

15. ESSENTIAL SKILLS

Performance Level: Good

Areas inspected:

- Further education, work-based learning and provision in the community.

CONTEXT

15.1 The essential skills provision in the College is large and varied, with a total of 5,496 enrolments in the 2012/13 academic year. It encompasses the provision in further education, work-based learning and adult and community which services areas of identified social need and disadvantage in Newry and in the wider Southern region. In its community provision, the College also offers pre-essential skills and a pre- English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision to encourage adult learners who are hardest to reach to engage in learning; the College has recently won a Beacon award for this provision.

The quality of the leadership and management is good.

15.2 The executive management team actively supports the essential skills and has invested significantly in their development and delivery. This is underpinned by a clear strategic vision for the essential skills within the College curriculum. There are good internal management structures in place and an effective communications system which is well-informed by a regular cycle of meetings between senior management, curriculum managers and the lecturers. Curriculum leaders have been successful in ensuring that professional and technical tutors and essential skills tutors have a shared understanding on the value and purpose of the essential skills provision in the College. The roles of the co-ordinators in literacy and numeracy have been largely administrative and it is appropriate that the College is currently planning to enhance these to better support the development of teaching and learning, and in providing appropriate staff development for the lecturers. The College also has a number of Teaching and Learning Advisers who provide appropriate support, advice and guidance for staff in the delivery of essential skills.

15.3 The high quality leadership and management of the Fresh Start programme, the Employ ME programme and the College's links with community organisations is a feature of the essential skills provision. Underpinning all of this is the very positive interface between the social inclusion agenda and the economic imperative which is demonstrated in well articulated, cohesive community policies in the College.

15.4 Good progress has been made in the use of management information to monitor the essential skills provision. The recently developed e-portal tool captures effectively the prior attainments of new learners on entry to the College. Appropriate arrangements are also in place to benchmark the performance of the groups of learners undertaking the essential skills across the College and to identify potential underachievement at an early stage. In work-based learning, a case conference approach is being piloted to identify those learners at risk of under achievement and to provide timely interventions to support them. Overall, the essential skills management team work effectively with the quality improvement unit, and they have implemented a range of support strategies to improve learners' attendance and performance, for example, the mentor in-class support programme. The outcomes of teacher observations under the performance enhancement programme have also been used effectively to inform staff development programmes. In addition, the College has introduced the Teaching and Thinking programme to help meet some of the development needs of part-time lecturers. The College should continue to strengthen its evaluations of the impact of these interventions.

15.5 The timetabling arrangements for the essential skills vary across the College. They include, for example, intense sessions that are timetabled for one semester, and sessions that are timetabled throughout the full academic year. While the College has carried out some analysis of the impact of the models of delivery on the learning experiences of the learners, it should review these models more robustly through the self-evaluation process. Some of the semester-based sessions last for around two and a half hours and are unsuitable for some of those learners with more profound weaknesses in literacy and numeracy; this is particularly evident in work-based learning and should be reviewed by the College.

15.6 Self-evaluation arrangements do not evaluate sufficiently the quality of the strategic and operational management for each strand of the provision across the College.

The quality of the provision for learning is good.

15.7 The College has worked hard, and to mostly good effect, to develop the links between the professional and technical lecturers and the essential skills lecturers to facilitate the integration, contextualisation and embedding of the essential skills. This is more evident in the further education provision than it is in work-based learning; a feature of good practice is where the sessions are taught by professional and technical lecturers with a strong background and experience in the essential skills.

15.8 Across the provision, the quality of teaching and learning was good or better in the majority (61%) of the observed sessions. A significant minority (39%) of the observed sessions, however, were either satisfactory or inadequate. The teaching and learning profile was typically better in the further education and the adult and community provision than it was in work-based learning. In the more effective practice, the sessions were contextualised effectively to motivate and engage the learners; they were also encouraged to relate their responses to real life experiences, to current affairs and to aspects of their vocational work. Marking for improvement was strong and questioning techniques were effective in developing the learners' thinking skills. These sessions had a good balance in composite skills development, including the development of speaking and listening and reading and writing in literacy. In the less effective practice, the lecturers overly focused on task completion at the expense of learning. There were too few opportunities for extended responses, both oral and written and too little time was accorded to facilitating learners to articulate and plan their own learning. The learning was overly assessment driven and there were occasional examples of expectations which were too low. Overall, the use of ILT to enhance the quality of teaching and learning across the provision is underdeveloped; more needs to be done to use online learning platforms to better facilitate independent learning. In addition, differentiation is generally underdeveloped; while most tutors provide good one-to-one support, a wider range of differentiation strategies need to be developed, particularly for those learners working at the lower levels of the essential skills.

Achievements and standards are good.

15.9 Most of the learners across the provision enjoy their learning, make good progress and are keen to complete and achieve their essential skills qualifications. In work-based learning, almost all of the learners who are retained achieve in line with the requirements of their framework and a minority achieve beyond this. While a majority of the learners communicate with confidence about their work, a minority of them are reticent communicators and also lack confidence in their writing and number work. More needs to be done to promote these skills in interesting and engaging contexts beyond those required for assessment. In addition, more opportunities need to be created to enable these learners to transfer their learning across a wider range of contexts. In further education, there is

evidence that a majority of learners develop a good range of skills, including group working skills and peer and independent working skills which are supported and enhanced in their professional and technical programmes. Within the adult provision, the learners are very well motivated and are well supported in their learning. Almost all are keen to progress beyond the present level of study. Most of the adult learners achieve appropriately high standards in literacy, numeracy and ICT.

15.10 Overall, the achievements in the essential skills provision are above the sector average. The average three year achievement rate is 84% in literacy; 81% in numeracy and 76% in ICT. However, it is of note that within the Training for Success provision, whilst the achievement rate has risen over a three year period in numeracy and ICT, it has declined slightly in literacy and this needs to be kept under review by the College.