

# Northern Regional 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 and Northern Regional College (the 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 the college, 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 the college 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 childcare and **construction\***, 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 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

The college currently operates from six campuses in five locations: Ballymena (Farm Lodge and Trostan Avenue), Ballymoney, Coleraine, Magherafelt and Newtownabbey. Through the redevelopment of the Ballymena, Ballymoney and Coleraine sites, the college is in the process of rationalising its estate to four campuses by 2025 (all data used for the evaluation and presented in this report has been supplied and verified by the college at the time of the evaluation). The college also offers a range of community and industry-based provision across the main council areas in which it operates and from which most of its learners are recruited (Antrim and Newtownabbey, Causeway Coast and Glens, Mid and East Antrim, and Mid Ulster).

At the time of the evaluation visit, 3180 learners were enrolled on level 3 provision in the college which accounted for 34% of the whole college provision; 1431 (45%) were full-time and 1749 (55%) were part-time. In the period from 2018/19 to 2022/23, at level 3 FE enrolments in the college declined by 34%, while enrolments to the ApprenticeshipsNI programme increased by 35%.

Forty-four percent of the learners registered as female, and over one-half (55%) were aged 16 to 19. Approximately 44% of all level 3 enrolments were in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) related areas. Almost all (99%) of the apprentices registered as male, and 56% of them were aged 16-19. The ApprenticeshipsNI level 3 enrolments were mainly in STEM related areas.

In the P&T areas sampled, from 2020/21 to 2022/23, full-time level 3 enrolments in childcare declined by 17%, by contrast part-time enrolments increased by 48%. Over the same period, in construction, full-time level 3 enrolments increased by 15%, and part-time level 3 provision also increased by 38%. During the evaluation, 165 students were enrolled on full-time FE courses; 97 in childcare and 68 in construction. Six hundred and eighty-nine students were enrolled on part-time FE courses; 546 in childcare and 143 in construction. On the ApprenticeshipsNI programme at level 3, 642 apprentices were enrolled across a range of P&T areas: 336 electrotechnical; 74 carpentry and joinery; seven civil engineering; five bricklaying; 90 engineering; 28 motor vehicle; and 102 plumbing. There were no apprentices in the sampled P&T area of childcare.

Of those learners 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, 390 were appropriately enrolled on an essential skills course; 275 FE students and 115 apprentices. Information and communications technology (ICT) accounted for 120 (31%) of the enrolments, literacy 81 (21%) and numeracy 189 (48%).

On level 3 programmes, 26% of full-time and 18% of part-time FE learners, and 5% of apprentices had declared a disability or a specific learning difficulty.

## Views of the learners

Very few learners (32) completed the online questionnaire, representing less than five percent of the level 3 learners enrolled at the time the evaluation visit. Most of the very few respondents were positive about their learning experiences indicating that: their course was interesting and appropriately challenging; their work is assessed regularly; they have access to good resources; they feel safe and secure in the college; and overall that their course is preparing them well for the next steps in their careers.

Most of the learners (101) inspectors met with in focus group meetings reported that they feel well supported by staff and value the range of learner support services, including Northern Plus, the access to financial support, the breakfast provision, the study facilities in the library and the information technology (IT) equipment. They reported that they: are making good progress in their qualifications and skills development; are developing confidence; and are motivated because they are well-informed about their progress through one-to-one termly reviews and e-portfolio feedback. They also spoke positively about the enrichment activities they can undertake, the use of guest speakers and industry visits, participation in project-based learning (PBL), the good quality resources, including the use of online learning platforms; and the alignment of subject content with the work they undertake with their employers or during work placement. The apprentices spoke with pride about their work and how they are able to contribute in their workplaces with increasing confidence.

## Key findings

The following key findings are based on 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

- The college's vision is to be the FE college of choice, providing lifelong learning opportunities for all, through innovative, high-quality education and skills training, and supporting the NI economy to be globally competitive; this aligns well with DfE's policy drivers of economic and social development. Its three-year strategic plan (2022 to 2025) identifies twelve key goals, structured around three core themes of learners, professional services and partners, and underpinned by the core values of ambition, collaboration, excellence, inclusivity, integrity and respect.

- A number of changes have taken place recently at senior management and governance level; it will be important for the Governing Body to have continued oversight and provide challenge if required on how these changes impact on the quality of provision at level 3.
- The recent re-organisation of the leadership and management of the essential skills has resulted in a more centralised provision. There is an appropriate reporting and accountability structure, however the role of the essential skills co-ordinators needs to be reviewed, developed, and embedded further in order to be more strategic and not just operational. The essential skills curriculum area managers (CAMs) are working collaboratively to devise and implement initiatives to enhance the profile of essential skills and to promote their integration within the P&T areas.
- The workforce challenges for the sector were evident in the college. Staffing levels, including lecturers, technicians and work-based assessors, are a challenge across most of the ApprenticeshipsNI P&T areas sampled, which limits growth. In response, the college has been innovative in its approach to recruiting and developing staff at different entry points, including former learners, providing them with a structured support programme, relevant training and qualifications, and clearly identified progression pathways to enable progression to lecturer posts. For example, the college has upskilled staff to address skills shortage areas, such as in quantity surveying. Overall, the recruitment and retention of appropriately qualified and experienced staff is reported by the college managers as a growing issue. The staffing complement for the level 3 provision was approximately 70% full-time, including associate lecturers and 30% part-time.
- In the P&T areas sampled, there is evidence of well-conceived and wide-ranging collaborative partnerships with industry, employers and other stakeholders, which are used well to ensure that curriculum provision is aligned to regional and strategic priorities, and there is a focus on being at the fore in new areas such as public transportation and hydrogen technologies. The development of any new courses is considered carefully to avoid duplication or displacement of important aspects of existing college provision. There has been the introduction of Advanced Technical qualifications in business and finance, health and social care and IT into the level 3 curriculum (the implementation of the roll-out of the DfE level 3 Advanced Technical programme pilot is currently paused across the sector by DfE).
- The college has demonstrated that it is flexible in meeting learner, industry and stakeholder needs, as evidenced through focus group meetings, with examples being given by employer and industry representatives of curriculum adaptations to provide bespoke education and training, with an associated range of qualifications. There are clearly identified progression pathways for learners within the college and then to employment or higher education progression and/or their job roles.

- The P&T area of childcare has been on an important improvement journey over recent years. Changes have included a restructuring of the provision, the allocation of smaller teaching teams to each course, an improved approach to timetabling, and a review of the curriculum that identified more appropriate practical progression pathways from level 3 to better meet the needs, aspirations and abilities of the learners, as well as the needs of the local economy. The implementation of changes have been supported by well-considered staff training sessions.
- The childcare sector continues to change and develop as childcare providers struggle to recruit and retain staff; more skilled and dedicated childcare professionals are needed. The sector is part of the essential economic infrastructure, with a key role to play in helping parents move into work and thereby addressing Northern Ireland's high levels of economic inactivity. Contributing to the development of the workforce in this sector is therefore of strategic importance to the college; it is recognised that creating a culture of lifelong learning and upskilling the existing workforce impacts positively on retention of staff and promotes progression within the workforce, thereby supporting the strategic objectives set out in the Skills Strategy and its broader influence on 'A 10x Economy'.
- The college managers and staff work closely with a wide range of relevant agencies/partners and attend meetings regularly to keep abreast of developments within the childcare sector. Consequently, the business development and childcare staff in the college have worked in close collaboration with a number of partners, including one health and social care trust (the trust) to widen access and deliver a range of qualifications and short online level 3 courses to upskill the existing workforce. A significant number of the trust staff, across a range of job roles, have accessed qualifications including level 3 Infant/Child Mental Health and its Impact on Social/Emotional Development and, Introducing Mindfulness Techniques to Reduce Stress and Anxiety in Children and Young People.
- In construction, engagement with employers has resulted in the delivery of a number of tailored level 2 and 3 qualifications, as well as construction skills register training, for staff. A number of the level 3 learners have secured full-time and part-time employment as a result of undertaking a work-experience placement, and are being supported by the companies to progress to higher education programmes.
- The apprenticeship provision is well-led and managed. The staff that ETI met with reported that the management team work effectively and collaboratively to deliver high quality training. They meet regularly with a clear focus on continuous improvement and have been successful in sourcing investment and sponsorship for industry standard resources and equipment, for use by level 3 apprentices, across all of the professional and technical areas including robotics, computer numerically controlled (CNC) machines, plasma cutters,



welding and fabrication tools and equipment, advanced plumbing and heating resources, carpentry and joinery machines, motor vehicle resources, and electro technical services workshops and equipment. To support the realisation of 10X, efforts are being made to attract and retain a more diverse workforce by recruiting learners to P&T areas which were traditionally male dominated.

- Staff have upskilled and are working with a local council lead to develop qualifications at level 2 and level 3 to upskill industry in hydrogen and hydrogen fuel cell technology, an area of importance to local industry and the NI economy. New equipment and facilities, including a hydrogen skills lab, enable learners to develop their skills and knowledge in green technologies and support well industry training needs.
- The college continues to develop its work with local schools, to support delivery of the [Framework](#) to transform 14-19 education and training provision. Examples of successful collaboration with a number of local post-primary schools, as part of the entitlement framework provision, include the delivery of construction and environmental technology, as well as good working relationships established with primary and nursery schools/centres to offer work-experience placement opportunities for childcare learners. The principals and other senior staff of these post-primary schools, who met with inspectors, reported that communication with the college is regular, with effective working relationships between college and school staff, visits and assessments are well planned, and learner progress is discussed at regular intervals. They were complimentary about the learning experiences their pupils had while attending the college and the skills they are developing as a result.
- The college is represented on a range of industry bodies and fora and work is underway to develop industry fora across the range of level 3 P&T areas, aligned to local council priorities and key economic drivers. The college would benefit from the use of a client record management (CRM) system to: ensure all relevant college staff are fully aware of the range of business engagement activities; avoid duplication of contact with industry and key stakeholders; and promote greater efficiency and impact in its work.
- With its designation as the lead college for the entrepreneurship Hub, the college has, as required of all of the Curriculum Hubs, submitted an updated Hub action plan to DfE. At the time of the evaluation visit, the inspectors met with DfE officials, and it was indicated that DfE's feedback to the college on the submitted action plan was pending. The college is supporting wider departmental work to deliver an entrepreneurship strategy, in line with the 10X triple bottom line of innovation, inclusion and sustainability. The college's Entrepreneurship Club was re-launched during the evaluation visit to further promote and support the development of entrepreneurship within the college. In progressing the work of the Hub with DfE and the sector, as the lead college, the staff identify re-engagement and effective working as key challenges in developing further and consistently entrepreneurship and associated activity.



## The curriculum provision

- The level 3 provision across the college and in the P&T areas sampled is contemporary and economically relevant, with alignment to key DfE strategies, delivering on the college's dual remit of social inclusion and economic engagement. The inclusion of a range of additional qualifications for learners supports well the opportunities for their holistic development. Learners reported they are well-informed about their progress through one-to-one termly reviews and feedback through their e-portfolios, and about the progression pathways available to them when they complete their course.
- The childcare curriculum is well-planned and has been reviewed, adapted, and expanded appropriately to encompass a broader range of full and part-time courses with clear, flexible and appropriate curriculum progression pathways through to level 5, which meet the needs of learners, business and industry. The full-time level 3 programmes include appropriately a range of additionality, such as the level 2 food safety and level 3 award in emergency first aid at work, which further develop the learners' sector relevant employability skills.
- The effective links with a health and social care trust (trust) have resulted in the development of tailored provision for a significant number of trust staff, across a range of job roles, enabling them to access relevant qualifications at level 3. Managers at the trust reported that the college has been very responsive to meeting their needs. Training has been very effective and has had a positive impact on the trust staff, with an increase in their confidence, knowledge, skills and experience which they are able to apply to their practice in a meaningful way. The staff recognise the benefits of re-engaging with education, taking advantage of upskilling and reskilling opportunities.
- In childcare, learners on work placement gain experience across a range of rooms/settings and age ranges; they reported that they enjoy the breadth of experiences and the opportunity to apply their learning in a 'real life' setting. They reported that they are given regular feedback about their observations and assignments through their e-portfolios and the college's virtual learning environment. Adaptations to online learning for the childcare students has resulted in a standardised, well-organised and user-friendly online platform which enables the students to access their course materials. The students reported that they find the online resources stimulating, easy to navigate and support them well with their learning.
- Apprenticeships in childcare are not delivered currently but the college has been approved to commence delivery of the level 2 and 3 apprenticeship programme from September 2023.
- In construction, the curriculum is tailored well to meet the needs of the learners, employers and those post-primary schools with which they are currently collaborating. The full-time FE curriculum is offered in three college campuses with appropriate, flexible timetabling arrangements in place for the learners. An extensive range of part-time programmes is available in areas

such as civil engineering, construction and the built environment, construction contract operations, and environmental technology. Enrolment on the civil engineering programme is relatively small. There are currently nine students enrolled on the programme; six civil engineering apprentices and three from the Department of Infrastructure. Learners can undertake a level 2 computer-aided design (CAD) qualification as part of the enrichment provision which also includes site visits, guest speakers from industry, career advice and guidance, and internal college competitions. They also have good opportunities to progress to higher education programmes both internally and externally, further training and/or employment.

- The apprenticeship programmes are delivered using a collaborative team approach between lecturing staff, trainer/assessors, training support officers and essential skills tutors. The apprentices with whom inspectors met reported that they are supported well to develop their skills and knowledge to a high standard across all of the professional and technical areas. The standards of practical and written work achieved by them are of a high quality and are also reflected in the successes they have had in local, national and international competitions, which are also highly valued by employers. A minority of the apprentices that inspectors met with reported variation in their learning experiences across the college campus sites, citing a mismatch between the curriculum on their apprenticeship programme and their job role.
- As a consequence of the pandemic, alternative methods of assessing the civil engineering apprentices' competence for their national vocational qualification (NVQ) were introduced such as video recording of their practice, online observation in the workplace and witness statements. These approaches have continued post-pandemic and provide a rich variety of evidence of the development of the learners' skills and competences.
- Apprentices in construction can access a broad curriculum offer that is matched well to employer needs, provides them with the recognised training and qualifications matched to their job roles and has effective progression pathways. It is well informed through regular and effective engagement with a wide range of employers. Employers also get the opportunity to visit their apprentices in the directed training sessions and to review and evaluate the progress they are making.
- Through the use of a range of funding programmes, the provision offered to support business development and economic engagement, particularly to upskill and address skill gaps in the sector, has been increased. For example, additional targeted support has been provided in response to feedback from employers through short course provision in welding and electrical engineering.
- There is an initial assessment of all learners who have achieved a grade C or above in General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) English and/or mathematics. In childcare this approach has been used well to identify areas where extra support can be provided by the P&T tutors. However, continued monitoring is required of the benefit of this approach across all P&T areas

against the contextualised assessment for learning within the areas. The college needs to be minded of the potential negative impact of the current approach on the learners, in respect of how it may impact on perceptions of the integrity of the GCSE qualifications and potentially, learners' self-esteem.

- As a result of greater consultation with professional and technical (P&T) CAMs about the timetabling of essential skills, it is reported that there is flexibility in the delivery models to better suit the needs of the learners and the employers. Literacy and numeracy classes are delivered on the same day as the P&T area classes, to improve further learner attendance. In electrical installation, apprentices are offered a six-week fast track programme for ICT.
- The delivery and accreditation of **transversal skills**\* is in development, with different approaches being taken across the level 3 provision to integrate and assess their development. These include the use of real-life scenarios, PBL activities, industry visits, mock interviews and the use of naturally occurring evidence in the workplace. Rigorous monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness and impact of these approaches is required.
- On-going engagement with employers through workplace visits, invitations to be guest speakers, job fairs and open days also supports the facilitation of work experience and placement opportunities for learners. On the programmes sampled, there is clear evidence of good opportunities for learners to develop P&T skills and wider employability skills through work placement or experience opportunities, a PBL model of delivery, and external competitions.

## Support, guidance and keeping safe

- Student Support Services in the college comprises Education Support, Finance, Careers and **Northern Plus**\*. The collaborative working of these teams and the use of a wide range of shared reports by management and staff support well the whole college focus on improving attendance, wellbeing and retention, as well as achieving successful outcomes and progression for learners. For example, in construction, the learners are supported through a weekly pastoral tutorial session in which their progress is discussed, and career advice and guidance is given. The electronic learner management information system provides live information on attendance and grades. Where appropriate, learners are referred to Northern Plus to access additional support such as one-to-one sessions with achievement coaches.
- A Northern Plus pilot has been focused on supporting both the learners and the curriculum staff. Priorities include the provision of timely support for learners for whom there are concerns about attendance and punctuality; helping non-achieving learners to refocus; and co-ordinating support other than academic for learners who are struggling with various debilitating factors. Northern Plus acts as a bridge between learners and a wide range of support

available from within the larger Student Services team, the college community, and external organisations. Learners can self-refer to Northern Plus achievement coaches if they feel they are at risk of not achieving or if relationships have broken down with lecturers, even if attendance is above the 95% threshold.

- Student Support Services staff are well-informed about the needs of the learners and work with a wide range of multi-agency partners and stakeholders to address these. A range of case studies presented at the time of the evaluation exemplify the work of the teams across the college directorates to support well level 3 learners with barriers to learning, enabling retention, successful outcomes and progression. For example, interventions include one-to-one support for specific course challenges, study skills, and support or signposting for matters related to mental health and finances. Specialist support services include for example, sexual health, financial management and alcohol and drugs issues. A free 24/7 counselling service is also available to learners.
- Provision for careers information, advice and guidance is in place across the college campuses. Learners spoke positively about the one-to-one and whole class support from the career's coordinator; they reported they are well-informed about the progression pathways available to them when they complete their course. There is on-going engagement with employers through for example workplace visits, guest speakers, job fairs and open days to support facilitation of work experience and placement opportunities. Addressing variations in the range of speakers available across campuses has been identified as an area for development.
- The college has maintained its Matrix standard for information, advice and guidance (IAG) services delivered across learner experience areas and inclusive support.
- Learners reported that they feel supported by staff and value the range of learner support services, including Northern Plus, financial support, the free breakfast, the study facilities in the library and IT equipment, and the one-to-one and whole class support from the career's coordinator.
- Inspectors had meetings with representatives of the designated safeguarding team. The team is responsive and experienced in supporting and as appropriate, referring or signposting learners to a wide range of external statutory, community and voluntary organisations with whom they have well established professional working relationships. Inspectors also scrutinised documentation provided. 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. Safeguarding and awareness training for all staff is being given an appropriately high priority in the college. An investment in training has resulted in a greater staff understanding of appropriate referrals

to the safeguarding teams, as evidenced by the reducing number of referrals and subsequent escalations. 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

- Work is being progressed to use the sector's electronic learner management information system to collate, analyse and use data more effectively at course team, programme and whole college levels, and to use this data to monitor performance and track and review learner progress at regular intervals. The leaders and managers that inspectors met with reported that this is now supporting greater oversight of the provision and performance across the campuses. It is reported that the range of data available from the management information system is of a better quality. This data should, however, be used more effectively to review and better inform the quality of strategic action planning across the college, with planned actions, success criteria and milestones clearly set out. This will allow impact and outcomes to be better measured and evaluated.
- A range of mechanisms is used by the college to capture the learner voice, including through the staff-student consultative forum and learner surveys which are conducted regularly. These are used to obtain the learners' views about the quality of teaching and learning, the curriculum and enrichment activities, as well as learner motivation and engagement. For example, learners have identified benefits of the services of Northern Plus, such as improved confidence, organisational skills and the ability to manage their time and cope with the course. Additionally, the college continues to build up knowledge from exit interviews for the reasons learners choose to withdraw from a course or leave a course without completing. Actions to address these factors should be identified, including the continued development of timely interventions for those learners at risk of disengaging.
- Teaching and learning has been identified by the college as an area for improvement. Notably, through observations, the college has self-evaluated a number of lessons as requiring improvement across the provision, including in the essential skills. Additionally, the range of college learner surveys has identified the need to address a lack of motivation, engagement, or behavioral issues of some learners. During the evaluation visit, learner focus groups also spoke about variation in teaching and learning and learning experiences. The work of the various college teams needs to be integrated better, with well-managed, collaborative working required between the Student Support Services and the Teaching and Learning Excellence Team to effectively identify and implement actions to address these areas for improvement. The teams should regularly monitor the impact of the actions taken in effecting the necessary improvement.

- There is evidence, across the P&T areas sampled, of robust systems having been introduced to track and monitor learner assessment including the use of clearly defined targets. This has enabled lecturers and CAMs to monitor individual learner progress and implement appropriate interventions where additional learner support is needed. Additionally, the collaborative working of a number of the student services teams and the range of processes in place to regularly monitor and track the impact of their work, including the use of a wide range of shared reports by management and staff, support well the whole college focus on improving attendance, wellbeing and retention, as well as achieving successful outcomes and progression for learners.
- The whole college quality improvement plan identifies appropriately the need to improve the outcomes in essential skills. The evidence available from the college's internal reporting indicates that there is undue variation in the quality of the learning experiences in the essential skills; the learners spoke about this in the focus group meetings. The essential skills action plan contains too many areas for improvement. It should include more realistic, measurable and achievable targets which are better informed by baseline data and focus clearly on the impact of the actions to improve the learners' experiences and outcomes.
- The data provided and verified by the college indicates that overall outcomes for learners across the level 3 provision who completed in 2021/22 are very positive; most were retained (90%) and almost all achieved their targeted qualification (91%). On the ApprenticeshipsNI programme, almost all of the apprentices were retained (97%) and achieved their targeted qualification (96%).
- In childcare, in the same period, most of the students were retained (90%) and achieved their targeted qualification (89%). In construction, most of the students were also retained (86%) and 76% achieved their targeted qualification; the achievement rate is an area for improvement.
- In the essential skills, overall outcomes are too low at 55%; this is an area for improvement. Most of the learners were retained (77%), however, too few of the learners of the learners achieved their targeted qualification in literacy (45%) and numeracy (32%). Almost all of the learners achieved their targeted qualification in ICT (97%)
- In recent years, although full-time enrolments in childcare have dropped by around 18%, there is a significant and growing number of level 3 part-time students. At the time of the evaluation there were 546 part-time enrolments which represents 85% of the overall level 3 enrolments; 331 FE part-time courses and 215 short on-line courses established through business engagement. It is of note that there has been a positive trend in outcomes for both full-time and part-time over the last five years.



- The college's monitoring of learner registrations across the level 3 provision includes its reach to learners from all of the quintiles, which supports well the promotion of greater social inclusion. Of the college's level 3 learners, 24% registered on the FE programmes and 25% registered on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme are from the most deprived areas in NI (quintiles one and two); 33% registered on the FE programmes and 64% registered on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme are from the most advantaged areas (quintiles four and five).

## Professional learning for staff

- The Student Services team works with the quality assurance, curriculum, and support teams to self-evaluate and provide an evidence-based approach to professional learning. The needs of the learners and performance review of the staff inform the professional learning programme. As a result, the staff who met with inspectors reported that they have good opportunities to undertake relevant continuing professional development (CPD), which supports well their commitment to providing positive and successful experiences for the learners. Student services have provided a range of behaviour intervention and pastoral training opportunities in response to needs identified by some CAMs.
- Identified staff have received additional specialist training, in for example, Supporting Children and Adults with Special Needs, First Aid, and Understanding Autism; informed by this training and as required, they work with other staff in the college. There is training and support in place for staff identified by the college as underperforming. The induction process for lecturers has also been recently reviewed and updated, with a new start induction programme pilot in the process of being rolled out.
- A childcare lecturer has been appointed as the WorldSkills Educator and represents the college in cascading the **WorldSkills Educator Programme\*** to other cohorts of staff across the colleges. The initiative allows the college to showcase the nature and profile of the college provision, as well as support the focus on high-quality standards within sectors. Additionally, there are examples of the college working in partnership with local schools, to share upcoming professional development courses with the staff in the schools, to support further professional development.
- There has been CPD when procuring new equipment, through the Curriculum Hubs, in areas such as security systems, robotics integration and process modelling, and collaboration among cross-curricular teams and with other colleges to share good practice and develop industry links. In childcare, staff have engaged in a range of CPD activities including supporting children and adults with special needs; first aid; understanding autism; diversity and inclusion; and trauma sensitive approaches. Participation in these activities has provided the childcare staff with up-to-date knowledge and skills in this sector, as well as awareness of best practice approaches for teaching.



## 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.

In the P&T areas sampled, there is evidence of a well-conceived and well-planned curriculum, with clear progression pathways to meet the needs of learners, business and industry. The delivery of the curriculum is complemented by relevant professional learning for staff. The college has self-evaluated a number of lessons as requiring improvement across the provision, including in the essential skills provision.

The college is inclusive and widening access through collaborative delivery approaches, marketing campaigns, careers education and the use of learner role models to attract a diverse range of learners. 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 recommended next steps are for the college to:

- integrate better the work of the various college teams, with well-managed, collaborative working and monitor regularly the impact of actions taken in effecting the necessary improvement, including the recent changes at senior management and governance level, on the quality of provision at level 3;
- use more effectively the range of data available from the management information system, to review and better inform the quality of strategic action planning across the college;
- improve the achievement rates in construction, and overall outcomes in the essential skills; and
- progress the work of the entrepreneurship Hub with DfE and the sector, to develop further and consistently entrepreneurship and associated activity.

## Appendix A: Background information

The evaluation of the curriculum provision at level 3 provision in Northern Regional College 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 the college 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 an 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 and Further Education Division. The feedback highlighted key findings and any areas for focus for the college going forward.

During the evaluation visit, inspectors undertook five workplace visits, had six focus group meetings with 101 learners and key stakeholders (three collaborative partners, three employers, one external agency), discussions with the Chief Executive and executive management team, the curriculum director, the quality manager and other key staff (60) across the college, including those responsible for the safeguarding arrangements and a representative 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.

**construction\*** - All of the college's apprenticeship provision (bricklaying; carpentry and joinery; civil engineering; construction; electrotechnical; engineering; motor vehicle; and plumbing) was included by the college as part of the sampling of the P&T area of construction.

**Page 14**      **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).

**Northern Plus\*** - Northern Plus is an NRC pilot begun in February 2021 as part of the wider student services in the college. Northern Plus is committed to helping learners study, achieve their potential and enjoy their time at the college.

**Page 20**      **Worldskills Educator Programme\*** - Worldskills Educator Programme: The programme run by the international charity, Worldskills involves institutions being assigned to a High-Performance Skills Coach who coach and mentor teaching staff to receive training, equipping educators with a range of skills, practices, and methods to embed excellence into teaching practice.

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