work experience and placement opportunities.
- The engineering curriculum has been designed to meet the needs of a range of engineering employers, with examples of the curriculum being to the fore of current industry and technological advances in areas such as aeronautical, marine and maritime engineering. Learners gain industry recognised skills to a high standard in areas of economic importance including coded welding and industrial electronics; a small number have also achieved medals in the **Worldskills*** competitions.
- The health and social care provision offers students structured opportunities to progress to a range of careers including nursing, social work, counselling and allied health professional roles. The full-time courses in health and social care are consistently oversubscribed. Part-time health and social care provision is delivered flexibly to promote accessibility and meet the needs of learners who are in employment in health and social care settings and want to attain a recognised competence-based qualification. For example, the college has been successful in piloting a bespoke training programme for a Health and Social Care Trust which is meeting well the upskilling needs of existing employees working in the sector. A level 3 health and social care apprenticeship is being planned to further support employment and progression opportunities for learners. Overall, the provision is meeting well the needs of learners and the sector.

- The high priority given to the provision for the essential skills at level 3, to meet effectively the needs of the learners and employers, is evidenced by the flexible delivery model in place; fast track, blended fast track and semesterised delivery is supported by multiple exam windows. The staff reported that effective links between the essential skills and the professional and technical areas allow for the development and consolidation of the learners' ICT, literacy and numeracy skills.
- To effect higher levels of attendance and retention, a well-conceived pre-entry advice and guidance process identifies the essential skills as an integral part of the professional and technical qualification. The initial and diagnostic assessment is used consistently to set appropriate targets for the learners. To facilitate progression at the earliest stage, the learners work towards achieving level 2 in the first year of their vocational programme, which learners and staff reported is highly motivating and contributes to the positive outcomes. Timely and individualised support is put in place as required. Appropriately identified as an action within the college's quality improvement planning, is to support further the small number of learners who identify a need to undertake GCSE English and/or GCSE mathematics for progression purposes; more consideration should be given to how to progress this action.
- The college has also responded to identified changing needs of learners and their learning preferences preferred learning styles, with short level 3 courses now provided online, with learner access at a time, place and pace to suit individual learners. The development of a range of **microcredential*** courses is also being explored.
- A good range of enrichment and additionality opportunities are provided to further develop sector relevant employability skills and enhance progression opportunities. These include level 2 qualifications, short online skills intervention programmes and relevant industry recognised vendor qualifications.
- A project-based learning (PBL) model continues to be developed as a method of curriculum delivery across the college, with its implementation at various stages. Collaborative teaching, employer engagement and innovative learning enables learners to apply and develop their technical knowledge, and practical and transversal skills. Continued monitoring and evaluation of its effectiveness and impact, however, is required, to ensure that it is meeting well enough the needs of the learners.
- This PBL model, for example, is an integral element of the curriculum in engineering and supports a range of industry-led projects in creative media. Lecturers from different engineering disciplines (welding, machining, fabrication, and electronics) work collaboratively to provide learners with the knowledge, skills and support necessary to develop the confidence to complete individualised projects. In creative media, the recent revival and

production of a popular television chat show involved level 3 learners from a range of courses such as fashion, hair, make-up, media, music performance and theatre working within a real-life production with learners from other FE and higher education programmes and retired industry specialists. The learners are able to gain industry experience as well as the development of **transversal skills*** needed in the workplace.

- The delivery and accreditation of transversal skills is in development across the level 3 provision; different approaches to integrate and assess the development of the learners' transversal skills are being piloted. Continued monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness and impact of these approaches is required. Where naturally occurring evidence is not available to enable learners to develop all of their transversal skills, in any particular P&T area, it is intended that discrete PBL projects will be created.
- In engineering for example, an online learning platform is being piloted to support the learners' development of transversal skills, which includes interactive videos and assessment mapped to an accredited level 2 framework. In hairdressing and beauty therapy, the transversal skills have been embedded into the learners' vocational qualification.
- In a focus group with inspectors, employers reported that, despite the college being responsive to employer/industry need at level 3, there are significant challenges to realising positive economic development and securing an available workforce in key sectoral areas, due mainly to a buoyant employment market where demand is outstripping supply. They articulated clearly their frustrations in respect of attracting and retaining apprentices in particular sectors such as engineering and hospitality and tourism. Challenges persist of encouraging more learners to engage in apprenticeships, as well as to attract and retain a more diverse workforce by recruiting learners to P&T areas which were traditionally male dominated.
- Appropriate opportunities exist for learners to develop further their professional and technical skills and wider employability skills through: undertaking work-experience placements; participation in skills competitions such as UK and WorldSkills; engaging in entrepreneurial and enterprise activities, which have been given a high priority across the level 3 curriculum; or participating on externally funded initiatives such as the **Erasmus+ programme*** or the **Turing scheme***. Overall, the level 4 and level 5 provision available in the college augments well the progression opportunities for the students.

Support, guidance and keeping safe

- The college staff know well the profile of the learners, and the vocational curriculum provision is underpinned by a comprehensive suite of support in place for them, including a range of learner support services, careers information advice and guidance and funded initiatives which are well-designed to promote equality and inclusivity.

- The learner support services across the college are strategically well-led and provide effective direction and support for the staff in planning for and meeting the needs of the learners, promoting successful outcomes and progression. The college has invested significantly in the provision of a wellbeing team and an inclusive learning team. The wellbeing officers work in collaboration with curriculum teams to address and explore the range of issues and barriers to learning, tailoring solutions to individual learner need. According to the most recent college data at the time of the evaluation, 93% of all learners referred to the learner wellbeing team are retained by the college.
- Due to experiencing a significant increase in the number of learners needing support, the college has implemented a new strategy of 'promotion, prevention and intervention', the focus being on promotion and prevention rather than escalation. Learners are encouraged to self-disclose any learning difficulties or disabilities at the application stage; initial assessments are then conducted, to assess need. Notably, appropriate early mitigations and transitional support are then put in place through the inclusive learning team, regardless of whether they go on to enrol in the college. A college review of the effectiveness of the strategy is ongoing.
- At the time of the evaluation approximately 537 level 3 learners had support plans in place; this is mainly for examination access. Identification of the key issues presented by the learners are analysed and evaluated by each college department and this informs the types of initiatives implemented and the level and type of support provided. Across the departments, it has been identified that a greater number of learners are presenting with anxiety, stress, low moods and depression. As a result, tailored programmes have been developed to support the learners to cope and develop their resilience, such as the six-session wellbeing programme, and a wide range of assistive technologies is also available to learners to meet their individual learning and support needs. There is also one-to-one mentoring. Learners who met with inspectors in focus groups reported that they valued the support they receive.
- Through its charitable Trust, Belfast Met is committed to supporting a number of initiatives for learners, including those at level 3, during their time in the college. In the current academic year, these have included the provision of a breakfast facility for students on the Millfield and Titanic Quarter campuses; supporting student volunteers to engage with and contribute to various student services and projects across the college, in conjunction with the college's student union; and working with the college's student wellbeing team to provide emergency support to learners in crisis.
- If required, the inclusive learning team also liaises closely with external support agencies, along with learners' parents/carers, to ensure the learners are supported appropriately to develop and progress in their learning. Strong and purposeful relationships are also well-established with key external agencies to support the learners' wellbeing. Clinics on, for example, sexual health, financial management and alcohol and drugs are delivered on the campuses by specialist external agencies. A free counselling service is also available to learners.

- The college's careers and employability service is available to all full-time and part-time learners and is delivered by dedicated careers education, information, advice and guidance staff located on each campus. The service provides learners with impartial advice and guidance on career planning across a wide range of areas and in a variety of ways including career planning and decision-making workshops, job search, curriculum vitae development, and interview preparation.
- Learners can also access a range of careers and employability resources through the career resource centres located on each campus, online via the college's learning management system, and on social media where career events are promoted, and job vacancies are posted regularly. There is a wide range of valuable information about progression routes, higher level apprenticeships, employment and self-employment, and higher education application and selection processes. A planned calendar of events is available which includes university talks, and job and apprenticeship fairs to support the learners' career planning and decision-making.
- The highly committed multi-disciplinary team for wellbeing, inclusive learning and careers and employability work collaboratively to continuously improve the learner experience and ensure that the learners are referred to the service that best meets their individual learning, development and progression needs. The college has maintained its Matrix standard for information, advice and guidance (IAG) services delivered across learner experience areas and inclusive support.
- Based on the scrutiny of documentation and meetings by inspectors with the staff with responsibility for safeguarding and with representatives of the board of governors, there is evidence that safeguarding and awareness training for all staff and governors is given a high priority in the college. Due to the industrial action, with no observations of learning and teaching, the inspection team is unable to evaluate the effectiveness of the arrangements for safeguarding and, for protecting young people and adults at risk. The designated safeguarding team are experienced and responsive and refer or signpost learners to a wide range of external statutory, community and voluntary organisations with whom they have well established professional working relationships. Those who responded to the online questionnaire and the learners who met with inspectors in focus groups reported that they know who to talk to if they have any concerns in their placement and/or in the college.

Monitoring and evaluation

- Through its self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes, the college's strategic plan and associated objectives are monitored and reviewed regularly. The processes are informed by the FE sector's electronic learner management information system which is being implemented well by the college and used regularly to track, monitor and review learner progress and performance outcomes across the curriculum.

- A range of surveys are conducted regularly by the college to obtain and act on the views of the level 3 learners on the provision of inclusive learning, wellbeing and careers support and to inform the development of the college provision. For example, the learner wellbeing individual support survey in January 2023 sought the views of the learners who engaged with wellbeing support to gauge its effectiveness; the learner welfare provision survey sought learner views on initiatives such as the breakfast club, “taste not waste” food bank, and the wear to share sustainability hub; and the follow-on learners’ wellbeing workshop asked learners what they found most/least useful.
- The college also analyses a wide range of information, such as the attendance and engagement of learners in different initiatives and rates of access to digital technology/information in order to target resources to areas of need.
- The data provided and verified by the college indicates that overall outcomes for learners across the level 3 provision in 2021/22 are positive; most were retained (83%) and achieved their targeted qualification (88%). Overall, in 2021/22, most (86%) of the level 3 learners progressed to further education and/or employment.
- In health and social care, almost all of the students in 2021/22 were retained (91%) and achieved their targeted qualification (99%), and in engineering, most were retained (77%) and almost all achieved their targeted qualification (98%). In the essential skills, most of the learners were retained (84%) and achieved their targeted qualification (80%).
- The college should continue to monitor any variation in retention and achievement outcomes for the small number of learners in the literacy and numeracy essential skills; achievement rates for ICT have been consistently high.
- The college’s reach to learners from the lowest quintiles supports well the social inclusion theme of DfE’s [Further Education Means Success](#) - Further Education Strategy. Just over 23% of all its level 3 learners are from the most deprived areas in NI (socio-economic deprivation quintiles one and two), whilst just under 27% are from the most advantaged areas (quintiles four and five). On the FE programmes, 24% of students and 40% of apprentices on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme are from the most deprived areas in NI. Twenty-six percent of the FE students are from the most advantaged areas, and 25% of the apprentices are from the most advantaged areas.
- The employer representatives who met with inspectors are very positive about the college, and value the regular communication about progress and planning for work-based assessment opportunities, and the skills their apprentices are developing. Employers are involved in the review of learners’ progress including assessing PBL projects. Good use is made of an e-portfolio system to record assessment evidence and provide regular feedback to them on progress and development.

Professional learning for staff

- Across the college, training programmes are developed for the identified needs of the curriculum areas and the staff are provided with good opportunities to undertake relevant and contemporary continuing professional development (CPD). The college provides online training webinars and there are professional development events such as the annual staff development conference, which has a good balance of learning and teaching, leadership and management and wellbeing sessions.
- Managers are encouraged to develop their leadership and management skills. Personalised professional learning is available for lecturers to meet their individual needs, with opportunities to develop their pedagogical and occupational/professional knowledge and skills, as well as leadership and management qualifications. A staff induction programme is in place for all new lecturers to support their introduction to the college and its services. Part-time staff are supported well to develop their pedagogy, including to attain the required Certificate in Teaching qualification.
- Staff have a clear awareness and understanding of the increasing range and incidence of barriers to learning, including the ongoing impact of the pandemic on the learners. Training has been provided for staff to support the learners' pastoral and additional learning needs, for example, training on anxiety in the classroom. Learner support staff have also delivered upskilling programmes on autism and ADHD for staff to meet the increasingly complex needs of the learners, and the Student Wellbeing team has provided staff training on trauma informed practice and adverse childhood experiences.
- The engineering staff are encouraged to develop their skills to keep pace with industry developments. This includes, for example: upskilling in electric vehicle and hydrogen technologies and developing foundry skills. The essential skills team is highly responsive to need and a wide range of appropriate CPD is in place with a focus on high quality learning and teaching.
- Effective use of the NI Skills Barometer and proactive horizon-scanning leaves the college well placed to respond to future demand and emerging needs. Instances exist of staff having upskilled and being ahead of current industry practices and the readiness of industry to deliver, in areas such as green technologies, which the college has identified as being of importance to the NI economy.
- Good opportunities exist for health and social care staff to undertake relevant CPD both in the college and through the Curriculum Hub. Examples of professional learning include bespoke PBL sessions, safeguarding training modules and disability awareness. Professionally registered staff maintain their professional and technical skills and also complete a range of industry mandated training such as first aid and manual handling. Staff also attend industry relevant conferences such as the Northern Ireland Confederation for Health and Social Care. There are very good mentoring arrangements in place to support new managers.

- Additionally, the curriculum hub for health and social care, provides good opportunities for lecturers to share resources, learning and teaching approaches, assessments and actively engage in staff forums to ensure that provision is responsive and relevant to the needs of the sector.
- The college has developed plans to address recruitment issues through the deployment and upskilling of technical staff to support further the delivery of the curriculum in some P&T areas such as engineering and creative media.

Conclusion

Due to the industrial action, the evidence base does not include any observations of learning and teaching. As a result, inspectors were unable to evaluate fully the overall impact of the level 3 provision in supporting economic and social development.

Nevertheless, based on the evidence available, the evaluation visit has identified the positive actions the college's leaders, managers and staff are taking to deliver a relevant and contemporary curriculum at level 3, including the ApprenticeshipsNI 2021 programme. These actions as set out in the key findings are supporting economic and social development.

Informed well by the self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes in place, the curriculum has clear progression pathways to meet the needs of learners, business and industry in the P&T areas sampled. There is strong evidence that the views and ideas of the learners, staff, business and industry representatives are informing ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness and responsiveness of the curriculum in meeting needs and emerging needs.

The college is inclusive and widening access to attract a diverse range of learners, including through collaborative delivery approaches, marketing campaigns, and careers education. The delivery of the curriculum is complemented by relevant professional learning for staff.

The recommended next steps are for the college to:

- continue to recruit apprentices across the range of provision, and put in place the planned level 3 apprenticeship provision in health and social care;
- review those elements of the engineering provision which are currently fragmented across departments and impacting negatively on the effectiveness of holistic planning and curriculum design and development;
- be able to monitor and report on any variation in retention and achievement, including the outcomes in the essential skills, and
- consider how to support further the small number of learners on the level 3 programmes who identify a need to undertake GCSE English and/or mathematics for progression purposes.

Appendix A: Background information

The evaluation of the curriculum provision at level 3 provision in Belfast Met is set against DfE's ongoing review of the FE delivery model, its FE Estate Strategy and the [Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland](#). Sectoral challenges include budgetary pressures, recruitment and retention of learners and staff, and the management of complexities arising post-pandemic.

The implementation of the Department of Education and the [DfE 14-19 Framework](#) is central to delivery of 'a [10x Economy](#)' and the policy objectives set out in the Skills Strategy, and in fulfilling [Fair Start](#) commitments. It is also a key element of the Executive's [Building Forward: Consolidated NI COVID Recovery Plan](#) and a first step in addressing some of the challenges raised in the [Independent Review of Careers](#).

The [NI Skills Barometer](#) forecasts future skills needs and skills gaps by qualification level, subject area and sector for Northern Ireland; an update report covers the coming decade to 2030.

Appendix B: Methodology and evidence base

In advance of the evaluation visit, ETI inspectors met with DfE officials and representatives of the leadership of Belfast Met to discuss the aim and objectives of the evaluation.

ETI acknowledged the right of lecturers to take legitimate industrial action and planned the format of the evaluation visit with the college's representatives, to take account of mandated industrial action.

The evaluation visit by the ETI inspection team took place over five days during March 2023, led by a Reporting Inspector. Oral feedback was provided on day five to representatives of the P&T areas sampled, the essential skills, preparation for life and work, the senior leaders and governors, and relevant staff and representatives from DfE's Quality Improvement Team. The feedback highlighted key findings and any areas for focus for the college going forward.

As part of the evaluation visit, inspectors attended an IT employer event, undertook two workplace visits, had six focus group meetings with 72 learners and key stakeholders (eight collaborative partners, ten employers, and one external agency), discussions with the Chief Executive/Principal and executive management team, the curriculum director, the quality manager and other key staff (approximately 90) across the college, including those responsible for the safeguarding arrangements and representatives of the governing body. Learners had the opportunity to complete a confidential questionnaire. Scrutiny of relevant data and documentation included, for example, the curriculum plan, samples of learners' practical work and learner e-portfolios, and a range of course and college resources.

Appendix C: Quantitative terms

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%

Appendix D: Notes

Page 2 **February 2020 to March 2020*** - [North West Regional College, February 2020](#); [Southern Regional College, March 2020](#); [South West College, February 2020](#); [South Eastern Regional College, March 2020](#)

submission* - Submitted in December 2022, as part of the pilot DfE arrangements for Quality Improvement Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting in place for the FE sector for the 2022-24 period; the submission required the college to submit a complete DfE Statement of Assurance, its Quality Improvement Plan 2022-24, and its Whole College Self-Evaluation/Quality Improvement Plan 2020-22 Report.

Page 9 **FinTech*** - FinTech (Financial Technology): The term used to describe new technology that seeks to improve and automate the delivery and use of financial services.

Page 11 **WorldSkills*** - WorldSkills is an international charity that organises world and national championships for vocational skills and is held every two years in different parts of the world, and also hosts conferences about vocational skills. WorldSkills describes itself as the global hub for skills.

Page 12 **microcredential*** - A microcredential is a short, personalised and often on-demand learning experience which teaches students a range of skills and competencies. Typically, a microcredential is completed over a number of days or weeks leading to certification upon completion.

Page 13 **transversal skills*** - UNESCO defines transversal skills as: “Skills that are typically considered as not specifically related to a particular job, task, academic discipline or area of knowledge and that can be used in a wide variety of situations and work settings (for example, organisational skills).

Page 14 **Erasmus + programme*** - Erasmus +: The European Union’s programme to support education, training, youth and sport in Europe.

Turing scheme* - The Turing Scheme is the UK government’s global programme to study and work abroad.

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