



*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

Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Survey

Higher Education Courses

in

Further Education Colleges

Inspected: May 2007

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1. BACKGROUND

1.1 In the context of this survey report, higher education (HE) in further education (FE) is the delivery of programmes of study, both full-time and part-time, at both degree and sub-degree level, through the FE sector. Further education colleges (FECs) have been delivering HE courses in Northern Ireland since the 1980s. In 1997 the Dearing Committee recommended that in relation to FE:

- i. there should be growth in full-time HE, particularly at sub-degree level, and therefore in FECs; and
- ii. there should be no growth in degree level work at FECs.

1.2 In response, the government recognised the need to increase participation at sub-degree level and to respond to the needs of the economy. The government accepted that, in general, sub-degree provision should take place in FECs and there should not be significant growth in degree level courses in the FE sector.

1.3 The Higher Education Funding Council for England has recently undertaken a review of HE in FE provision, taking into consideration the White Paper on FE published in March 2006¹. The White Paper noted that in line with the wider mission, there should be a presumption that HE delivered in FE should have a strong occupational and employment focus and that the main area of expansion should be foundation degrees.

1.4 The Department for Employment and Learning (the Department) is currently implementing the Further Education Means Business Strategy through a series of projects. The review of HE in FE is one of the projects within this programme, the scope of which includes both improvements to the processes relating to the management of HE in FE and the policy development of foundation degrees. The review also sits within the wider context of the Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland - Success Through Skills.

1.5 In April 2007 the Department requested the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) to undertake a survey of the HE provision within the 16 FE colleges in Northern Ireland, as part of the review process.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 This survey was carried out in May 2007 across the then 16 colleges, ten offered full-time HE provision, and all offered part-time HE provision. The survey involved six teams of two district inspectors visiting each of the 16 colleges which have since merged into six area-based colleges (1 August 2007). The focus of the survey was to evaluate the provision of HE within each college, including the standards and achievements, the learner profile, quality assurance arrangements, leadership and management, and the arrangements for learner support.

3. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

3.1 STRENGTHS

¹ 'Further Education: raising skills, improving life chances' (March 2006)

All the figures and tables used in this report were verified by the Department and the colleges.

The main strengths are the:

- wide range of full-time and part-time provision;
- range of external links;
- good opportunities for work-based study;
- mostly good retention rates;
- mostly good or excellent success rates;
- diverse range of learners;
- good quality assurance arrangements;
- commitment of the colleges to the development of HE provision;
- good staff profile;
- access to good accommodation and physical resources; and
- good systems in place for learner support;

3.2 AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The main areas for improvement are the:

- duplication of provision within and across all of the colleges;
- inability of nearly all the colleges to fill full-time Maximum Student Number (MaSN) places including allocated MaSN places in priority skills areas in the period 2003-2006;
- use of management information systems to produce accurate and relevant information on HE provision;
- non-alignment of HE provision to local industry or priority skills needs in a small number of colleges;
- low recruitment to programmes in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) across the colleges; and
- further development of information and learning technology (ILT) to support teaching and learning.

4. PROVISION

4.1 The 16 FE colleges offer a broad range of both full-time and part-time HE provision including degree programmes, higher national diplomas (HNDs), higher national certificates (HNCs), foundation degrees, professional qualifications, and national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 4 to 7. The majority of the HE courses offered are HND and HNC programmes.

4.2 Most of the colleges review their HE provision and carry out a needs analysis on a regular basis to meet the emerging needs of local industry, as well as offering provision in the recognised priority skills areas. A minority of the colleges are offering or planning to offer programmes for emerging technologies or in niche market areas including wind turbine technology, rural sustainability, environmental science, environment conservation and garden design. In a small number of colleges, however, the HE provision is based mainly on what the lecturing staff can offer rather than meeting the needs of local industry or priority skills areas.

4.3 The colleges have developed good links and established effective working relationships and partnerships with a range of organisations including the sector skills councils (SSCs), local industry, other colleges and universities, local and national awarding bodies, professional bodies and other outside agencies.

The strategic alliance long-term strategy (SALTS) initiative, for the foundation degree in hospitality, offered across a number of colleges is an example of best practice including:

- *single specification programme;*
- *links with industry;*
- *collaboration between colleges, industrial visits and guest speakers;*
- *planning and sharing of planning for modules (ten shared across colleges in planning terms); and*
- *interviewing skills.*

4.4 There is duplication of provision across the colleges and within all of the new area-based college structures and consequently there is a need for most to make improved use of emerging labour market information in the planning and development of HE provision, including the improved use of the Northern Ireland College Information System (NICIS) and management information systems to identify provision across geographical areas. In addition, recruitment to programmes across a number of professional and technical areas including sports studies, computing, engineering and science based courses is generally low, resulting in some cases in non-viable combined classes and reduced options for students.

4.5 A minority of the colleges offer an appropriate range of supplementary and value-added qualifications to HE students to develop their employability, personal and transferable skills. These are mainly professional or vendor specific qualifications or other qualifications, which are not on the national qualification framework (NQF), but are recognised as being desirable within specific professional and technical areas such as Sports Studies.

4.6 There is some evidence of good progression opportunities for full-time HE students to both local and mainland universities. However, this is specific to particular professional and technical areas; in one college, for example, students on the HND in performing arts can progress to year 3 of a theatre studies degree programme with a local university, however, students on the HND in sports science can only progress to year 1 of the relevant degree programme.

4.7 A majority of the colleges offer appropriate work-placements and work-based opportunities for full-time students as part of their HE provision. There is, however, a variation in the number of hours allocated and the mode of attendance for work-based learning provision across and within the colleges. In a minority, there is good employer involvement in course design and in the self-evaluation and review process.

4.8 The number of timetabled hours allocated to HE programmes varies both across and within the colleges.

5. STANDARDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

5.1 The staff across most of the colleges have high expectations for HE students. Most students are highly committed to their programmes of study. The standards of work produced by the students, across most of the colleges, range from good to excellent, and they are developing good occupational competence. Most of the students demonstrate good standards of oral communication skills.

5.2 A minority of full-time students progress to employment as a result of undertaking a work-based learning element during their programme of study. In addition, a number of part-time students are promoted or change employment as a result of achieving their qualification.

5.3 Data available from the Department indicates that the total number of enrolments in colleges for HE in FE in Northern Ireland has been generally static over the period 2003/04 to 2005/06 (Appendix One). The data also indicates that none of the ten colleges offering full-time HE provision filled their MaSN allocation in the period 2003-2006. Over the same period, only a small number of the colleges were filling their MaSN allocation in the identified priority skills areas.

5.4 Data available from the colleges indicates that retention rates on both full-time and part-time HE courses across the colleges range from satisfactory to excellent and are mostly good. A minority of the colleges report that recruitment to their part-time HE provision is low and retention on part-time courses can be more problematic due to a number of issues including, students experiencing difficulty obtaining day release, their personal priorities and changes in their employment status during the programme. There is a need for colleges to review their part-time HE provision with a view to developing a strategy to improve recruitment and retention rates.

5.5 Success rates, across the colleges, range from satisfactory to excellent but are mostly good for those students who complete their courses.

5.6 At present, there is variation in the way that HE statistics are presented and used across the colleges; there is a lack of appropriate mechanisms in place in most for the analysis

of data relating to HE provision. For example, most colleges do not have well developed tracking systems to record learner progression or achievements.

6. LEARNER PROFILE

6.1 The HE provision within the FE colleges attracts a mixed profile of students in terms of age, gender, locality and qualifications and from a diverse range of backgrounds including schools, colleges, training organisations, employment, unemployment, adult returners, women returners, mature learners and retired learners. Higher education provides good opportunities, for both full-time and part-time students, who could not otherwise access HE within the traditional university system for various reasons including, funding, travel arrangements or failure to meet entry requirements. In the majority of colleges the students are recruited from within the local catchment area but a minority of colleges also attract students from a wide geographical area. At present, the number of foreign students recruited across the colleges is low.

6.2 The opportunities provided by the colleges are highly valued by HE students. A sample of the learners interviewed had varied backgrounds, mostly mature students who have been working for a number of years, and all welcomed the opportunity to gain additional qualifications on a part-time basis. Most were keen to progress further. Students were also positive about the local accessibility of the HE provision.

6.3 There is evidence that a majority of the colleges carry out initial assessments to ascertain the essential skills needs of the HE students and provide appropriate support. In a small number of colleges, students do not undergo a formal initial assessment but their essential skills needs are identified through informal methods such as induction tasks. In one college there is insufficient collation of data relating to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) English and mathematics profile of the HE students.

6.4 Students interviewed indicated that the careers staff in schools do not provide accurate or current information regarding HE progression opportunities within FE. The students stated that they obtained information about courses from other sources including job centres, the colleges themselves, newspaper advertisements or from friends.

7. QUALITY ASSURANCE ARRANGEMENTS

7.1 The quality assurance procedures established across most of the colleges are good. A number of the colleges have put in place centralised quality assurance units with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for staff. These include co-ordination of the quality assurance and self-evaluation and review process across the college. Others have established a HE committee to oversee the quality assurance process including the sharing of good practice. Overall, there is a strong commitment of senior management to the development of the HE provision within the colleges. In a small number of colleges, however, there is no systematic college wide quality assurance of the HE provision. In addition, no overall self-evaluation and development planning for HE is carried out by the senior management.

7.2 In those colleges where effective quality assurance procedures are in place, regular monitoring of the provision is carried out by the senior management team, rigorous internal verification procedures have been developed in line with awarding body requirements, the views of stakeholders are routinely considered and the Improving Quality: Raising Standards

(IQ:RS) self-evaluation and review framework has been implemented and integrated effectively within the quality assurance process. In addition, the framework has been used effectively to complement the quality assurance procedures of the college's partner organisations.

7.3 While quality assurance procedures across the most of the colleges are good, there is insufficient monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning and the sharing of good practice.

7.4 In a majority of the new area-based colleges, quality working groups are being established to develop appropriate quality assurance procedures.

8. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

8.1 Most of the colleges have made a good commitment to the development of HE provision at both middle and senior management level. The development of HE is better in those colleges where a HE committee exists, chaired by a senior member of staff, to consider the HE provision across the college, develop clear lines of communication and share good practice. In a small number of colleges, however, the HE committee has no input to the strategic planning process but deals solely with operational issues.

8.2 There is good use of the management information system in a minority of colleges with statistics readily available and reviewed on a regular basis. In the majority of the colleges, however, whilst management information is used to capture data for HE students and their pathway through the college from entry to successful completion, there is at times variable use of this information. More effective use needs to be made of the key performance indicators to better inform the strategic planning and monitoring of the provision. In addition, in a small number of colleges, there is no cohesion across the HE provision and no overall view as to performance. Within these colleges the HE provision is managed largely within faculty structures with little cross-college co-ordination.

8.3 Most of the colleges have developed good external links with a range of relevant organisations and a small number of colleges have also developed good cross-border and international links. Across the colleges, however, there is insufficient involvement of employers in the learning process. There is also a need to develop further the input of the newly developed Workforce Development Fora in formulating curriculum planning and identifying local economic needs.

8.4 Enrolment levels across the colleges in STEM programmes are low. Colleges need to consider innovative ways of delivering these programmes across the new area-based college structures.

8.5 Governing bodies, across most of the colleges, are insufficiently involved in the monitoring and review of curricular provision, particularly the quality and performance of the provision and the extent to which it meets the needs of the community the college seeks to serve.

8.6 There is evidence to demonstrate that curriculum planning groups are being established across most of the new area-based colleges with one particular focus being the HE provision.

9. RESOURCES

9.1 Staff involved in the provision of HE across the colleges are well-qualified and have extensive and relevant industrial experience. A mixture of both full-time and part-time staff are deployed and almost all are committed to the students and enthusiastic about their professional and technical areas. Staff deployment across the colleges is generally good, however, there is evidence that some programmes of study are heavily dependent on part-time staff or on individual lecturers within specific professional and technical programmes. Colleges also report difficulties in recruiting full-time and part-time staff from industry for some specialist areas such as engineering, the built environment, and counselling.

9.2 There is variation in the amount of time allocated to lecturers involved in the delivery of HE provision across the colleges. In a small number of colleges there is no remitted time for staff teaching on HE programmes despite the extensive demands of the preparation, internal verification and marking of work. There is a need for the college as well as the sector as a whole to recognise the demand on staff delivering at HE level. This is important in terms of continued capacity for high quality provision at this level, the need for course tutors to update their industrial experience and the further strengthening and utilisation of the developing links with employers across the HE provision.

9.3 Good opportunities exist for staff in colleges to undertake continuous professional development (CPD) through the provision of appropriate internal staff development sessions and almost all of the colleges have made good use of the lecturers into industry scheme, which provides staff with the opportunity to update their skills by spending time working in industry. Staff, from across the colleges, also have the opportunity to participate in cross-college and university programmes as well as events organised by organisations such as the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) and the Regional Support Centre (RSC).

The HNC in Planning in one college was designed in conjunction with the Department of Environment Planning Service, to devise an industrially relevant course. Other features include:

- *excellent use of the Blackboard virtual learning environment to deliver course materials;*
- *lecturers use their personal CPD events to engage guest speakers to deliver talks to students; and*
- *the programme co-ordinator organised her own placement into the Planning Service for six days over the summer holiday period.*

9.4 A number of colleges are recognised centres of excellence (CoE) in the Department's designated priority skills areas. This has allowed staff to develop close links with industry and broaden their expertise through providing and undertaking training with current industry practitioners. For example, one college is a CoE for construction and the built environment and has provided a programme of events and training aimed at architects, quantity surveyors, building control officers and other professionals in the industry.

9.5 Good ILT facilities exist across the colleges and there is evidence to suggest that the use of ILT to support teaching and learning by individual lecturers is increasing. There is,

however, variation in the way that ILT is used both across the colleges and on individual courses within colleges. In particular, the use of the virtual learning environment to support students effectively in their learning is variable. There is a need to further develop this area and to support further the HE students through the provision of more on-line learning resources and more flexible learning opportunities. There is also a need for management, across most of the colleges, to make more effective use of the ILT facilities to further develop appropriate college-wide managed learning environments.

9.6 The standard of the accommodation, across most of the colleges, is good. The standards of the physical resources, especially within the centres of excellence, range from good to excellent with good student access to industry standard equipment. Some examples include the business incubation centres for students, wireless interactive media resources, rapid prototyping equipment and specialist industry standard software. In a small number of colleges the HE students have commented on the need for a more adult ethos to be developed and the lack of recreational or common room facilities.

10. LEARNER SUPPORT

10.1 The support systems, for both full-time and part-time, HE learners across almost all of the colleges are good. Most of the colleges have established learning support units or offer support through a centralised student services unit with a dedicated student services officer, assisted by learning support staff. A range of support mechanisms have been developed including a well-planned induction, counselling, learning support, careers guidance, financial support, and support for students with specific disabilities. In most cases, a full assessment is made of the student's learning needs and a programme of support, including one-to-one support, is established. Across the colleges it is reported that full-time HE students make more use of student support services than part-time students. There is a need, therefore, for colleges to encourage more part-time HE students to avail of the support provided.

10.2 The standard of the accommodation and quality of the resources available for learner support are good. Most colleges provide appropriate and well-equipped learning resource centres with customised resources for support services as well as traditional library, computer and on-line resources.

One college has been innovative in using technology to support students. The college has developed the virtual learning environment to provide students with information which is unique to themselves. The system is also linked to the college's careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) and induction provision and there are plans to introduce a career planning programme, for all students, to include interview techniques and the development of curriculum vitae.

10.3 The provision for CEIAG for HE students is generally good across the colleges. A majority of the colleges have a dedicated careers officer in place who undertakes specific, tailored career development work with HE students, particularly identifying progression opportunities. In addition, impartial advice is available through scheduled appointments with a support worker from the education guidance and support service for adults (EGSA). In all of the colleges informal careers guidance is also provided by tutors and lecturers, many of whom work in industry or have a good knowledge of current industrial needs.

Figure 1: Full-time enrolments 2003-2006

College/Institute	Full-time MaSN* Allocation	03/04	04/05	05/06
Belfast Institute	1371	1281	1270	1298
North-West Institute	631	694	422	514
East Antrim Institute	68	29	31	37
North-East Institute	193	118	114	170
Fermanagh College	136	137	89	70
Newry Institute	220	127	107	102
Upper Bann Institute	191	160	138	173
East Down Institute	32	14	6	0
Lisburn College	78	50	47	64
North-Down & Ards Institute	438	393	428	356

* MaSN (Maximum Student Number)

Figure 2: Part-time enrolments 2003-2006

College/Institute	03/04	04/05	05/06
Belfast Institute	2654	2420	2674
Castlereagh College	136	118	95
North-West Institute	589	444	466
Limavady College	134	96	110
East Antrim Institute	0	0	335
North-East Institute	399	372	491
Causeway Institute	146	148	139
Fermanagh College	651	288	285
East Tyrone College	448	300	251
Omagh College	214	200	188
Newry Institute	803	615	460
Upper Bann Institute	429	399	366
Armagh College	65	49	26
East Down Institute	198	160	194
Lisburn College	348	236	265
North-Down & Ards Institute	551	566	363

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