

Further Education, Work-based Learning and European Social Fund Phase Report

September 2018 to December 2020



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Foreword

The last year has brought challenges to education and training in Northern Ireland unlike anything we could have imagined. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) along with many others, had to re-think priorities quickly in response to the Covid-19 outbreak, including pausing inspection indefinitely.

Successful responses to the pandemic both, here and across the world have required understanding, adaptable and flexible leadership, underpinned by technological creativity; testing to the extreme the very attributes our education and training curricula endeavour to foster. Personal resilience is at a premium.

Maintaining operational integrity within and across the education and training system, continues to be a demanding, and increasingly exhausting undertaking for individuals and organisations. The long held ambition of providing access to education online had to be put in place virtually overnight.

Since March 2020, inspectors have been focusing largely on supporting leaders and practitioners to provide continuity of learning for children and young people and to support their wellbeing. Inspectors have shared their expertise and worked collaboratively with other key education and training stakeholders, to develop advice and guidance for a range of sectors.

This report is one of a series of seven individual reports (for Pre-school; Primary; Post-primary; Special; Education Other Than At School; Youth; and Further Education and Work-based learning) covering the period September 2018 to December 2020, replacing the previous biennial Chief Inspector's Report.

This series of reports sets out: to help to promote improvement in the interests of all learners; to identify, affirm, and share evidence of effective learning, so that all learners can benefit; and to provide a basis to continue the professional educational discourse between inspectors and educators, for the benefit of all children and young people.

The reports are intended to stimulate debate and discussion on what we are discovering about the nature of effective learning and teaching, that can not only support a swifter recovery but that can influence and shape the future of education in Northern Ireland.

The immediate future continues to be uncertain, but I feel privileged to lead ETI, in continuing to contribute our impartial and objective analysis, evaluation and expertise to the collective work of addressing the challenges facing the education and training system in Northern Ireland.

These reports mark a change of direction and a fresh start to our organisation and our work. I welcome your thoughts and contributions as to how we can continue to support learners and educators to adapt flexibly and quickly to changing and unforeseen circumstances in the future through capturing and building on the experiences of educators before and during the pandemic.



Faustina Graham

Faustina Graham
Chief Inspector

Context

This multi-phase report, including further education, work-based learning, the European Social Fund (ESF) and Northern Ireland (NI) prisons, draws on evidence from inspections and evaluations that took place between September 2018 and March 2020, when inspections were paused as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic. The report also draws on evidence from the work of ETI district inspectors who have continued to engage with and support organisations during the pandemic.

Part one: September 2018 to March 2020 (Key Inspection Findings)

Over the period September 2018 to March 2020 there had been significant inspection and evaluation work completed across further education, work-based learning, the ESF projects and NI prisons.

In work-based learning, 13 full work-based learning inspections, 6 quality improvement planning inspections and 5 follow-up inspections were completed. In further education, the level 3 curriculum evaluation was completed in 4 of the 6 colleges. Across the ESF, 3 full inspections, 19 quality improvement planning inspections and 12 baseline inspections of the new project promoters took place. In addition, ETI undertook the inspection of purposeful activity¹ in two prisons and one private language school was inspected (Tier 4 educational oversight inspection).

The key findings from each phase are outlined below. In July 2020, a detailed written overview of the inspection findings from September 2018 to March 2020 was shared with the relevant officials in the Department for the Economy (Department).

Work-based learning

- Most trainees and apprentices were developing good or better professional and technical skills, those who completed training were achieving well, which was increasingly underpinned by more effective levels and impact of employer engagement, including collaborative development of apprenticeship programmes.
- The number of work-based learning suppliers continued to decline. One-third of the training supplier organisations inspected over the period, including follow-up inspections, needed to address important or significant areas for improvement within their provision. Across the provision inspected, there were undue variations in the quality of the provision for the essential skills and the effectiveness and the robustness of the arrangements for safeguarding trainees and apprentices, whilst compliant, needed further development.

¹ Purposeful activity is one of four broad thematic judgements, known as healthy prison tests, used by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons in their prison inspection expectations guidance. Essentially, prisoners are able, and expected, to engage in activity that is likely to benefit them (which typically includes participation in learning, skills development and work activities).

- The care and welfare provided for the trainees and apprentices in work-based learning was a strength of the provision and was impacting positively across the supplier organisations inspected.
- ApprenticeshipsNI was a highly valued and effective training programme that was meeting well the training needs of young people and industry. Overall qualifications outcomes and associated skills levels in apprenticeships programmes were high. Almost all (95%) apprentices, across the organisations inspected, were being trained and developed in professional and technical provision that was good or better.
- Not enough young people with the required aptitudes and prior attainment are engaging in the apprenticeships programmes; consequently there are significant skills gaps, particularly in areas important to the economy and growth. In addition, more apprentices need to progress from level 2 to level 3 training programmes and work needs to be done with employers to encourage or incentivise them to better support this progression pathway, in order to meet better the higher level skills of the wider economy.
- Too few young female learners were engaging in professional and technical training; overall, for example, just over one-quarter (27%) of the apprentices at that time were female and it is a concern that they make up just 3% of STEM-related apprenticeship registrations (this rises to 11% when health and social care registrations are included).
- Outcomes for learners² and quality of leadership and management were good or better in 77% of the work-based learning supplier organisations inspected across the period; the quality of provision for learning was good or better in 85% of them.

Further Education

- The ETI evaluation of curriculum provision at level 3 in the further education sector, completed in four of the six colleges, provided evidence to show that the sector is increasingly adaptable and agile, meeting very well the learning and progression needs of a significantly diverse range of students.
- The colleges have a strong and impactful social inclusion agenda. In a majority of the colleges, at least one-half of the level 3 enrolments are from the two highest socio-economic deprivation quintiles. It is, therefore, evident that a significant strength of the colleges is the provision of learning and progression opportunities to meet the career aspirations of an often socially disadvantaged intake of students.

² During inspections, inspectors use the Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework (ISEF) to come to summative evaluations on outcomes for learners, quality of provision and leadership and management.

- The further education colleges offer a broad and economically-relevant curriculum, often co-designed with employers, preparing the students well for progression to higher education or employment.
- The standard of the students' vocational work was mostly good or better and the overall outcomes attained by the students on level 3 programmes in further education are mostly high; most of them progress to higher education.
- While project-based learning, across the colleges, was at different stages of development, focus and embedding, it is clear that the further education provision is uniquely placed and able to provide rich learning experiences for the students to develop a broad range of relevant employability skills that are highly regarded by employers. Further investment in the continued professional learning of lecturing staff in this important area, including in teacher training qualifications, should be considered by the colleges and the Department.
- The further education colleges have worked very hard, and with success, to establish and maintain effective links and partnerships with a wide range of employers, industry bodies and key stakeholders at local, regional, national and international level which have informed well the curriculum planning process.
- The decline in full-time level 3 enrolments across the colleges, and the increasing duplication of vocational provision by post-primary schools, is a challenge to the capacity and potential of the further education sector to meet the diverse skills development needs of the NI economy.
- The quality of the colleges' facilities and learning resources ranged from good to outstanding, but in a majority of the professional and technical areas evaluated they are outstanding; they were used to very good effect to provide students with access to often state-of-the-art equipment and resources and to support them to develop contemporary industry-standard skills. Staff are well-qualified and experienced in their professional and technical areas and provide students with authentic and contemporary learning and skills development.

Work is needed to address the sustained decline in full-time level 3 enrolments, the overly low uptake and achievement rates in the essential skills provision and how performance data is collated, reported and used to effect improvement.

European Social Fund

The projects used an effective range of approaches to enhance recruitment and consistently met targets; they largely offered an appropriate curriculum matched well to the needs of participants. The high quality of the provision for care and welfare impacted positively on the participants' readiness for learning, development and ultimately sustained employment.

A particular, successful feature of the ESF projects was strong, collaborative partnership working, including with the health and social care trusts, the prisons, other community and voluntary organisations and a wide range of employers.

The majority of the projects need to strengthen their self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes and to improve the tracking and monitoring processes of the distance travelled of the participants, from their various starting points, and to set more challenging targets for progression. In almost all of the projects, the arrangements for safeguarding young people and adults who may be at risk, although compliant, needed to be reviewed and contemporised.

NI Prisons³

The evidence showed that the positive signs of improvement in the learning and skills provision in Northern Ireland's prisons, reported on in the last Chief Inspector's report, have been sustained and built upon. High quality, adequately resourced and fit-for-purpose learning and skills provision continues to be a high priority for the senior leaders in the prison service.

The further education sector⁴ has provided more consistency and continuity in the provision across the prison establishments. The establishments and colleges are aware of the need to further align the curriculum offer with the skills needed in the world of work and for more learners to take up provision in the essential skills to improve their literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

³ The ETI in partnership with Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI), the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, inspects purposeful activity within prisons, evaluating the quality of prisoner work roles, education, training and skills. Purposeful activity is one of four key areas in prison inspection methodology. During the reporting period (September 2018 – March 2020), the ETI contributed to two prison inspections and the evaluations were incorporated into the CJINI inspection reports published in June 2020.

⁴ Currently, Belfast Met deliver much of the learning and skills in Hydebank Wood, Maghaberry and Ash House with the North West Regional College delivering provision in Magilligan.

Part two: March to August 2020 (Responding to the Pandemic)

The response to Covid-19 by the further education colleges, work-based learning providers and ESF projects had to be undertaken at pace and in an unprecedented situation. From mid-March 2020, almost all organisations were closed to learners⁵ and they refocused their work and resources from a model of largely face to face, on-site provision to one of moving significant aspects of their **provision online. They rapidly established a model of alternative online learning⁶, teaching and engagement support**, with varying levels of engagement by learners.

The evidence shows providers found themselves **at various states of readiness**, and at **very different starting points**, for this very changed education and training landscape. Those organisations who had previously invested in establishing an operational digital learning platform, with which staff and learners were familiar and competent in using, coped better with the transition to the emergency online teaching model that was required in the early days of lockdown.

The further education colleges were best placed to quickly adapt to the online delivery of significant aspects of their curriculum. All have well-established and fit-for-purpose digital learning platforms and tried and tested blended learning curriculum delivery models, particularly in areas at level 3 and above. Substantial proportions of staff had benefited from ongoing lecturer/tutor professional learning in the key areas of technology enhanced learning and digital pedagogy, and had substantive experience in the delivery of effective online learning prior to the pandemic. The work was underpinned by the colleges' ongoing strategies for the further embedding of technology enhanced learning, including staff access to peer mentors with considerable expertise in digital pedagogy, synchronously and asynchronously.

Further Education College: Initial response to the pandemic and online learning

The response of a further education college in moving to online learning was strategically and operationally well-planned by senior management. The College progressed rapidly and well to online working and learning and sought to 'create routine' for students and staff by adhering as much as possible to the current timetable for classes. Staff were supported by pedagogy mentors who had previously trained them in a range of digital technologies, which enabled an increased use of online technology across the curriculum.

A key challenge across the College was in relation to students' access to personal computers and laptops. By April, the College had provided an extra 200 personal computers and laptops (and delivered these where required) to staff and students.

⁵ The term learner in this report encompasses students in further education colleges, trainees and apprentices in work-based learning and participants on ESF projects.

⁶ This term can also be taken to mean remote learning

The College was also aware that internet access at home was an issue for some students and smart phones were being used to access online services and learning. Agile working amidst a rapidly evolving situation saw effective collaboration and support for students, helping them as they transitioned to online learning. Effective communication was maintained in real time through virtual classroom sessions in Microsoft Teams. Students were able to join classes through their phones and other devices.

Across the College, there continued to be a strong commitment at all levels to supporting students to overcome any barriers to participation and engagement, to remain on their programme and to succeed. Staff were able to signpost students to the range of accessibility features to assist them to work effectively in the remote context. Where specific learning needs arose, tutors worked with learning support staff and the College's pedagogy mentors to find a solution to help the students continue to learn.

The College had previously developed effective integrated real-time systems, including a Progress Tracker and a College Student App. During the first week of remote working, 200 College staff engaged in online professional learning in the use of Microsoft Teams and the online environment. Since the move to remote working, these digital applications and systems have proved invaluable, supporting staff and students with the continuation of online learning, teaching and assessment. The College was able to monitor individual student attendance on a weekly basis.

The College used the well-established virtual learning environment extensively to provide a platform to enrich the online learning and teaching experience through a blended approach to learning. Curriculum managers monitored individual cohorts of students to gauge the reaction of students and staff across curriculum areas. Across Level 1 programmes, staff reported students were more engaged online than before the crisis. Essential skills staff teaching classes online evidenced that students engage well across curriculum areas. Needing creative solutions to practical assessments tutors adapted assessments, for example, performing arts students created group vlogs and radio plays as they adapted to what was possible in the context of remote working.

While the colleges had the required infrastructure and a substantive staff capacity to deliver online learning to good effect, and despite their best endeavours, their **efforts were hampered** by: the digital strain reported by many learners, such as inadequate ongoing access to appropriate digital devices along with sufficient, reliable bandwidth and data minutes; the number of staff who were not adequately trained or prepared in terms of the required digital skillset; provision of access, at home, to infrastructure and training for staff to support the rapid transition to online learning; the closure of childcare facilities which impeded on staff availability and flexibility; and the additional challenge of following the guidance and associated demands of a very wide range of awarding organisations with regard to the provision of calculated assessment grades/outcomes and the planning required for adapted assessments.

Many of the providers who didn't have an operational learning platform largely coped by taking the resources used for face-to-face learning and teaching and making these available online, using a range of digital applications. Due to the pace with which this was done, and the then lower level of staff digital skills, the impact of this approach, in terms of learner engagement and participation, varied greatly. In the majority of providers new to this manner of delivering learning and teaching, there was too little time for thought and planning about how the resources and digital applications would be used to support learning, namely it was approached in the absence of any sound digital pedagogical processes or training. Where the organisations did not have an appropriate online platform, resources were either emailed to the learners or provided in hard-copy format.

The opportunities for learners, across all provision, to **develop and apply professional and technical practical skills came pretty much to a halt** in March 2020. The impact of virtually no practical skills training was most acute for those professional and technical areas where the training and attainment of occupational skills is required as a licence to practise to recognised industry standards. During this period, however, it is noteworthy that providers worked hard, using flexible and agile delivery models within the health guidelines, to facilitate adaptive assessments to ensure as many learners as possible achieved their qualifications and progressed.

Senior and middle leaders, along with Departmental officials, found themselves to be in the eye of a storm; and given the unprecedented circumstances, the scale of the challenges faced, including the pace with which they had to act, many of them coped admirably. Without doubt, senior leaders have found it very challenging to maintain a focus on strategic leadership while at the same time dealing with the operational impact of a daily multiplicity of urgent issues related to the pandemic, including uncertainty around qualifications and assessment processes.

Across the providers, the **logistics of providing staff with the necessary infrastructure** to enable them to work and teach from home proved extremely challenging; however, progress was rapid, staff were flexible and supportive of one another and a majority were up and running quite quickly. Appropriate work was also carried out in updating and communicating the relevant and related policies and procedures, particularly those related to safeguarding and acceptable IT use, with appropriate training for staff. In addition, it is clear that there was a strong focus, across the providers, on the care and welfare of their learners. In the days and weeks after lockdown in March 2020, a small number of work-based learning and ESF providers re-opened their premises in order to support those learners they knew to be more vulnerable, and also to address specific welfare or safeguarding concerns.

Work-based learning: Supporting vulnerable trainees

A work-based learning provider, located in an inner city area of high deprivation, was very concerned about the effect that the closure due to the March 2020 lockdown would have on their most vulnerable young Training for Success trainees. The staff know and support the trainees very well; many of the young people experience very disruptive and unhealthy family circumstances and report that the organisation is a safe haven where they are cared for, along with progressing in their education, training and work-readiness. While maintaining adherence to PHA guidance, the provider continued to provide support for the young people by opening the premises and providing a well-controlled drop-in facility for the most vulnerable who, as a result of a lack of routine, were at risk of engaging in antisocial behaviours and risk-taking. The uptake was good and the young people were supported to remain on their programmes and to stay safe.

The evidence shows that a majority of organisations worked hard to provide a range of support to staff, with a particular focus on training in the use of virtual meeting tools and the use of technology to deliver training. Work also commenced quickly to identify and support those learners most in need, including strategies to provide equipment and connectivity to them, and processes to provide remote mentoring support on a one-to-one basis. Understandably, few providers across work-based learning and the ESF projects had sufficient internal expertise to undertake this specialist online way of learning and support. As a consequence, not enough of them provided sufficient training and development for tutoring staff in the strategies and practice for effective digital pedagogy to enable them to use the tools to best effect in the early days.

A majority of providers reported that learners at levels 2 and below, and especially those following courses with a large practical element, found engagement and participation in online learning much more challenging. While there were some instances of improved engagement and attendance, organisations generally reported lower levels of learners' attendance and participation. This was mainly as a result of insufficiently well-developed learner digital literacy skills, which hindered an optimal use by them of the digital platforms to support effective learning. Where these learners often attempted to access learning and work through the use of mobile phones, the extent of their interaction was often significantly impacted. **It is clear that the rapid implementation of a model of alternative/emergency online teaching did not adequately meet the needs of these learners.** Many of them did not make discernible progress in learning over the period of lockdown from March to June, meaning they presented in September with significant gaps in both their learning and their skills development. A lot more work, backed by research, is needed to explore the online pedagogical methods and techniques that work best with learners at the lower end of the ability range and also for those following lower level qualifications or those that are highly practical by nature.

Very few ESF and work-based learning providers had the technical infrastructure, including a relevant learning platform around which to build a coherent delivery platform or easily accessible repository of resources; in addition, not enough staff had the required digital skillset in order to plan and deliver effective online lessons. The issues associated with digital poverty, such as relevant device and bandwidth availability, and the capacity of their learners, particularly trainees on the Training for Success programme and many of the participants on ESF projects, to engage effectively in an online learning environment, very quickly became evident in these phases of provision.

The initial response by the ESF project promoters was to provide individualised one to one support to their participants by telephone, door-step visits and by means of social media platforms. A majority of the ESF project promoters and work-based learning providers, however, quickly improved and further developed their online presence, offering a range of online resources for trainees and participants; specifically and appropriately, these were targeted in the first instance at **supporting the participants' health and wellbeing**. Many of the ESF project promoters went further by providing practical support for participants, including help with essential food, heating and access to mobile devices. Appropriately, consideration was given to alternative methods of communicating better and more effectively with those with learning and/or physical disabilities. In the initial period after society's entry into lockdown in mid-March 2020, many ESF projects closed temporarily, with staff either furloughed or redeployed to home working. To their credit, most projects, however, quickly sought, purchased and implemented a range of virtual meeting applications/tools to engage with, support and mentor participants. The ESF projects report high levels of satisfaction with the flexibility and support received from Departmental officials during this period.

European Social Fund: Delivery during lockdown

An ESF project promoter, with no previous experience of online learning prior to the onset of the pandemic, introduced a virtual learning environment to facilitate participants' access to online learning materials. Participants were supported using a wide range of methods, including email, video calls, social media, phone calls and text messaging. Sudden changes in participants' income, including furlough and uncertainty around when they can return to work, led to financial difficulty and increased anxieties for some. This resulted in a significant increase in demand for access to foodbanks and support with benefit applications, as well as signposting for financial advice. A flexible approach to delivery was necessary to cater for participants' individual circumstances, particularly those with parenting or caring responsibilities who found it difficult to engage in scheduled training activities.

Looking after the wellbeing of project staff during the lockdown was also a priority. Regular team meetings, including quizzes and health and wellbeing activities such as mindfulness and daily exercise challenges, helped to keep staff motivated and engaged.

All staff were provided with the necessary facilities to engage with remote working, including access to the appropriate equipment and information systems. An online repository was used to ensure that the relevant learning and support resources were available to all staff for dissemination to participants.

As a result, overall levels of engagement with participants was maintained and their support needs were met.

All of the colleges and other contracted providers took the appropriate steps and worked diligently and with success to provide the wide range of awarding organisations with the necessary assessment information and calculated grades to meet the assessment and progression needs, where possible, of a majority of their learners.

Over the summer months, the colleges and other training providers undertook a phased approach to resumption of certain activities, in order to prepare the way for learners' wider return. This included learners attending to complete adapted assessments during July and August, staff returning to prepare the buildings and training facilities, and the return of some learners, albeit a small number, to work placements.

The ApprenticeshipsNI programme has been severely adversely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Over the first few months of the crisis, the evidence shows that just under one-half of apprentices remained in employment, with the majority of them being furloughed; their training programmes were paused entirely and they found themselves quite suddenly in uncertain circumstances with regard to future training, employment and career progression.

Part three: September to December 2020 (Restarting Education, Training and ESF provision)

From mid-August 2020, **colleges and work-based learning suppliers were able to resume face-to-face delivery of training** as part of the Department's ApprenticeshipsNI and Training for Success programmes; this was, however, within the confines of clearly set out restrictions based upon the outworking of a departmental Advisory and Oversight group and informed by Public Health Agency (PHA) advice. The development by the Department of a comprehensive framework⁷ on safe resumption, underpinned by wide consultation with stakeholders and financial support, was important in supporting providers to return to on-site learning and teaching in September 2020. While not without its challenges, including the differing social distancing rules being adhered to by schools and colleges participating in Entitlement Framework provision, good progress in the resumption of learning and training was made. It is clear that a blended learning approach works better for learners working

⁷ In August 2020, the Department for the Economy published a Framework to guide the safe resumption of on-site educational provision and related activity; this Framework is subject to ongoing review and updating.

above level 2, with many providers endeavouring to deliver as much face-to-face as possible for learners following programmes at level 2 or below, including the essential skills. Most ESF projects also resumed face-to-face mentoring support and delivery of training, while maintaining adherence to PHA guidance.

Adherence to social distancing has introduced significant challenges to curriculum delivery across a range of vocational provision, with smaller group sizes, reduced access for learners to practical skills work and a resultant increased workload for many staff. No amount of online learning will be a substitute for workshop and workplace training, which will need to be factored into the blend at some stage across learners' programmes of study. The number of Training for Success trainees and ESF participants able to secure or access a suitable work experience placement has dropped significantly, which has the potential to de-motivate many of these learners, a good proportion of whom already require high levels of support and mentoring. In addition, the reduction in the availability of work placements has impacted adversely in the assessment arrangements for qualifications in several professional and technical areas, including health and social care and childcare; many of these assessments have been carried forward to the 2020/21 academic year, causing logistical and staffing problems for providers and delays in learners achieving critical accreditation of occupational competence.

A majority of learners, across all types of provision, are experiencing a more blended approach to curriculum delivery, with often significant parts of their curriculum delivered remotely. The work-based learning providers have worked to deliver as much of the curriculum as possible in a face-to-face environment, particularly for the Training for Success cohorts. The logistics of this in terms of sticking to industry and Departmental guidance normally means less contact time, as recognised by appropriate mitigations in the operational guidelines. The two-metre social distancing requirement, along with ongoing Government restrictions on non-essential close-contact services such as hairdressing, beauty and hospitality, is impacting adversely on the opportunities for learners to be taught practical occupational skills, **to access work placements which are a required part of their qualification and ultimately on the development and assessment of their occupational competence.**

The **guidance around Covid-related restrictions differed for schools and further education colleges**, in particular around social distancing; the guidance to colleges, based upon PHA advice, requires the implementation of two-metre social distancing restrictions. This impacted on the further education Entitlement Framework provision collaborative courses for schools, leading to lower numbers in classes and the consequent and significant upward pressure on cost of delivery. It also impacted on the extent of A-level provision in the colleges, which is substantive, including the class sizes that can be facilitated, with the requirement to deliver more of it remotely.

Learners are having to cope with many barriers to learning in terms of access to equipment with good connectivity, online group dynamics and sustaining levels of motivation; added to this there is the uncertainty around the type and timing of any formal assessment processes. Providers, across all types and levels of provision have reported to the District Inspectors that the resilience of young learners, along with ESF participants, is waning as time goes on, and those at level 2 and below seem more likely to opt out of learning more quickly. Feedback from the further education colleges also shows that there is an increase in the number of adult learners that are withdrawing from their courses, as they report finding it more difficult to maintain their motivation for learning in the online environment, in particular the peer learning and support aspect. The levels of engagement and progress being made by learners in these very different learning circumstances needs to be kept under close review by the range of providers.

Whilst **recruitment overall to the Training for Success programme has largely been maintained**, and increased in a number of supplier organisations, a significant number of ESF projects have struggled to recruit participants and to meet associated into employment⁸ and other targets. The reasons include: they have found that their traditional recruitment and referral routes are less accessible to them and their participants; the health guidelines restrict the curriculum offer; staff do not have access to a suitable virtual platform nor have the skillset to deliver effective online learning; small, inflexible accommodation and premises, with more limited options in regards to adequate social distancing; and online learning approaches are quite often not appropriate to meet the individual, largely mentoring needs of a significant number of the participants. The Department for the Economy appropriately adjusted recruitment and other targets to reflect the ongoing changed circumstances, which is being kept under review.

While inspection has been paused since March 2020, District Inspectors have engaged and worked with their district organisations to provide advice and support, including with their recovery-focused quality improvement planning processes⁹. The scrutiny of the quality improvement plans for the 90 work-based learning providers and ESF projects took place during November and December 2020. It is noteworthy overall that 90% of the ESF project promoters and work-based learning providers submitted sufficient evidence to demonstrate that were planning effectively for recovery, continuity in learning and quality improvement; seven of the ESF project promoters and two work-based learning providers were asked to submit supplementary information in order to demonstrate more fully their planning for improvement. The main areas for improvement, across the quality improvement plans scrutinised, included the need for: clearer comment and evaluation of the standards of the learners' work, including their professional and technical skills; stronger

⁸ The strategic aim of the ESF programme in NI is to combat poverty and enhance social inclusion by reducing economic inactivity; a key part of this is supporting the participants to acquire employability skills and progress into, and sustain, employment.

⁹ [The interim arrangements for evaluating the effectiveness of quality improvement planning in the context of the Covid-19 public health pandemic](#)

analysis, review and reporting on the development of the learners' transversal/wider skills; and sharper targets in the quality improvement plans to ensure the required improvement actions are prioritised, specific and more measurable.

Inspectors have noted and observed evidence of effective practice in a number of work-based learning supplier organisations. Despite a relatively slow start, these organisations have adapted well to blended learning, including: investment in appropriate technology; focused and appropriate staff training; use of varied and effective techniques to engage trainees and apprentices; attention paid to the 'blend' of learning and practical/technical skills development; and good monitoring of the progress being made by trainees and apprentices. As a result, these organisations now have evidence of good levels of engagement by the trainees and apprentices, with a broad curricular delivery taking place through the blended learning model, including close attention to the essential skills. The work is underpinned by adaptations to premises and provision of PPE to facilitate practical work and technical skills development. This type of work has been supported to good effect through a Hardship Fund from the Department, which has made good inroads in providing appropriate equipment to many of the learners facing issues related to digital poverty.

Work-based learning: Adapting to online learning

A work-based learning provider, with several training offices, adapted well to the delivery of online/blended learning, including the redesign of its training premises to better facilitate this model of delivery. A number of 'learning pods' have been installed to allow staff to deliver professional and technical, or essential skills training, synchronously to groups of trainees and apprentices across the organisation's offices. Alternatively, those learners, who may not otherwise have access to IT equipment, can use the pods to access training in a safe and controlled environment within the organisation. The installation of cameras in workshops also allows a mix of theory and practical training to take place online. A review of the learning and support materials on the organisation's virtual learning environment has been carried out and the organisation has invested significantly, in addition to accessing the Department's Hardship Fund, to purchase and supply IT equipment and provide internet access to trainees and apprentices. The quality of the online learning and teaching sessions observed is mostly good and learners are supported online through pastoral care calls and the introduction of 'virtual tea breaks'.

For many providers, across further education, work-based learning and ESF, enrolments are down and learner and staff attendance levels vary widely due to the need for adherence to self-isolation practices. Providers report difficulties in accessing cover for absent staff, which impacts on the coherence of learning experiences. Enrolments to level 3 programmes in the further education colleges were already declining, but this has been exacerbated significantly by the Covid-19 pandemic; to make matters worse, there has also been a significant decline in the number of enrolments to their higher education programmes, including higher level apprenticeships and foundation degrees. As a result, some courses, including in

STEM-related and economically important areas have not been sufficiently viable for the colleges to run. The main reasons for the enhanced decline in enrolments include: some potential grade inflation at GCSE level leading to more pupils meeting the entry criteria to progress to post-16 study in post-primary schools; the approach taken by some universities to make unconditional offers of a place to a majority of applicants during July 2020, and prior to the issue of Advanced level (A-level) results; and the decision by many employers to pause recruitment of apprentices, including higher level apprentices, or the imposition of furlough or redundancy to current apprentices.

During October and November 2020¹⁰, **ETI observed first-hand over 50 remotely delivered sessions**, across a range of professional and technical and essential skills provision, involving several providers. Almost all of the sessions observed were evaluated as good or better. The evidence from these observed sessions shows that **online learning is more effective when:**

- there is investment by senior leaders in time for middle leaders and staff to review and adapt the curriculum offer and to plan carefully the implementation of a blended model of curriculum delivery, which is designed or adapted to meet the specific needs of learner cohorts, with careful planning to maximise the opportunities for learners to acquire and apply practical skills in the workshop and the workplace;
- there are high levels of support and encouragement for staff, underpinned by targeted, high quality ongoing professional learning and development for them to build their digital and online pedagogic skills, capacity and confidence to deliver a blended learning model with a significant proportion of online learning;
- the induction of learners is well-planned and provides them with the opportunity to acquire the level of digital skills and confidence necessary to access effectively a proportion of their learning remotely, including awareness of online safety and a code of conduct while learning online;
- the online learning is underpinned by a robust and fit-for-purpose contemporary digital learning platform, with high quality resources available, that learners can access synchronously and asynchronously;
- learners, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have access to appropriate digital equipment, sufficient data availability and broadband connectivity;

¹⁰ The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) commissioned ETI to carry out a baseline review of the delivery and impact of remote learning provided by the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), which took place in November 2020.

- learners have appropriate internet access and almost all of them access the sessions through an appropriate device, such as a laptop or tablet device; the evidence shows access of online learning by a mobile phone diminishes the learning experience and restricts the levels of engagement and participation by learners;
- relationships and trust are built upon in the early stages of the programme, preferably during induction, and learners are encouraged, and indeed expected, to engage as fully as possible in the learning process with cameras and microphones largely kept on;
- close attention is paid to the care and welfare needs of the learners, with good levels of feedback to reassure and alleviate any concerns, along with close monitoring of their attendance, engagement, participation and progress, with appropriate and timely interventions to support them;
- formative assessment is ongoing in the sessions and staff use a range of online formative assessment tools to encourage and motivate learners, check on their levels of understanding and ensure there is progress in learning overall and the learners are aware of what they need to do to improve;
- learners have opportunities to develop and apply wider skills and dispositions, including literacy, numeracy, independent-working, problem-solving and team-working;
- safeguarding policies and procedures are reviewed to incorporate the changed model of curriculum delivery and ensure learners and staff are protected in face-to-face and online environments; and
- the impact of the blended curriculum is kept under review, including staff workloads and the balance of time learners spend getting online instruction.

Where the tutor/lecturer follows a similar pedagogy online to that used in previous face-to-face lessons, the evidence shows that the learning process is often not as impactful in the online learning environment. Overall, there are not enough examples of innovative practice such as the 'flipped classroom', whereby a proportion of the learning is undertaken by learners in a self-study approach prior to the formal online sessions. This would facilitate more opportunities to explore and deepen the learning, and to practice and apply concepts and ideas through breakout group interactions with peers and tutors/lecturers. There is a need for further professional learning opportunities for staff to support the implementation of more effective online pedagogy, in particular around the approaches to assessing learners' progress, both during online learning sessions and overall in their studies.

CAFRE: Equine studies observed online learning session

The detailed planning for the session took into account the learners' prior knowledge and understanding, which resulted in high quality individualised learning experiences; these were well-contextualised to build on their practical experience of working in an equine environment. As a result, the learners were well-motivated and they all participated and engaged fully.

The lecturers had developed good relationships with the learners, based on mutual respect, with clear and consistent organisational guidelines on acceptable behaviours which the learners respect and comply with.

The online sessions used an appropriate range of strategies to engage the learners, including video clips, group notice boards, and virtual meetings along with online drawing tools within the virtual learning environment. As a result of these resources and the highly effective questioning, the learners engaged well in discussions, with most of them being able to articulate their views confidently and they made good quality written responses that were peer-reviewed. The learners' digital skills were well-developed, enabling them to proficiently alternate between several technology-enhanced learning applications during the lesson. The learners reported that they felt well-supported across the equine provision and reported that the skills being developed are preparing them well for employment in the industry.

Persistent issues remained with regard to the awarding of qualifications, including: the lost curriculum time during the March to June 2020 lockdown and since the resumption of provision from September due to regular staff and learner self-isolation incidents; the lack of time available for learners to develop and apply practical skills at the right level, and to have these rigorously assessed; the carryover of learners from the 2019/20 group who were unable to complete their final assessments due to the pandemic, leading to staff workload and other logistical issues; and the ongoing uncertainty about what assessment process will take place for 2021, including differing approaches being adopted across the four jurisdictions in the UK and the associated risks for portability and comparability of qualifications. Providers report regularly that learners are anxious around the cancellation of examinations and the interruption to ongoing assessments.

Across 14-19 provision, learners have found themselves surrounded by uncertainty around the **assessment of the qualifications and programmes they are following**. The unpredictability of the spread and longevity of Covid-19, sporadic staff and learner absences, including geographic variations, makes decision-making around the future process of examinations and vocational assessments for 2021 programmes/courses difficult.

As time has gone on, a majority of the ESF projects have reported to the District Inspectors increasing difficulty in maintaining engagement with some of the more vulnerable participants and those with higher level barriers to employment; typically, these participants rely on a more personal mentoring service, often on a one-to-one basis. Commendably, the projects have used a variety of strategies and techniques to maintain their engagement and participation, including information newsletters, the use of social media and virtual meeting applications, although it is clear that the key progression to employment focus has been lost for now.

The opportunities for learners, across all provision, to regularly, progressively and coherently develop and **apply occupational and the wider employability skills remains a challenge**. In addition, many of the providers and learners spoken to report that the loss of the on-site or 'college' experience, with its associated socialisation benefits, impacts adversely on the mental health and wellbeing of the learners and staff. The apprenticeship incentive scheme introduced by the Department is leading to an increase in recruitment, although overall numbers remain down when compared with this time last year.

Part Four: Lessons Learned and Key Considerations Going Forward

The **post-Covid education, training and social landscape is going to be quite different** to the one that existed in the early months of 2020; the implementation of Brexit brings additional challenges and complexities to be overcome, particularly around future longer-term funding arrangements for the ESF projects. Basically, NI is facing into very significant labour market challenges, such as rising youth unemployment and a skills and training mismatch, at a time of uncertainty and a likelihood of reduced financial resources due to the huge cost of battling Covid-19.

At the moment, and despite significant and hugely expensive Government interventions on a national scale, **employment rates are declining and unemployment and inactivity rates are increasing, and on an upward trend**. It is clear that, in very broad terms, the people more adversely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic are younger people, particularly those in the 18-24 years old age bracket, the lower paid and the lower skilled who are less likely to be able to work or study from home. Consequently, a predictable outcome from the pandemic is an exacerbation of the already wide disparities and inequalities in education and training outcomes attained by young people. It is vitally important that every effort is made across all facets of government to ensure that young people do not get detached for long periods of time from the labour market.

The New Decade New Approach Deal¹¹, published in January 2020, proposes a Programme for Government which commits to improved resources, efficiency and

¹¹ [Annex 1 Programme for Government \(Pages 39/40\)](#)

effectiveness in education (which encompasses further education), including to deliver enhanced careers advice, curriculum, training and apprenticeships to enhance employability. All of the providers funded by the Department for the Economy, not just the further education colleges, have important roles to play in taking these appropriate commitments forward.

Blended learning will remain a feature of provision post-Covid. Senior leaders, in the further education colleges but also in other providers, report a strong awareness of the opportunities that effectively delivered blended learning offers, including a broader reach to potential learners and a more flexible, agile curriculum offer; overall there is a strong desire to review the impact of blended learning and to retain and embed the more effective aspects of it. It is clear that more needs to be done by providers to better track and monitor the engagement and progress by learners, as a prerequisite for evaluating the success of the online learning programmes delivered. However, in the absence of a well-planned and sustained programme for lecturer/tutor professional learning to ensure that they have the required digital and associated pedagogical skills to deliver effective online learning, the potential benefits that blended learning offers will not be fully enough realised.

All providers need to review the induction process for new and existing learners on programmes of study where a significant proportion of the learning is to be delivered remotely. The onus is on the provider to ensure the digital learning platform is fit-for-purpose, staff have the necessary digital pedagogical skills and the learners have the relevant level of digital skills and the opportunity to become competent with the device, learning platform and range of tools they will be using. In addition, the learners need to be aware of the code of conduct for online learning and what is expected from them in terms of engagement and participation. As far as possible, learners should access online learning using a laptop or tablet device which will have the required functionality to provide them with access to the full range of tools and applications that are needed for optimal participation in the learning process. The induction process needs to make this distinction clear to learners and also how they can go about getting access to a device if they only have a mobile phone available to them.

Experience from the economic fall-out from the financial crisis in 2008/09 shows that reduced productivity levels and future skills shortages will be the most likely outcome from reduced numbers of apprentices in training, particularly in key areas of the economy such as construction, engineering and hospitality. The employer incentives introduced by the Department regarding the recruitment or return from furlough of apprentices increased the number of apprentices being recruited or returning to the workplace and training later in 2020, but the numbers continue to be lower than pre-pandemic levels.

While recruitment to the Training for Success programme has been sustained during the pandemic, **the evidence shows reductions in the number of apprenticeships and also a decline in enrolments to the further education sector**, including to the higher education programmes. This is an ominous sign in terms of the future

availability to employers and the economy of technically skilled workers at level 3 and above, including in key economically important areas and clearly shows the need for a strategic and urgent need to invest in skills. Recently published¹² research evidence shows that NI has a structural labour issue that needs to be addressed, namely it has, relative to its competitors, too low a proportion of people employed in higher valued added sectors such as ICT, scientific and technical, professional, finance and insurance. By contrast, it has too high a proportion in low skilled, low qualification and thereby more vulnerable job roles; and the levels of economic inactivity remain too high. Policy makers, working with providers and employers, need to ensure coherent and impactful progression pathways from the lower skills qualifications to higher level skills ones, particularly where there are identified skills gaps in the labour market.

The pandemic has brought with it rapid changes in the labour market, and in the manner and location by which work gets done, many of which are likely to remain post-Covid. The curriculum areas of the health and life sciences, IT/cybersecurity, pharmaceuticals, green construction, energy and recycling, agri-food and health and social care have come to the fore, which should be reflected in curriculum planning going forward. As informed by the NI Skills Strategy, planning needs to take place now, however, for investment in further education and training opportunities for young people, in particular apprenticeships at higher levels, to ensure the economy has available a workforce with the required future skills, at the right level, that will be needed as the economy recovers and grows over the next few years.

Due to the outworking of the pandemic, with substantially increased unemployment, young people disproportionately impacted, the amplification of poverty levels, potential deterioration in people's mental health and wellbeing and the more disadvantaged communities hit hardest, **the demand for the range of services offered through ESF projects is going to increase**. Into work targets will be harder to achieve as the ESF participants compete for jobs with the work-ready people who have been made redundant, or are on longer-term furlough. For all too many of the participants who access ESF programmes, and are often the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in society, there is very little in the way of other suitable, relevant, accessible or tailored provision. It is, therefore, vitally important that the ESF projects are funded and supported to meet the post-Covid needs of increased cohorts of participants accessing their quite specific services.

¹² The Competitiveness Scorecard for Northern Ireland: A Framework for Measuring Economic, Social and Environmental Progress, University of Ulster Economic Policy Centre (December 2020).

The improvement of the economy post-Covid is a major Government priority; there will be a reliance on existing providers, in particular the further education colleges and work-based learning providers, to build upon existing professional and technical training programmes to address the skills mismatch which has been exemplified by the pandemic, and to increase the progression of learners to higher skills qualifications. They will, however, with Government support and investment, have to devise new employment and skills programmes, which have employment and training opportunities for young people at the centre. **Over the short to medium term, the 14-19 curriculum needs to be sufficiently flexible to reflect the changing and emerging needs of employers in order to ensure any new employment opportunities are maximised.**

At the commencement of the pandemic in March 2020, few tutors across work-based learning and the ESF projects had expertise, or even personal experience, of delivering online learning or of implementing blended learning in the programmes they taught on or oversaw. The evidence from the District Inspectors, not surprisingly, shows that a significant number of work-based learning supplier and ESF projects faced significant challenges in ensuring tutoring staff were adequately developed, equipped and informed in order to provide effective online learning experiences for their learners. While there was appropriate participation by some members of tutoring staff in the upskilling training and development programmes in online and blended learning, such as those run by Stranmillis University College¹³, a significant programme of upskilling of staff in the effective delivery of online learning, including the use of sound digital pedagogic practices is required.

A **strategic investment in skills**, as informed by the Department's Skills Strategy especially in the area of digital skills, is appropriately a key Departmental priority. In addition, while the timings of policy implementation have been impacted by the pandemic, the Department is well down the road in terms of preparations for the new training programmes at level 2 and below, including the Traineeships which will replace the Training for Success programme and the swathe of level 2 provision across the further education colleges. Recruitment to the Training for Success programme will end in 2021, with full roll-out of Traineeships taking place from September 2022. All of this brings into sharp focus the need for effective communication and careers guidance to ensure young people, supported by their parents, make informed decisions around the best pathways for them. This needs to include well thought through strategies to impact on the existing adverse attitudes some parents have towards further education and work-based learning provision, still often referred to as 'The Tech', despite this being a meaningful, largely successful and positive career pathway for young people.

¹³ Learning leaders programme

While structural problems of low productivity, high levels of economic inactivity and too many existing employees with low skills and qualification levels existed prior to the pandemic, it has become ever clearer that existing employees with lower skills levels and those made redundant or at higher risk of redundancy need information and opportunities about how best they can upskill and in what economic areas of growth. Needless to say, existing providers such as the further education colleges and ESF projects have a crucial role to play going forward. In order to be competitive and productive, existing employees are going to require quite different skillsets than before, in particular enhanced digital skills.

The evidence is clear that teachers, pupils and their parents/carers are not well enough informed about the valuable pathway **available to all prospective learners within the further education sector**. Recently published further education leaver¹⁴ information shows that just over two-fifths (41.9%) of the leavers aged 19 and under, had found out about the further education course they had taken from their post-primary school. All too often, the contemporary technical and professional qualifications, developed in collaboration with employers and delivered to a high standard by the further education sector, are both undervalued when compared with academic qualifications, and the excellent pathway they offer to higher education and training overlooked.

The very significant investment in state of the art, industry-standard facilities and expertise mean that the sector is well placed to upskill young people in economically important areas providing good career and progression opportunities; but also to reskill the existing workforce, including those impacted by redundancy as a result of the pandemic or indeed through increasing automation/digitisation of job roles. The increasing level of competition, however, across the post-16 educational provision, as exemplified by considerable duplication of vocational provision by post-primary schools, represents a challenge to the capacity and potential of the further education sector to meet the diverse and specialist skills needs of the NI economy; clearly, it is also a value for public money issue. It is increasingly important that the skills needed by the economy are delivered through the most appropriate pathway and that young people are impartially directed towards this. An outworking of the pandemic is that the barriers to a more complementary and collaborative provision across further education and post-primary have been lowered somewhat by the potential that effective blended learning now offers.

The further education sector has been able to demonstrate significant flexibility and adaptability in how it responded to the pandemic and how it has taken forward curriculum delivery through blended learning since March 2020. Importantly, a small number of further education colleges, supported by the Department, have offered flexible January 2021 enrolment to appropriate pilot level 3, 4 and 5 programmes, targeted at young people who had progressed to unsuitable university or post-16

¹⁴ [Survey of Further Education \(FE\) College Leavers 2018/19](#) (Data collated up to March 2020 and published in November 2020);

provision in September 2020, providing them with an opportunity to get back on track and to continue to progress.

An emergent concern, particularly in the further education colleges, is the increasing backlog involving significant numbers of learners with incomplete occupational training and associated assessments which are needed for employment, and at times for progression purposes. Prior to September 2021, flexible options will need to be considered to facilitate opportunities for these learners to develop and show competence in the required occupational skills, and to reduce the potential impact on delivery capacity and funding of large numbers of deferred learners. It will be important to monitor closely the impact of the 2020 and 2021 assessment arrangements on learner progression, and, if necessary, how progression difficulties can be alleviated through innovative interventions.

The uncertainty over post-Brexit funding and provision provides an additional challenge to the ESF projects, including the retention of important, skilled staff but also the impact it may have on very successful programmes such as Erasmus in the further education sector. The projects and colleges need to be provided with clarity around proposed replacement programmes and how they will be funded.

Key considerations going forward include:

- An innovative, cross-sectoral approach to careers education, information advice and guidance (CEIAG) is developed and implemented; this should involve better collaboration and proactivity between further education colleges, work-based learning providers and post-primary schools, to ensure post-primary pupils and their parents/carers are better informed about the full range of pathways available to them to better inform their career decision-making.
- Through the NI Skills Strategy, and to ensure the economy has an available workforce with the required future skills that will be needed as the economy recovers over the next few years, there needs to be significant investment in further education and training opportunities for young people and those already in work; this should include more higher level apprenticeships but also access to apprenticeship training for those already in work, in appropriately targeted curriculum areas, irrespective of age.
- A communication strategy is implemented to ensure schools, parents, teachers, young people and employers are better informed about the significant potential of the further education sector to provide a specialist contemporary curriculum with excellent progression pathways to upskill and reskill the future workforce is better realised. The sustainability of the unique offering provided by further education needs to be invested in and the number of enrolments increased strategically.

- Online and blended learning needs to be planned and developed in a measured and meaningful way, for the foreseeable future. A significant programme of upskilling of staff, in particular across the work-based learning suppliers and ESF projects, in the effective delivery of online learning, including the use of sound digital pedagogic practices. Allied to this is the need to ensure the digital skills of learners are developed to the level that enables them to optimise their engagement and participation in online learning.
- Build on the lessons learned from the range of blended learning models used, before and during the pandemic, to ensure a flexible curriculum that delivers a contemporary workforce is developed and supported. This should include close attention to the curriculum and qualifications being developed in England and the potential opportunity a similar approach offers in NI, and to include more collaboratively planned and delivered curriculum offer across the further education sector.
- Improved digital skills for young people, from pre-school to higher education levels, and also for existing employees and those currently outside of the workforce, is vital going forward and provides access to lifelong learning opportunities.
- For all too many of the participants who access ESF programmes, whom are often the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in society, there is very little in the way of other suitable, relevant, accessible or tailored provision. It is, therefore, vitally important that the ESF projects are funded and supported to meet the post-Covid needs of increased cohorts of participants accessing their quite specific services.
- Provision of tailored, economically relevant education and training programmes to restart employment and provide new career opportunities for those who have lost employment due to the Covid-19 pandemic and associated economic changes, particularly for the 16-24 year olds who are likely to be the most severely impacted by it.

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