Department *of* **Education**

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Report of a Survey of

College Development Planning Processes and Provision for Basic Skills in Colleges of Further and Higher Education in Northern Ireland

Inspected: 2000/2001

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The Education and Training Inspectorate -
Promoting Improvement

Providing Inspection Services for

Department of Education
Department for Employment and Learning
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

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1.   INTRODUCTION

1.1   In 1997, the then Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI), issued Circular FE 1/97, which required all colleges of further education to submit, for the first time, a college development plan (CDP), outlining strategic aims, development priorities and key curriculum targets, informed by Government priorities for the further education sector. Since then, the development planning process has become an integral feature of the management of colleges, and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) provides regular guidance to colleges on requirements for development plans, and strategic priorities for development of the sector.

1.2   Each college is now required to submit an annual development plan to the DEL, to inform of developments in individual colleges, and facilitate a strategic overview of the further education sector.

1.3   During the academic year 2000-2001, the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) visited 15 colleges of further education, to assess the planning processes involved in the production of the CDP and, in particular, to evaluate the planning for the provision of basic skills and staff development. In addition, in each of the colleges visited, either basic skills or staff development was the primary focus for a more detailed inspection. This report is a summary of the main findings from the inspection of basic skills.

1.4   This survey develops further the inspection of college development planning and, in particular, builds upon the survey undertaken by District Inspectors in 1999/2000 of the Access, Collaboration and Incentive initiatives. The focus of the survey, the management of basic skills provision in colleges, is set in the wider context of the demands impacting on the sector including: the strategic aims of widening access and increasing participation; raising standards and improving quality; and the challenges presented to the colleges through recent policy initiatives, including, the Lifelong Learning Strategy, reflected in the report Lifelong Learning: A New Learning Culture For All (DENI 1999).

1.5   For the purposes of the survey, basic skills was defined as literacy and numeracy provision up to and including level 2 for both full-time and part-time students. Basic skills provision in each of the following contexts was evaluated during the survey:

   ■   in discrete programmes (often with titles such as Adult Basic Education or Improve your English);

- as part of other programme areas, often integrated into vocational provision, for example within Jobskills or mainstream full-time courses or within other interest areas, such as parenting;

- as part of learning support.

The basic skills survey did not cover discrete provision for young people or adults with learning difficulties or disabilities, that is, those categorised as students with learning difficulties or disabilities (SLDD).

1.6 The quality of the management arrangements and organisation of basic skills provision was evaluated in all of the colleges inspected. In the seven colleges in which basic skills was the primary focus of the survey, the quality of teaching and learning was also evaluated. In total, 64 basic skills lessons were observed across the three learning contexts.

1.7 In all colleges, discussions were held with students and a wide range of staff including lecturers, basic skills and key skills co-ordinators, heads of departments and other managers responsible for the planning and organisation of basic skills, assistant and deputy directors, the directors of colleges, and key employers.

1.8 This composite report is based on the Inspectorate's findings across the colleges in Northern Ireland, and summarises key issues for colleges in their delivery of basic skills provision.

2. MAIN FINDINGS

2.1 Almost all colleges identify basic skills as an area for development in their CDPs, and most set targets for improving their enrolments in basic skills classes. There is, however, little evidence that these have been determined through systematic analysis of previous provision and outcomes, or rigorous identification of the basic skills requirements of full-time and part-time students, or the needs of community groups or local industry.

2.2 The planning for basic skills in the majority of colleges lacks coherence and is not co-ordinated sufficiently across the three learning contexts. In most colleges, the planning for each strand of provision is undertaken by individual lecturers or course teams, and systems to support initial assessment, learning and teaching, and recording and monitoring of student progress, are designed separately for each learning context. This results in considerable duplication of effort and significant variation in the quality of provision across the learning contexts, both within and across colleges.

In a minority of colleges, the planning process is informed by a clear understanding of the importance of basic skills provision to the effectiveness of the college, in terms of its potential to improve student retention, achievement and progression rates. In these colleges, planning for basic skills is undertaken on a whole-college basis. A designated senior member of staff has responsibility for the co-ordination and management of basic skills and a standardised approach is adopted for the development and implementation of systems for initial assessment, induction, recording and monitoring progress, and evaluating provision across the three learning contexts.

2.3 Almost all of the colleges have withdrawn the use of course titles such as 'adult basic education' for discrete programmes, and replaced them with titles such as 'Improve your English'. Most report an increase in enrolments as a result. Almost all colleges offer a good range of courses in literacy, but there is a narrow range of basic skills provision in numeracy in the majority of colleges. In addition, planning for basic skills programmes in numeracy is poor in a minority of colleges, and does not ensure that students progress is in line with their ability.

Nomenclature remains a problem, and both college staff and employers interviewed during the survey report a concern with the title 'basic skills'. A minority of colleges have developed innovative approaches to the marketing of basic skills through the provision of courses that promote basic skills development through other contexts including basic hygiene, information technology (IT), or parenting skills.

2.4 Most colleges have developed good relationships with local community groups, and there has been a considerable increase in community-based provision over the past three years. Factors contributing to this expansion include the use of mobile units to provide courses in isolated and rural locations, and college staff working in close partnership with community groups to design, market and deliver basic skills provision. However, the progression strategy to ensure learners continue to develop by moving from accredited to non-accredited programmes, or from outcentres to college campuses, is weak in the majority of colleges. Insufficient emphasis is placed on the development of strategies to encourage learners to move on to more challenging programmes, and many community-based learners

remain in their own centres to take further programmes which do not progress their learning sufficiently.

2.5   A significant minority of colleges have made good progress in identifying and working with local employers to meet the skills needs of sections of their workforces. However, more needs to be done by all colleges to strengthen their links with employers, and to develop provision for employees in need of support in basic skills.

> There are examples of good practice in terms of provision for both large and small employers. The best practice is characterised by: well planned and systematic approaches to the audit and analysis of local employment needs; the development of programmes customised to the needs of the individual workforce, planned, delivered, monitored and evaluated in close consultation and collaboration with employers.

2.6   There is considerable variation, both within and across colleges, in the quality of procedures to identify students and learners with weaknesses in literacy and numeracy. The initial assessment arrangements for students enrolled on discrete basic education programmes were judged to have more weaknesses than strengths in a significant minority of colleges. Initial assessment is generally well developed in Jobskills provision and, in the best practice, the outcomes are used effectively to plan and implement suitable learning programmes for individual students. In contrast, initial assessment procedures for full-time students on mainstream programmes are not well developed in the majority of colleges and, in a minority of colleges, there are no systematic procedures for assessment of students' abilities in literacy and numeracy.

2.7   In the majority of colleges, quality assurance arrangements are not sufficiently rigorous to ensure consistency in provision of learning support for students across the different learning contexts. There is considerable variation in the quality of the learning support provided on mainstream programmes for students with weaknesses in literacy or numeracy. The management arrangements for learning support were considered excellent in two colleges, good in four colleges, and to have more weaknesses than strengths in the other colleges. In three of the colleges, there is no policy or provision for learning support, or learning support is provided on only one of a number of the college campuses. In a minority of colleges, the learning support policy is either too general or narrowly focused and, as a result, leads to wide-ranging interpretation by individual lecturers, and this results

in considerable variation in practice across the college. In the majority of colleges, insufficient use is made of individualised student learning agreements (ISLAs) to monitor progress in basic skills against agreed targets.

In the best practice, full-time students complete a comprehensive but practical initial assessment on admission to the college. All are advised of the outcomes, and those who have weaknesses in literacy or numeracy attend a confidential interview at which they are provided with the facility to attend learning support workshops, or receive practical help in the classroom or workshop. Learning targets are identified clearly and recorded on the ISLA. Students follow a well-designed individual learning programme, and progress is monitored closely by both the vocational and learning support tutors.

2.8   In most of the colleges, there is considerable variation in the quality of learning and teaching, and the standards achieved by learners, across the three learning contexts. In just under a quarter of the lessons observed, the teaching was excellent; in two-thirds it was good. It was poor in just over one-tenth of the lessons observed. In almost all colleges, there are examples of good practice in learning and teaching in at least one of the learning contexts. There are, however, insufficient opportunities for staff involved in basic skills provision to come together to learn from each other, and there is an absence of strategies to allow for the sharing of good practice across the different contexts.

Excellent teaching was characterised by a good match between the needs and interests of learners, and the learning and teaching approaches used. Learners' needs were identified clearly, suitable learning programmes were developed, and each learner was involved in a regular review of their progress. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) was used effectively as a teaching and learning resource, and also as part of developing communication skills and developing skills in information-handling. Lesson plans and schemes of work were clear, and designed to promote progression. Detailed records of progress were kept on a weekly basis, and review of individual progress was monitored and evaluated regularly.

2.9   In most of the colleges, there is no coherent strategy for the management or development of basic skills provision across the three learning contexts. The strategies for identifying and sharing good practice, for designing and refining processes to support delivery, and for monitoring and evaluating provision, are weak.

2.10   In almost all colleges, the monitoring and evaluation of basic skills provision in each of the learning contexts are poor. In most of the colleges, the course review procedures do not give sufficient consideration to the impact of students' weaknesses in basic skills, on retention and success rates.

> In one college, following a concern with poor retention rates identified during the course review process, the course team implemented a strategy designed to strengthen initial assessment arrangements, and provide additional support for students with identified weaknesses in literacy and numeracy. As a result, the retention rates for this programme have improved significantly for the past two years.

2.11   The provision of basic skills in each learning context is managed and delivered by both full-time and part-time staff in each of the colleges. In almost all colleges, there is insufficient communication between key staff involved in basic skills teaching and a lack of opportunity for them to come together to learn from one another. The interface between key skills and basic skills lacks cohesion and clarity, and most staff involved in basic skills do not have a common understanding of the relationship between basic skills and key skills.

2.12   There is considerable variation, both within and across colleges, in the way volunteers are deployed in basic skills sessions, and in the opportunities they have for training and development. Similarly, while most colleges have induction programmes for part-time staff, these concentrate on administrative matters, and do not focus sufficiently on helping staff to develop their skills in teaching and supporting learning. While many colleges have provided staff development for full-time and part-time staff in both key skills and basic skills, there is little evidence of monitoring and evaluating the impact of staff development on classroom practice.

In one college in which volunteers are used extensively and effectively to support the learning and teaching in basic skills sessions, involvement in basic skills classes is conditional on undertaking a rigorous period of induction, and receiving frequent feedback on performance from a supportive yet rigorous basic skills co-ordinator. Volunteers are required to undertake the requisite staff development and training programmes, keep comprehensive notes of their short-term and long-term planning, and record their own progress regularly against identified learning targets. In the best practice observed during the survey, all part-time lecturers in one college have their classroom practice observed by an experienced member of staff, and receive comprehensive feedback on their performance.

2.13   Over recent years, almost all colleges have made a considerable investment in capital resources, and in materials to support learning and teaching in basic skills. The quality of accommodation and resources was graded excellent in three of the colleges, good in nine colleges, satisfactory in one college and poor in one college. There is, however, differential access to these resources across the three learning contexts and, in a minority of colleges, discrete provision for traditional adult basic education classes is poorly served.

3.   CONCLUSION AND AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The survey of basic skills provision has identified considerable variation, both within and across colleges, in the quality of provision and learning and teaching in the three learning contexts. However, the survey has also identified examples of good practice in at least one of the learning contexts in each of the colleges where basic skills was the primary focus of the survey. In most colleges, the planning and management of provision across the three learning contexts, and the identification and sharing of good practice, are poorly developed. These issues will have to be addressed by colleges if the quality of provision and standards are to be improved to meet effectively the key challenges of the basic skills agenda.

3.1   SUMMARY OF AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The following are areas for development to improve and strengthen the quality of basic skills provision:

■   the development of a whole-college basic skills strategy, which identifies provision in each of the three learning contexts;

- a common approach to the development and implementation of policies and strategies for initial assessment, induction, and recording progress in each of the learning contexts;

- a policy for learning support which promotes coherence and consistency of diagnostic arrangements, and learning support, for all students with basic skills needs across the college;

- a coherent approach to monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the basic skills policies across the college, which takes full account of the course review process;

- a strategic, systematic and collaborative approach to the identification and design of programmes to meet the needs of local communities and industry;

- the implementation of awareness-raising sessions to communicate basic skills policy and strategy, including the interface between basic skills and key skills, to all staff across the college;

- effective strategies to ensure that staff involved in the delivery of basic skills programmes receive comprehensive induction and training, and have regular opportunities to meet and learn from one another;

- comprehensive induction programmes which inform all new staff and volunteers of basic skills policies and procedures, and incorporate guidance on strategies for teaching and learning, and monitoring and evaluation;

- a centralised approach to the identification of teaching and learning resources to plan and implement effective basic skills programmes, which build on the existing good practice within the college in initial assessment, recording, monitoring and evaluation of individual progress;

- the development of a strategy to identify and extend good practice in learning and teaching, and self-evaluation, across the college;

- the development of strategies for monitoring and evaluating staff development, and assessing its impact on teaching and learning and standards and outcomes, including retention rates.

COLLEGES IN WHICH BASIC SKILLS WAS
THE PRIMARY FOCUS OF THE SURVEY

East Antrim Institute of Further and Higher Education

East Tyrone College of Further Education

Limavady College of Further and Higher Education

Lisburn Institute of Further and Higher Education

North East Institute of Further and Higher Education

North West Institute of Further and Higher Education

Upper Bann Institute of Further and Higher Education