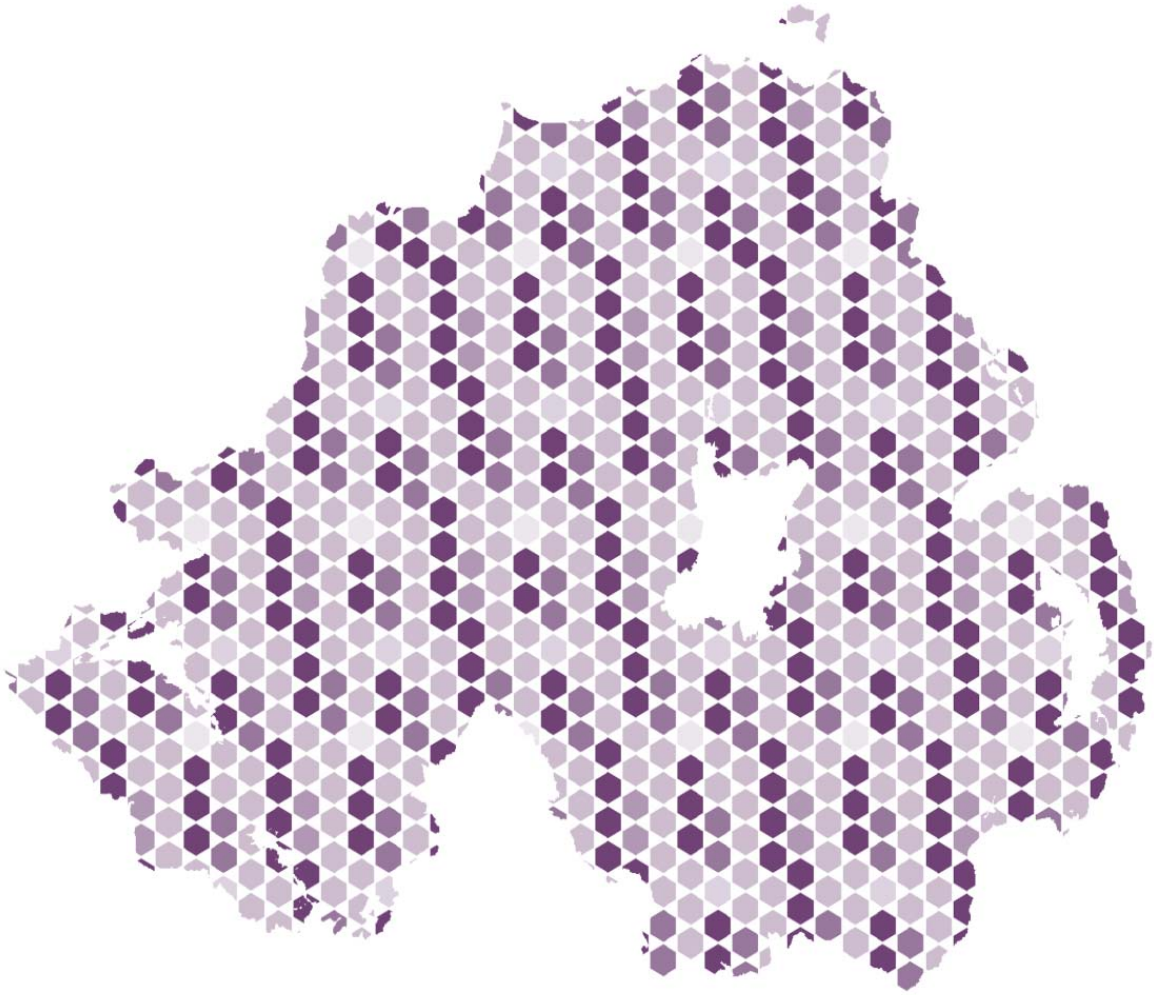
FURTHER EDUCATION INSPECTION



Education and Training Inspectorate

Provision for the Priority Skills Areas at Level 3 South Eastern Regional College

Report of an Inspection in March 2010

The Education and Training Inspectorate - Promoting Improvement

Providing Inspection Services for
Department of Education
Department for Employment and Learning
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE

CONTENTS

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%

In assessing the various features of the provision, Inspectors relate their evaluations to six descriptors as set out below:

DESCRIPTOR
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This report summarises the findings of an inspection of the college's provision at level 3 in the National Qualifications Framework in the Priority Skill Areas of computing and information and communication technology (ICT), construction and the built environment (construction), electrical and electronic engineering, and manufacturing and mechanical engineering. The college's provision of Priority Skill Area programmes funded by the Department for Employment and Learning (the Department) under the Apprenticeships Northern Ireland programme was not inspected. The inspection was undertaken by the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) during the second term of the 2009/10 academic year.

1.2 In the Autumn term of 2010, the Inspectorate will publish summary reports for each Priority Skill Areas Priority Skill Area across the further education sector. These reports will evaluate the:

- the quality and effectiveness of the curriculum for each Priority Skill Area;
- the strategic planning for the provision;
- the effectiveness of employer engagement and links with key stakeholders;
- the quality of the provision for learning; and
- the standards of students' work.

The reports will identify best practice to help the further education sector implement strategies to meet the needs of students and the economy. They will also inform the Department on the impact of its current policies regarding level 3 provision in these Priority Skill Areas.

1.3 A total of 49 lessons were observed during the inspection visit and members of the inspection team interviewed groups of students in each of the Priority Skill Areas. The inspection team met members of the senior management and college management teams, curricular managers, heads of school, and course teams, managers with cross- college responsibilities, and employer representatives. The inspection team reviewed quality assurance documentation and self-evaluation reports, curriculum development plans and minutes of course team meetings.

2. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

2.1 The college has a good provision of full-time level 3 courses in most of the areas inspected. The college provides full-time courses across most of the main campuses; curriculum managers have worked effectively to maintain the college's provision of the Edexcel National Diploma courses in the Lisburn campus. The college has a satisfactory range of part-time courses. There are examples of good practice where the college has responded flexibly to meet the needs of employers, and is making a significant contribution to up-skilling and re-skilling the local and regional workforce. These include the provision of National Vocational Qualifications at level 3 in carpentry and joinery and bricklaying for experienced workers. The college has recently expanded its provision of bespoke courses for employers in engineering. It is about to introduce, for example, a re-skilling National Certificate course and a technician up-skilling course for maintenance engineers who work in

a large regional employer. The college also has a wide provision of part-time level 3 courses in electrical installation. There are however, gaps in the college's provision of part-time courses. These include the lack of part-time technician courses in construction and level 3 courses in computer-aided design and welding in engineering. The college has a good provision of level 3 courses in engineering for 75 pupils from local post-primary schools.

2.2 Most of the courses are well-designed to meet the needs of the students. The professional and technical programmes provide a good mixture of theoretical and practical units to enable students to progress to employment and higher education. Full-time students in engineering, for example, have good opportunities to develop their practical skills though well-planned workshop sessions. With the exception of the full-time Edexcel National Diploma in engineering at the Bangor campus, the students have good opportunities to undertake further units in mathematics to aid progression to relevant university courses. The college has made good progress in developing its capability to meet the requirements of the emerging Qualifications Credit Framework. Although it was not part of the pilot programme for the introduction of the Unique Learner Number, all students enrolled in the college during the current academic year have been registered with the United Kingdom Learner Registration Service.

2.3 There are good progression routes from level 2 to level 3 courses, particularly for full-time students. The college provides appropriate higher education courses for those students who successfully complete their level 3 courses.

2.4 The quality of the provision in the professional and technical areas inspected is good or better in all of the professional and technical areas; it is good in engineering, very good in construction, and outstanding in computing and ICT. The features of outstanding practice in computing and ICT include, excellent curriculum leadership and collegial work, a shared commitment for improvement, strong industrial links, innovative approaches in the management of programmes backed up with action to enhance the quality of the students' learning experiences. The planning of the curriculum in electronic and electrical engineering is, however, fragmented; key links with the professional and technical areas of computing and ICT, and construction are underdeveloped. There is a need for more coherent planning of the provision, to ensure that the college can respond more effectively to new technologies, particularly in automation and control systems, renewable energies, and in computer networking.

2.5 Senior members of staff in the college have developed strong links with key sectoral bodies in industry and professional groups. The college has effective management structures in place to support economic development through its Business Innovation and Development Unit. The strategy is well-informed through its three work streams to meet the college's mission to support local and regional employers. Across the areas inspected, the course teams have developed strong links with local, regional and international employers. The inspection has identified examples of good practice, where strong industrial links have enhanced the quality of the provision. These are particularly strong in computing and ICT, and have made a significant contribution towards improving the quality of the students' learning experiences and their standards of work.

2.6 The senior management team has given appropriate attention to improving the quality of provision through the development of robust self-evaluation arrangements. Appropriate action has been taken to enhance the professional capacity of course teams to undertake evidence based judgments on the quality of the provision. The inspection has identified examples of good practice, where course teams have taken action to improve retention rates. In computing and ICT, this included a review of assessment procedures to meet the needs of students.

2.7 The lecturers are well-qualified and experienced across nearly all of the professional and technical areas inspected. The college invests significantly in staff development; the arrangements are effective in enhancing the professional and technical expertise of lecturers and support curricular development across the professional and technical areas. The recently introduced college-based information and learning technology mentorship programme, is a model of good practice, and has played a significant role in equipping lecturers with the pedagogic skills to make good use of learning technologies in their lessons.

2.8 Significant numbers of students enrolling on full-time courses have poor levels of academic achievement, particularly in construction and engineering. The course teams report, however, that many of these students achieve well in their vocational units, with examples of students doing much better than other students who enter the courses with entry grades well in excess of the minimum grades. There is a need to strengthen pre-entry admission arrangements, particularly to determine each student's aptitude for their chosen career and interest in the chosen area of study.

2.9 The quality of teaching and learning is a strength across all of the professional and technical areas. The quality of teaching and learning is good or better in most (82%) of the lessons, and just under half of the lessons are very good or outstanding. The very good or outstanding teaching and learning is a feature of the provision in computing and ICT, and in construction.

2.10 The use of information and learning technology to support students in their learning is effective in most of the professional and technical areas. The lecturers make good or better use of a range of information and learning technology applications in computing and ICT, and construction. The information and learning technology mentors in both of these areas, have played a significant contribution in enhancing the lecturers' skills and expertise in making good use of education technology in their lessons. Although there are features of good practice in engineering, the use of information and learning technology is inconsistent, with undue reliance on the college shared drive facility and the under-use of interactive and multi-media resources to stimulate students in their work.

2.11 Work-related learning is well-developed in all of the professional and technical areas inspected. The college Business Innovation and Development Unit, through the Enterprise Champions programme, provides full-time students very good opportunities to develop their employability and enterprise skills. The extensive range of programmes has been particularly effective in developing their team working skills through inter-campus collaborative projects and skill competitions. These arrangements are excellent in computing and ICT and in construction, where the strong industrial links enhance the quality and challenge of the students' learning experiences. Across the areas inspected, course teams make effective use of guest speakers from industry and students have good opportunities to undertake visits to employers and higher education institutions.

2.12 A significant proportion of full-time students enrolled on level 3 courses have not achieved a level 2 qualification in literacy or numeracy, particularly in construction and engineering. These students, however, have good opportunities to develop their skills of literacy and numeracy in their timetabled essential skills' lessons. Students in most of the areas inspected have good opportunities to enhance their communication and numeracy skills in their professional and technical units, particularly in computing and ICT, and construction, through well-planned work-related learning activities. There are features of good practice where essential skills tutors and vocational tutors share resources on the college virtual learning environment. These arrangements are well-developed in computing and ICT.

2.13 Across nearly all of the areas inspected, the quality of student support is very good. Students have access to a well-developed tutorial system, with appropriate attention given to careers education and personal and social development. The additional tutorial provision for full-time students in computing and ICT is a model of good practice, where students are provided with opportunities to develop their employability skills through team-building, and participation in inter-campus events and competitions. The college has excellent arrangements in place to support students who are at risk of withdrawing from their courses, through the South East Regional College Extra service. The college Student at Risk officers provide timely and appropriate support for these students. The tracking of this work through the college management information system is well-managed.

2.14 The quality of the specialist resources to support students in their learning is a feature of the provision in the college in all of the professional and technical areas; the range and quality of the resources are very good, and this has been supported with a considerable investment by the college. These resources will be further enhanced with the planned opening of the new campuses in Downpatrick and Lisburn. The decant operation in advance of the opening of these new campuses has been well-managed by the college, minimising any disruption for the students.

2.15 The use of management information to measure performance across the curriculum areas is outstanding; the college has a well-developed managed learning environment, with integration of learning platforms, classroom registers, electronic learner agreements, student support and well-honed reporting tools. The college was a joint winner in the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta) 2010 Next Generation Learning Awards for Devolved Administrations in Further Education.

2.16 Most of the students attain good standards in their professional and technical work across in computing and ICT, construction, and mechanical engineering. The standards of work attained by the students in electrical and electronic engineering is inconsistent; the quality of the assignment work for a minority of the students is poor, and expectations are not good enough. Most of the students have good oral skills and they are developed well in computing and ICT, and construction, through their work -related learning tasks. The standards of the students' writing skills are variable ranging from poor to good. There is a need to ensure that staff in the college takes appropriate attention to develop the students' writing skills and their overall study skills. The standards in numeracy are variable; a significant minority of students in mechanical engineering struggle with the demands of the course.

2.17 The levels of attainment in the professional and technical areas are variable, with mostly good outcomes on most part-time courses and lower levels of attainment on two-year full-time courses; typically they have modest retention rates.

2.18 Assessment arrangements in most of the courses are well-organised; they are particularly effective in computing and ICT, where the lecturers make use of an appropriate range of assessment tools, and marking for improvement is implemented effectively. In mechanical engineering, the use of industry-based project work is underdeveloped. The assessment arrangements for full-time students in electronic engineering are inadequate; a significant minority of assignments are not sufficiently challenging and internal verification arrangements are weak.

3. **CONCLUSION**

3.1 OVERALL EVALUATION OF THE QUALITY OF THE PROVISION

In the professional and technical areas inspected, the quality of education provided by South Eastern Regional College is very good. The college is meeting very effectively the educational and pastoral needs of the learners; and has demonstrated its capacity for sustained self-improvement.

3.2 EVALUATION OF THE QUALITY OF THE PROVISION IN EACH PSA

In the professional and technical area of computing and information and communications technology, the quality of education and training provided by the South Eastern Regional College is outstanding. The college has significant strengths in most of its educational and pastoral provision.

In the professional and technical area of construction, the quality of education provided by South Eastern Regional College is very good. The college is meeting very effectively the educational and pastoral needs of the learners; and has demonstrated its capacity for sustained self-improvement.

In the professional and technical areas of electrical and electronic engineering, and mechanical engineering, the quality of education provided by South Eastern Regional College is good. The college has important strengths in most of its educational and pastoral provision. The inspection has identified areas for improvement which the college has demonstrated the capacity to address. The Inspectorate will monitor the college's progress on the areas for improvement.