Education and Training Inspectorate

Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI Provision in the Northern Regional College

Report of an Inspection in March 2017

Contents

1.   Context

The Northern Regional College is a non-departmental public body and is one of six regional colleges of further education in Northern Ireland. It provides education and training opportunities across the four council areas of Antrim and Newtownabbey, Causeway Coast and the Glens, Mid and East Antrim, and Mid Ulster. The college has campuses located in the towns of Ballymena, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Magherafelt, Newtownabbey and Larne. It is contracted by the Department for the Economy (Department) to provide the Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI programmes[1]. At the time of the inspection, 226 trainees and 582 apprentices were registered across the professional and technical areas of brickwork, electrotechnical services (electrical installation), engineering, plumbing, vehicle maintenance and repair, and wood occupations.

A small number (68) of the trainees and apprentices has a disability and/or additional learning support needs. A significant minority (31%) of the trainees and the majority (59%) of the apprentices entered their programme with four or more GSCE passes at grades A* to C or equivalent, including English and mathematics. Almost all (97%) of the trainees are in a suitable work-experience placement.

2.   Focus of the inspection

The inspection focused on:

- the outcomes for learners;

- the effectiveness of the self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes;

- the quality of provision for learning and development; and

- the quality of the leadership and management.

3.   Overall findings of the inspection

Overall effectiveness	Capacity to identify and bring about improvement
Outcomes for learners	Good
Provision for learning	Good
Leadership and management	Good

Overall quality of learning and training programmes		
Training for Success	28%	Important areas for improvement
ApprenticeshipsNI	72%	Good

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[1] Programme registration data provided by the college at the time of the inspection is included in the Appendix of this report.

Overall quality of the professional and technical areas inspected[2] and the essential skills provision	
Essential skills	Important areas for improvement
Electrotechnical services	Good
Vehicle maintenance and repair	Good
Wood occupations	Good

The arrangements for safeguarding learners reflect broadly the guidance issued by the Department.

Key Findings

Strengths

- The good or better standards of the trainees' and apprentices' professional and technical skills and knowledge.

- The high retention (85%), achievement (99%) and progression (97%) rates on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme.

- The good overall quality of the professional and technical areas of electrotechnical services, vehicle maintenance and repair, and wood occupations.

- The good quality of most of the learning, teaching, training and assessment.

- The high work-experience placement rate (97%) for the trainees on the Training for Success programme, providing almost all of them with good quality, relevant learning and skills development opportunities.

- The high levels of support provided for the trainees and apprentices by the lecturers and training support officers which includes regular and effective monitoring in the workplace.

- Clear strategic vision and ambition for improvement set by the senior leadership team that informs well the whole-college strategic improvement planning.

- The effective management of change by the senior leadership team that has led to better communication, greater collegiality and transparency of decision making across the college.

Areas for improvement

- To address the low retention (43%) and progression (68%) rates on the Training for Success programme.

- Improve the quality of the essential skills provision which has important areas for improvement.

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[2]   A representative sample of professional and technical areas, agreed with the college, was selected for inspection.

- Develop further the self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes, particularly the effective collation and use of data to inform, plan and evaluate the quality of the provision.

- Implement strategies and support for lecturers to further improve the quality of the provision, including a stronger emphasis on reflective practice to promote greater use of a broader and more appropriate range of learning, teaching and training approaches.

4. Outcomes for learners

The trainees and apprentices are achieving good or better standards of work in their professional and technical skills and underpinning knowledge. In directed training, they develop well their practical competencies in using tools and techniques to complete relevant tasks, which they can apply with increasing confidence in the workplace. In electrotechical services and wood occupations, the trainees and apprentices are able to, for example, interpret complex technical information to plan and install a wide range of electrical systems; or mark out, cut and manufacture complex timber joints; and mostly to a very good standard. Similarly, in vehicle maintenance and repair, the trainees and apprentices are able to carry out a range of routine services and maintenance checks, and diagnosis and repair faults with increasing independence, to a good or better standard.

The standards of the trainees' and apprentices' literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) skills range from good to important areas for improvement. In numeracy and ICT, the standards they achieve are at least good; they have a good understanding, for example, of key mathematical concepts which most of them can transfer confidently to other contexts. The trainees and apprentices demonstrate good or better standards of speaking and listening skills, although the standards of their reading and writing skills are too variable. While most of them are able to read and interpret information relating to their professional and technical area with growing confidence, their ability to undertake independently extended and complex writing tasks is underdeveloped, and is an important area for improvement. They need to develop and demonstrate the use of a wider range of language styles which they can transfer appropriately to a variety of contexts.

Most of the trainees and apprentices are developing positive dispositions to learning, and increase quickly their self-confidence and ability to work collaboratively and respectfully with their peers and supervisors, both in directed training and in the workplace. In most of the sessions observed during the inspection, the standards of the trainees' and apprentices' behaviour were exemplary. Their workplace supervisors and lecturers report increasing levels of independence and an improving ability to plan and organise work, and to use their initiative to solve problems. Their ability to carry out independent research, manage and use information critically is, however, more variable across the programmes inspected. In wood occupations, for example, the trainees and apprentices would benefit from a greater range of project work to increase their thinking and creative skills. The trainees' and apprentices' attendance rates in professional and technical training are mostly good, but overly variable in essential skills.

Overall, almost all (97%) of the trainees and apprentices who complete their training achieve their targeted qualifications. Over the last three years, the achievement rate on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme is outstanding at 99%, and very good on the Training for Success programme at 91%.

Most of the trainees and apprentices, in their professional and technical training, are progressing well in their learning, and they are completing their qualification units at an appropriate pace. Those with additional learning needs benefit from well-targeted additional support and are able to overcome effectively any barriers to learning they have and achieve to their potential.

In essential skills, the trainees' progress in their learning is overly variable; the majority are making slow progress in improving their literacy and numeracy, particularly at level 2. Over the last three years, it is noteworthy that most (87%) of the trainees and apprentices who undertook a level 2 qualification in literacy and numeracy achieved. By contrast, over the same period, only 65% of those who undertook a level 1 qualification in both literacy and numeracy achieved, and, of these, only a small number progressed to level 2 in numeracy (10%) and literacy (7%).

Overall, while the apprentices are making good progress, progression on the Training for Success programme is not good enough. The retention rate on the Training for Success programme, over the last three years, is too low at 43% and requires urgent improvement. In addition, the progression rate to further training or employment, for those who complete successfully their training, is also low at 68%. In contrast, the retention rate, over the same period, on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme is very good at 85% and progression to employment or further training is outstanding at 97%. Significantly, most (89%) of the apprentices who achieve their level 2 framework progress to level 3.

5. Quality of provision

The college, through its ongoing strategic improvement plan, has appropriately recognised the need to revise its curriculum offer to ensure it is balanced and is meeting better the needs of the employers and the local communities it serves. While the work-based learning provision has traditionally provided a wide range of construction and engineering programmes which met well the needs of employers, going forward, it is appropriate that the college is actively exploring opportunities to broaden the provision. Consequently, a range of Youth Training pilots at level 2 are underway in additional professional and technical areas. These include: business studies; hairdressing; health and social care; and travel and tourism. In addition, there is a need to review the current small level 1 provision to ensure it is meeting well enough the needs of current and future trainees with a low entry qualification profile.

Across the professional and technical areas inspected, the curriculum is well planned and matched appropriately to the aspirations of the trainees and apprentices and to the workforce development needs of the local employers. The trainees and apprentices benefit from a balanced range of learning experiences to develop both their practical skills and their technical knowledge. In the workplace, trainees and apprentices have suitable opportunities to consolidate, develop and apply their skills and knowledge. It is a significant strength of the Training for Success programme that almost all (97%) of the trainees have a relevant work-experience placement where they can increase their employability skills and awareness of the world of work.

The curriculum provision to develop the trainees' and apprentices' literacy, numeracy and ICT skills up to, and including level 2, and beyond to GCSE, is an important area for improvement. There is a need to provide clearer pathways to ensure all trainees and apprentices are able to access high quality provision in literacy, numeracy and ICT, which supports their learning across the duration of their training programme. Much of the level 2 provision in literacy is narrow, and on occasions is overly assessment driven, with too few opportunities for the trainees and apprentices to develop a wider range of language skills.

There are well-developed induction arrangements with good levels of pre-entry information and guidance. The recent introduction of a college-developed mobile phone application directs the trainees and apprentices to a wide range of learner support services, including, for example, access to educational psychologists for specialist assessments. At the time of the inspection, 68 (8%) of the trainees and apprentices with recognised disabilities were accessing well-targeted and effective additional learning support. Dedicated educational support officers co-ordinate effectively the additional learning support and evaluate regularly the impact of the interventions provided, which informs well future planning and improvement of the provision.

The quality of the trainees' and apprentices' personal training plans is mostly good; they are detailed and capture fully the trainees' and apprentices' prior qualifications and any barriers to learning. Strategies to enable them to access any additional learning support are clearly identified and tracked thoroughly. Most of the trainees' and apprentices' progress reviews are regular and comprehensive; their progress is measured against well-considered milestones and appropriate improvement targets are set where necessary.

The careers education, information, advice and guidance provision is underdeveloped. While the trainees and apprentices have general access to a well-resourced college-wide careers advice and guidance service, there is limited planning to ensure that it is an integral and well-targeted aspect of the work-based learning provision. Notably, most of the trainees and apprentices are aware of the immediate progression pathways within their professional and technical areas; however more needs to be done to increase their awareness of wider career pathways and opportunities, to inform better their future career planning. In addition, the provision of industry speakers and visits is inconsistent and not planned well enough, particularly for the Training for Success programme.

The quality of the learning, teaching and training ranges from very good to important areas for improvement, and is mostly good; 79% of the sessions observed were good or better.

Across the professional and technical areas inspected, the practical training sessions are well planned and provide a good range of engaging and appropriate learning activities to develop the trainees' and apprentices' occupational skills. The theory sessions to develop their underpinning knowledge, however, deploy a mainly narrow range of teaching approaches. Consequently, a minority of the sessions are characterised by a slow pace of work and overly passive learning. More needs to be done to increase the range of appropriate teaching and learning approaches, particularly to include active learning and more effective use of information and learning technologies (ILT) to enhance and support the learning.

The quality of provision in the essential skills is an important area for improvement; there is limited evidence of planning for holistic skills development. In the least effective sessions, too little account is taken of prior learning and the trainees spend too long on functional tasks which do not enrich their capacity to use their skills, particularly their language skills, for a variety of purposes. In the better sessions, the planning is comprehensive and allows the trainees to develop their competencies beyond the minimum requirement of the external assessment. In these sessions the pace of work is appropriately brisk, and includes, for example: opportunities for the practical application of mathematical concepts; a well-prepared range of learning tasks and activities that help to stretch and challenge the trainees; and the effective use of ILT to engage and motivate them.

The assessment arrangements are broadly effective. Assessment activities are well planned and the trainees and apprentices are provided with appropriate feedback to help them improve the quality of their work. Individual course teams use reliable systems to record and track aspects of the trainees' and apprentices' achievements, however, the overarching recording, tracking and monitoring of their progress holistically across all aspects of their training framework is underdeveloped, and is an important area for improvement.

The care and welfare provided for the trainees and apprentices impacts positively across all key aspects of their learning, teaching and achievements. The college has well-established links with a range of external support agencies, which include, for example, access to counselling services and learning disability support services. It is also proactive in arranging a pertinent range of drug, alcohol and health-related workshops throughout the year. Notably, this includes an on-site annual 'Info Fest' which provides the trainees and apprentices with access to advice, guidance and information from a key range of external agencies, relating to, for example, personal finances, support agencies and leisure activities. In addition to the well-planned support for those trainees and apprentices with recognised additional learning needs, timetabled tutorials have been introduced recently to enable all of the trainees and apprentices to access appropriate learning support interventions. Going forward, the college needs to track and review its preventative education provision more systematically to ensure it is responding fully to the needs of all the trainees and apprentices across the work-based learning provision.

Almost all of the trainees and apprentices surveyed through the online confidential questionnaire, and those interviewed during the focus group meetings, report positively on their learning experiences and know who to contact if a concern or issue arises.

6. Leadership and management

The senior leadership team, most of whom were appointed within the last two years, has developed a clear and shared vision for improvement with active support from the governing body. A well-targeted and appropriately ambitious strategic improvement plan, underpinned by a strong commitment at all levels, provides a robust framework for quality improvement. A recent review and reconfiguration of the college's organisational structure to provide clear roles, responsibilities and more efficient reporting lines has placed the college on a sound footing to achieve its strategic improvement objectives. As a priority, the new management team has initiated a number of well-considered and critical improvement projects. These include the: development of more effective learner marketing and recruitment processes; rebuilding the ICT infrastructure and digital learning environment to support learning and learner services; and development of a robust and reliable management information system. At the time of the inspection, development work was at an early stage and had not yet impacted significantly on the quality of the provision.

Across the college, there is effective management of change that has led to better communication, greater collegiality and transparency of decision making at all levels. The recently appointed heads and assistant heads of department are working hard to implement necessary changes to the curriculum and to maintain a quality provision that meets more effectively the needs of the learners and employers. There is continuing engagement with local employers to promote and deliver apprenticeships tailored to their needs; in electrotechnical services, for example, the college staff worked with determination and to good effect in a short timeframe to enable the transfer of a large number of apprentices from another training supplier who ceased to offer the apprenticeship training.

In particular, the leadership and management arrangements of the essential skills provision are at an early stage of development. The distributed leadership model for the essential skills is in the process of being embedded and needs to be monitored closely to ensure that the roles, responsibilities and functions operate effectively and in the best interests of all of the trainees and apprentices. The management team with overall responsibility for the essential skills provision are committed to developing, supporting, monitoring, tracking and reporting effectively on the quality and outcomes of provision. The essential skills policy, however, is not sufficiently linked to other college policies. As a consequence, progression pathways are underdeveloped from the essential skills to the GCSE provision and the policy is in need of review.

There is supportive continuing professional development provision for staff, including for part-time tutors, with an appropriate focus on building lecturers' capability to use ILT more effectively to support and promote learning. Going forward, however, there is an important need to embed the developing link between self-evaluation, the recent programme of lesson observations and continuing professional development to ensure there is a stronger emphasis on reflective practice to promote greater use of a broader and more appropriate range of learning, teaching and training approaches.

The heads of department and assistant heads of department are beginning to establish collaborative arrangements with their counterparts in other regional colleges to bench mark and share good practice. More needs to be done, however, to support and build further the curriculum managers' capacity to develop their leadership and management skills.

A key strength of the provision is the lecturers' industry expertise and professionalism which they use to good effect to enrich the trainees' and apprentices' learning experiences and build positive relationships with them. Across the college the quality of the specialist training resources and facilities is mainly good; the college is proactive in upgrading its facilities to ensure they reflect current industry standards. For example, the college has recently upgraded the resources for vehicle maintenance and repair, to ensure the trainees and apprentices can carry out their practical training on modern equipment and vehicles.

The ETI has confidence in the college's self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes. Building on a clear ambition and strong commitment at senior management level, the college is currently strengthening, to good effect, its quality assurance and improvement processes. A well-resourced quality improvement team is in place to guide and underpin the processes and the actions being taken to bring about sustained improvement. Clear roles and reporting structures ensure senior leaders and the governing body are aware of key areas for improvement, which are aligned well to the college's strategic improvement priorities, and are appraised regularly of the progress against key performance measures and targets. Appropriately, the college has recently improved senior management's access to, and use of, much more reliable data relating to recruitment, retention, achievement and progression rates. Importantly, further development work is underway to provide more accessible dashboards of key performance indicators in order to give management and course teams access to real-time data and information, from a central source, to improve further the quality of self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes.

The recent appointment of four teaching and learning advisers, including the provision of four digital learning coaches, is an important measure to identify and drive improvement in the quality of the learning, teaching and training. Increasingly, the lecturing staff are more receptive to supportive lesson observations by the teaching and learning advisers, which underpins and promotes a culture of reflective practice and quality improvement planning. Across the professional and technical areas inspected, the quality of the course teams'

self-evaluation reports and quality improvement action plans is, however, an important area for improvement. In particular, there is a need for a more critical evaluation of the quality of the learning, teaching and training, underpinned by effective collation and use of data. The quality improvement plans require sharper, more targeted actions that are regularly monitored and reviewed to ensure key improvements are realised and sustained. In particular, there is a need for a more coherent, well-articulated strategy to improve retention rates on the Training for Success programme.

On the basis of the evidence available at the time of inspection, the arrangements in the college for safeguarding young people and adults at risk are well developed and reflect broadly the guidance issued by the Department. There is a strong team approach and commitment at all levels to safeguarding trainees and apprentices both in directed training and on work-experience placements. Safeguarding training is a high priority in the college, as indicated by the college's investment in an online safeguarding training package to raise the awareness of safeguarding among all staff across the college.

An accredited level one social media qualification has also been introduced, and is currently being piloted, to promote safer internet usage among the trainees and apprentices. There are clear policies and procedures for reporting concerns and a responsive approach by the safeguarding team. However, the college needs to:

- communicate more effectively the safeguarding information to all stakeholders; and

- develop a positive behaviour policy.

7.   Overall effectiveness

The Northern Regional College demonstrates the capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the interest of all the trainees and apprentices. There are areas for improvement that the organisation has demonstrated the capacity to address. The ETI will monitor how the college sustains improvement.

Programme registrations

Table 1 - Current registrations by programme

Programme	Numbers of registrations	% of total registrations
ApprenticeshipsNI	582	72%
Training for Success (2013) Skills for Your Life	0	0%
Training for Success (2013) Skills for Work (strand 1)	7	1%
Training for Success (2013) Skills for Work (strand 2)	219	27%

Table 2 - Current registrations by professional and technical area

Professional and technical area	Number of trainees	% of total registrations
Brickwork	25	11%
Engineering	57	25%
Plumbing	30	13%
Vehicle maintenance and repair	36	16%
Wood occupations	78	35%
Professional and technical area	**Number of apprentices**	**% of total registrations**
Brickwork	15	3%
Electrotechnical services (electrical installation)	163	28%
Engineering	155	27%
Plumbing	86	15%
Vehicle maintenance and repair	102	17%
Wood occupations	61	10%

Table 3 - Qualifications of current trainees/apprentices on entry to their programme

Programme	Training for Success (%)	ApprenticeshipsNI (%)
(%) of learners with 4 or more GCSEs or equivalent at Grades A*-C including English and mathematics	31%	59%
(%) of learners with 4 or more GCSEs or equivalent at Grades A*-C	41%	60%
(%) of learners with GCSE English or equivalent at Grades A*-C	41%	66%
(%) of learners with GCSE mathematics or equivalent at Grades A*-C	44%	72%
(%) of learners with 4 or more GCSEs or equivalent at Grades A*-G	89%	88%
(%) of learners with no prior level 1 or level 2 qualifications	-	-

B.   Inspection methodology and evidence base

The ETI's Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework is available on the ETI website www.etini.gov.uk.

Seven ETI inspectors and three associate assessors observed 230 apprentices and trainees in 24 directed training sessions; visited 17 trainees and apprentices in their workplace; and interviewed 97 in focus group meetings. Discussions where held with the principal and chief executive; vice-principal for business development and transformation; chief operations officer; head of cooperate challenge; head of process and systems transformation; head of digital learning, head of marketing and communications; head of human resources and continuing professional development; work-based learning manager; the heads and assistant heads of department for care and access, student experience, and engineering and built environment; course coordinators, training support officers, teaching and learning assistants, lecturers, employers and workplace supervisors. Samples of the trainees' and apprentices' work and personal training plans, and lecturers' schemes of work and lesson plans were examined; and the college's self-evaluation report and other relevant documentation were scrutinised.

As part of the evaluation of Northern Regional College's arrangements for care, guidance and support and for safeguarding young people, the trainees and apprentices completed an online questionnaire prior to the inspection. One hundred and ninety four (24%) responses were received, including 18 with written comments. The questionnaire returns show that nearly all of the trainees and apprentices who responded reported a positive experience, and felt safe and well supported in the college.

C.   Reporting terms used by the Education and Training Inspectorate

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%

Performance levels

The ETI use the following performance levels when reporting on Outcomes for learners, Quality of Provision and on Leadership and Management.

Outstanding
Very good
Good
Important area(s) for improvement
Requires significant improvement
Requires urgent improvement

Overall effectiveness

The ETI use one of the following inspection outcomes when evaluating the overall effectiveness of the organisation:

The organisation has a high level of capacity for sustained improvement in the interest of all the participants. The ETI will monitor how the organisation sustains improvement.
The organisation demonstrates the capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the interest of all the participants. The ETI will monitor how the organisation sustains improvement.
The organisation needs to address (an) important area(s) for improvement in the interest of all the participants. The ETI will monitor and report on the organisation's progress in addressing the area(s) for improvement. There will be a formal follow-up inspection.
The organisation needs to address urgently the significant areas for improvement identified in the interest of all the participants. The ETI will monitor and report on the organisation's progress in addressing the areas for improvement. There will be a formal follow-up inspection.

Key Performance Indictors and Definitions	
Retention	The percentage of enrolments measured over the full duration of their programme.
Achievement	The percentage of participants who completed their targeted individual outcomes.
Progression	The percentage of successful completers who achieved positive progression.