

EDUCATION AND TRAINING
INSPECTORATE

Further Education and Training Insights Report

September 2021 – September 2024

Contents

Introduction	2
Key findings and challenges.....	2
Conclusion	9
Appendix: Supporting documentation.....	10

Introduction

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) is committed to being the voice for equity and excellence for all learners by identifying, reporting and empowering improvement through enhanced professional dialogue with leaders and staff, including dissemination of impactful practice. This phase insights report highlights the work undertaken by ETI for the Department for the Economy (DfE), the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJI) during the reporting period 2021-24.

The findings within this report are distilled from ETI's first-hand observations and evidence from a wide range of engagements including: two thematic evaluations across the six further education (FE) colleges; seven baseline inspection visits to training organisations; five training organisation follow-up inspections; six training organisation inspections; and one prototype and six pilot inspections across the training provider network.

The report includes evidence from evaluation activity in the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), and inspection across two prisons and 62 European Social Fund (ESF) projects. The findings are informed also by ETI's annual desk-based scrutiny of quality improvement planning documentation from the FE colleges, training organisations and ESF project promoters.

The period 2021-2024 covers a transition period from the use of ETI's Inspection Self-evaluation Framework (ISEF) to the implementation of the ETI's [New Inspection Framework: Empowering Improvement](#).

Key findings and challenges

Curriculum planning is matched to the learners' education and training needs and aligned to the needs of the economy.

To grow a highly skilled workforce, with the skills and competences needed to raise productivity, the delivery of vocational education and training must be underpinned by a responsive, economically-focused curriculum. In the colleges and training organisations inspected, the curriculum is well-considered, informed by employers and stakeholders, and constructed to meet the individual needs of learners on different programmes.

All of the training organisations contracted for the Skills for Life and Work programme have designed contextualised training programmes to ensure all learners have access to: suitable personal development and employability qualifications; a wide range of professional and technical qualifications up to level 2, where appropriate; and, well-targeted essential skills qualifications.

Similarly, in training organisations delivering the ApprenticeshipNI programme, a relevant curriculum provision is offered which is matched to the workforce development needs of local employers and the training and development needs associated with the apprentices' job roles, including their future progression opportunities.

The colleges have undertaken significant collaborative work in improving curriculum review and planning processes to ensure that further education provision is flexible and meeting the skills' needs of the Northern Ireland (NI) labour market, aligned to the Department for the Economy's Economic Vision. Project-based learning (PBL), for example, is a key curriculum initiative which continues to be developed as a major driver for a more contemporary curriculum, providing learners with opportunities to apply their learning and develop transversal skills, which are in demand by employers. A remaining challenge within the FE curriculum development is the delivery and assessment of the transversal skills; different approaches to integrate and assess these skills are being trialled and adopted.

A new level 2 vocational education and training programme, the Traineeship Programme, is available for young people aged 16 or over not currently in employment. Significant development work is underway to provide qualifications appropriate to all elements of the programme. Traineeships are intended to provide young people with interconnected pathways to achieve economically-focused qualifications, along with literacy and numeracy qualifications, at level 2, either as a full-time student or as an apprentice in employment. Although the Traineeship programme has not yet been evaluated formally by ETI, it is evident from other evaluation work in the colleges that collaborative and co-design approaches across the colleges are underpinning this important development work.

In CAFRE, curriculum design and content are relevant and meaningful, responding innovatively and flexibly to local and topical issues within the agriculture sector. Participants on Business Development Groups (BDG) scheme reported that, as a result of the curriculum content of the scheme, the quality of their work practices improved, with safer working environments, better animal welfare and more efficient techniques, thereby promoting more sustainable farms.

In prisons, further curriculum development work is required to ensure prisoners have access to a learning and skills provision that is matched to their needs and to potential employment opportunities available to them during their resettlement in the community.

There has been well-targeted investment in good quality, industry-standard learning resources and specialist training facilities.

The thematic evaluations of [further education curriculum provision at level 3](#) and the [further education curriculum hubs](#) show that the FE college sector is well placed to fulfil its dual mandate of economic development and social inclusion. There have been continued high levels of investment in modern industry-standard accommodation and resources in the colleges. In recent years the estate has been enhanced significantly by new state-of-the-art buildings and facilities which are accessible, sustainable, adaptive spaces that can support a twenty-first century innovative curriculum. Significant work is being done to support innovation with industry, for example, in high-value areas such as marine engineering and hydrogen fuel technology.

The learning environments in training organisations are fit for purpose and generally to good or better standard. Professional and technical programmes are suitably well-resourced with modern equipment. The specialist facilities, together with the occupational expertise of the staff and relevant on-the-job training, enable apprentices to develop industry-standard occupational skills in line with the needs of employers.

Well-planned learning programmes are enabling learners to acquire new skills and knowledge needed to progress to higher programmes or employment.

Successful learning is predicated on high quality learning and teaching. In the organisations inspected almost all of the learning, teaching and training sessions were characterised by effective planning, teaching and assessment to enable successful learning. Following the period(s) of remote learning necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, tutors are increasingly more competent in the effective use of digital technology to support learning and teaching and provide blended delivery models where appropriate.

Learners on the Skills for Life and Work programme benefit from highly supportive and affirming learning environments, provided sensitively by dedicated tutors. Access to industry relevant resources and facilities enables these learners to develop new occupational skills, build their self-confidence and develop greater agency to manage their own learning and progression.

Apprentices benefit from the organisations' well-targeted investment in good quality, industry-standard learning resources and training facilities. The tutors draw on their own occupational expertise and experience to create meaningful learning experiences, enabling the apprentices to achieve the skills and knowledge pertaining to their professional and technical area and current job role. Workplace training and assessment processes are planned with a strong focus on the development of employability and transferable skills. The apprentices achieve good or better standards of work which they can apply in the workplace. They are self-confident, work effectively in teams or independently, and have a sound knowledge and understanding of their work environment.

Collaborative networks are contributing well to the development of communities of learning.

In the colleges, there is well-considered and effective engagement with an extensive range of external stakeholders and partners, including employers and industry representatives, to support economic engagement. Curriculum design and provision across the colleges is strategic and informed by 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. These links serve to give learners higher quality learning experiences which are more rooted in actual practice.

Learners have good opportunities to develop further their professional and technical skills and wider employability skills through: undertaking work-experience placements; participation in skills competitions such as [WorldSkills UK](#) and [WorldSkills](#); engaging in entrepreneurial and enterprise activities; or participating in externally funded initiatives such as the Erasmus+ or Turing programmes.

Colleges continue to engage actively with the post-primary and special schools in their respective Area Learning Communities. It is becoming increasingly more challenging for them to recruit to collaborative provision. The number of learners involved in the colleges' entitlement framework provision for schools has declined steadily over the past five years. The DfE published data shows that Entitlement Framework enrolments in 2022/23 were 17% lower than those reported for 2018/19. The Department of Education and DfE are taking forward a range of actions in relation to careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG), including a [new joint strategy](#) and implementation plan for careers. ETI evidence shows that a minority of schools have identified CEIAG provision as needing improvement. It is timely then for schools and colleges to renew partnerships so that pupils are aware of all pathways in post-16 provision and have access to a broad and balanced range of courses that are relevant to their interests and their future career aspirations.

In the training organisations, effective links and partnerships have been developed with a wide range of stakeholders, including specialist organisations and statutory agencies, to support the learners. These include local community groups, addiction and counselling services, the Careers Service, the DfE Peer Support Network, and an extensive range of employers.

Inspection evidence also shows an increase in engagement of training organisations with post-primary schools. Most of the organisations have established effective partnerships with several post-primary schools; working closely with them to promote post-16 training options for their pupils through engagement with careers teachers and targeted meetings with pupils.

Collaboration between and across training organisations and the colleges is not effective enough in establishing pathways for learners on the Skills for Life and Work Programme to progress seamlessly to the Traineeship Programme or to other level 2 provision. To mitigate this deficit, there is an increased emphasis by training organisations on progressing learners from the Skills for Life and Work programme to level two apprenticeship programmes, but mainly within their own provision. Going forward, further work is needed to ensure that learners on the Skills for Life and Work Programme have good knowledge of and better access to apprenticeships, Traineeships and other FE provision.

A well-structured formal partnership and associated governance framework between Belfast Metropolitan College and the Northern Ireland Prison Service is supporting a more expansive and responsive delivery of a broader education and skills provision in prisons.

Effective self-evaluation is leading to action for improvement including impactful staff professional learning.

Effective, accurate self-evaluation systems are critical to effecting improvement. All organisations are becoming more adept at the analysis of a wide range of relevant quantitative and qualitative data to inform the quality improvement planning process and there is evidence of greater ownership by all staff.

Where quality improvement planning is most effective, insightful evaluations at programme and course level set the agenda for more impactful staff professional learning, with a focus on subject specialist skills and knowledge and pedagogy.

Performance data reporting structures are not sufficiently consistent or standardised enough across the further education and training sectors, with too much variability in the use of common management information systems.

More impactful collaboration across the education and training systems is essential to ensure better outcomes aligned to the needs of the NI economy.

The Independent Review of Education's report ["Investing in a Better Future"](#) recommends that all learners "from the age of 14 should explore a wider range of educational pathways including pre-vocational and technical education and learning about the world of work." Collaboration between schools and colleges needs to be improved to ensure our young people make well-informed choices about their progression pathways. It is also important for ensuring continuity of knowledge about learners at transition so appropriate support to overcome potential barriers to learning can be put in place. The continuing falling enrolments in FE may be explained partly by the COVID-19 pandemic and the alternative awarding and assessment arrangements but increasingly, post-primary schools offer vocational qualifications at key stage four and post-16 within schools. The high-quality specialist resources in further education colleges are not then being utilised fully to support the delivery of vocational programmes to school pupils. The significant decrease in the recruitment of learners is compounded by the public perception of vocational qualifications as being of lesser value or portability than general qualifications – all of which threatens the sustainability of some provision.

The Minister of Education, in his response to the Independent Review of Education, announced that there will be review and reform of the statutory education curriculum, with a focus on improving transitions at key stages. Integral to this review is the role that pre-vocational pathways and associated qualifications play in meeting better learners' needs in respect to progression to better jobs within a thriving economy. Going forward it is critical that progression from post-primary to further education and/or training is seamless, coherent and enables learners to develop agency and skills to thrive in a 21st century economy.

There is a significant increase in the number of learners presenting with additional support needs.

All organisations are reporting a significant increase in the number of learners requiring additional support. The types of barriers to learning are more complex and learners present more often with multiple barriers. Increasingly, young people are transitioning to further education or training without the work-ready skills for successful work experience placement.

Leaders and staff work with empathy and care to help address the range of needs. These are often most acute among those that live in the lowest quintiles of areas of social deprivation and those who are the most disengaged from education and training. Organisations are providing wraparound support including budget advice, access to counselling and signposting to other mental health services.

Participants on the European Social Fund (ESF) projects consistently provided positive feedback to ETI about: the wide-ranging support received from project staff; the high-quality learning activities and social engagement; and the good opportunities to develop their employability skills and where appropriate, gain relevant qualifications.

The cyclical contractual funding for ESF projects, however, impacted negatively on the continuity of high-quality provision for the participants and the retention of key, skilled staff who knew and understood the local communities in which they were working. Inspection evidence from the project third call has shown that larger organisations were better placed for sustainability going forward.

The United Kingdom Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) economic inactivity competition sought applications to deliver economic inactivity support projects. Evaluation of the consistency in the delivery and the quality of the provision is crucial given the collaborative working and wide geographic spread of many of the UKSPF economic inactivity projects. It is important to identify and affirm where there is impactful practice, and, to highlight necessary improvement should it arise.

In prisons, more consistent joint-planning between the Northern Ireland Prison Service and the Belfast Met, as the lead provider for education and skills provision, is required to ensure that access to purposeful activity is aligned closely to the individual needs of prisoners, especially those with complex health and well-being needs.

Too many learners are not achieving the Essential Skills at level 2.

There is a good awareness of the importance of the essential skills qualifications as an integral part of training programmes and as being critical for the progression and life chances of the learners enrolled on the programmes. Training organisations and colleges offer a variety of delivery models including semesterised, fast track, online and hybrid to meet the diverse needs of the learners. The outcomes attained are not successful enough, particularly at level 2. The learners requiring essential skills are more likely to reside in the two most deprived quintiles in Northern Ireland. They present with the lowest prior attainment, may have multiple barriers to learning and

negative experiences of school. For future progression it is vital these learners achieve essential skills in transferrable literacy, numeracy and ICT. The refresh of the ICT curriculum is timely but more needs to be done to support learners to achieve these passport qualifications. The recruitment of essential skills staff is another challenge with more organisations opting to sub-contract the provision. This can impact the timeliness of the provision and the monitoring of the quality.

In prisons, essential skills outcomes are also a challenge; too few prisoners enrol for classes to improve their low levels of literacy, numeracy and digital skills and not enough achieve qualifications at level 2.

It is time now to consider a different approach to ensure all learners are literate, numerate and have the required level of digital skills to be effective workers and successful, happy citizens.

Not enough learners are achieving and progressing to higher level programmes.

There is an underlying decline in recruitment to ApprenticeshipsNI, with 12% decrease in apprentice starts over the period 2018/19 to 2022/23. However, there has been a notable increase in starts since 2019/20 (13%), indicating recovery from the impact of COVID-19 pandemic public health restrictions.

The overall proportion of apprentices achieving their full qualification framework at level 2 has improved steadily from 43% to 56% over the period 2020/21 to 2022/23 but is not back to pre-pandemic levels. Similarly, for level 3, achievement rates have improved from 54% to 64% and are now at pre-pandemic levels. While this upward trend is encouraging, too many apprentices do not complete successfully their apprenticeship qualification framework.

In training organisations, inspection evidence shows that apprentice achievement rates vary significantly across organisations. In some employment sectors, particularly those with lower skilled jobs with associated lower wages, there is higher staff-turnover, impacting negatively on achievement rates. Recent inspection evidence shows that organisations are working hard to mitigate the causes of lower achievement rates, but with limited success.

Not all apprentices progress to a level 3 apprenticeship; slightly more are completing an apprenticeship at level 2 than at level 3. Consequently, the ApprenticeshipsNI programme is not impacting well enough on the skills imbalance in the labour market at NQF level 2 and at level 3, as set out in the [NI Skills Barometer](#) 2021 report.

In the training providers inspected that were contracted to deliver the Skills for Life and Work programme, learner completions and achievement and progression rates are variable across organisations. Where completion and achievement rates are low, in a significant minority of the organisations inspected, too many learners leave their programme early without achieving their target qualifications.

Published data for the Skills for Life and Work shows that around one-third of leavers achieve a qualification. For those who do achieve, progression rates to further education, training or employment are also too variable. More needs to be done to understand and address the low achievement and progression rates of learners on this programme.

The number of learners benefiting from valuable work-experience placements varies significantly across the training providers, ranging from just over one-half of the learners in placements to around two-fifths of them. Due to their complex needs and challenges, many of the learners require additional time and support to be work placement ready. This raises the question if the balance and duration of the Skills for Life and Work programme is meeting well enough the needs of those learners furthest from engaging in workplace learning or the next educational stage.

It is of some concern that, the number of further education students achieving regulated qualifications decreased by 17% over the period 2018/19 to 2022/23; at level 3 the decrease was 20%. Declining recruitment to colleges is a key contributory factor to this reduced outcome; overall enrolment levels have reduced by 21% over this period.

Continuing gender imbalance across most professional and technical areas.

The DfE data shows that almost half of the apprentices come from areas within multiple deprivation quintiles 1 and 2. Similarly, a large portion of the learners on the Skills for Life and Work programme come from the most deprived areas, indicating that learner access to training is equitable and inclusive. It is a concern that there is persistent gender imbalance in the uptake of apprenticeships; almost three-quarters of all apprentices are male. In STEM areas on level 3 programmes less than 5% are female. The ApprenticeshipsNI provision is employer/demand led. The gender balance is a reflection of employment patterns in various occupational areas, but organisations need to be more pro-active in addressing this imbalance. The marketing of apprenticeships and the quality of careers education, information, advice and guidance need to reflect improvements in provision, particularly where training provision is catering equitably for the needs of male and female learners.

Conclusion

The further education and training sectors are well-placed to realise the Department for Economy's vision of good jobs, regional balance, raising productivity levels, and reaching net zero carbon emissions. They provide well-targeted and responsive lifelong learning opportunities within the dual mandate of economic development and social inclusion. The resources and infrastructure can support industry standard knowledge and skills development and accreditation. There are, however, significant challenges for sustainability facing the sectors. Key among these include the continual decline in further education enrolments across the colleges, compounded by duplication of post-16 vocational provision in the post-primary sector. Strategic and well-considered collaboration at local and regional levels is crucial to ensure that the Northern Ireland education system supplies the skilled workforce it needs to be a thriving economy with well-paid jobs for all.

Appendix: Supporting documentation

[The Assessment of Vocational Education and Training Qualifications: a review of European policy and practice](#)

[Investing in a better future: the independent review of education in Northern Ireland](#)

[Department for the Economy's economic vision](#)

[Further education college statistical information](#)

[ApprenticeshipsNI statistical information](#)

[Skills for Life and Work statistical information](#)

[Evaluation reports of the effectiveness of the level 3 curriculum in the further education colleges](#)

[Evaluation report of the curriculum hubs in the further education colleges](#)

[Evaluation report of the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise \(CAFRE\) Business Development Groups](#)

[Training provider organisation inspection reports](#)

[European Social Fund projects inspection reports](#)


[Criminal Justice Inspection prison inspection reports](#)

[Northern Ireland Skills Barometer 2021 update report](#)

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