An evaluation of the Youth Training pilot programmes at level 2 and the ApprenticeshipsNI pilot programmes at level 3 provided by the six colleges of further education in Northern Ireland

June 2017

ETI: Promoting Improvement in the Interest of all Learners

The Education and Training Inspectorate
Promoting Improvement

Providing inspection services for:

Department of Education
Department for the Economy
and other commissioning Departments

CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE

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1. Introduction

The Department for the Economy (Department) requested the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to carry out an evaluation of the arrangements across the six colleges of further education to support the development of Youth Training programmes at level 2 and the Apprenticeship programmes at level 3, as part of the implementation of the Department's Youth Training[1] and Apprenticeship[2] Strategies. The evaluation was carried out between November 2016 and April 2017 and the Department and each college received oral feedback at the end of their evaluation. The following is a written summary of the overall main findings across the Northern Ireland further education sector.

2. Context

Sixteen Youth Training programmes were delivered in the colleges in the first year of the pilot in 2015/16, of which seven continued into their second year of delivery in 2016/17. In addition, in mid 2016, the Department asked the colleges to submit new proposals for pilots to commence in 2016/17 and consequently, an additional twenty-nine Youth Training programmes were accepted by the Department to be piloted in 2016/17.

In addition to the pilot Youth Training programmes, the Department also accepted proposals for the delivery of two pilot level 3 Apprenticeship programmes in two colleges in 2015/16 and six pilot level 3 Apprenticeship programmes, in five colleges in 2016/17.

The programmes being piloted by the colleges in 2016/17 are listed in the appendix.

3. Summary of overall main findings

The Youth Training and Apprenticeship pilot programmes are given a high strategic priority in all six colleges, and each is committed to piloting innovative programmes that will inform the implementation of the Department's strategies. All of the colleges have collaborated effectively and most are making a significant contribution to the cross-sector development of the pilot programmes, including sharing of effective practice. The pilot programmes have many innovative features, within the constraints of the existing qualifications and structures, that have been trialled across a range of professional and technical areas. There are gaps however, as the pilots did not test all of the economically important areas, such as, in agri food and renewable energies[3], and the entry/progression routes to the level 2 Youth Training programme are not clear.

Most of the pilot programmes are appropriately designed to enable students to progress or re-engage with education and training, to learn new skills and build upon their prior experiences. They enable students to access education and training at an appropriate level and to progress seamlessly to employment, and further and higher education.

The colleges have taken appropriate action to address most of the key priorities for development identified by ETI in phase one of the evaluation. Curriculum planning for most of the professional and technical areas is well considered and based on the results of consultations with industry and other stakeholders including college staff at all levels. Management and staff in most of the colleges have reviewed and evaluated rigorously the year 1 pilot programmes. As a result, improvements have been made in the curriculum offer for year 2 to reflect better industry practice, to widen the range of progression pathways, or to ensure that the qualifications being offered are fit for purpose.

[1] Generating our Success - The Northern Ireland Strategy for Youth Training
[2] Securing our Success: The Northern Ireland Strategy on Apprenticeships
[3] For full list: https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/del/FE18-12%20Priority%20Sectors.pdf

In the second year of the pilots, the colleges have tested the new delivery concept across a wider range of economically important and priority skills areas, such as creative and cultural skills, civil engineering, land-based engineering, and manufacturing engineering, in addition to piloting programmes, designed to meet student demand such as hairdressing and health and social care. The colleges have also tested the Youth Training pilots across professional and technical areas traditionally aligned to both work-based learning and further education. This has allowed them to trial various elements of the Youth Training Strategy, and to identify potential issues to inform future planning. In contrast, there is limited uptake of level 3 apprenticeship programmes by the colleges, although the piloting of civil engineering and dental nursing across three colleges has fostered effectively collaborative working.

Most of the students on the Youth Training programme are enrolled on the non-employed strand, although a small number in fabrication and welding, motor vehicle, mechanical engineering and wood occupations follow the employed route. Whilst the effectiveness of the Youth Training model for employed students has not been fully tested some issues have emerged, for example, in-college training takes place over an academic year and interrupts their ongoing training and the development of their skills. The model of delivery and curriculum for youth training for employed students needs to be explored across the colleges further to include, for example, a greater strategic focus on the planning of the work-based element to ensure it meets the needs of the employers and the students.

The development and integration of project-based learning to enhance the experiences of the students continues to be a high priority across the colleges. In all of them, good progress has been made in developing project-based learning resources but there is still variation in the definition and understanding of what exactly project-based learning is and in the range and quality of the projects being developed both within and across most of the colleges. In the majority of the colleges, there is a need to develop further and embed the concept of effective project-based learning across the curriculum.

Example of effective practice 1: In one pilot, project-based learning has been embedded throughout the provision linking successfully the core values of care and person-centred approaches with the work-experience element of the programme. Students are asked, within the boundaries of confidentiality, to develop profiles of individual clients, identifying their individual needs, interests and preferences. This work ensures that the students develop a clear understanding of, and develop, the necessary skills to be able to meet well the individual needs of their clients.

The colleges continue to review and improve the quality of the work-experience placement delivery models and a wide range of models have been developed to meet the needs of the students and the professional and technical areas. These include, one or two days per week and block placements of one week, several times a year. Whilst each model has clear strengths, such as facilitating the ongoing development of occupational and employability skills, the learning entitlement is not always sufficient to meet the assessed need of the student and the skills requirement of the professional and technical area.

Example of effective practice 2: In one pilot programme, the delivery model is divided into 17 week long blocks that meets the students' and employers' needs more effectively through an early emphasis on developing work-readiness specialist practical skills, with staged progression toward employment. The model also enables lecturers to visit students in the workplace at key points in the year, to integrate the work and college elements of the training more effectively, to improve links with employers, and to better inform curriculum planning.

While effective links and partnerships are mostly well developed across the colleges with a wide range of employers that provide good quality work-experience placements for most of the students; there is variability, in each college, of their effectiveness across the professional and technical areas. Where there is variability, this could be reduced by better co-ordinating the planning engagement with employers to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of appropriate, high quality work-placements for all of the students and to integrate better their workplace and directed training.

Example of effective practice 3: In one pilot programme, the integration of the directed and workplace training elements is a particularly strong feature in hairdressing where reflective practice and peer learning are used very effectively to engage and motivate the students in their learning. A range of well-targeted projects reflecting contemporary industry experiences, are used effectively to support the students' development and understanding of current and commercially relevant industry skills and knowledge.

Example of effective practice 4: One lecturer has developed particularly effective workplace links leading to benefits including the more effective development of the role of the work-experience placement mentors and their related high levels of support for the students, better integration of the training, and the identification of naturally occurring assessment evidence to reduce duplication of the assessment of learning.

Most colleges have implemented good processes to ensure that workplace mentors and buddies are in place for those students on work-experience placements. Whilst there are some examples of effective practice, such as the mentors and buddies providing high levels of support for students, there continues, to be variation in the understanding of the role of the buddy and how they can provide consistent, effective support for the development of the students' personal, social, employability and occupational skills development.

Example of effective practice 5: In one pilot programme, the innovative approach taken to the development of the role of the workplace buddy involves the deployment of higher education students to support the Youth Training students in the development of their work-related projects. This approach is impacting positively on the development of both the mentor's and mentee's personal and employability skills.

The colleges need to review the pre-entry guidance and make better use of initial assessment to ensure that the students will be able to meet the requirements of the Youth Training programme, including being able to undertake a minimum of level two in the essential skills and progress to GCSE study in both English and mathematics with a reasonable expectation of success at GCSE level. Too many students on the pilot programmes are targeting level 1 or lower, thereby reducing their opportunity to achieve the equivalent of 5 GCSEs including English and mathematics. The pre-entry guidance needs to be aligned to a programme of fast track essential skills signposting/options to upskill students who are entering the pilot programmes at level 1, and below, in English and mathematics. Students not yet ready to enter the programme should be supported or sign-posted to alternative provision to enable them to progress.

In the second year of the pilot, almost all of the colleges provide access to GCSE English and mathematics, however, most of them need to monitor closely the planning for the delivery of a cohesive learning programme to ensure that there is a clear and effective progression for students to access level 2 in the essential skills and, on completion, progress to a GCSE programme of study. In one college, the pace of the students' progression along the pathways, across the essential skills levels to GCSE, is slow and needs to be reviewed. Collaboration between the essential skills and GCSE lecturers needs to be strengthened to ensure that the teaching and learning more effectively supports the transition to GCSE.

The quality of almost all of the learning, teaching and training observed on the pilot programmes across the colleges is good or better, with the majority (55%) being evaluated as good. Where the learning experience was most effective, the lecturers provided well-conceived practical activities, including project-based learning opportunities, for the students to develop their wider communication, independent and team working skills, to think flexibly and to make informed decisions. Across the colleges, information and learning technologies are used well in the majority of sessions to support and enhance learning, although there is still work to be done to cascade and embed the practice across all of the professional and technical areas.

Example of effective practice 6: In one pilot, significant investment has made in the appointment of project-based learning mentors to support lecturers in developing projects that progressively develop the students' professional and technical, personal, social and employability skills, and there is a wide range of opportunities for the trainees to learn. In catering, for example, the students visit an organic garden over a number of weeks to acquire knowledge and skills through first-hand experience of the planting, pruning and growing of vegetables. The students are challenged to use a range of fresh produce from the garden. They need to think creatively and make decisions on what and how to prepare, cook and serve as an integral part of the menu produced for the evening restaurant. This type of learning fosters the development of communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, collaboration and self-directed learning skills.

Across the colleges, the staff demonstrate a strong commitment to the care and welfare of the students. The needs of students with additional learning requirements are met effectively with the provision of additional support, resources and reasonable adjustments.

Example of best practice 7: in one pilot programme, the development of an innovative curriculum of individualised enhanced support, which is informed well by a thorough analysis of student and the employer needs, is effective in supporting the students to: overcome their barriers to learning and employment, address their social and emotional barriers, and to build their resilience, confidence and motivation, enabling them to sustain their work-experience placement and participation on the programme.

The provision of careers education, information, advice and guidance is mainly good across the colleges; most of the students interviewed are aware of the progression pathways in their professional and technical area. In the majority of the pilot programmes, there is a well-developed schedule of enrichment activities which are linked well to the colleges' curriculum. In a significant minority of the pilot programmes, however, there is a need to develop the careers, education, information, advice and guidance programme to include a programme of enrichment activities such as industry visits and guest speakers, and to plan for events such as intercampus working and competitions, and team building days.

Across the colleges, there are appropriate self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes in place to monitor and improve the quality of the pilot programmes. The colleges, however, should conduct a cross-sector review of all of the pilot programmes to identify strategies and models that are particularly effective and to collectively learn lessons from pilots or actions that were less successful to inform planning going forward.

While in a minority of colleges highly effective open days/evenings use employers well to promote the youth training programmes, there continues to be a need for them to be promoted more effectively to pupils and parents in post-primary schools and for schools and colleges to work more collaboratively to actively inform the pupils about the range of career and progression opportunities available to them through the programmes offered.

The standards of work demonstrated by the students on the pilot programmes, across the colleges, are mostly good or better; the students are well-motivated and, to date, are progressing well on their professional and technical programmes. For example, in one college, the motor vehicle students are growing quickly in their confidence and competence to complete practical tasks to a good or better standard, and they demonstrate well the transfer of their literacy, numeracy, and information and communications technology (ICT) skills to their professional and technical project work. Their behaviour and levels of engagement are very good.

Overall, across the two years of the level 2 pilot, recruitment to the programmes has increased from 248 across 11 programmes to 532 across 13 programmes; in particular, in year 2 four colleges have recruited well to motor vehicle programmes accounting for just over a fifth (21%) of the total recruitment. In contrast, only small numbers have been recruitment to the areas of horticulture, professional butchery and land based technology.

Recruitment in year 1 of the level 3 pilots was low with only two colleges piloting a level 3 apprenticeship and between them registering only 29 apprentices. It is positive that in year 2, this has widened with five colleges delivering apprenticeship programmes in six professional and technical areas. While it is welcome that three completely new level 3 programmes have been piloted in the skills shortage and STEM[4] areas of civil engineering, creative and cultural skills, and dental nursing and that overall recruitment has increased significantly to 109 apprentices, it still remains low.

Outcomes from the 2015/16 level 2 pilot programmes are variable. Whilst, at the time of the evaluation, the overall retention rate was very good at 80%, it was lower on two-year programmes where it has important areas for improvement at 69%. While 88% of the students who completed their programme achieved their professional and technical qualifications, the rate for the achievement of all targeted qualifications is too low at 53%. This low achievement rate is mainly due to poor essential skills and GCSE performance at level 2 and the number of students that are targeting entry level and level 1 essential skills, with no opportunity to achieve at level 2. While outcomes for the GCSE qualifications in English and mathematics are modest to date there are some signs of early success at GCSE in two of the colleges where the students have been facilitated to undertake GCSE qualifications. At the time of the evaluation, the retention rate on the 2016/17 level 2 pilots was high at 95%[5].

In 2015/16, the overall retention rate on the two level 3 programmes piloted by two of the colleges is very good at 86%. The comparable figure for the 2016/17 level 3 cohorts was also high at 99%.

The progression rate for those students who achieved their professional and technical qualifications is good at 71%, however, it is low overall in hairdressing and health and social care programmes at 42% and 56%.

Overall, the colleges need to continue to monitor and review the provision to ensure that the changes made to the curriculum and the models of delivery are effective in improving the retention and achievement rates across all of the pilot programmes.

[4] Science Technology Engineering and Maths
[5] All data was derived from the information supplied by the colleges at the time of the evaluation.

4. Key priorities for development

As the pilot programmes develop further, it will be important that the colleges:

- conduct a cross-sector review of the level 2 and the level 3 pilot programmes to evaluate their effectiveness and to inform planning going forward;

- prioritise and establish a wider range of sectoral partnerships to support the development of an economically relevant curricula that facilitates the transparency and transferability of skills, qualifications and experience;

- develop, co-ordinate and plan better links and collaborative working with employers, other training providers and the colleges to facilitate the sharing of best practice and the development of quality programmes across the sector;

- strengthen the pre-entry guidance on entry to the programmes to ensure that the students are placed on the most appropriate programme at the correct level;

- develop and implement a clear and well articulated pathway for achievement at level 2 in the essential skills and progression to achievement in GCSE English and mathematics; and

- continue to monitor closely the retention, achievement and progression rates on the pilot programmes.

APPENDIX

Table of the programmes being piloted in the colleges in 2016/17

College	Youth Training pilot programmes at level 2	Year of programme	Duration (years)
Belfast Metropolitan College	Fabrication and Welding Health and Social Care Hairdressing IT	1&2 1 1&2 1	2 2 2 1
South Eastern Regional College	Catering Hairdressing Horticulture Mechanical Engineering Motor Vehicle	1&2 1 1&2 1&2 1&2	2 2 2 2 2
Southern Regional College	Land Based Engineering Manufacturing Engineering (mechanical and electrical) Plumbing Professional Butchery Motor VehicleWood Occupations	1 1 1 1 1 1	2 2 2 2 2 2
Northern Regional College	Business Administration Hairdressing Health and Social Care Motor Vehicle Travel and Tourism	1&21 1 1 1 1	1&22 2 2 2 1
North West Regional College	Business Administration Hairdressing Health and Social Care Motor vehicle Wood occupations	1 1 1 1 1	1 2 2 2 2
South West College	Culinary Skills Engineering Hairdressing Information Technology	1 1 1 1	2 2 2 1

College	Apprenticeship pilot programmes at level 3	Year of programme	Duration (years)
Belfast Metropolitan College	Creative and cultural skills (L3) Civil engineering (L3) Information technology (L3)	1	2
South Eastern Regional College	Civil engineering (L3) Catering (commenced March 2017)	1 1	2 2
Southern Regional College	Dental nursing (L3)	1&2	2
Northern Regional College			
North West Regional College	Dental nursing (L3)	1	2
South West College	Civil engineering (L3) Dental nursing (L3) Automotive Engineering (L3)	1 1 1&2	2 2 2

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