

Evaluation of Curriculum Planning at level 3 in the Southern Regional College

March 2020

ETI: Promoting Improvement in the Interest of all Learners



The Education and Training Inspectorate
Promoting Improvement

Providing inspection services for:

Department of Education
Department for the Economy
and other commissioning Departments



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1. CONTEXT

During the 2019/20 academic year, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) was commissioned by the Department for the Economy (Department) to evaluate the effectiveness of curriculum planning at level 3 in the further education (FE) provision across the six regional FE colleges.

The evaluation in the Southern Regional College took place in March 2020 and included the six Tier 1 areas of: business administration, finance and law; construction, planning and the built environment; engineering and manufacturing technologies; health, public services and care; hospitality and tourism¹; and science and mathematics. The provision for preparation for life and work was also evaluated.

At the time of the evaluation, 4,241² students were enrolled on FE level 3 programmes in the college; 1,913 full-time and 2,328 part-time students. In terms of the areas sampled for the evaluation, 878 students were enrolled on full-time courses in the areas being evaluated (46% of the total full-time enrolments) and 1,157 students were enrolled on part-time courses (50% of the total part-time enrolments). The college also delivers a range of level 3 ApprenticeshipsNI programmes at level 3³, but these were not included in this evaluation.

The following is a summary of the key findings for the college.

2. KEY FINDINGS

Range and content of the learning programmes

- The level 3 further education provision represents approximately 18% of the total college enrolments. Around 37% of the level 3 enrolments are in STEM-related areas and just under one-half of them are from the highest socio-economic deprivation quintiles one and two. Approximately 60% of students enrolling on level 3 programmes are female.
- Enrolments to full-time programmes have declined by around 16% over the past three years. Over the same period, part-time enrolments have increased by 5%. This decline is particularly evident in hospitality and catering and travel and tourism where enrolments have been in decline over the past four years. There is a need to increase enrolments to both full-time and part-time programmes in these professional and technical areas and develop further the provision to more fully meet local industry needs and support progression opportunities for the students. It is also a concern that recruitment to both full-time and part-time programmes in construction is low, largely as the result of post-primary schools duplicating this provision.

¹ Hospitality and Catering is a subset of the Tier 1 area of retail and commercial enterprises, and travel and tourism is a subset of the Tier 1 area of leisure, travel and tourism. These economically important professional and technical areas were evaluated jointly at the request of the Department for the Economy for the purposes of the evaluation.

² All data used for the evaluation and presented in this report has been supplied and verified by the college.

³ The Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI programmes in the Southern Regional College were inspected in November 2018 and the published report can be accessed on the ETI website at:

<https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/training-for-success-and-apprenticeshipsni-provision-in-the-southern-regional-college.pdf>.

- Across the majority of the professional and technical areas evaluated, a broad range of full-time and part-time programmes are offered at level 3; these are well-designed and delivered flexibly to best meet the learning and development needs of the students and support progression to higher education and training. The students are provided with good opportunities to develop contemporary industry-relevant skills and knowledge and the programme content is matched well to industry needs. In a significant minority of the professional and technical areas, the input from employers could be used more effectively to support the curriculum planning and development process in the college.
- A good range of industry training, including bespoke programmes, is offered through the college's business support and innovation centre. In engineering and construction, for example, a well-targeted range of part-time specialist courses is offered to those already in employment in order for them to develop the skills needed for upskilling and new job roles.
- Revised Regulated Qualification Framework (RQF) qualifications have been introduced in two of the professional and technical areas evaluated and planning is underway to introduce them across the other areas from September 2020 onwards. The college should continue to ensure that effective support is in place for staff and students in order to allow them to prepare for the revised assessment arrangements and the associated changes in pedagogical practices that this will entail.

Employability, enterprise and work-ready skills

- Most of the students have good opportunities to develop their employability, enterprise and work-ready skills. These are developed very effectively through a range of initiatives, including project-based learning, work-experience placements, external competitions, employability sessions, entrepreneurial activities, international work-experience opportunities through the Erasmus+ programme, and studying in realistic working environments within the college. Going forward, the college should monitor and exploit further the good opportunities that also arise for the students to develop their enterprise skills specific to their curriculum areas.
- At the time of the evaluation, the college had 98 live project-based learning activities in place with an appropriate focus on developing the students' transversal skills. There is evidence that most of the students are developing good leadership, team working and communication skills through this provision. There is a need, however, to develop it further in some professional and technical areas. This includes better engagement with industry to design and develop projects that facilitate collaborative working between students from different professional and technical programmes, and exploiting better the opportunities provided to develop the students' literacy, numeracy and digital skills.
- The senior management team places a very high priority on project-based learning, including planning for dedicated "SOLVE"⁴ spaces in all of the new build projects to ensure it is sustained and further embedded.

⁴ SOLVE is the internal college name assigned to breakout areas for the students to undertake practical and project-based work, including problem-solving.

Literacy, numeracy and digital skills

- Most of the students who do not have a level 2 qualification in literacy, numeracy or ICT/digital technology are enrolled on an appropriate programme of essential skills or repeat GCSE English and mathematics programmes. Most of these classes are appropriately timetabled but there are a small number of classes where the timetabling could be improved to better accommodate the needs of the students. A fast track model has been introduced for those students who demonstrate the ability and motivation to succeed, and there is scope for the college to review and further extend this model across the provision, if deemed appropriate. Comprehensive tracking arrangements are in place to monitor the students' progress and performance in their essential skills. The attendance at the essential skills classes observed, however, was variable but too low overall and the outcomes attained by the students, particularly in literacy and numeracy, are also too low.
- Where higher level mathematics is required to progress to higher education, the students are provided with appropriate higher level units as part of their learning programme. Most of the students have good opportunities to develop appropriate industry-standard digital skills relevant to their professional and technical area, including for example, the use of digital health assessment tools, the use of business software systems, and the development of coding skills for embedded microprocessors systems.

Learning outcomes and progression

- The standards of almost all of the students' work are consistently good or better; in a minority of the areas evaluated the standard of technical skills and knowledge attained are mostly very good. Most of the students are well-settled, motivated and developing a good understanding of the theory and practice associated with their professional and technical areas.
- Where the standards of work attained are very good or better, the students are highly-motivated, are keen to learn, and are developing good analytical and problem-solving skills. Across a minority of the areas evaluated, the students exploit well the college's industry-standard learning resources to develop high levels of practical competence. In addition, through participation in competitions, industry projects and work placements they grow in confidence in their ability to perform competently industry-standard tasks, to solve complex problems and take increasing responsibility for their own learning and career progression. In the most effective practice, high-quality industry-linked projects underpin to very good effect the development of the students' thinking skills and wider transversal skills.
- Most of the students are also progressing well in the development of their wider skills and personal capabilities; for example: work collaboratively in small teams to explore and evaluate possible solutions to problems; take leadership roles in project work; and make professional presentations to their peers. The development of the students' creativity and enterprise skills, however, is more varied across the professional and technical areas evaluated. Going forward, the college needs to monitor and evaluate the reach and effectiveness of the current roll-out of its enterprise enrichment programme.

- The college makes very good, robust use of key performance data to underpin the self-evaluation process at whole-college and course-team level; appropriately, the process is based upon the collation and analysis of data for the entirety of the students' learning programme, including two-year data⁵ for courses. In the majority of the professional and technical areas evaluated, student retention⁶ rates over the last three years for full-time two-year diplomas are good or better, however, they are low in both construction and the built environment (69%) and travel and tourism (61%) and are an important area for improvement. Over the same period, the achievement rates across the areas range from good to outstanding. Progression rates to either higher education or employment are outstanding at over 90%, with a majority of the students progressing to higher education. The college's own analysis shows that most of the college's level 3 learners progress to either employment or higher education, with a slightly greater proportion to employment. Outcomes on part-time programmes across the professional and technical areas are high.

Range and quality of the learning experiences

- Nearly all of the learning and teaching observed was good or better; notably, almost one-half of the lessons observed were very good or outstanding. The most effective practice is characterised by the effective use of a well-considered range of learning and teaching strategies, which include: a well-balanced blend of theory-based and practical learning activities; differentiated questioning to underpin learning; and engaging and purposeful use of information and learning technology. The lesson planning also provides a range of opportunities for the students to participate in group activities in order to build their self-confidence, communication, research and analytical skills.
- In the less effective practice, while the lessons were for the most part effective, the learning was overly lecturer-led, resulting in more passive learners with overly limited opportunities for them to actively engage in their learning and for lecturers to consolidate their understanding through questioning or problem-solving tasks. There is a need for the college to be more insightful and incisive in its self-evaluation and action planning processes to promote a greater level of reflection and development of more effective pedagogical practice.
- Across most of the professional and technical areas evaluated, the students benefit from a well-targeted range of practical skills development. For example, industry-standard automation suites, advanced design and manufacturing workshops, science laboratories, production kitchens and restaurants enable the students to experience a realistic working environment. A range of good quality work-experience placements also allow the students to develop expertise in the use of contemporary industry-standard equipment and technology in the workplace. On most occasions, these industry-standard facilities are exploited to very good effect to develop the students' understanding and skills to closely match professional practice, preparing them very well for professional and technical roles in industry. It is noteworthy, that the college also provides additional opportunities for some students to showcase their emerging talent in niche areas through participation in external competitions.

⁵ For students on two-year programmes of study, two-year data provides a more accurate and robust evaluation of the performance of these students across the entirety of the learning programme.

⁶ Student retention, achievement and progression rates are only for the Tier 1 areas included in the evaluation sample.

Care and welfare provision

- The care and welfare provision is highly effective. The college has achieved the Matrix award for their student services provision. The multi-disciplinary student support team work closely with other stakeholders, including transition officers, to ensure that appropriate intervention and support is put in place in a timely fashion for those students who require it. The learning support co-ordinators are either qualified to level seven or working towards this qualification, which enables them to carry out detailed student assessments to identify their learning support, development and progression needs.
- The students' learning support and development needs, and the support being put in place, is clearly documented in their individual learning plans which are shared with their professional and technical programme team. The students' progress is regularly monitored and, in the last academic year, it is noteworthy that most (83%) of those students receiving support achieved their targeted qualifications. The staff work with a wide range of appropriate external organisations and agencies that students can be referred to, if appropriate. This includes, appropriately, a counselling service in the college that can be accessed by both students and staff.
- Relationships between staff and students are respectful, positive and supportive. Nearly all of the students report that they are well-supported and have access to a very good range of information and services. All of the students have a weekly tutorial where they are kept well-informed of progress in their learning programme and are provided with, or signposted to, appropriate support if required. Staff are proactive in working with middle leaders to ensure students at risk are well-supported to reach their fullest potential. The college is designated as a trauma-informed college with proactive and appropriate staff training and development taking place.
- Nearly all of the students who completed the confidential online questionnaire prior to the evaluation were largely positive about their experiences in the college. They reported that they had been given adequate advice and opportunities to complete level 2 qualifications in English, mathematics and ICT and that their course is preparing them well for the next steps in their career. A minority reported that they did not have access to good facilities in the college in which they could relax and socialise.
- On the basis of the evidence provided during the evaluation, the arrangements for safeguarding young people and adults at risk reflect current legislation and practice.

Careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG)

- The college has also achieved the Matrix award for its CEIAG provision. A high priority is placed on pre-entry advice and guidance to ensure that the students are enrolled on the most appropriate programme of study for them. A wide range of relevant careers events are organised for the students including information on progression pathways within professional and technical areas, CV preparation, mock interviews, UCAS support and opportunities to hear from the career and progression experiences of past students. The staff also provide advice and guidance to pupils in a number of post-primary schools in their catchment area and work closely with the school careers advisors to ensure they are well-informed about the wide range of programmes that are available in the college.

- The CEIAG staff have developed very strong links with the professional and technical staff and students. Almost all of the students interviewed or spoken to were well-informed about progression routes to employment or higher education, including higher level apprenticeships. Careers advice is well-embedded in all of the professional and technical programmes evaluated, including in the tutorial process.

Collaborative arrangements with other educational providers

- The college has maintained good working relationships with the post-primary schools across three local area learning communities; it currently has the largest entitlement framework provision across the further education sector. At the time of the evaluation, the college was working with 27 post-primary schools, involving 1,427 students (2,670 enrolments), although it is significant that only 92 (6%) of them were enrolled on level 3 programmes.
- Outcomes on entitlement framework programmes at level 3, over the past three years, are high and in line with expectations (98% retention, 93% achievement). Despite the availability of a coherent curriculum offer and a strategic willingness to engage with post-primary schools to make this offer available, the college has seen a significant decline (82%) in the number of students enrolling on level 3 programmes in the period since 2013/14. It is a concern that, with the exception of a declining and limited provision in construction, there is currently no uptake of level 3 qualifications to post-primary students in the economically important areas of engineering, hospitality and tourism or health and social care.
- The schools spoken with who are currently engaging with the college report that the provision offers an inclusive learning environment for their pupils and is an appropriate pathway to support their career aspirations. The post-primary pupils who attend the college are provided with good opportunities to participate in skill-build competitions and college careers events and a well-targeted mentoring programme is in place to engage with pupils and help them overcome any barriers to learning and progression.
- The college has also established effective links and partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders and community organisations to offer a range of funded bespoke programmes aimed at addressing social inclusion and reducing economic inactivity, particularly through the access provision at level 3.

Employer links (economic engagement)

- The college has established effective links and partnerships with a wide range of employers, industry bodies and other key stakeholders across most of the professional and technical areas evaluated. It is well-represented by relevant staff on a range of industry and community fora, sectoral bodies and committees. These links are mostly used well to: inform and support curriculum development planning and review; facilitate industry visits and the use of guest speakers; promote relevant career progression pathways for the students; identify contemporary industry practices and skills needs; and provide good opportunities for staff to undertake relevant continuing professional development. They have also supported the development of project-based learning in the college. More needs to be done, however, in a significant minority of the professional and technical areas evaluated, to exploit further the good opportunities that exist to further develop project-based learning and provide relevant work-experience placement opportunities for more of the students.

- The college has been proactive in organising and attending a series of conferences and events to support economic engagement across its catchment area. Key stakeholders and employers interviewed report that the college is flexible and responsive to meeting the re-skilling and up-skilling needs of employees and the wider community. They further report that they are involved and supported well in the design and development of relevant and, at times, bespoke or specialist training programmes for their employees, and that they have high levels of confidence in the quality of the learning and training provided by college staff.

Learning resources

- The quality of the facilities and learning resources range from good to outstanding. In a majority of the areas evaluated, the range of specialist equipment is outstanding and used to good effect to support students to develop contemporary industry-standard skills. In engineering, for example, a comprehensive range of industry-standard equipment aligned to that available in local industries provides the students with unique learning experiences to master high-demand occupational skills. Similarly, in most of the other areas, the learning environment mirrors closely industry practice, providing the students with very good opportunities to become competent users of contemporary equipment and technology. In a small number of areas, the specialist resources, although mostly to industry-standard, are not exploited fully enough to advance the students' learning.
- A well-considered complement of lecturers and support professionals, with appropriate experience and high levels of professional and technical expertise, work hard, and mostly to very good effect, to provide a well-targeted curriculum offer. The staff also promote and sustain a positive and affirming learning environment where diversity and tolerance is promoted and highly valued. The relationships between staff and students, and amongst students, are consistently characterised with high levels of co-operation, mutual respect, inclusivity and support.
- An exciting, state-of-the-art new college estate is at an advanced stage of construction and will soon come online; this will enhance significantly the college's capacity to deliver a highly-relevant, economically-focused curriculum, targeted and adaptable to meet well Northern Ireland's Programme for Government vocational education and training targets.

Quality improvement planning to sustain improvement

- The self-evaluation and quality improvement planning process is well-embedded across the college and is aligned well to other key strategic management processes. The whole-college self-evaluation and quality improvement planning process is well-informed by accurate and reliable data, and mostly provides a good overview of the overall quality of the provision across the college. During the evaluation, management and staff interviewed provided a number of examples of the impact of quality improvement on key elements of the provision, including curriculum design, the quality of learning and teaching and improving outcomes. It is notable that the college has identified some undue variations in learner outcomes and is proactively taking action to address the low retention and achievement rates across a number of professional and technical areas and the essential skills.

- A majority of the professional and technical area reports include a considered reflection of the quality of the provision, make appropriate use of data to report on outcomes and identify key areas for improvement. There is variation, however, in their quality and impact. Going forward, staff should be further supported to: make more incisive evaluations of key aspects of the provision, such as the quality of learning, teaching and training; improve the overall quality of action planning; and be more aware of the key underlying issues affecting programme performance when allocating internal evaluative performance levels.

Strategic and middle management

- The college has recently undergone a significant restructuring process, involving a review of the delivery of all elements of the curriculum provision. While it is early days, the evidence shows the new structure supports greater cohesion, clearer channels of communication, more responsive decision making and greater levels of accountability for and by management and staff.
- The college is led and managed effectively at both strategic and operational levels. Senior leaders have a good strategic overview of key government priorities and cross-sector initiatives; they demonstrate a clear strategic vision in relation to improving performance and addressing to good effect local and regional economic needs along with supporting social inclusion. They have a good understanding of the key challenges that will impact on the long-term sustainability and viability of the college's level 3 FE provision. Appropriate management information systems are in place and have the integrity to accurately support and inform the work of the college.
- The governing body are well-informed about the work of the college and play a proactive role in its ongoing strategic development, including curriculum planning and review. They meet regularly with management, staff and students in the college and present an appropriate challenge role to management and staff to support ongoing improvements in the relevance of the curriculum and the quality and impact of the provision.
- The professional and technical areas evaluated are managed effectively. The heads of faculty and curriculum managers demonstrate high levels of commitment to the development and delivery of a relevant curriculum underpinned by high quality provision. They have access to a range of reliable data which enables them to track, monitor and review effectively performance of the courses across the college. Good relationships exist between senior and middle leaders and staff. Staff are well-motivated and are supported well to engage in a wide range of relevant continuing professional development opportunities.

3. EXAMPLES OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

The following examples of effective practice were identified during the evaluation of the level 3 curriculum in the Southern Regional College:

1. Construction, planning and the built environment: the development of links with industry to support curriculum development.

The building technology curriculum team has developed a wide range of industry links and partnerships which it uses to very good effect to inform curriculum planning and development, source work-experience placements, organise guest

speakers and arrange site visits. The curriculum team along with the college's business support and innovation unit are responsive and flexible in meeting the education and training needs of the employers. In consultation with employers, the team has developed and introduced new level 3 apprenticeship programmes, developed specialised training courses and associated qualifications and have extended the range of progression pathways to higher education within the college.

2. Engineering and manufacturing technologies: well-targeted investment in industry-standard equipment in order to provide an industrialised curriculum offer

Purposeful engagement with employers has led to a curriculum offer aligned closely to industry needs. The resultant industrialised engineering curriculum is underpinned by significant investment in equipment that mirrors closely the technology used by a range of manufacturing companies. The students benefit from highly authentic learning opportunities where they work in small teams to solve realistic engineering problems. Proprietary software is used to generate design ideas which are manufactured on industrial computer-controlled machining centres. Well-equipped laboratories enable the students to code, test and manufacture industry-standard embedded microcontroller systems, equipping them with in-demand labour market skills. An integrated, automated process control suite affords the students with appropriately challenging problem-solving activities which are critical to the development of key employability and work-ready skills valued by employers. As a consequence of the industrialised curriculum, young people are provided with high-value learning programmes, equipping them with highly-relevant occupational skills and personal capabilities that support them to transition easily to higher-level apprenticeships or higher education.

3. Health, public services and care: supporting positive mental health through project-based learning in health and social care.

During 2019, the college held a cross-campus competitive event and awards ceremony to recognise the excellence and diversity of project-based learning across a wide range of curriculum areas. The aim of the event was to provide students with the opportunity to further develop their skills in planning, problem-solving, communication and presentation. The competing students worked on real, live project briefs connected to local businesses and then had to pitch their ideas to a panel of independent judges. The health and social care group were awarded the best overall winner, working in collaboration with the local Health and Social Care Trust, a community/voluntary organisation and level 3 media students to produce a video and print resources to support positive mental health. The video resource has been adopted by the community/voluntary organisation as part of their online presence.

4. Preparation for life and work: supporting work-experience placements and the development of employability skills through the Erasmus+ programme.

Over the last two years, 2018-2020, the college has sent 108 level 3 health and social care students and 39 members of staff to Barcelona, Granada, Italy, Malta and Portugal. The students engage in a well-structured selection process in order to participate, which includes high levels of attendance and timely submission of all assignment work associated with their college programme. The visits have provided excellent opportunities for health and social care students and staff to learn about practice and procedures in other countries, gaining valuable practical

skills and developing further their knowledge of key health and social care principles and values. All students complete a two week placement in a range of settings, including care homes for older people, day centres for individuals with learning disabilities and civil protection services. In addition to skills and knowledge development, the students gain wider life experiences and have the opportunity to travel internationally; one-quarter of the students who have been involved had never travelled outside the United Kingdom or Ireland.

4. AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Going forward, the college needs to:

- continue to improve the outcomes attained by the students in the essential skills at level 2, along with the variation in retention rates across the professional and technical areas evaluated;
- address the variation and breadth of the opportunities available for project-based learning, work-experience placements and enterprise skills development across the professional and technical areas evaluated;
- continue to refine the quality improvement planning processes across the professional and technical areas evaluated, including the need for more incisive evaluations of key aspects of provision, improved action planning and a clearer awareness by staff of the key underlying issues affecting programme performance when allocating internal evaluative performance levels; and
- continue to work collaboratively with other colleges, schools and key stakeholders, at all levels, to address the declining enrolments across the full-time level 3 programmes in the college, and particularly the low levels of post-primary pupils who should be benefiting from their engagement with the college to participate in high quality industry-standard vocational training.

Quantitative terms used by ETI

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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