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January 2016

Further Education Means Success:
The Northern Ireland Strategy for Further Education

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Foreword

I am pleased to launch this new strategy for further education for Northern Ireland.

Our further education sector has a proud tradition, going back over a hundred years, of providing a wide range of learning opportunities for an equally wide variety of learners, and of supporting employers and the economy of Northern Ireland. At no time in colleges' history is their role more important.

The further education system sits at the centre of the professional and technical education system. Alongside mainstream further education provision, colleges will continue to be key deliverers of higher education provision, and of the new approaches to apprenticeships at levels 3 - 8 and youth training at level 2 which I announced recently.

Under the existing strategy for further education in Northern Ireland, 'Further Education Means Business', colleges have undergone a remarkable transformation in terms of the support they provide to employers, and the quality and economic relevance of the provision they deliver to individual learners. 'Further Education Means Business' delivered many key achievements and the sector has much of

which to be proud. The most visible transformation has been the creation of the six regional colleges, from the previous 16 colleges. To accompany college restructuring, the college estate has been improved beyond recognition over the past 10 years, with almost £250 million having been invested to ensure that accommodation provides students with access to a modern, state of the art, learning environment, and there are plans for further significant investment.

The Northern Ireland Executive's Economic Strategy aims to rebuild and rebalance the economy by stimulating innovation, research and development and creativity, by improving workforce skills and employability, by improving our ability to compete with the global economy and by

encouraging business growth. The Northern Ireland Executive acknowledges the critical importance of skills to developing a vibrant knowledge based economy.

Our Skills Strategy, ‘Success through Skills – Transforming Futures’, has as one of its key aims the aspiration to enable people to access and progress up the skills ladder, in order to raise the skills level of the whole workforce, raise productivity and secure Northern Ireland’s future in a global marketplace.

Consequently, my top priority as Minister for Employment and Learning has been to transform the professional and technical education and training system, in order to provide the most effective support to the growth of our economy, and to provide learning pathways that enable the people of Northern Ireland to reach their full potential.

The colleges now work more closely with employers to understand their needs, and provide a curriculum and qualifications focused on supporting economic development. Social inclusion has been strengthened through widening participation measures and the provision of programmes to increase levels of literacy and numeracy. Quality has also improved in many aspects of college provision.

It will be important for further education to have an identity which is distinct and sets it apart from the other education sectors, promoting professional and technical learning pathways and skills development

which the sector is uniquely placed to provide. This can be achieved through further education’s passion for learning and ambition for its learners.

In the increasingly fast moving economy of the future, fewer people will have ‘jobs for life’, with many moving between jobs throughout the course of their careers. This emphasises the importance of creating a culture of lifelong learning. Colleges have around 140,000 enrolments each year on provision leading to qualifications on the regulated qualifications frameworks.

The further education sector goes beyond providing a skilled workforce. It also leaves a significant footprint on our economy as an industry in its own right in terms of job creation and wealth generation. With colleges and campuses located across the region, they are embedded in local communities and their role as employers and generators of economic activity is particularly important at a local level. Research indicates that the sector (the colleges together with non-Northern Ireland students) contributes additional benefits to the economy, generating over £524 million of output in Northern Ireland, and providing 7,139 full time equivalent jobs.

Therefore, colleges are extremely well placed to deliver the challenging and ambitious policy commitments that are set out in this strategy. Particularly challenging is the dual role that colleges play in helping to create a vibrant economy, while supporting active inclusion by welcoming into education those with low or no

qualifications, or who have barriers to learning, and providing them with the skills and qualifications they need to find employment.

It is against this wider background that further education will be recognised as an equal and valued pillar of the education system in Northern Ireland, alongside higher education and the statutory school system.

I am grateful to those who took time to respond to the consultation. Your considered feedback has been extremely helpful in the development of this final strategy which, alongside the challenges, provides the further education sector with huge opportunities to become the world class sector that I know it can be.

Colleges have undergone a remarkable transformation in terms of the support they provide to employers, and the quality and economic relevance of the provision they deliver to individual learners.



The Northern Ireland Executive's Economic Strategy aims to rebuild and rebalance the economy by stimulating innovation, research and development and creativity.

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Executive Summary

This strategy is the result of a review of the further education sector in Northern Ireland, instigated by the Minister for Employment and Learning. The review has been wide ranging in its approach and has considered regional, national and international policies and best practice. A public consultation to seek views on a number of policy commitments to inform the development of the new strategy for further education in Northern Ireland was published in July 2015 and closed on 2 October 2015. <https://www.delni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/del/new-further-education-strategy-consultation.pdf>

The strategy takes account of the responses received to the consultation. It outlines the future direction for further education in Northern Ireland and sets out the new policy commitments to ensure its delivery.

The Department and the further education sector will develop and publish an implementation plan within three months of the publication of this strategy.

Vision

The vision is that further education colleges will be recognised locally, nationally and internationally for high quality and economically relevant education and training provision. Colleges will be focused on achieving excellence in delivering the skills needed for the economy of today and tomorrow, and will be ambitious for their learners and for the

contribution they make to improving the competitiveness of the economy of Northern Ireland. Colleges also have an important responsibility to help fight poverty and support social inclusion by providing those with low or no qualifications, or who have barriers to learning, with the skills and qualifications they need to find employment.

Consequently, the further education system in Northern Ireland has a dual role:

- ▶ taking a pivotal role in generating a strong and vibrant economy through the development of professional and technical skills, increasingly at higher levels, and by helping employers to innovate; and
- ▶ supporting social inclusion by providing those with low or no qualifications, or who have other barriers to learning, with the skills and qualifications needed to find employment and to become economically active.

This dual role is reflected in the themes and policy commitments contained within this strategy.

To achieve this vision and associated dual role, the key objectives that set the future direction for further education are as follows:

- ▶ ensuring high quality provision for learner education and training;
- ▶ developing the talents of those already in work and those seeking to enter employment in order to provide a

pipeline of suitably skilled and qualified individuals at all levels to meet employers' needs, including indigenous companies and inward investment projects;

- ▶ supporting employers to become more innovative and competitive, and to source new markets; and
- ▶ encouraging and supporting the economic participation of those who have barriers to learning and who are furthest from the labour market, to the benefit of individuals, the economy and wider society.

Increasingly, colleges will work collaboratively together, and in partnership with other organisations in the public, private, and voluntary and community sectors, to deliver their services to learners, employers and communities to maximum effect.

Colleges, with key partners, will also be major deliverers of the new apprenticeships and youth training systems, and will have a prominent role in the Strategic Advisory Forum and the Sectoral Partnerships that have been established to identify skills demand and to ensure that professional and technical qualifications meet the needs of employers and the economy.

This strategy document is structured around nine themes which contain a total of 21 policy commitments, and these are detailed below.

THEME 1: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Policy Commitment 1 – Priority Skills

Colleges will have a crucial role working with employers and other key stakeholders to ensure that the professional and technical qualifications and curriculum they provide support the rebalancing and rebuilding of the Northern Ireland economy.

Policy Commitment 2 – Levels of College Provision

Further education colleges will have a particular focus on further developing provision at level 3 (‘A’ level equivalent) and above in areas that will support the rebalancing and rebuilding of the Northern Ireland economy. Progression for learners who wish to study at higher levels will be encouraged and facilitated through the qualifications system, and through innovative delivery and clear pathways.

Policy Commitment 3 – Up-skilling the Existing Workforce

Colleges will support indigenous companies and new companies which are being established in Northern Ireland, to ensure that employees have the required knowledge, skills and qualifications. In doing this, colleges will operate in flexible ways in terms of where, when, and over what period of time up-skilling activities are provided, so that the needs of employers can be met effectively and in a manner which suits business needs.

Policy Commitment 4 – Support to Employers

Colleges will be at the forefront of providing support to employers to enable them to innovate, grow, operate more effectively and efficiently, develop new products and to identify new markets for their products.

Policy Commitment 5 – College Specialism and Regional Capacity

Centres of specialism and expertise will be developed in each college to enable the further education sector as a whole to deliver high quality professional and technical provision to employers. Through a collaborative approach, individual colleges will have identified sectors where they will be recognised for their expertise and specialism. As well as identifying specialisms, all colleges will develop networks of experts who will share the latest developments in curriculum and skills training across Northern Ireland.

THEME 2: SOCIAL INCLUSION

Policy Commitment 6 – Increasing Economic Participation through Engagement

Colleges' distinctive contribution to social inclusion will be to provide learners with the knowledge, skills and qualifications required to find, or progress within, employment in order to avail of the benefits of economic participation. Working in partnership with others, colleges will support diversity and social inclusion through widening access to provision for those with low or no skills or other barriers to learning. They will work with other organisations in the voluntary, community, public and private sectors to strengthen pathways for learners that can open up their ambition and develop their talents.

Policy Commitment 7 – Improving Literacy, Numeracy and Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

Colleges will raise the level of literacy, numeracy and ICT competence in Northern Ireland by adopting the new qualifications that are being developed through the refreshed Essential Skills strategy and the reviews of GCSEs in English and mathematics in Northern Ireland.

THEME 3: CURRICULUM DELIVERY

Policy Commitment 8 – Using Technology to Enhance Learning

Colleges will adopt international best practice in the use of technology enhanced learning to support and improve their teaching and learning, and will adopt flexible approaches to learning to meet the needs of learners and employers.

Policy Commitment 9 – Developing Employability and Enterprise Skills

A distinctive element of provision delivered by colleges will be the development of employability skills, through high quality and relevant work placements and the use of virtual reality technology to simulate work placements in innovative and effective ways. Through their teaching strategies and approaches, colleges will also seek to develop enterprising learners, who are innovative and creative, and are able to adapt to change.

THEME 4: EXCELLENCE

Policy Commitment 10 – Embedding High Quality Teaching

Through a new teacher education framework, there will be a renewed focus on high quality initial teacher education and continual professional development for all lecturing staff, with minimum standards for pedagogy and subject qualifications put in place. The Department will support the development of research in pedagogy to inform best practice in professional and technical education and training to establish Northern Ireland as an internationally renowned centre for excellence in teacher education in professional and technical subjects.

Policy Commitment 11 – Ensuring Industrial Knowledge

College staff will also have the opportunity to undertake relevant and good quality industrial placements to ensure that they understand the needs of employers and workforce development.

Policy Commitment 12 – Reviewing Inspection and Quality Improvement

The quality improvement process, including the inspection regime, will be reviewed to ensure that it is appropriate for all aspects of delivery in colleges.

Policy Commitment 13 – Improving Performance

Standardised approaches to receiving and analysing feedback from learners and from employers will be developed and introduced. Additional performance measures will be adopted to enable colleges and the Department to monitor colleges' performance more effectively as part of quality management, including learner progression and learners' destinations after leaving further education. Colleges will publish information on learner retention, achievement, progression and destinations on their web sites in such a way as to inform learners' choice of courses on which to enrol.

THEME 5: COLLEGE PARTNERSHIPS

Policy Commitment 14 – Sectoral Efficiency through Collaborative Working

In order to ensure that their services are delivered with maximum efficiency, colleges will operate more collectively in the delivery of their corporate services through a more rigorous and comprehensive approach to collaborative (shared services) working. Where appropriate, the colleges will take advantage of their NDPB status by adopting collaborative working opportunities that are available across the public sector.

Policy Commitment 15 – Sectoral Effectiveness by Sharing Best Practice

Colleges will share best practice, and learn from each other, in the innovative and imaginative delivery of services to learners and employers. In particular, colleges will work together to ensure that technology can be developed and used in the most cost efficient and effective way to support learning.

Policy Commitment 16 – Delivery Mechanism to Drive Efficiency and Effectiveness

A mechanism will be established to stimulate, manage and oversee collaboration and sharing of best practice between colleges to ensure efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of services, and to maximise the level of resource that is available to fund front line services.

Policy Commitment 17 – Working in Partnership with Others

Colleges will strengthen their partnership working with a range of other organisations in the public, private and voluntary and community sectors in order to improve the services delivered to employers and individuals.

THEME 6: GOVERNANCE

Policy Commitment 18 – Further Education Governance and Business Model

Colleges and the Department will work together to maximise the benefits to colleges' and their customers of colleges' NDPB status, while also addressing any challenges posed.

Colleges will be focused on achieving excellence in delivering the skills needed for the economy of today and tomorrow.

THEME 7: FUNDING MODEL AND COLLEGE SUSTAINABILITY

Policy Commitment 19 – Reviewing the Further Education Funding Model

In partnership with colleges, the funding model will be reviewed to ensure that it supports and incentivises colleges to deliver this strategy, that it supports a sustainable further education sector and that it aligns with the funding models that will be developed for other departmental programmes that further education colleges will deliver, in particular apprenticeships and youth training.

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THEME 8: INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION

Policy Commitment 20 – Operating Internationally

Colleges will enhance the learner experience, and the professional development and industrial knowledge of their staff, through placements and exchanges with similar institutions in other countries. They will also build on the excellent partnerships that have already been created across the world to share best practice with, and to learn from, others. In addition, colleges will, with the Department for Employment and Learning, explore commercial opportunities to deliver more services in the international market.

THEME 9: PROMOTING THE FURTHER EDUCATION SECTOR

Policy Commitment 21 – Promoting Further Education Provision

Colleges Northern Ireland, individual colleges and the Department will work together to demonstrate the distinctive role that the further education sector has as part of the wider education system, and the role that the sector plays in strengthening the Northern Ireland economy. More generally, the benefits and status of professional and technical qualifications will also be promoted.

The next steps to be taken to implement these policy commitments are set out in the Way Forward section.

Colleges also have an important responsibility to help fight poverty and support social inclusion by providing those with low or no qualifications, or who have barriers to learning, with the skills and qualifications they need to find employment.

1

Introduction

Building on the ground breaking achievements of the further education sector over the past decade, through the implementation of 'Further Education Means Business', this new strategy articulates the policy for the future of further education in Northern Ireland. It is the result of a review of the further education sector in Northern Ireland, instigated by the Minister for Employment and Learning. The review has been wide ranging in its approach and has considered regional, national and international policies and best practice.

The Northern Ireland economy has changed considerably in recent years with current and future jobs requiring increasingly high levels of skills and a breadth of knowledge across many occupational areas. Over the next ten years the pace of change will accelerate, driven by globalisation, advances in technology, new business models and rapidly changing consumer needs. The planned introduction of a reduced rate of corporation tax also has the potential to invigorate our economy.

These developments will lead to substantial changes to the world of work.

The further education sector has a clear and unrivalled role to respond to the changes in work through the development of innovative, flexible and economically beneficial programmes that will both meet the requirements for new ways of learning and adaptable skills, and lead the development of a 'learning to learn' culture in Northern Ireland.

This new further education strategy complements the pioneering work that the Department for Employment and Learning is implementing to create a new system of apprenticeships¹ at level 3 and above, and youth training² at level 2 in Northern Ireland. Colleges, with key partners, will be major deliverers of this innovative system of professional and technical education and training. Colleges will continue to be the sole deliverers of higher education at levels 4 and 5, including apprenticeships at these levels.

The new apprenticeship and youth training systems will be instrumental in determining the nature and content of a significant proportion of the provision to be delivered by colleges in the future.

Further education college staff will have a critical role to play in working with employers and other key stakeholders to develop qualifications and programmes of learning. In particular, they will be representatives on the Strategic Advisory Forum and the Sectoral Partnerships, which are being set up as part of the new apprenticeship and youth training systems, and they will have a prominent role to design and develop high quality and economically relevant qualifications and curriculum. The aim is that further education colleges deliver qualifications that are valued by employers, learners, and other educational institutions.

This ambition will be informed by the skills barometer, which has also been established as part of the new

apprenticeship system. The skills barometer will continue to forecast both supply and demand for skills, and will identify areas where gaps are likely to occur.

Further education opens up pathways to skills needed by the economy. There will also be clear progression routes for learners to higher levels of provision.

One of the key features and strengths of the further education sector over the years is its accessibility to a wide variety of learners, for example, in terms of the level and type of learning required (from those with no, or very few qualifications to those who are following higher education provision), and in terms of age. Further education students come from a variety of backgrounds and have a range of learning, work, and life experiences. This diversity strengthens and enhances the learning experience.

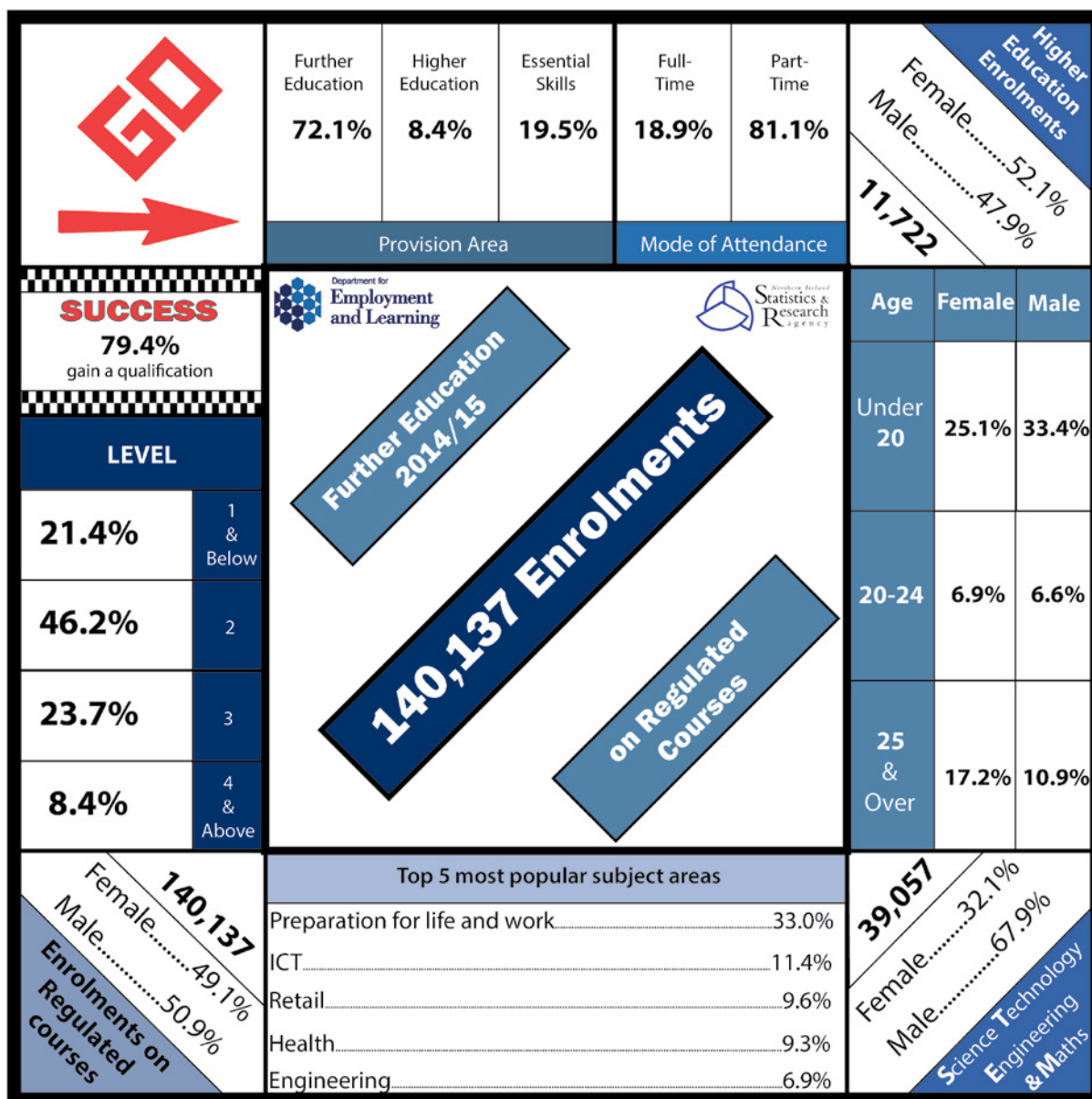
Colleges will continue to deliver provision of a broad nature to meet the needs of a wide variety of learners and will be open and available to all.

Figure 1 illustrates the number and breadth of enrolments within the further education sector in the 2014/15 year.

1 Securing our Success: The Northern Ireland strategy on Apprenticeships.
<https://www.delni.gov.uk/publications/securing-our-success-northern-ireland-strategy-apprenticeships>

2 Generating our Success: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Youth Training
<https://www.delni.gov.uk/publications/generating-our-success-northern-ireland-strategy-youth-training>

Figure 1: Key Statistics and College Enrolments 2014/15
(All enrolments at all levels)³



³ Further Education Activity in FE Colleges in Northern Ireland 2014/15 <https://www.delni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/del/Further%20Education%20Activity%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%20201415%20summary%20infographic.pdf>

The further education sector has also played a considerable role for over 30 years in providing education and training for people from all sections of the community in a society divided by social and political conflict. By enabling students from different traditions and cultures to come together to work and learn with others from different backgrounds, further education has contributed to the development of a stable and more harmonious society, and will continue to do so. Enrolment statistics demonstrate clearly that the further education sector as a whole is integrated, with learners from all backgrounds studying together. Colleges are also reflective of the geographical areas they serve, with their intakes reflecting the breakdown of the communities in their areas.

The outcome of the consultation process indicated broad support for the policy commitments in the consultation document. There were 45 responses to the 12 week consultation process which closed on 2 October 2015. The full summary of the consultation responses is available at:

<https://www.delni.gov.uk/consultations/new-further-education-strategy-northern-ireland>

It is the Department's ambition for the further education sector that colleges will be the engine room of our economy, sharing best practice with each other and with others around the world, using

technology to enthuse learners, increasing flexibility in delivery, and striving for excellence in all that they do. But above all else, colleges will offer economically relevant provision to provide a pipeline of suitably qualified individuals at all levels to meet employer needs, while supporting employers to be more innovative and competitive. Colleges, as anchor institutions in local and regional economies, will also encourage and support economic participation of those furthest from the labour market, and those who have barriers to learning.

This strategy, and the 21 policy commitments within it, will be taken forward through the following indicative list of 8 projects:

- Project 1 Curriculum Content and Delivery;**
- Project 2 Economic Development;**
- Project 3 Social Inclusion;**
- Project 4 Excellence – Quality and Performance;**
- Project 5 College Partnerships;**
- Project 6 Governance/Leadership;**
- Project 7 Funding Model and College Sustainability; and**
- Project 8 Promoting the Further Education Sector**

Details of these projects are set out in Annex A.

2

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Strategic, Economic and Social Context for Further Education

The Role of Further Education in a Modern Education and Skills Landscape

Some of the most successful economies in the world, judged in terms of both productivity and employment, have well developed professional and technical education and training systems. The further education sector is a key economic driver for Northern Ireland and plays a central role in the implementation of key elements of the Programme for Government. Alongside economic growth, there is a need to support social inclusion by ensuring that those who have barriers to learning or who are unemployed or economically inactive are encouraged to participate in education and training that will help them to secure employment and to improve their life chances.

The economic downturn has had a detrimental social impact in Northern Ireland in areas such as health, crime, social mobility, and youth unemployment. Furthermore, rates of economic inactivity have been stubbornly higher than in the rest of the United Kingdom over a prolonged period of time. Further education colleges have a strong track

record of engaging with those who are furthest from the labour market.

Colleges are engines of economic and societal transformation. They make a significant and high quality contribution to addressing the current and future skills needs and have an increasingly important role in attracting inward investment

companies. Colleges develop skilled individuals, to the benefit and satisfaction of their students and employers, enabled by well qualified lecturers and physical resources.

The new strategies for apprenticeships and youth training in Northern Ireland have set out the benefits of these types of programmes to participants, to employers, to providers and to the economy and society in general. While further education colleges will be key deliverers of these strategically important programmes, colleges have a broader remit which adds to the benefits that are achieved by the wider education and training system.

In particular, colleges deliver provision, in the main, from entry level to level 6. The colleges are major providers of intermediate higher education in Northern Ireland, delivering around 18% of all provision at level 4 and above. Colleges also provide learning and training to a very wide age range: for example, 14 to 18 year olds as part of the delivery of the Department of Education's Entitlement Framework for school pupils, provision for 16 to 18 year olds who have left the statutory school system, and provision for adult learners of all ages. In addition, colleges work collaboratively with employers to provide them with the skills and capacity they need to engage in innovation, and to help them to bring new products to market through support with ideas generation and product development.

Policy Context

Growing a sustainable economy has been the top priority of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly in successive Programmes for Government, and will undoubtedly be a key imperative in future Programmes for Government.

The establishment of the forthcoming Department for the Economy, as part of the reform of the Departmental structure during 2016, will bring into a single department responsibility for all of the major levers for the economy, including inward investment, business innovation and growth, and professional and technical education and skills. This will facilitate an even stronger and more co-ordinated focus to strengthening our economy. It will also help us to realise the many economic opportunities that could be delivered by the planned reduction in corporation tax to 12.5% from April 2018.

The further education sector is a key part of the wider education and training system, and supports the delivery of a wide range of the Department for Employment and Learning's strategies, including those listed below:

- ▶ **Securing our Success: The Northern Ireland Strategy on Apprenticeships**
<https://www.delni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/del/Securing%20our%20Success%20The%20NI%20Strategy%20on%20Apprenticeships.pdf>;

▶ **Generating our Success: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Youth Training**

<https://www.delni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/del/youth-training-strategy.pdf>;

▶ **Graduating to Success: A Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland**

<https://www.delni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/del/Graduating%20to%20Success-Higher%20Education%20Strategy.pdf>;

▶ **Access to Success: An Integrated Regional Strategy for Widening Participation in Higher Education**

https://www.delni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/del/Access%20to%20Success-An%20integrated%20regional%20strategy%20for%20widening%20participation%20in%20HE_0.pdf;

▶ **Success through STEM**

<https://www.delni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/del/STEM%20Strategy-Success%20through%20STEM.pdf>;

▶ **Preparing for Success 2015-2020: Careers Strategy**

(to be agreed);

▶ **Enabling Success: A Strategy to Address Economic Inactivity**

<https://www.delni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/del/enabling-success-economic-inactivity-strategy.pdf>;

▶ **Refresh of Essential Skills for Living Strategy** and, in conjunction with the

Department of Education in Northern Ireland, **The Review of GCSEs in English and Mathematics** (currently under development);

▶ **Pathways to Success**

<https://www.delni.gov.uk/publications/pathways-success-strategy>; and

▶ **Employment for People with Disabilities**

<https://www.delni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/del/employment-strategy-for-people-with-disabilities.pdf>

The further education sector also supports the work of other government departments and other parts of the public sector in areas of educational, economic and social policy.

3

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Vision for Further Education in Northern Ireland

Vision

The vision is that further education colleges will be recognised locally, nationally and internationally for high quality and economically relevant education and training provision. Colleges will be focussed on achieving excellence in delivering the skills needed for the economy of today and tomorrow, and will be ambitious for their learners and for the contribution they make to improving the competitiveness of the economy of Northern Ireland. Colleges also have an important responsibility to help fight poverty and support social inclusion by providing those with low or no qualifications, or who have other barriers to learning, with the skills and qualifications they need to find employment.

The further education system has a dual role:

- ▶ taking a pivotal role in developing a strong and vibrant economy through the development of professional and technical skills, increasingly at higher levels, and by helping employers to innovate; and
- ▶ supporting social inclusion by providing those who have low or no qualifications, or who have other barriers to learning, with the skills and qualifications needed

to find employment and to become economically active.

To achieve this vision and associated dual role, the key objectives that set the future direction for further education are:

- ▶ ensuring high quality provision for learner education and training;
- ▶ developing the talents of those already in work and those seeking to enter employment in order to provide a pipeline of suitably skilled and qualified

individuals at all levels to meet employers' needs, including indigenous companies and inward investment projects;

- ▶ supporting employers to become more innovative and competitive, and to source new markets; and
- ▶ encouraging and supporting the economic participation of those who have barriers to learning and who are furthest from the labour market, to the benefit of individuals, the economy and wider society.

The importance of colleges' balancing this dual role in the design and delivery of their curriculum was emphasised in the responses to the consultation, and is reflected in the themes and policy commitments in this strategy. It is recognised that further education opens doors to the hardest to reach communities and its ability to transform lives of those furthest from the labour market is central to the core purpose of social inclusion.

Themes

The themes which aim to deliver the vision and the key objectives outlined above are:

- ▶ **economic development;**
- ▶ **social inclusion;**
- ▶ **curriculum delivery;**
- ▶ **excellence;**
- ▶ **college partnerships;**
- ▶ **governance;**
- ▶ **funding model and college sustainability;**
- ▶ **international dimension;** and
- ▶ **promoting the further education sector.**

These themes, and associated policy commitments, are discussed in more detail in the sections that follow.

4

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THEME 1: Economic Development

This theme outlines the first part of the dual role referred to in the Executive Summary, namely the key role colleges will play in identifying and meeting the skills and qualification needs of employers via a more economically focused curriculum, providing direct support to employers by upskilling employees and supporting employers to become more competitive and innovative.

Introduction

The further education sector is a key economic driver for Northern Ireland and plays a central role in the implementation of the Programme for Government and in particular delivering on the Northern Ireland Economic Strategy, the Skills Strategy, the Strategy for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), and the Innovation Strategy. In the immediate future, the sector, along with key partners, will have a major role in the delivery of the new apprenticeships and youth training systems.

There will be an enhanced role for further education colleges to work more strategically with employers and other key stakeholders to design and develop qualifications and curriculum that meet the current and future needs of employers and the economy. There will be a focus on provision to support strategically important areas of the economy, many of which are export driven, especially at level 3 and above. However, while there was broad support in the responses to the consultation that provision delivered by colleges should focus on the needs of the priority sectors in the economy, and on

higher level skills, there was also a strong recognition of the need for colleges to offer provision at lower levels to enable learner progression, to supply a pipeline to higher level skills, and to actively support social inclusion. There was also recognition that it will be important to ensure that the needs of all sectors of the economy are identified and supported, so that the needs of all employers and the diverse needs and career aspirations of individuals are met.

The need for colleges to balance their curriculum in these ways was emphasised strongly by respondents to the consultation on this strategy. In addition, the skills barometer has adopted the principle that “every job matters” to reflect the contribution that jobs make to the economy and to value all employment opportunities.

The policy commitments in this theme will further strengthen colleges’ role in this important strategic area.

Policy Commitment 1 – Priority Skills

Colleges will have a crucial role working with employers and other key stakeholders to ensure that the professional and technical qualifications and curriculum they provide support the rebalancing and rebuilding of the Northern Ireland economy.

This will be delivered through Project 1: Curriculum Content and Delivery

Identifying Future Skills and Qualifications Needs of Employers

The growing sectors of the Northern Ireland economy will require an increasing number of skilled workers with qualifications in STEM subjects, and other priority areas that are essential to the rebalancing and rebuilding of the economy. A local workforce equipped with these skills is hugely important in supporting and developing our indigenous companies, in attracting foreign direct investment to Northern Ireland and in driving future competitiveness and economic growth. As indicated above, other sectors of the economy, for example the service sectors, while not export driven, have an important role to play in providing jobs and rebalancing the economy. The skills barometer will help to ensure that the current and future skills needs of the economy are identified.

The identification of skills requirements cannot be left to government alone. Employers need to be at the heart of identifying the skills they need both now and in the future. Many of the recommendations in the OECD’s ‘Skills beyond Schools’⁴ review of postsecondary vocational education and training indicate that professional and technical qualifications stand the best chance of being relevant to employers and being valuable to students, when they are developed, updated and delivered with the full engagement of all relevant labour market stakeholders.

4 OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training: Skills Beyond School Synthesis Report <http://www.oecd.org/edu/skillsbeyond-school/Skills-Beyond-School-Synthesis-Report.pdf>

In addition to qualifications development, there is compelling evidence to show that curriculum design should be a collaborative process so that colleges, training providers and employers are involved directly in shaping programmes that reflect up to date needs of occupations and workplaces, and which are based on a broader, more aspirational concept of competence.⁵ This in turn provides a clear line of sight to work on all professional and technical programmes for learners, employers and providers.⁶ Such engagement with employers sends a signal to the learner (and his/her parents who often have an important role in the learner's choice of pathways) that the programme has value in the labour market.

The Strategic Advisory Forum and the Sectoral Partnerships which have been established as part of the new apprenticeship system will be instrumental in identifying skills demand and in ensuring that professional and technical qualifications meet the needs of employers and the economy. Further education colleges are represented on the Strategic Advisory Forum and have a particularly prominent role in working with employers and other stakeholders in the Sectoral Partnerships to design and develop high quality and economically relevant qualifications and curriculum for the new apprenticeships and youth training systems. These qualifications will not only form the basis for apprenticeships by

occupation, but will also be the basis for professional and technical qualifications that are delivered through mainstream further education provision. However, consideration will be given to the extent to which qualifications and curriculum developed for these systems are also applicable to the wider cohorts of learners who avail of college provision.

In these ways, the further education curriculum will be shaped to support the needs of learners and employers by matching professional education and training provision to the skills needed for an innovation led economy. Colleges will be at the centre of skills delivery for professional and technical occupations, matching people and skills with economic growth. The sector also needs to be increasingly agile and responsive to the changing needs of employers to meet short-term skills pressures, while at the same time remaining focused on meeting long term challenges and economic goals.

The Department will rationalise and simplify the professional and technical qualification landscape to make it more easily understood by users of qualifications including employers, learners and education and training providers. The approach to qualifications and curriculum design and development that is outlined above will facilitate this rationalisation. It will also have to ensure that, through the regulatory system, qualifications that are developed in this way will be recognised outside Northern Ireland.

5 Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning: It's About Work – Excellent Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning 2013, Page 14. <http://repository.excellencegateway.org.uk/fedora/objects/eg:5937/datastreams/DOC/content>

6 Ibid Page 15.

Policy Commitment 2 – Levels of College Provision

Further education colleges will have a particular focus on further developing provision at level 3 ('A' level equivalent) and above in areas that will support the rebalancing and rebuilding of the Northern Ireland economy. Progression for learners who wish to study at higher levels will be encouraged and facilitated through the qualifications system, and through innovative delivery and clear pathways.

This will be delivered through Project 1: Curriculum Content and Delivery

Research shows that labour productivity in Northern Ireland remains well below the UK average. Higher skills levels are associated with higher productivity, higher wage levels, higher employment rates and increased economic growth. Consequently, there is an increasing need for higher level skills and a reducing demand for lower level skills. The proportion of those in employment with qualifications at level 4 to level 8 will need to rise from 33% in 2008 to 52% in 2020,⁷ while the proportion of those in employment with low qualifications is forecast to fall to 10% by 2020. Evidence regarding the importance of training and educating people to level 3 and above has also been demonstrated in 'Securing our Success – the Northern Ireland Strategy for Apprenticeships'. In particular, the recent skills barometer report, 'Skills in Demand', estimates that the most acute skills gap is likely to emerge in the mid-tier skills at

level 3 ('A' Level equivalent) and levels 4 and 5 (Foundation Degree/HNC/HND equivalent).

Further education colleges will meet the need for higher level skills through mainstream further education provision at level 3, and by continuing to be the sole providers of intermediate level (levels 4 and 5) higher education provision in Northern Ireland. In addition, colleges, together with key partners, will be key deliverers of the new apprenticeships system at level 3 and above.

As well as being extremely valuable in its own right, level 3 provision in further education also offers progression to higher education either in a college or at university. In 2014/15 there were 11,722 regulated higher education enrolments in further education colleges. The new apprenticeships system will also make a significant contribution, and higher level apprenticeships, which colleges are already piloting, will complement more traditional forms of higher education provision.

However, while the focus on provision at level 3 and above is important, it is recognised that skills needs and job opportunities below level 3 remain. In order to fully support social inclusion and provide opportunities for those who have become disengaged from education and the labour market, it is vital that we continue to have high quality provision at level 2 and below with clear pathway/ progression routes to level 3 and above, or into employment. The rationalised

⁷ Taken from The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland "Success through Skills – Transforming Futures", 2011 <https://www.delni.gov.uk/publications/success-through-skills-transforming-futures>

professional and technical qualification landscape referred to above will facilitate learner progression.

Therefore, colleges will also have an important role in offering provision at level 2 and below, in particular to ensure that clearly structured and articulated pathways exist from lower to higher levels of learning. This theme is developed further in section 5, under social inclusion.

Policy Commitment 3 – Up-skilling the Existing Workforce

Colleges will support indigenous companies and new companies which are being established in Northern Ireland, to ensure that employees have the required knowledge, skills and qualifications. In doing this, colleges will operate in flexible ways in terms of where, when, and over what period of time up-skilling activities are provided, so that the needs of employers can be met effectively and in a manner which suits business needs.

This will be delivered through Project 2: Economic Development

Upskilling the Workforce

With the substantial capital investment in further education in recent years, colleges are well placed to support the development of skills in the private sector. They will provide tailored solutions to the skills needs of employers based on regulated qualifications and industry standard training. Projects will be

developed to meet the specific needs of individual employers or, where numbers are small, clustered projects will be developed to accommodate groups of companies requiring similar training.

It will also be important for the sector to raise awareness among the business community about the type, range, quality and flexibility of the support and services that colleges provide, so that they can become the training provider of first choice for employers. Flexibility of delivery is paramount in meeting the up-skilling needs of employers, and key issues to be considered are the skills sets and contracts of college staff and the innovative and imaginative use of technology.

Policy Commitment 4 – Support to Employers

Colleges will be at the forefront of providing support to employers to enable them to innovate, grow, operate more effectively and efficiently, develop new products and to identify new markets for their products.

This will be delivered through Project 2: Economic Development

Support to Employers

Business engagement activity has been transformed following the colleges' rationalisation in 2007. The further education sector has a proven track record in delivering a range of programmes to Northern Ireland businesses in areas such as product design, research and

development, business incubation, and innovation and knowledge transfer. Along with universities, colleges will play a vital role in the aspiration for Northern Ireland to be recognised as an innovation hub and one of the UK's leading high-growth, knowledge-based regions.

The Department has developed the Employer Support Programme, consisting of 'Skills Focus' and 'Innovate Us', specifically to enable colleges to support employers. The aim of the 'Skills Focus' programme is to support, promote, and facilitate collaborative working between business and colleges. Through the programme, colleges will provide tailored skills provision to small to medium enterprises to increase the skills levels of their workforce to level 2 and above. Colleges will manage, and will be the sole providers of, this programme, and will be the first point of contact for employers who can benefit from participation on the programme.

Colleges will use the 'Innovate Us' strand of the Employer Support Programme to increase and develop small employers' ability to innovate, and they will increase their research and development and knowledge transfer activities to complement and work in partnership with universities in these areas. However, there is considerable scope for further education colleges and the university sector to develop stronger partnerships in order to collaborate in identifying and meeting the innovation and knowledge needs of Northern Ireland businesses.

The further education sector plays an increasingly important role in attracting

inward investment, particularly through delivery of the 'Assured Skills' programme, which is a joint initiative between the Department and Invest Northern Ireland. This programme is designed to help attract new foreign direct investment companies to Northern Ireland by assuring them that the skills they need to be successful are available here. For example, 'Assured Skills' has enabled the further education sector to develop a number of highly successful and ground breaking Academies which enable colleges to respond very quickly to the needs of specific employers and sectors. Colleges will continue to work with key partners in government, including Invest Northern Ireland and other economic development agencies, to attract and support inward investment, particularly in high value added sectors.

Policy Commitment 5 – College Specialism and Regional Capacity

Centres of specialism and expertise will be developed in each college to enable the further education sector as a whole to deliver high quality professional and technical provision to employers. Through a collaborative approach, individual colleges will have identified sectors where they will be recognised for their expertise and specialism. As well as identifying specialisms, all colleges will develop networks of experts who will share the latest developments in curriculum and skills training across Northern Ireland.

This will be delivered through Project 2: Economic Development

College Specialisms

There is a need for the colleges to collaborate and provide a more co-ordinated approach to how they engage with employers in providing the support outlined above, and colleges have agreed to create a model for excellence based on the two pillars of business engagement and subject specialisms, under the term Specialist Provision for Industry using College Expertise (SPICE). In effect, each college will have identified sectors of the economy where they will have a lead role, and where they will be recognised for their expertise and specialisation. Colleges will also act as the first point of contact for Invest Northern Ireland and local employers in their areas of specialism. In addition, colleges will further build their own local capacity in all priority areas by developing networks of experts across the regional colleges who will share the latest developments in curriculum and skills training.

Significant work to develop specialisms has already taken place, and colleges are, increasingly, working together to maximise capability and capacity across the further education sector in specific knowledge areas. For example, the sector has developed a SPICE NI portal which provides real examples of how colleges have supported employers in up-skilling the workforce, and which is helping to demonstrate to employers the services and support they can receive from colleges.

In taking forward this concept, care will be taken to ensure that specialisms are balanced across Northern Ireland, and that access to college services for students and employers is maximised. For example, this could be facilitated through the use of digital learning, enabling access to specialisms outside colleges' normal catchment areas.

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The further education sector is a key economic driver for Northern Ireland and plays a central role in the implementation of the Programme for Government.

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THEME 2: Social Inclusion

This theme outlines the second part of colleges' dual role, namely the distinctive contribution they make to providing learners with the knowledge, skills and qualifications required to avail of the benefits of economic participation, and their role in supporting diversity and social inclusion by widening and encouraging participation from the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland and ensuring access for those with low or no skills or other barriers to learning.

Introduction

Widening participation in education and training is an essential factor in promoting social inclusion, combating poverty, and helping people from disadvantaged backgrounds to become engaged with society in general. It is also a vital means of supporting the achievement of economic goals. It is fundamental that Northern Ireland utilises all of the resources of its people, including those currently excluded from the labour market, to attain enhanced productivity, employment and international competitiveness. Therefore, there are

strong links between economic growth and social inclusion, and they should be viewed as supporting each other.

One of the greatest strengths of the further education sector is its ability, in partnership with others, to develop innovative approaches to engaging with the hardest to reach communities, and to offer pathways at all levels to further education opportunities. Colleges are locally based, and their students span all ages, come from a variety of backgrounds and have a range of learning, work, and life experiences.

Benefits of Further Education

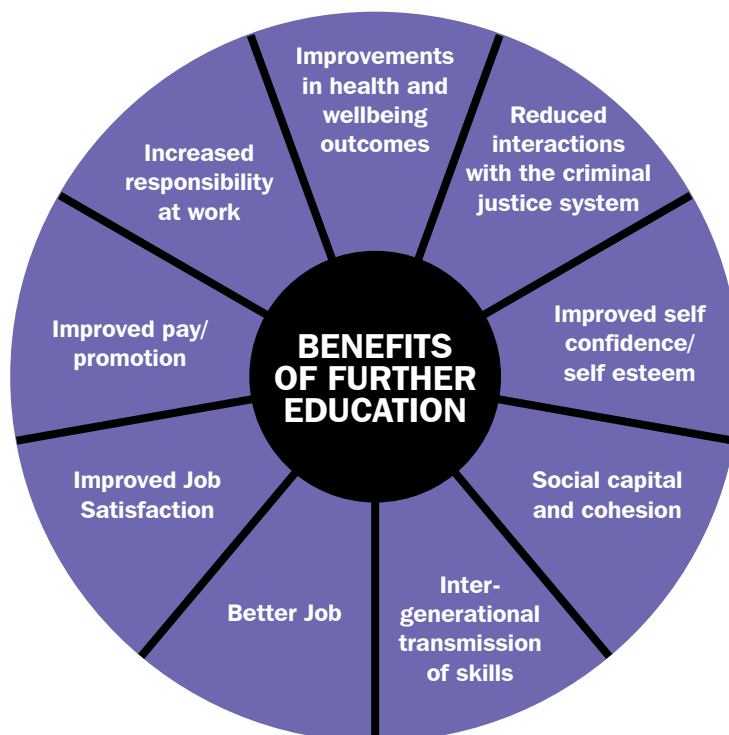
Participation in further education delivers many benefits, at an individual, economic and societal level. Professional and technical qualifications are strongly associated with improved labour market outcomes, in terms of the likelihood of being in employment and the wage premium associated with that.

In addition, recent research⁸ suggests that qualifications at level 2 and below bring greater economic benefits to learners than had previously been thought, and that

learners from the most disadvantaged backgrounds have the most to gain from lower level qualifications. The researchers estimated that learners with a level 2 qualification can earn 12% more than their peers from a similar socio-economic background who have no qualifications.

Access to employment is the best way out of poverty and social exclusion. This is best achieved by providing people with the confidence, skills and qualifications to engage with the labour market. The further education sector is critical to this process.

Figure 2: Benefits of Further Education



There are a number of structural issues to address. Around 16.2% of Northern Ireland's population aged between 16 and

64 have no qualifications, while 18% of adults have low proficiency in literacy and 25% have low proficiency in numeracy⁹.

⁸ Professor Peter Unwin and colleagues

<https://www.tes.com/news/further-education/breaking-news/exclusive-level-2-qualification-can-add-12-students%E2%80%99-earnings>

⁹ Source: Labour Force Survey Quarterly supplement to the labour market report July – September 2015.

Northern Ireland cannot afford this waste of talent, and the policy commitments under this theme will ensure that colleges continue to address the issue of social inclusion by widening participation to further education at all levels, including to learners with low or no qualifications, learners with other social barriers, those who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and those who are furthest from the labour market. A key outcome of this is improved job skills, qualifications, and capabilities for all learners.

Policy Commitment 6 – Increasing Economic Participation through Engagement

Colleges' distinctive contribution to social inclusion will be to provide learners with the knowledge, skills and qualifications required to find, or progress within, employment in order to avail of the benefits of economic participation. Working in partnership with others, colleges will support diversity and social inclusion through widening access to provision for those with low or no skills or other barriers to learning. They will work with other organisations in the voluntary, community, public and private sectors to strengthen pathways for learners that can open up their ambitions and develop their talents.

This will be delivered through Project 3: Social Inclusion

Widening Participation

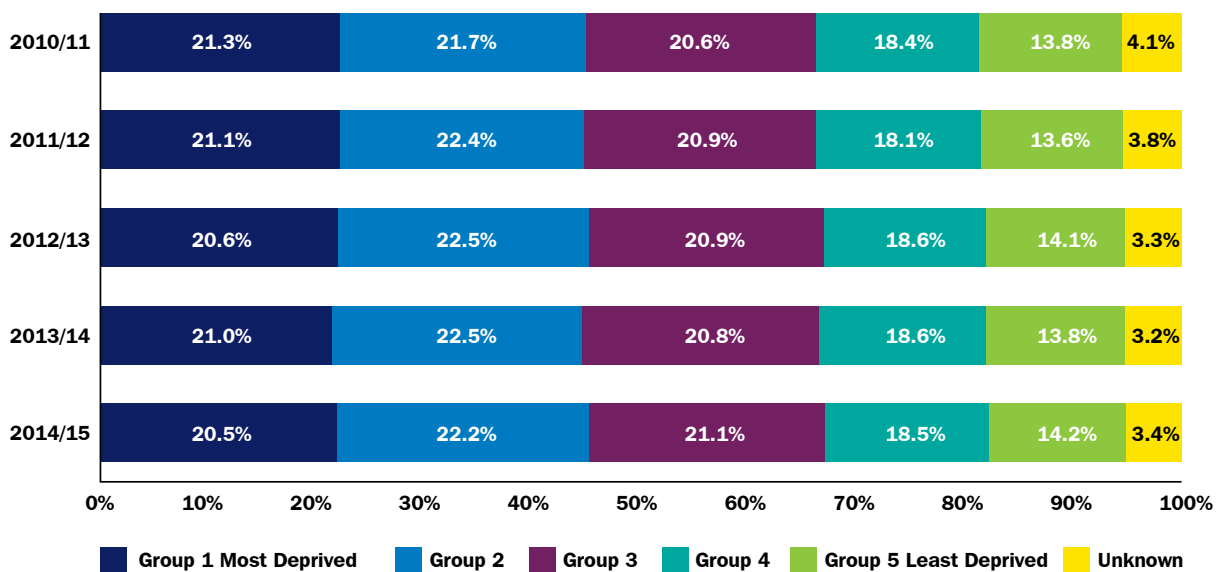
The further education sector has continued to develop its internal capacity, awareness and expertise in targeting, engaging, and retaining those who are most hard to reach in mainstream further education provision, both in college campuses and in outreach centres. This continues to be supported by a range of measures currently in place in further education which help people gain access to, participate in and achieve in further education, and which includes the provision of additional funding and pastoral support.

The further education sector will continue to engage with students with a wide variety of needs, many of whom have barriers to participating in learning, such as: health and disability issues; students from a care background; accessibility of course provision; personal circumstances including caring responsibilities and criminal records; family or peer pressures and attitudes to learning; those who have low levels of qualifications or, in some cases, no qualifications at all; those with literacy and numeracy problems; or those in need of English language skills. The gaining of skills and qualifications, including in the important areas of literacy, numeracy and ICT, helps individuals to secure the life changing benefits arising from employment and/or increased levels of skills and education attainment.

In 2014/15, the most recent academic year for which validated data is available, there were 140,137 enrolments on courses that potentially lead to regulated qualifications. Of these enrolments, around 21.4% were at level 1 and below, and 46.2% were at level 2. This number demonstrates the clear demand for qualifications at these levels, and the important role further education has and will continue to have in the delivery of lower level qualifications that subsequently improve learners' life chances and enable them to progress to higher level qualifications. Providing more structured and well signposted learner progression pathways is a fundamental and underpinning principle of the further education system.

Importantly, colleges' enrolments are spread across the five recognised groupings of deprivation and, as demonstrated in the figure below, they deliver strongly to the two most deprived quintiles. In 2014/15, 42.7% of regulated enrolments were from the two most deprived quintiles. Just over a fifth of regulated enrolments, 20.5%, came from the most deprived quintile, compared to 14.2% from the least deprived or most affluent quintile.

Figure 3: Regulated enrolments by deprivation quintiles¹⁰



¹⁰ Table derived from: Further Education in Northern Ireland: 2009/10 to 2013/14.
Data is sourced from <https://www.delni.gov.uk/publications/further-education-activity-fe-colleges-northern-ireland-201415>

School Leavers

In the 2014/15 academic year, 81,904 enrolments, which represents 58% of all further education enrolments, were in respect of learners aged 19 and under. Of these, 10,532 enrolments were in respect of post primary school pupils under the Department of Education's Entitlement Framework.

There are a number of deep rooted issues to address that are specific to those leaving school. In 2013/14, 21.4% of Northern Ireland's school leavers left school without five GCSEs at Grade A* to C or equivalent, and this figure rises to 36.5% in respect of those who left school without five GCSEs at Grade A* to C or equivalent including GCSE English and mathematics.¹¹

This emphasises the importance of colleges working in effective partnerships with post primary schools. Colleges currently have good relationships with schools through Area Learning Partnerships, and they support schools in the delivery of professional and technical provision as part of school pupils' entitlement to a mixed curriculum. This needs to continue. As well as ensuring an enriched curriculum for school pupils, it also helps to ensure their transition from school to further education or training is managed through well articulated learner pathways. The new youth training and apprenticeship systems will provide simpler and more coherent progression at level 2 and above, but colleges and schools will

need to continue to work together to also meet the transition needs of learners who will not immediately be able to avail of provision at these levels.

Students with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities

Further education colleges offer 'discrete' provision designed for students with moderate to severe learning difficulties, who are unable to participate in mainstream provision. It is specifically designed to meet their individual needs and is delivered in a more supported environment. This provision has a higher staff to student ratio than mainstream provision so students benefit from being in smaller class sizes and from extra assistance provided by classroom assistants and other specialist staff. Students undertaking discrete programmes study a range of provision from unregulated courses to regulated courses at entry level, level 1 and level 2. Discrete provision typically consists of a mix of work focused, personal development and lifeskills content. This provision can either be full-time or part-time. Students on discrete provision may also undertake work placements which can help to prepare them for future employment opportunities.

The vast majority of these students come from special schools or special units at mainstream secondary level. The provision delivered by local colleges at different levels gives these students the chance to access vitally important opportunities to build on their achievements in school and

¹¹ Department of Education: Qualifications and Destination of Northern Ireland School Leavers 2013/14 <https://www.deni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/qualifications-and-destinations-1314.pdf>

move on to the next stage in their academic career. A move to further education for these students also offers highly significant opportunities to become more independent, integrate with the wider community and gain valuable life skills. This provision, therefore, provides a vital stepping stone for people whose opportunities for progression beyond statutory schooling are already limited, to gain the additional skills, qualifications and, crucially, life experience which will enable them to progress within further education and also beyond to training, and employment.

Annually, the Department provides £4.5 million of ring-fenced funding through the 'Additional Support Fund' (ASF) to help provide additional support to students with disabilities and/or learning difficulties. This funding enables further education colleges to provide technical and personal support. Technical support includes specialised enabling equipment, such as brailers, Reading Edge equipment, IT adaptations, specialist software and related licences and IT hardware, hearing loops and conference folders. Personal support includes specialist tutors/advisers, such as hearing or visual impairment tutors, speech therapists, IT advisers, interpreters (for students with a hearing impairment), support workers/classroom assistants and note-takers.

The fund was recently increased by £1m in recognition of the importance of enabling access and providing support to students with learning difficulties or disabilities to meet their goals in education, progression to employment or towards independent

living. In 2013/14, 3,542 students benefited from support provided through ASF.

Learner Support

Widening participation does not stop at attracting learners *into* the system. It is also about providing appropriate support systems to retain those students, and give them the best chance of successful completion of courses, qualification attainment, and progression into further study or employment. Colleges will continue to provide the following pastoral care services to support students:

- ▶ one to one mentoring;
- ▶ student counselling services;
- ▶ childcare and crèche facilities;
- ▶ safeguarding for vulnerable students;
- ▶ study skills, including planning, organisation and time management, and revision and exam techniques;
- ▶ financial advice and support; and
- ▶ careers advice.

Partnerships

There was strong support in the consultation for increased collaboration between the further education sector and the voluntary and community sector, particularly in the provision of programmes at entry level and level one. Colleges will work in partnership with others to identify and overcome barriers to participation in learning by individuals. Increasingly, social inclusion activities will be seen in the wider context of community planning, with

colleges supporting the work of the forthcoming Department for Communities, and also working in partnership with the new district councils.

Colleges work actively in partnership with the voluntary and community sector, and have developed a range of innovative delivery approaches to enthuse learners, including the use of technology to encourage greater adult participation. Community based education provides a first point of access for many adults who missed the opportunity of education and training the first time round and, subsequently, became disengaged from the education system and the labour market. Colleges are committed to their work in this area, and they partner with numerous external bodies, including statutory agencies, private training organisations and the voluntary and community sector to target and deliver training to those learners who are hardest to reach. There are many examples of high quality provision within the voluntary and community sectors, and many courses are provided in response to requests from local groups, and are provided in informal venues which are close to home for the learners.

The colleges will work with the experts employed in community and voluntary organisations to gain a better understanding of the specific needs and requirements of different groups, and determine the best options for the delivery of programmes. An important aspect of this work will be ensuring that there are

clear and easily understood pathways and progression routes from provision delivered in community settings into further education and training, and promoting the benefits associated with the attainment of qualifications.

Policy Commitment 7 – Improving Literacy, Numeracy and Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

Colleges will raise the level of literacy, numeracy and ICT competency in Northern Ireland by adopting the new qualifications that are being developed through the refreshed Essential Skills strategy and the reviews of GCSEs in English and mathematics in Northern Ireland.

This will be delivered through Project 1: Curriculum Content and Delivery

Literacy, Numeracy and ICT Skills

Improving the level of literacy, numeracy and ICT skills has been a priority for the Executive and for this department, and further education colleges have been the major providers of Essential Skills since the Essential Skills strategy was introduced in 2004.

Results from the 2012 International Survey of Adult Skills indicate that literacy levels in Northern Ireland amongst working age adults (ages 16-65) have increased

since last measured in 1996. However, in spite of this, Northern Ireland's performance in both literacy and numeracy was below the OECD average, the difference being statistically significant. In common with other countries, literacy and numeracy performance was linked closely to qualifications and educational attainment, which in turn is linked with improved labour market outcomes and earnings.

The Essential Skills Strategy, which is aimed at improving levels of literacy, numeracy and ICT, is currently being refreshed, and alongside this the Department of Education is reviewing GCSEs in English and mathematics. The outcome of these reviews will help to determine the role colleges will play in the future delivery of literacy, numeracy and ICT as part of their wider programme delivery, including the implications for the reviews of apprenticeships and youth training, and working collaboratively with schools to improve the level of these crucial skills among school leavers.

Increasing the level of provision in community and voluntary settings, as discussed above, will also be beneficial in raising participation on essential skills programmes.

One of the greatest strengths of the further education sector is its ability, in partnership with others, to develop innovative approaches to engaging with the hardest to reach communities, and to offer pathways at all levels to further education opportunities.

Further education colleges have a strong track record of engaging with those who are furthest from the labour market.

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THEME 3: Curriculum Delivery

This theme details how colleges will deliver future provision, making use of technology to engage learners and enhance the teaching and learning experience. It also explores the importance of developing employability skills through work based learning and by developing enterprising students.

Introduction

Curriculum delivery is the engine of high quality further education provision. There is a need for innovative delivery, making imaginative and effective use of technology enhanced learning, to support both classroom teaching and blended/distance learning. Delivery needs to be flexible,

responsive, and fast paced, accommodating different learning styles and developing enterprising students through various methods of teaching. Where possible, work placements will be a part of all learning, as this is recognised widely as the best way to develop individuals' employability skills.

Policy Commitment 8 – Using Technology to Enhance Learning

Colleges will adopt international best practice in the use of technology enhanced learning to support and improve their teaching and learning, and will adopt flexible approaches to learning to meet the needs of learners and employers.

This will be delivered through Project 1: Curriculum Content and Delivery

Use of Technology

Technology has a pivotal role in supporting high quality teaching and learning, and coherent pedagogic support is fundamental to enabling effective technology enhanced learning. As the curriculum continues to innovate to meet the changing needs of diverse learning groups, colleges will examine methodologies for curriculum delivery to ensure responsiveness and adaptability to learner and employer needs and to underpin skills development in areas of economic growth.

Professional and technical learning has always involved technologies, but technology innovations have increased at a rapid rate over the last few years, for example in the area of mobile technology. Teaching and learning styles need to keep pace with the speed at which businesses and learners adapt to and adopt new technologies. This is happening in information technology, which is

increasingly used to communicate; in learning technologies, supporting blended learning and digital simulations; and in workplace technology, which supports and transforms working practices.

An approach that incorporates the use of technology to enhance learning will help to address the changing learning environment, for example, the “flipped classroom”, which creates a greater focus on activity based learning. Access to interactive online resources helps to develop self-paced, independent learning opportunities. Students respond positively to online assessment due to the immediacy of the feedback and the opportunities it provides for them to review and improve.

Colleges will develop approaches that address the needs of the diverse groups of learners within further education, taking account of the breadth of provision offered. With careful pedagogical design, on-line delivery can provide a richer and more efficient learning environment. Therefore, blended learning and e-learning options will be exploited fully to ensure colleges’ programmes remain relevant to learners and support the complexity of their lifestyles. Expanding access to technology will ensure that all students can engage with learning resources.

These changes in the use of technologies will require colleges to plan effective network infrastructure. Tutor created content, alongside authored content, provides students with a range of interactive resources to engage them in their learning. Colleges will also need to

work collaboratively to share best practice with each other. These areas are developed further in section eight (College Partnerships).

Policy Commitment 9 – Developing Employability and Enterprise Skills

A distinctive element of provision delivered by colleges will be the development of employability skills, through high quality and relevant work placements and the use of virtual reality technology to simulate work placements in innovative and effective ways. Through their teaching strategies and approaches, colleges will also seek to develop enterprising learners, who are innovative and creative, and are able to adapt to change.

This will be delivered through Project 1: Curriculum Content and Delivery

Developing Employability Skills/ Work Placements

Colleges will seek to develop enterprising learners who have the confidence, attitude and employability skills to make them attractive to employers, and to equip them to adapt to changes in the labour market that will inevitably occur during their working lives. Colleges will help to develop an enterprising culture that fosters innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship.

Work-based learning through a structured work placement is a crucial element of effective professional and technical

training. The review of youth training at level 2 has provided strong evidence of the benefits to both learners and employers of well managed and relevant work placements and the important role they play in the development of employability skills that are so important to employers. Learners on mainstream further education programmes also benefit from a period of work placement. Where possible, work placements will be part of all learning, and colleges will take advantage of the processes being established as part of the youth training system to source work placements. They will also accelerate the innovative work they are doing to develop and use virtual reality environments to simulate work placements in effective and stimulating ways.

While real work placements are undoubtedly the most effective approach, and this view was expressed strongly in the responses to the consultation, technology can help to compensate for a lack of job based training by allowing the learner to practice in virtual environments. It helps the learners integrate practical job-based experience with theoretical learning or assessment. Simulations are an ideal way to learn how to complete tasks where mistakes would be expensive, such as the use of copper piping, and can prepare learners to move onto a more formal work placement at a later stage. However, it is recognised that the use of immersive technologies to simulate real life workplace experiences may be more appropriate in some areas than in others.

Project based learning is also a dynamic approach to teaching that can help to develop important employability skills. Exploring real world industry based problems and challenges, project based learning enables students to gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to a complex business related problem. This approach will be adopted, increasingly, by colleges to enhance students' learning experience.

The development of enterprising individuals with positive attitudes and a range of employability skills sought by employers is a key aspect of professional and technical education and training programmes. Attitudes and skills may also prepare some individuals to proceed to become self employed or to start their own businesses. Recent research carried out by the Department for Employment and Learning suggested that in order to foster entrepreneurship, learning preferences should be taken more into account in curriculum delivery and that those students with entrepreneurial characteristics should be encouraged to achieve success with tailored learning solutions.

Greater use will be made of skills competitions such as regional, national and WorldSkills to showcase the high standards of professional and technical training within colleges, and to stimulate the confidence, abilities and work based skills of learners. Further Education colleges in Northern Ireland have embraced skills competitions as a valuable

tool to enhance the learning experience for students. Over the past number of years colleges have developed strengths across a number of skill areas to excellent effect, for example, automotive, construction, engineering, creative and professional services.

This has resulted in an outstanding record of achievement for Northern Ireland in skills competitions at regional, national and world level and has placed Northern Ireland as the top UK region in relation to the number of competitors taking part and medals awarded in the last three WorldSkills competitions. The 2015 WorldSkills results represented the best outcome to date for Northern Ireland with four of the nine UK medals being awarded to Northern Ireland competitors.

Northern Ireland has also performed extremely well at the annual UK Skills Show which hosts the UK finals, and the number of Northern Ireland competitors competing at the finals has increased year on year. In the 2015 Skills Show three Northern Ireland further education colleges and one training organisation were ranked in the top ten across the UK based on medal count.

Careers

There is a strong emphasis on learners' progression in all of the Department's education and training programmes, with progression pathways underpinned with good quality career guidance and information available to learners both before entering and during professional

and technical programmes. High quality careers guidance is a key component of the decision making process for young people progressing from compulsory schooling, and adults facing career changes.

The careers strategy, 'Preparing For Success 2015-2020', to be jointly agreed between the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education, provides a guarantee that young people will be encouraged to access impartial advice and guidance before progressing onto further education, taking up an apprenticeship, remaining at school, or moving into training or employment. This advice will be underpinned by reliable and up to date labour market information as set out in the skills barometer, with a particular focus on areas expected to have employment growth. The skills barometer will therefore assist young people in making informed career choices.

Young people with disabilities or special needs will be offered personalised careers advice to help them make the right choices to realise their full potential. Through agreed data sharing arrangements with the Department of Education, all young people in their final year of compulsory schooling will be case loaded by the careers advisers to ensure that everyone is fully supported to make a successful transition to an appropriate post 16 option.

The careers service will also reach a much greater number of the working age population to encourage upskilling and reskilling through a new webchat and telephony careers guidance centre. The aim is to provide professional guidance to those needing help to access, sustain and progress in employment by developing the skills and qualifications most valued by employers.

'Preparing for Success' also outlines the Department's commitment to establishing a whole system accountability and quality assurance system which will include an assessment of the quality and impact of the careers guidance services provided by further education colleges.

Where possible, work placements will be a part of all learning, as this is recognised widely as the best way to develop individuals' employability skills.

7

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THEME 4: Excellence

This theme describes how colleges will deliver excellence by embedding high quality teaching and by enhancing how performance is monitored.

Introduction

Excellence is at the heart of everything that the Department does, and this is particularly the case for services delivered to customers, whether delivered by the Department's own staff or on the Department's behalf by others such as further education colleges.

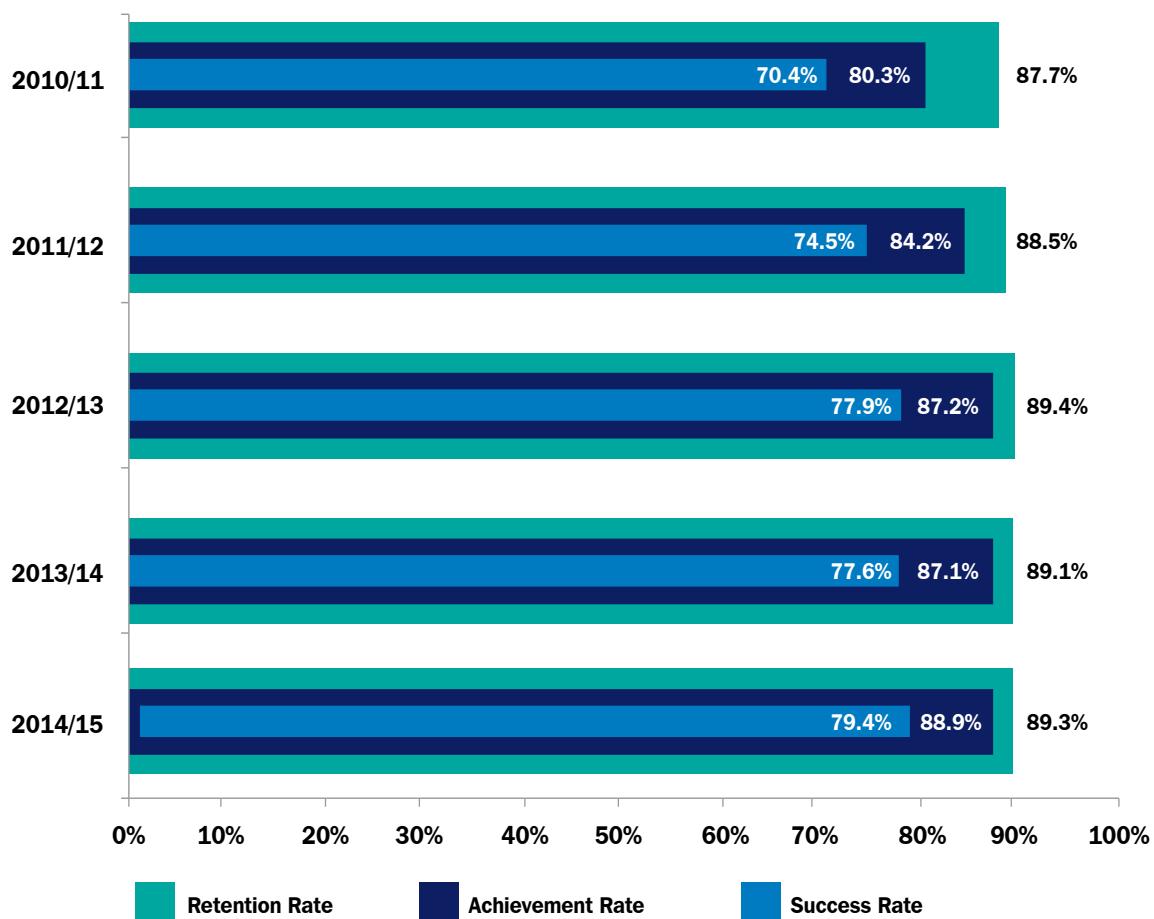
There are a number of important activities that will enable colleges to deliver to the highest possible quality standards. These include:

- ▶ continuing to develop strong leadership and management across all aspects of colleges' operations;
- ▶ ensuring that colleges' diverse workforce is qualified to appropriate minimum standards;
- ▶ embedding high quality teaching through initial teacher education and continual professional development;
- ▶ enabling relevant college staff to keep their industrial knowledge up to date;
- ▶ reviewing the inspection and quality improvement processes to ensure that they are appropriate for the wide range of services that colleges now provide and that inspectors have up to date and relevant industrial experience;
- ▶ capturing performance information that will enhance quality improvement and inform learner choice; and
- ▶ collecting feedback from learners and employers that will also inform quality improvement.

Our colleges are starting from a very strong position. For example, the latest reports by the Education and Training Inspectorate indicate the high quality standards that most colleges are now achieving. In the most recent Chief Inspector's report¹², achievements and standards are described as consistently good with the quality of

teaching and learning listed as good or better in 84% of the lessons evaluated in the colleges observed. Also, over the five academic years from 2010/11 and 2014/15 there has been a dramatic improvement in learner achievement rates, from 80.3% to 88.9%, and the success rate has increased from 70.4% to 79.4%.

Figure 4: Performance of Regulated Enrolments by Academic Year¹³



¹² Education and Training Inspectorate Chief Inspector's Report 2012-14. www.etini.gov.uk/index/inspection-reports/the-chief-inspectors-report/ci-report-2012-2014.htm

¹³ Data is sourced from <https://www.delni.gov.uk/publications/further-education-activity-fe-colleges-northern-ireland-201415>

Focusing on these issues and sharing best practice between colleges locally, and with others nationally and internationally, will ensure that the further education sector in Northern Ireland continues to aspire to, and achieves, excellence. In enabling the further education sector to deliver excellence, the Department will ensure that a range of stakeholders including universities and the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland play a supporting role for the sector.

Policy Commitment 10 – Embedding High Quality Teaching

Through a new teacher education framework, there will be a renewed focus on high quality initial teacher education and continual professional development for all lecturing staff, with minimum standards for pedagogy and subject qualifications put in place. The Department will support the development of research in pedagogy to inform best practice in professional and technical education and training to establish Northern Ireland as an internationally renowned centre for excellence in teacher education in professional and technical subjects.

This will be delivered through Project 4: Excellence - Quality and Performance

Leadership and Management

It is generally recognised that leadership and management skills are integral to the success of any organisation, and colleges are no exception. The Department has in the past supported the development of management and leadership programmes for managers across the sector and has encouraged the sector to develop a common framework which recognises the diverse programmes that are delivered to staff in this area.

Colleges will continue to develop these critical skills through the lifetime of this strategy, and the Department, together with the further education sector, will consider how this activity can be supported effectively in future years.

Colleges' Diverse Workforce

Colleges are increasingly engaged in a number of activities that go beyond teaching and learning, in particular the work they do to support employers and the wider economy. To deliver these types of services effectively and in flexible ways to meet employers' needs can require colleges to employ staff with different skills sets, expertise, experience and capability, and some colleges employ staff, on non-teaching contracts, specifically to work in their employer support teams.

Teacher Qualifications

The ambitious aspirations that have been set for the further education sector throughout this strategy will only be achieved effectively by a highly qualified

teaching workforce that has access to on-going and relevant initial teacher education and continual professional development. In particular, it is widely recognised that having lecturers with strong pedagogical skills is essential if curriculum is to be delivered at the highest quality standards. It will also be necessary to ensure that lecturers are equipped with the skills and knowledge to deliver curriculum in the innovative ways outlined in the previous section, in particular, technology enhanced learning and project based learning. These approaches will be used not only in the delivery of mainstream further education provision, but in delivering the new apprenticeships and youth training systems.

Over recent years, the Department and colleges have made significant progress in enhancing teacher education for college lecturers. For example, in 2009 the Department extended the requirement for initial teacher education for full-time and associate college lecturers from the one year, in-service, Postgraduate Certificate in Further and Higher Education to the two year Postgraduate Certificate in Education (Further Education) (PGCE(FE) Level 7), to be completed within the first three years of appointment. In addition, during 2014 the Department developed and piloted, very successfully, with Ulster University, a module for part-time staff. Continuing professional development courses have also been developed in conjunction with UU, for example, a 'Lecturers into Industry' module relating to industry placements and advanced essential skills teaching.

The Department will, as part of this new further education strategy, build on this good work and seek to make the Northern Ireland further education sector a centre of excellence in teaching and learning. In partnership with colleges and other relevant stakeholders, it will seek to establish a new framework for teaching qualifications that is recognised by all providers of teacher education. The framework will include both initial teacher education and continuing professional development qualifications. Teacher education and development will also be linked to initial and continuing registration with the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland and to the latest developments in pedagogical research. Pedagogical knowledge and skills will also be underpinned by recent, relevant industrial experience to ensure that all lecturers are confident and competent practitioners. Given the high importance of lecturers bringing industrial experience to teaching, consideration will be given to how lecturing staff, particularly part-time lecturers who have specific industrial expertise, can also be appropriately skilled and qualified in pedagogy.

The new framework will be taken forward in conjunction with further education colleges, existing and prospective providers of teacher education and the General Teaching Council as the representative voice of the profession, once it has been established as the regulator for the further education teaching profession. This will ensure that the framework for further education teacher education is created with the agreement of the key players and should ensure ownership and common purpose.

The Department will develop specific policy proposals to realise its ambitions for teaching and learning in further education. As part of this, the Department will seek views from both of the regional universities and from the further education sector on how teacher education should be delivered, including the possibility of some teacher education being delivered by colleges.

There is also a real opportunity to develop new pedagogical practice in conjunction with providers of teaching qualifications and the General Teaching Council by encouraging research that takes place on-site to develop, identify and share good and developing practice. The Department also recognises the value of developing communities of practice across the sector to improve the sharing of research and expertise, and will support this approach where appropriate.

The Department intends to proceed, jointly with the Department of Education, with the establishment of the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland as the independent regulator and professional voice of further education lecturers. This will enable a system of registration and professional support to be established that recognises the unique status of further education lecturers in the education system as dual professionals who are committed to delivering the best professional and technical education and training they can to their learners.

The General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland will be empowered to take action when lecturers' conduct and competence falls short of the standards of the profession, with the ultimate sanction of removal from the register and consequent removal from the teaching profession. A role for the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland in the accreditation of continuing professional development activities is also envisaged, with the use of 'active registration' available to it to ensure that members of the profession are keeping their skills and knowledge up-to-date. As such, the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland will help to cement a lot of the actions set out in the foregoing section through a system of professional recognition and support for all its members.

Policy Commitment 11 – Ensuring Industrial Knowledge

College staff will also have the opportunity to undertake relevant and good quality industrial placements to ensure that they understand the needs of employers and workforce development.

This will be delivered through Project 4: Excellence - Quality and Performance

Industrial Knowledge

Occupational expertise is the defining characteristic of effective professional and technical teachers.¹⁴ Teachers and trainers are ‘dual professionals’; they are both professional and technical subject specialists, and teaching experts, committed to maintaining and developing their expertise in both aspects of their role to ensure the best outcomes for their learners.¹⁵ This expertise also needs to be updated continuously in response to ever-changing working practices and advances in technology as a prerequisite to maintaining high quality provision.

There can be no standard approach to doing this, and it is recognised that it is a challenge for further education colleges, and particularly for full-time teaching staff. However, responses to the consultation emphasised the importance of lecturers engaging in regular placements in business and industry. As well as being a very effective means of keeping lecturers’ skills and knowledge up to date, lecturers can then cascade this back into the classroom, and help to integrate current industry practice with curriculum delivery. Contacts with business and industry also promote better relationships between colleges and the workplace, and encourage more effective curriculum and resource planning.

In Northern Ireland, the ‘Lecturers into Industry’ scheme, which dates back a number of years and which was refreshed in January 2015, provides college lecturers with an opportunity to undertake a

placement in industry, with the support of a continuous professional development module provided by Ulster University. Consequently, ‘Lecturers into Industry’ will continue to be an important vehicle for lecturers to update their industrial knowledge, and will also form a key part of individual college self-evaluation processes and whole college quality improvement planning.

Policy Commitment 12 – Reviewing Inspection and Quality Improvement

The quality improvement process, including the inspection regime, will be reviewed to ensure that it is appropriate for all aspects of delivery in colleges.

**This will be delivered through
Project 4: Excellence - Quality and
Performance**

Inspection and Quality Improvement

Inspection is an important part of the quality improvement process. The inspection process for further education provision (i.e. up to level 3) is carried out by the Education and Training Inspectorate, and there are well defined procedures in place for ongoing inspection and rigorous follow up processes to ensure that quality improvement takes place. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for higher education in the UK currently has a role in quality assurance of higher education provision delivered in further education colleges. However, the role of QAA across

14 Commission on Adult Vocational teaching and learning: It’s About Work – Excellent Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning 2013, Page 14. <http://repository.excellencegateway.org.uk/fedora/objects/eg:5937/datastreams/DOC/content>

15 Taken from the introduction to The 2014 Professional Standards for Teachers and Trainers in the Education and Training sector. http://www.et-foundation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/4991-Prof-standards-A4_4-2.pdf

the UK is currently under review, the outcome of which will inform how higher education delivered through further education is quality assured in the future.

The current quality improvement strategy in further education, including the inspection regime, will be reviewed to ensure that it is appropriate for all aspects of delivery in colleges, that it takes account of good practice in colleges' existing self evaluation processes, that it meets the needs of all key stakeholders, that it considers how higher education delivered through further education is quality assured, and that it is consistent with proposals in the apprenticeship strategy and the review of youth training.

Policy Commitment 13 – Improving Performance

Standardised approaches to receiving and analysing feedback from learners and from employers will be developed and introduced. Additional performance measures will be adopted to enable colleges and the Department to monitor colleges' performance more effectively as part of quality management, including learner progression and learners' destinations after leaving further education. Colleges will publish information on learner retention, achievement, progression and destinations on their web sites in such a way as to inform learners' choice of courses.

This will be delivered through Project 4: Excellence - Quality and Performance

There was broad agreement in responses to the consultation to the proposals within this policy commitment, although the point was made that colleges operate in areas with differing economic and social profiles and priorities, and that this would need to be taken into account when considering benchmarking information. The Department has previously developed an econometric model that is capable of explaining further the observed variability in outcomes across colleges and for individuals.

Performance Information

The Department and colleges capture and publish very reliable and comprehensive data on students who are enrolled with colleges, on the courses they are following and on performance in terms of learner retention, achievement and success. This informs key aspects of colleges' quality improvement planning processes.

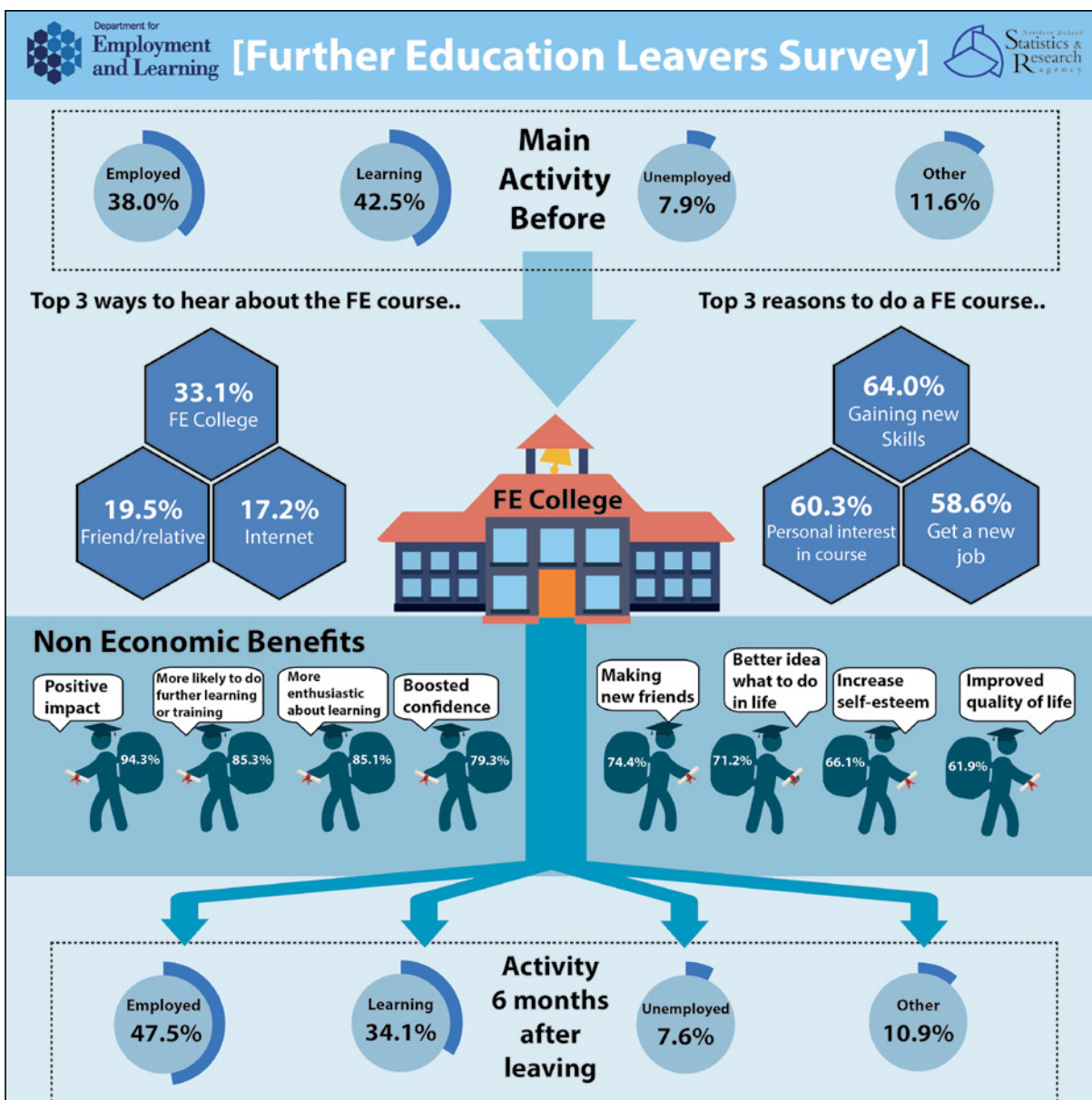
However, the real value of professional and technical education is whether learners make progress into or within employment or further learning. The progression of learners, either into employment or on to higher levels of learning, following their programmes of study, has been identified in this document as a distinctive role for further education colleges. Consequently, it is also important to understand the extent to which learning and qualifications can have an impact on the job prospects and potential earning power of learners, and the likelihood of learners progressing to higher levels of study. Therefore, the Department will work with the sector to identify ways to collect meaningful

information on the destinations of students when they finish their courses of study, and will consider approaches that are being used in other parts of the UK.

The Department has already made a start in this area. In December 2015, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) published the first annual

Further Education Leavers Survey which was based on a sample of learners six months after they completed their course. The survey assessed the destinations and potential benefits to students of completing and achieving a regulated qualification at a further education college in Northern Ireland.

Figure 5: Further Education Leavers Survey¹⁶



16 Further Education Leavers Survey 2015 <https://www.delni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/del/fe%20Leavers%202015%20Summary%20Infographic.pdf>

Cognisance will also have to be taken of the differences in data collection that exist between further education and higher education provision, and the extent to which this could be rationalised. Consideration will also be given to how the information gathered in this way can be used to improve quality and performance.

Information on the performance and destination of students from different types of college courses is potentially very valuable to individuals who are considering their career options, including whether they should enrol at a college and, if so, what programme of study they should follow. This type of information would also be very helpful to those who are offering careers guidance to potential learners. Therefore, to enable this to happen, alongside information on the courses they provide, colleges will also publish information on learner retention, achievement and success, and on learner destinations. In doing this, consideration will be given to how the 'distance travelled' by learners can be reflected, for example by capturing and analysing information on the qualification levels of individual learners on entry to and exit from programmes of learning. The econometric model referred to above could be used to ensure that colleges, which operate in different social and economic environments, can be compared on a like for like basis.

Customer Feedback

Fundamental to the drive for quality improvement will be a greater emphasis on feedback from employers and from students. The Department and colleges will seek to use a standardised approach to receiving and analysing feedback from each of these key stakeholder groups, across a number of criteria and at frequent intervals, to facilitate improved benchmarking across the Northern Ireland further education sector and more widely. This will provide invaluable information on the relevance of qualifications and skills to employers and on the wider support provided by colleges.

Learner Feedback

Capturing and analysing feedback from students on their experience of participating in further education is a crucial aspect of colleges' quality improvement processes. This can include feedback on a variety of dimensions including the delivery of their programmes of study, the use of technology, the flexibility of provision to meet their needs, the support they received from college staff, the extent to which their expectations were met and the facilities available at the college. Capturing this sort of information in a standardised way that enables effective and meaningful analysis, and which facilitates benchmarking with other colleges in Northern Ireland, and beyond, would add value to the information that is available to college management.

Therefore, the Department will work with the further education sector to introduce a standardised approach to collecting and analysing feedback from learners. Similar to destination data described above, cognisance will also have to be taken of differences in data collection on learner feedback that exist between further education and higher education provision, and the extent to which this could be rationalised.

Employer Feedback

Colleges provide a diverse range of services to employers, and this makes it more challenging to devise a standardised approach to gathering feedback from employers. However, it is recognised that this is an important part of the wider

quality improvement process, and the Department and colleges will consider the most effective way to capture employers' views on the services provided to them by colleges, including the relevance and quality of the skills learnt in further education by new employees. As well as enabling local benchmarking, this will help to strengthen curriculum design and delivery, and may create opportunities for work placements in future.

Excellence will be at the heart of everything that colleges do, particularly in terms of improving the quality of provision that is delivered, and monitoring and evaluating the outcomes that have been achieved.

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THEME 5: College Partnerships

This section details the two aspects of partnership through which colleges will deliver their services to learners, employers and communities more effectively and efficiently. These are partnerships between colleges, and colleges working in partnership with others.

Introduction

There is considerable evidence to confirm that collaboration is much more effective than competition in leading to improvement that will last. This section details the two aspects of partnership through which colleges will deliver their services to learners, employers and communities more effectively and efficiently. These are (i) collaboration between colleges and (ii) the further education sector working in partnership with others.

The rationalisation of further education colleges that took place in 2007 has been a strong enabling factor in colleges' successful delivery of services to learners and employers in recent years. In particular, the six large area based

colleges have played an increased leadership role in local and regional planning and in the delivery of economically relevant qualifications and skills at all levels across Northern Ireland. In recent reviews by the OECD, our college rationalisation was cited as an example of good practice.¹⁷

College to College Collaboration

Within the current structure there are considerable opportunities for colleges to work smarter in partnership through the use of collaborative working (shared services) to enable the sector, and individual colleges, to operate with maximum efficiency; and through sharing best practice to enable services to be delivered to learners and employers most effectively and to the highest standards of

17 OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training: Skills Beyond School Synthesis Report <http://www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/Skills-Beyond-School-Synthesis-Report.pdf>

quality. This approach has been embraced by colleges' governing bodies and by college principals and their senior management teams, which is evidenced by a number of recent collaborative initiatives.

Policy Commitment 14 – Sectoral Efficiency through Collaborative Working

In order to ensure that their services are delivered with maximum efficiency, colleges will operate more collectively in the delivery of their corporate services through a more rigorous and comprehensive approach to collaborative (shared services) working. Where appropriate, the colleges will take advantage of their NDPB status by adopting collaborative working opportunities that are available across the public sector.

This will be delivered through Project 5: College Partnerships

Transformational change in a shared delivery model has the potential to deliver significant cost savings, eliminate waste and duplication, and bring a common shared learning approach to all colleges.

Early work on collaborative working has focused on colleges' procurement activity, on college advertising, and on the development of a new management information system for use by colleges. Considerable progress has been made in these areas, for example, in the joint procurement of banking and insurance services and the printing of prospectuses. In addition, other areas of collaboration such as energy provision and facilities

management are subject to existing contracts which will be considered within the context of future collaborative procurement as the contracts end.

However, the current tight financial climate provides an imperative to re-energise this work. Significantly, and as outlined in the Economic Development theme, colleges are in the process of developing a model for excellence, the SPICE initiative, to provide a more co-ordinated approach to their work with employers and to the development and embedding of expertise across colleges.

A range of innovative collaborative projects will be taken forward across the six colleges, one of these being a strategically significant project where all six colleges have agreed a shared vision for the provision of Management Information Systems (MIS) and Information Learning Technology (ILT) services for use by colleges. The vision commits all colleges to “the provision of MIS/ILT systems and supporting processes that facilitate delivery of high quality teaching and learning, meeting the needs of staff and students both now and in the future”. At the heart of this vision is the provision of a common unified information systems platform for colleges, ensuring common reporting and business intelligence capability, a consistent approach to data capture and validation, harmonisation and standardisation of all associated business processes, and a standardised platform supporting access for all stakeholders. Other areas identified include payroll, human resources, IT support, finance, and the efficient use of the available estate across the sector.

In addition to collaborative working approaches, colleges, using their Non Departmental Public Body (NDPB) status, will explore adopting, where appropriate, corporate systems that are used by the Northern Ireland Civil Service. In addition to this, colleges will seek to identify further opportunities to secure efficiencies through sharing services.

A primary aim of these efficiency measures will be to maximise the level of resource that is available for the provision of front line services to learners and employers.

Policy Commitment 15 – Sectoral Effectiveness by Sharing Best Practice

Colleges will share best practice, and learn from each other, in the innovative and imaginative delivery of services to learners and employers. In particular, colleges will work together to ensure that technology can be developed and used in the most cost efficient and effective way to support learning.

This will be delivered through Project 5: College Partnerships

While all of our colleges exhibit excellence in many and different areas of activity, there is no room for complacency. There is, therefore, potential for colleges to learn from, and to share best practice with, each other, and by so doing to raise the overall standards of excellence across the entire further education sector.

In implementing the various policy commitments in this strategy, colleges will share best practice in areas as diverse as

engagement with employers, the development and use of learning technologies, innovative and flexible qualifications and curriculum design, working with disadvantaged learners, and pastoral care arrangements, to learn from each other to create a further education system here which is genuinely world class. Approaches could include staff exchanges and secondments between colleges.

Policy Commitment 16 – Delivery Mechanism to Drive Efficiency and Effectiveness

A mechanism will be established to stimulate, manage and oversee collaboration and sharing of best practice between colleges to ensure efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of services, and to maximise the level of resource that is available to fund front line services.

This will be delivered through Project 5: College Partnerships

There is evidence that colleges are already working collaboratively together in some of the ways described above. However, with strong leadership and decision making at a senior level within the further education sector and in the Department, much more can be achieved.

A process will be established, involving the Department and the further education sector, to drive forward and oversee in a holistic way, collaborative working, the sharing of best practice, and the

application of the specialist colleges approach in relevant areas of activity.

Further Education Sector Partnerships with Others

The further education sector has a strategic position in the education, economic and social structures in Northern Ireland. In fulfilling their various roles, colleges have forged effective strategic partnerships with employers and their representative bodies, with district councils, with voluntary and community organisations, with other education and training establishments (including post primary schools, universities and training organisations), and with other government departments and public organisations.

Policy Commitment 17 – Working in Partnership with Others

Colleges will strengthen their partnership working with a range of other organisations in the public, private and voluntary and community sectors in order to improve the services delivered to employers and individuals.

This is a cross cutting theme and will be delivered across projects.

In curriculum design, colleges have worked in partnership with our universities and employers, and they have also partnered with training organisations in the private and voluntary and community sectors to create flexible delivery models that benefit certain learner groups. Colleges have also worked very successfully in partnerships with schools, where colleges have been

important providers of professional and technical qualifications as part of the curriculum made available to school pupils under the Department of Education's Entitlement Framework.

Working in partnership with others will be increasingly important to colleges in delivering the challenging vision set out in this strategy to the benefit of individual learners, employers, the economy and wider society. It will be important for these partnerships to continue and to take account of changing circumstances and organisational arrangements, including the new government department structures that will be introduced in 2016 and the new structure to manage the statutory education sector. New partnerships will have to be formed, in particular, to ensure effective implementation of the new apprenticeships and youth training systems, and to ensure that colleges can complement the work of the new district councils in their respective economic and community development roles.

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THEME 6: Governance

This theme considers governance arrangements in further education colleges and colleges' NDPB status.

Introduction

Good governance adds real value and supports effective decision making within individual colleges. Governing bodies play an extremely important role in the strategic leadership of colleges, with responsibility for ensuring the effective management of the education and training provision, and for planning colleges' future development. They exercise both a support and challenge function in respect of college principals and their executive teams, ensuring that colleges implement government priorities for the further education sector.

Given the importance of their strategic leadership role, and the scale of colleges' operations and budgets, governing body chairs and members will be remunerated for the work that they do.

Policy Commitment 18 – Further Education Governance and Business Model

Colleges and the Department will work together to maximise the benefits to colleges and their customers of colleges' NDPB status, while also addressing any challenges posed.

**This will be delivered through
Project 6: Governance/Leadership**

Since October 2010 the six further education colleges in Northern Ireland have been classified as NDPBs and this is the business model under which colleges operate. While NDPB status has presented colleges with a number of organisational issues to address, for example in terms of budgeting and funding arrangements, one of the most strategically important issues to address is to ensure that colleges are able to generate and retain income outside of the funding provided by the Department. Colleges have a number of sources of such revenue, including funds provided by other government departments, European funds, a variety of services that colleges provide to employers on a full cost recovery basis, a number of philanthropic trusts, and from student fees. The Department is keen to encourage colleges to continue to earn income in these ways. In the future, colleges may also earn income from international activities.

However, it is equally important that colleges are able to retain income generated in this way, and that NDPB status does not inhibit colleges' desire and ability to be innovative and flexible in the delivery of services to learners and employers.

Colleges and the Department will work together to maximise the benefits of NDPB status and address any challenges posed. This will include procurement approaches to the delivery of the Department's programmes, exploring the issues associated with colleges generating income beyond that which is provided by the Department, and working with the Department for Finance and Personnel to ensure that colleges can retain income generated in this way.

Governing bodies play an extremely important role in the strategic leadership of colleges, with responsibility for ensuring the effective management of the education and training provision.

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THEME

Funding Model and College Sustainability: to underpin priorities

This theme details how the current funding model will be reviewed to underpin future priorities.

Introduction

The Funded Learning Unit (FLU) funding model, which is currently used to allocate the recurrent block grant to individual colleges, will be reviewed to ensure that it supports the strategic priorities for the sector, that it aligns with funding models for other major Department for Employment and Learning programmes that colleges deliver, and that it supports colleges' financial sustainability.

Policy Commitment 19 – Reviewing the Further Education Funding Model

In partnership with colleges, the funding model will be reviewed to ensure that it supports and incentivises colleges to deliver this strategy, that it supports a sustainable further education sector and that it aligns with the funding models that will be developed for other departmental programmes that further education colleges will deliver, in particular apprenticeships and youth training.

This will be delivered through Project 7: Funding Model and College Sustainability

The current FLU funding model is a distributive funding mechanism through which the annual recurrent grant for further education is distributed between the six colleges. A single FLU equates approximately with one full-time enrolment, and part-time enrolments are calculated as a proportion of FLU depending on the number of hours studied. The FLU model also has a number of weightings to take account of course level, of subject area cost of delivery and of the overall deprivation measure of the college catchment area.

A number of aspects of the FLU model will be reviewed. For example, the value of the FLU has not been increased since the model was first used in 2007/08 academic year, to coincide with the introduction of the six college structure. In addition, the model distinguishes, in financial value, between full-time and part-time provision, and this could act as a disincentive to colleges to deliver part-time provision, even though this is important in up-skilling the workforce.

As indicated earlier in this strategy, colleges will be key deliverers of the new apprenticeship system and youth training system at level 2. Consequently, the relationship between the FLU funding model and the funding models that are being developed for apprenticeships and youth training will have to be taken into

account in the review of the FLU model. For example, the new youth training system at level 2 for 16 to 24 year olds has, when fully operational, the potential to replace around 30% of all mainstream further education provision that leads to qualifications on the regulated qualifications frameworks. The funding and sustainability implications of this for further education need to be understood and taken into account.

It is premature at this stage to make specific proposals in respect of how the FLU model may need to change. It will be important to ensure that the model supports the future strategic direction for further education as this strategy is implemented, therefore the timing of when some aspects of the funding model are reviewed will be dependent on the outcomes from other areas of this strategy's implementation.

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THEME 8: International Dimension

This theme details how colleges will learn from best practise outside of Northern Ireland by maximising student and staff exchange opportunities and continuing to develop partnerships internationally.

Introduction

International experience is invaluable in today's interconnected world. Over recent years, colleges have become increasingly focused on the need to operate in an international arena and to equip their students and staff with the skills required to work and compete in the global economy.

The policy commitment under this theme will enable colleges to expand this aspect of their operations in ways that will support their own staff and students and will enable them to share and benefit from best practice in similar institutions in other parts of the world.

Policy Commitment 20 – Operating Internationally

Colleges will enhance the learner experience, and the professional development and industrial knowledge of their staff, through placements and exchanges with similar institutions in other countries. They will also build on the excellent partnerships that have already been created across the world to share best practice with, and to learn from, others. In addition, colleges will, with the Department for Employment and Learning, explore commercial opportunities to deliver more services in the international market.

This is a cross cutting theme and will be delivered across projects.

All aspects of colleges' activities in an international arena will be explored, including student and lecturer exchanges/placements, partnership arrangements with different countries and institutions, and the extent to which, and how, colleges can exploit opportunities to sell their education and training expertise in international markets.

Across the colleges, learners have good opportunities to apply and enhance their learning through participation in international exchanges/placements, and staff have the opportunity to develop their industrial and pedagogical skills through the sharing of knowledge, expertise and best practice.

Colleges will use international visits to develop staff further and to provide learners with the opportunity to undertake work and educational placements, particularly across the European Union (EU), supported by the Erasmus+ programme. E-twinning opportunities, and other transnational programmes such as Interreg, may provide resources to support placements for learners and exchanges for staff. Colleges will build on partnerships already developed in a wide range of countries across Europe and also in Japan, the USA, India, China and Brazil.

International exchanges also provide an opportunity for the colleges to showcase their work and facilities, and the high standard of the professional and technical education and training that is provided in Northern Ireland. Colleges will explore ways in which to promote further their

work to support foreign direct investment into Northern Ireland. Colleges have been participants on Invest Northern Ireland trade missions in the past and they will continue to be involved in this area.

The Department already supports a range of EU-led mobility initiatives in the sphere of professional and technical education which, taken together, make it easier for learners, employees and job-seekers to undertake learning in other EU countries, and to have their qualifications recognised. These include the European Qualifications Framework, the European Credit Transfer System for Vocational Education and Training and Europass. The Department is also an active participant in the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training which aims to make learning providers' systems more transparent and to support mutual trust and learner mobility.

Northern Ireland has had an excellent record of participation in EU mobility programmes, which support learner and staff exchanges, and promote cross-border projects and network-building. The current programme, Erasmus+ commenced on 1st January 2014. The remit of Erasmus+ encompasses a number of international activities including mobility in the further education, higher education and adult education sectors, strategic partnerships, sport and youth. With €14.7 billion available over seven years (2014 – 2020), the Department will encourage the colleges and other training organisations to participate fully in the opportunities available through this programme.

The Department and further education colleges will, therefore, take full advantage of existing and new sources of funding available from Europe to support the different aspects of colleges operating in an international context, and will explore opportunities to participate on other programmes and develop links with international organisations and groups.

A further element of international activity relates to the creation of commercial opportunities to sell educational services in other countries. The international market for education and training is a challenging and complex one, which needs careful balancing of risk and opportunity alongside the core purpose of further education. As part of the implementation of this strategy, this area will be scoped and evaluated.

Some aspects of this international theme will benefit from a collaborative approach across the further education sector, and this will be considered as part of the wider approach to shared services. There are also synergies in these areas with the implementation of the new apprenticeships and youth training systems.

International experience is invaluable in today's interconnected world. Over recent years, colleges have become increasingly focused on the need to operate in an international arena and to equip their students and staff with the skills required to work and compete in the global economy.

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THEME 9: Promoting The Further Education Sector

This theme details how colleges will work together and with the Department to identify ways in which to promote the further education sector.

Introduction

There is an ambition for professional and technical education and training to be valued equally to academic education by learners, employers, other educational institutions and wider society; and for further education and the wider professional education and training system to be recognised as an equal and valued pillar of the education system in Northern Ireland, alongside higher education and the statutory school system.

The further education sector will become known as a destination of first choice for both learners and employers because of its reputation for providing high quality and economically relevant education and training provision in state of the art facilities.

Policy Commitment 21 – Promoting Further Education Provision

Colleges Northern Ireland, individual colleges and the Department will work together to demonstrate the distinctive role that the further education sector has as part of the wider education system, and the role that the sector plays in strengthening the Northern Ireland economy. More generally, the benefits and status of professional and technical qualifications will also be promoted.

**This will be delivered through
Project 8: Promoting the
Further Education Sector**

To ensure that the further education sector is recognised for its distinctive role and high quality provision, the Department will work with the colleges to promote more effectively the benefits of professional and technical education to learners, parents, schools, and employers.

In Northern Ireland, provision in our further education colleges is referred to as ‘professional and technical’ education and training, rather than ‘vocational’. This terminology better describes the relevance of this provision to the world of work, and helps to improve its profile and status. The OECD has recently proposed that ‘professional education and training’ should become the internationally accepted description for this type of education¹⁸. Northern Ireland has chosen the term professional and technical.

There are many good measures in place to raise the attractiveness of further education, such as, raising awareness, improvements to guidance and counselling, improved quality of teachers and trainers, and use of skills competitions. These approaches will be strengthened and built upon to include the development of case studies and a network of further education champions, celebration of success stories, and promotion of the high quality state of the art college facilities and equipment.

Further work will be done to promote the range of direct support programmes the colleges provide to businesses including innovation, research and development, customised training, and upskilling employees, and to emphasise the vital role they play in supporting inward investment and economic growth.

Highlighting the fact that the further education sector currently delivers around 18% of all higher education provision in Northern Ireland will also help to strengthen its position as an equal part of the education system. In addition to this, provision such as Higher Level Apprenticeships will be highlighted as alternatives to the traditional university pathway.

The enhanced performance measures, discussed in Theme 4, ‘Excellence’, including destination data, will be particularly useful in highlighting the links between professional and technical qualifications and labour market outcomes, to ensure that young people, parents, and teachers become more aware of the value of those qualifications.

18 OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training: Skills Beyond School Synthesis Report. <http://www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/skills-beyond-school-synthesis-report.pdf>

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Way Forward

Programme and Project Management

The policy commitments outlined in this new further education strategy will be implemented jointly by the Department for Employment and Learning and the further education sector through a programme of individual projects, and the Department and the sector will establish formal programme and project management governance arrangements.

Indicative projects to deliver the strategy are listed below, and a high level outline of their potential scope is provided at Annex A.

Project 1	Curriculum Content and Delivery;
Project 2	Economic Development;
Project 3	Social Inclusion;
Project 4	Excellence – Quality and Performance;
Project 5	College Partnerships;
Project 6	Governance/Leadership;
Project 7	Funding Model and College Sustainability; and
Project 8	Promoting the Further Education Sector

As indicated previously, there is considerable synergy between this further education strategy and the new apprenticeships and youth training strategies for Northern Ireland. In particular, colleges will be involved in the design of qualifications and curriculum for all three strategies and will be key deliverers of the strategies. Consequently, the implementation of a number of the projects listed above will be integrated as appropriate with the projects in the apprenticeships and youth training strategies.

Implementation Plan

The Department and the further education sector will develop and publish an implementation plan within three months of the publication of this strategy.

Funding

In 2015/16, the Department allocated around £144m to colleges through the FLU funding model that is referred to in section 10. This funds three main areas of activity: mainstream further education up to and including level 3, higher education delivered in colleges, and Essential Skills provision. In addition, around £34m in earmarked funds was allocated to colleges for specific purposes such as Additional Support Funds to provide financial support to certain categories of learners, support to employers through the Employer Support Programme and funding for unitary payments under the Private Finance Initiative.

In addition to the further education budget allocation referred to above, colleges are also funded separately to deliver provision under the Department's apprenticeships and youth training systems, and a number of employment related activities.

As indicated in section 10, the FLU funding model will be reviewed alongside the funding models that are being developed for the new apprenticeships and youth training systems.

Finally, as indicated in the Governance section, further education colleges have other sources of income from the delivery of other government programmes, from a range of European programmes, from full cost recovery activities with employers, from a number of philanthropic trusts, and from student fees.

Impact Assessments

As part of the implementation of the strategy, all projects will conduct a Section 75 Equality of Opportunity Screening, with a full Equality Impact Assessment and/or consultation being carried out where appropriate.

Project 1 – Curriculum Content and Delivery

This project will focus on ensuring that colleges develop and deliver provision that meets the current and future needs of employers and the Northern Ireland economy, in the context of mainstream further education and the new apprenticeship and youth training systems. The project will also include improving levels of literacy, numeracy and ICT in the NI population, taking account of the reviews of Essential Skills qualifications and GCSEs in English and mathematics. Finally, the project will also consider how colleges will deliver provision in stimulating and engaging ways, for example through the innovative and effective use of technology. There will be strong linkages between this project and curriculum and qualifications projects in the apprenticeships and youth training systems.

This project will address the following policy commitments: 1, 2, 7, 8, 9 and 20.

Project 2 – Economic Development

This project will explore the respective roles and responsibilities of colleges, DEL, Invest NI, the new District Councils and others in providing support to employers, both indigenous companies and inward investment projects, to up-skill their workforce, and to support innovation and product development. It will also consider the current range of interventions and funding streams available to support this work, and how colleges, in partnership with universities, can increase their research and development and knowledge transfer activities, particularly with smaller employers.

This project will address the following policy commitments: 3, 4, 5, 13 and 17.

Project 3 – Social Inclusion

This project will identify the barriers that still inhibit different groups of learners from participating in further education provision, and explore ways to overcome these barriers. Colleges working in partnership with others, including district councils and providers, to identify and overcome barriers to individuals' participation in learning will be a key element of this project. The project will also take account of any wider developments in the Department regarding provision at level 1 and below. There will be linkages with the Curriculum project, for example the importance of the essential skills of Literacy, numeracy and ICT.

This project will address the following policy commitments: 6, 13, 17 and 20.

Project 4 – Excellence: Quality and Performance

This project will strengthen further colleges' performance in a number of key areas, including pedagogy, teacher qualifications, industrial placements for lecturers, including lecturer exchanges with other countries, leadership and management in colleges, research, quality aspects of flexible delivery, and the quality improvement and inspection processes. The project will also explore all aspects of performance measurement, including obtaining meaningful feedback from learners and employers, tracking learner progression and destinations, and identifying appropriate output measures. It will consider how this information is used to inform quality improvement and to inform learner choices. This information could also be used to raise the profile of the further education sector and, more generally, of the value of professional and technical qualifications. Therefore, there will be linkages with the project to promote the further education sector.

This project will address the following policy commitments: 10, 11, 12, 13 and 20.

Project 5 – College Partnerships

This project will establish a governance process and structure to stimulate, manage and oversee collaborative and partnership working between colleges to ensure that efficiencies are achieved through shared services, particularly in key infrastructure and systems areas, and that colleges share best practice in all aspects of delivery to learners and employers to increase their effectiveness. The project will also ensure that the concept of college specialisms is applied to key areas of colleges' activity including support to employers, qualification and curriculum design, the development or procurement of on-line materials, and the use of technology, to the benefit of the further education sector as a whole and of colleges' customers.

This project will address the following policy commitments: 14, 15, 16 and 17.

Project 6 – Governance/Leadership

This project will consider how colleges' NDPB status can be exploited to the benefit of the effective organisation and delivery of education and training in Northern Ireland. This will include procurement approaches to the delivery of the Department's programmes, exploring the issues associated with colleges generating income beyond that which is provided by the Department, including in an international context, and working with DFP to ensure that colleges can retain income generated in this way.

This project will address the following policy commitments: 18 and 20.

Project 7 – Funding Model and College Sustainability

This project will review the current FLU funding model to ensure that it supports the strategic priorities for the sector as set out in this strategy, that it aligns with funding models for other major DEL programmes that colleges deliver, and that it supports colleges' financial sustainability.

This project will address the following policy commitment: 19.

Project 8 – Promoting the Further Education Sector

This project will consider ways to promote to learners, parents, schools and employers the benefits of participation in further education provision. More generally, the project will also explore how to promote the benefits of professional and technical education and training. There will be strong links with promotional aspects of the new apprenticeships and youth training systems.

This project will address the following policy commitment: 21.





Department for
**Employment
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The Department:

Our aim is to promote learning and skills, to prepare people for work and to support the economy.

This document is available in other formats upon request.



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