

The
College
of the
Future

The
**Northern
Ireland**
College
of the
Future



A nations-specific
final report

The Independent Commission on the College of the Future is kindly supported by:



Foreword



Jackie Henry MBE

**Chair of the Skills
Strategy Advisory
Group**

**Deloitte UK
Consulting People
& Purpose Lead
and NI Office
Senior Partner**

I see the challenges that businesses face every day. Among the most pervasive is access to the right skills and people. At a time when the challenges we face with the pandemic are front of mind, we must not lose sight of ensuring that people have the skills they and businesses need for the future and in the future.

This timely and welcome report powerfully shows the strength of the college system in Northern Ireland and the opportunity to further capitalise on their role in supporting businesses and driving the prosperity of Northern Ireland. The pandemic has brought into sharp focus how vital they are to our society and economy. They have supported people to continue learning in the toughest of times and are central to supporting businesses with the skills they need to survive and thrive.

There are striking parallels between the Commission's vision for colleges across the UK – for colleges to deliver for people, productivity and place – and Northern Ireland's role for colleges set out in the 2016 Further Education Strategy. We should take pride in this. We should also take pride in the fact that many of the Commission's UK-wide recommendations are based on things already happening here, with significant inspiration drawn from colleges working in a system, the explicit role for colleges in economic regeneration and in supporting employers through Curriculum Hubs. This should be seen as an affirmation of the direction of travel in our skills system.

This timely and welcome report powerfully shows the strength of the college system in Northern Ireland and the opportunity to further capitalise on the role of colleges in supporting businesses and driving prosperity.

Skills is rightly high on the political agenda and a priority area for economic recovery, with the Skills Strategy consultation to be published shortly. This piece of work is critical because there is work to do to future-proof our college system. At a time when there are enormous challenges – from the implications of automation, an ageing population the climate crisis and leaving the EU – the coronavirus pandemic has shone a light on the weaknesses in our labour market. Recent research from the OECD has found that by 2030 Northern Ireland may have the fourth highest proportion of low qualified people out of 16 OECD comparators. Similarly, the recent The Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) Competitiveness Scorecard Report shows that competitiveness has been falling in NI over the last decade, which they predict will fall further by 2030 unless we start addressing issues such as skills. We must act now, and with high ambitions.

Contributing to the success of businesses and creating possibilities and opportunities that weren't there when I was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s is a personal passion of mine. That's why the Skills Strategy Advisory Group – which I chair – is addressing skills imbalances, driving economic growth; creating a culture of lifelong learning and enhancing digital skills to develop Northern Ireland's regional spine. All of this is vital to create a secure and prosperous future. I'm pleased to see that there are measures in the Commission's report that address these systemically, with policy coherence and an approach that can deliver on a regionally balanced economy.



This report's recommendations are notably wide ranging – building on and developing the system that exists. From calling for the creation of a cross-government oversight body for the skills strategy and a single coherent college structure to setting out the case for a statutory right to lifelong learning, the proposals set out in this report warrant serious consideration and action.

What I'm particularly exercised by is the call for funding measures that will empower colleges to maximise their capacity for business support and innovation. Sustainable funding that is mission driven and uncoupled from headcount of individual students and qualifications could significantly expand this role for colleges. It would enhance the use of their physical assets and specialist expertise as a resource for employers big and small. This coupled with the recommendation for targeted investment in digital infrastructure and skills across the tertiary sector could also make a major contribution to the rapid development of the digital economy. Importantly, it could help to ensure that no one is left behind.

A high skilled workforce is an essential component of economic recovery and of economic success in the future. It is what attracts companies from across the UK, Europe and the globe to invest in Northern Ireland. To kick-start economic recovery in Northern Ireland and build a more competitive, inclusive and greener economy, colleges must be seen as a vehicle for a brighter future. By further investing in skills and continuing to grow the strategic potential of colleges, I am confident that we will have the people and innovative practices to succeed in the globally competitive market.

I hope this ambitious report provides the college sector with the vision and authority to own the room in conversations about the future of their local communities and businesses and the Executive with a vision and tangible actions to unleash the power of colleges.

Jackie Henry MBE

Chair of the Skills Strategy Advisory Group

Deloitte UK Consulting People & Purpose Lead and
NI Office Senior Partner

To kick-start economic recovery in Northern Ireland and build a more competitive, inclusive and greener economy, colleges must be seen as a vehicle for a brighter future.



About us

The Independent Commission on the College of the Future was launched in Spring 2019 as a UK-wide, four nations process, asking two simple questions: what do we want and need from colleges from 2030 onwards, and how do we get there?

The Independent Commission was commissioned by the Four Nations College Alliance – which brings together college leaders, their representative bodies and senior government officials from across the UK.

The Commissioners - chaired by Sir Ian Diamond – have held roundtable and workshop events with a broad range of individuals and organisations across the UK. They are supported by an expert panel, who have been feeding in throughout the process.

The Independent Commission has benefited from learnings across the UK, drawing lessons and insights from reform trajectories and from exemplary institutional practices.

The Independent Commission has benefited from learnings across the four nations of the UK, drawing lessons and insights from reform trajectories and from exemplary institutional practices.

Key stages in our work

- Hosted or presented at over 150 events across the UK, including with senior college leaders, governors, staff and students, employers, universities, schools, local, regional and national governments, unions and many others.
- Invited international experts from the Basque Country, Ireland, Finland, Slovenia, the Netherlands and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to contribute to the Commission's thinking – including with a public seminar held jointly with the British Academy in September 2019, with over 100 stakeholders and members of the public.
- Published a Progress Report - reflecting themes emanating from early engagement - with a consultation process in November 2019, receiving over 60 responses from a wide range of organisations and individuals.
- Published the Commission's vision for the college of the future in July 2020, accompanied by a set of essays from education and skills experts.
- Published a report exploring the relationship between the NHS and the English college system in September 2020 – as an example of how the Commission's thinking can drive change with this important employer.
- Published our final UK-wide report in October 2020. This is the fourth and final of our nations-specific reports – having published reports for England (November 2020), Scotland (December 2020) and Wales (January 2021).



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

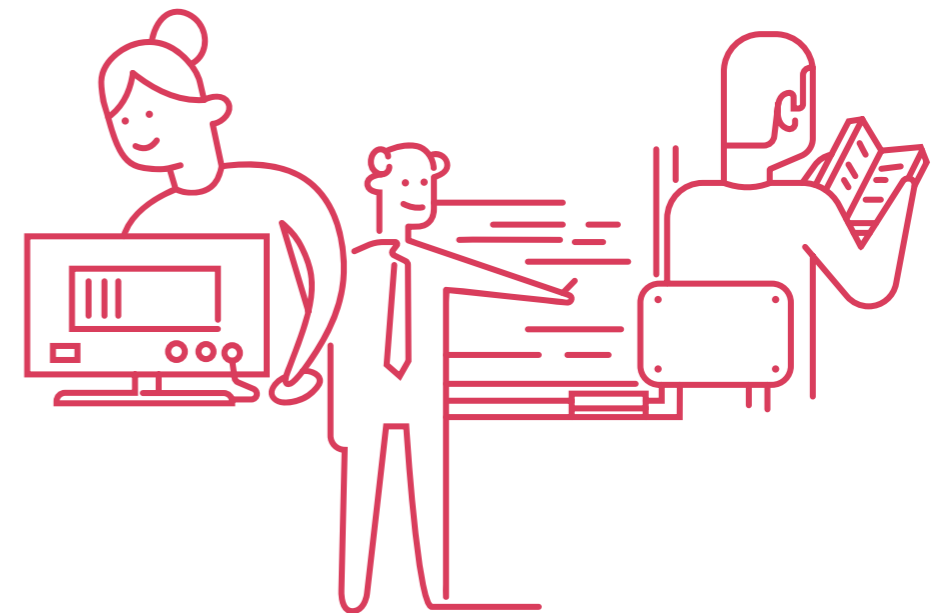


The Commission's approach

The UK-wide report (October 2020) makes a series of recommendations which provide a common framework for the reform and renewal of the individual college systems in each of the four nations of the UK. However, their relevance and application are very different in each individual context.

The unique nature and strength of the Commission is that, for the first time, it has taken a four nations perspective on the current and future role of colleges across the UK. This approach has meant that the Commission has been able to draw on and distil the rich diversity of policy and practice across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Throughout, it has been a partnership of equals, reflected in the membership of the Commission itself, in the active engagement of stakeholders from right across the education and skills system, and beyond.

As such, the Commission has been equally clear on the critical need to respect and acknowledge the widely differing policy and operational contexts in which colleges are working. The UK-wide report (October 2020) makes a series of recommendations which provide a common framework for the reform and renewal of the individual college systems in each of the four nations of the UK. However, their relevance and application are very different in each individual context.





About this report

Our work as a Commission over the past two years has been significantly informed and shaped by the Northern Ireland experience. In fact, the role of colleges set out in the 2016 Northern Ireland strategy strongly reflects the Commission's own vision for the college of the future in relation to **people**, **productivity** and **place** - striking the right balance between the critical role of colleges in the economy with their role as anchor institutions rooted in local communities.

Of particular significance in Northern Ireland, the restructuring of the college network and their close alignment with their parent department in delivering the Executive's policy agenda has meant that, without diminishing their local/ community role, they now operate as a system with a greatly enhanced role in wider economic development and regeneration.

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

Further Education Means Success, Northern Ireland Strategy for Further Education (January 2016)

“Covid-19, and the measures required to reduce its transmission, is having a significant impact on the NI labour market. At the same time, EU Exit is introducing changes to fundamentals such as migration and trade. We are focused on working with industry and our delivery partners to respond to these challenges and improve the skills profile of the working population; and, ensure our young people are well equipped for entry into the labour market. We will provide access and support to help people develop the skills required to meet the changing demands of the labour market. Not only does this support economic growth, it also improves wellbeing and helps address inequality.”

Economic Recovery Action Plan, Northern Ireland Executive (February 2021)

The benefits of this approach are already becoming particularly clear in the development of Curriculum Hubs - consolidating specialist expertise, business support and innovation capacity within a lead college to the benefit of businesses and the wider economy. This is a model which we have drawn upon greatly in informing our work over the past two years. We strongly believe this approach could be usefully replicated in England, Scotland and Wales – as seen in our recommendation for the development of ‘employer hubs’ in our UK-wide reports, and within those three nations-specific reports. And we believe it provides a very strong basis to build upon in Northern Ireland, in the context of wider integration across the wider tertiary system.

Overall, the Commission believes that the strategy and the important practical developments which have been implemented across the college network in Northern Ireland are to be commended, and offer a ready-made template for taking forward the recommendations of our own UK-wide report.

This report therefore does not propose any fundamental change of direction - rather, it looks to ways in which Northern Ireland can further capitalise on the considerable strengths of the colleges individually, collectively and within the wider tertiary system, as well as responding to the immediate challenges facing Northern Ireland. In a wider policy context, we hope it will also provide a valuable contribution to the Executive's forthcoming Skills Strategy and its overall programme for government.

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CASE STUDY

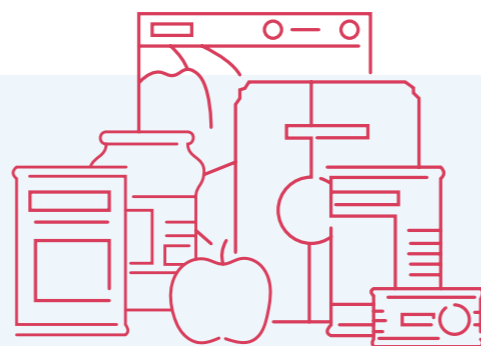
Foodovation Centre supporting local businesses to realise their business ambitions in food and drink

The Foodovation Centre and wider NWRC (including the Business Support Centre (BSC)) work collaboratively with a range of stakeholders to ensure businesses get the best support to develop their ideas. The centre supports entrepreneurs and businesses with turning their ideas and recipes into market viable products, whilst developing valuable knowledge and skills at the same time. It offers a 'hands on' approach to product development, covering everything from recipe development and standardisation to detailed research and testing for food and drink companies.

A need was identified to support entrepreneurs, chefs, and hospitality businesses to develop new products for market. A scoping exercise found that these businesses needed technical support and advice to grow their business alongside a state-of-the-art facility to allow them to innovate and develop new products they could bring to the market.

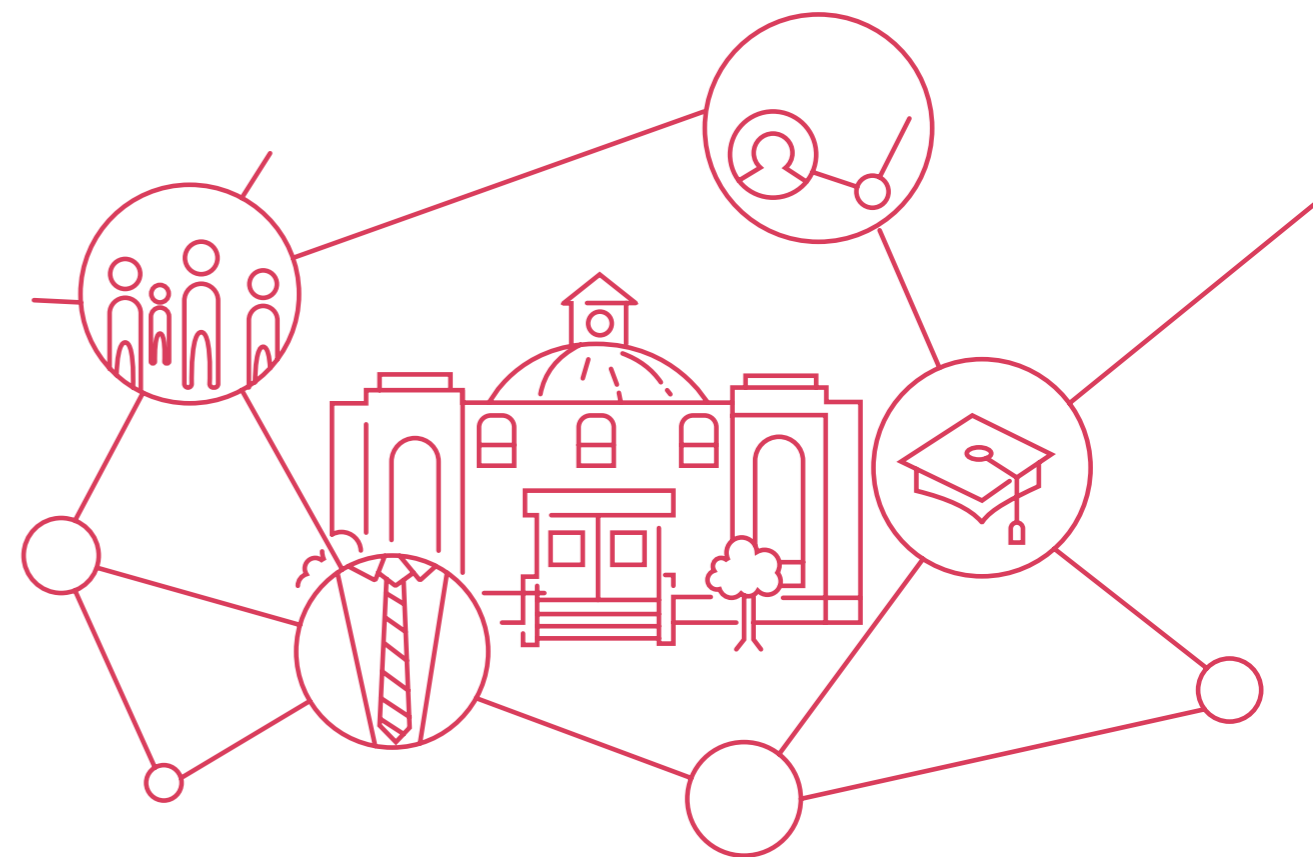
Since its inception in 2016 the Foodovation Centre has supported more than 150 businesses with various food and drink development projects. The centre provides ongoing support and skills development as businesses grow and develop.

The partnership includes funders such as the Department for the Economy, InvestNI, Connected NI, InterTrade Ireland, local councils such as DC&SDC and CC&G Council, the Food Standards Agency and Enterprise Centres amongst others.



"It has been an absolute pleasure to work with the very professional team at Foodovation. Without the help and guidance from Foodovation, we would not have been able to produce and promote our new range of products. It has been an extremely enlightening experience and we have learned a substantial amount about the nutritional and health value of our meals. Services like this are all too often beyond the reach of many SMEs."

**Hugh Hegarty,
Owner,
Hegarty's Butchers**



Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Strategic oversight

- To support the effective implementation of the skills strategy, the Northern Ireland Executive should establish:
 - A central oversight body with representatives from all relevant departments and arms-length bodies.
 - A single skills advisory board drawn from the network of employer stakeholder bodies.
- The new skills strategy to form the framework in shaping the remit of colleges as NDPBs and the high-level objectives in a new accountability regime.

Recommendation 2

A Single Coherent College Structure

- To maximise the contribution and impact of colleges across all aspects of the Northern Ireland economy and the wider public service realm by bringing them into a single governance structure.

Option 1 – A confederation

- Establish a Northern Ireland-wide board, with an independent Chair appointed by the Northern Ireland Executive, comprising all Chairs of governing bodies and principals and based on a new dual and binding accountability of both groups to their college and the whole network, formally set out in the NDPB remit letter. The national board would be responsible for a high-level strategic plan for colleges ensuring a single coherent response to the skills strategy through the right overall mix, balance and distribution of provision, including lead specialisms, the development of an infrastructure plan and, through the remit letter, the priorities for an outcome agreement(s). All responsibility for the day-to-day management of the colleges, including accountability for performance and quality, would remain with the individual college and colleges would retain their individual NDPB status.

Option 2 – A single NDPB

- Bring colleges into a single Northern Ireland-wide structure in the form of an NDPB under a national college board with a single remit from the Executive enabling the comprehensive mobilisation of all the college infrastructure, expertise and resources to the benefit of business, communities and the wider economy. It is assumed that college governing bodies would cease to exist in their current legal form, but that, at least in the short to medium term, principals would remain responsible for the day-to-day running of their colleges reporting directly to the national board.



Recommendation 3

Creating an Integrated Tertiary System**Institutional Roles and Remit**

- The Northern Ireland Executive to define the respective roles and remit of colleges and universities in terms of the types of provision and levels/qualifications which they deliver. Key to this will be to confirm the distinctive and exclusive role of colleges in the delivery of higher technical and professional skills programmes at Level 4 and 5, including Foundation Degrees and higher level apprenticeships at Level 4 and 5. While honours degree, degree-equivalent and post-graduate programmes will remain the responsibility of universities it should also be recognised that colleges can play an important role in widening participation at a regional level including delivery of full degree provision at Level 6 in individual specialist technical areas.
- This will avoid unnecessary competition and duplication across the binary divide as well as widening access and facilitating progression for individuals to degree programmes. Colleges have demonstrated a significant level of agility and responsiveness in addressing higher skills requirements of business and industry at a local and regional level. However, there is a need for increased flexibility within the system of HE in FE in NI and this must include the option of allowing colleges to partner with universities across the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

A Northern Ireland Articulation Agreement

- Economy Department, under its oversight of further and higher education, to work with colleges and universities to develop coherent curriculum pathways, progression routes and accreditation criteria across colleges and universities, improving access for individuals who wish to pursue a full degree. This should result in a single articulation framework further strengthening the links to the skills needs of the Northern Ireland economy.
- Develop a national campaign to promote the importance of higher technical and professional qualifications as highly valued career routes and as an integral part of colleges' purpose and brand.

Recommendation 4

Funding and Accountability

Accountability - Outcome Agreements

- Simplify the current accountability regime replacing it with a holistic plan-led approach with colleges' performance reviewed against a framework of high-level impact measures derived from the Northern Ireland skills strategy. These measures would then form the core of the ministerial NDPB remit letter developed with and through a single college board. Use outcome agreements to facilitate the wider development of a tertiary system through a common set of strategic impact measures across universities and colleges.

Regulation and Scrutiny

- Consolidate the individual regulatory and scrutiny mechanisms into a single regime linked to the proposed outcome agreements (see above) avoiding unnecessary duplication in terms of both inspection/audit requirements and processes. This should include two elements:
 - A review the separate regulatory mechanisms between colleges and universities with a view to establishing a common quality assurance framework across further and higher education.
 - Work to adopt common methods of scrutiny for further and higher education within the Economy Department.

Funding

- Northern Ireland Executive to commit support and sustainable funding to colleges, in line with the OECD's recommendations, to enable them to play their full part in the delivery of the skills strategy. In particular, it should address historical inequalities between college funding and that of schools and universities, adopting the principle of equal funding rates for comparable levels/types of provision.
- Ensure comparable funding is made available to fill the investment gap left by the loss of European Social Fund. This should include two elements:
 - Funding to be uncoupled from the headcount of individual students and qualifications to maximise colleges' contribution to business support and innovation enhancing the utilisation of their physical assets and specialist expertise as a resource for business.
 - Consolidate individual "initiative" budgets into the single line budget mirroring the shift to outcome agreements and a plan-led model.

Governance

- Bring colleges into a single governance structure as proposed in recommendation 2.

Recommendation 5

A statutory right to lifelong learning

A statutory right to lifelong learning should be established. As set out in our UK-wide report, this should include a free level three entitlement. It should also see funding to be equalised across further and higher education routes, with students able to access the maintenance support they need to engage in education and training, based on the following principles:

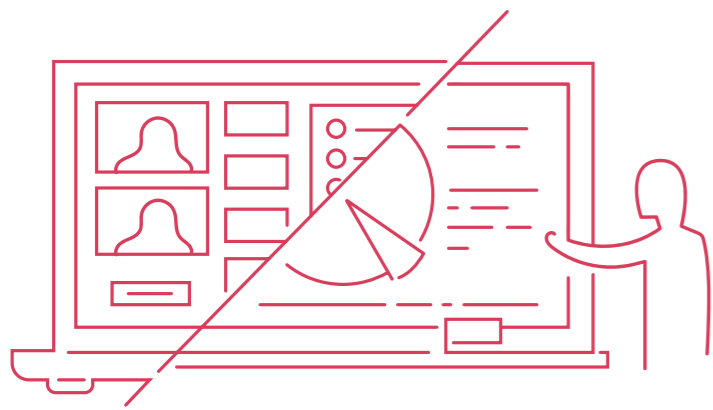
- Equal maintenance support across loans and grants is available for individuals in further and higher education and advanced skills training, adequate to an individual's needs whether part-time or full-time, so that everyone has the opportunity to pursue the route best suited to them throughout their lifetime.
- Flexibility in the use of the entitlement and any associated maintenance support in grants and/ or loans so that individuals able to build up their skills over time to match both their evolving career development needs and their personal circumstances.
- Unemployed people do not lose their welfare benefits where they use their entitlement to reskill/retrain full-time in areas of identified job opportunities and skills shortages.

Recommendation 6

Digital transformation

Economy Department to support the college network in the development and implementation of a digital action plan as a post-Covid recovery priority. This should include:

- Development of the digital infrastructure both in colleges and community outreach centres with capital investment in appropriate equipment and facilities.
- A substantial programme for the development of on-line, blended learning including building shared capability and capacity across the colleges.
- Targeted skills and business support for the further expansion of the digital economy, building on the success the Assured Skills programme.
- Establishment of a network of Community Hubs in disadvantaged communities combining a 'one-stop shop' for a range of community services including health, employment education with a specific role in addressing digital poverty.



Recommendation 7

Shared Services

Initiate a comprehensive review of the scope for shared services across the college network including the potential for streamlining of governance structures and processes (in line with recommendation 2).

Recommendation 8

14-19 Education

Education and Economy Departments to prioritise the completion of the Transition of Young People into Careers (14-19) project with its implementation through the establishment of a cross-departmental skills board with the following aims:

- Developing a coherent shared strategy to improve learner and curriculum pathways between schools and colleges across the 14-19 phase and spanning the breadth of academic and vocational options including the scope for the wider introduction of entitlement curriculum and of vocational options in the 14-16 phase.
- Developing an appropriate funding model that support college-school partnership working.
- Developing clear coherent progression pathways at regional level for 14-19 using the differentiated offer between schools and colleges.
- Redefining the role of area learning communities.
- Reviewing the range of careers education programmes and careers advice and guidance services with a view to establishing a comprehensive and independent careers programme with strong employer/employment focus.

Recommendation 9

College workforce and leadership

Develop a long-term system-wide workforce development strategy reflecting the rapidly changing external labour market context and its impact, in relation to skills and employment, on the working age population and the businesses in which they work to include the following:

- Curriculum hubs to create specialist peer practitioner networks in each of the key sectors/occupational areas. This should include:
 - Providing regular and systematic skills updating for vocational specialists including through short-term placement and business/industrial secondment.
 - Creating specialist peer networks ensuring regular and systematic exchange of practice and full engagement in the development of new curriculum models and accreditation.
- Creation of new specialist lecturer career roles building a cadre of dual professionals with a critical role in business support, innovation and company workforce development as well as a lead role in internal CPD/workforce development. This should include:
 - Leading peer practitioner networks.
 - Working across institutions to support colleagues through mentoring and coaching.
 - Working in teams in devising new upskilling programmes and new modes of delivery and accreditation.
- Diversification of the workforce with new roles, complementing the core cadre of teaching and learning professionals. This should include:
 - Career/ employment advisory functions to support the increasing demand for career change and individual reskilling programmes.
 - Specialist technological functions supporting the introduction/application of digital technologies and pedagogy.
- Development of leadership strategy with particular focus on succession planning and engagement in the Four Nations College Alliance and the opportunities it presents for peer exchange and joint commissioning of external support.

THE COLLEGE OF THE FUTURE:

FOR PEOPLE, PRODUCTIVITY AND PLACE



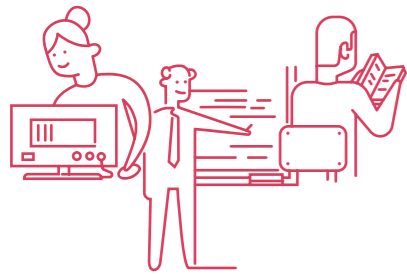
Colleges can and must play a strong and central role in responding to challenges and transformations, from global megatrends like climate change to immediate crises like COVID-19, as well as the changing demands, aspirations and expectations of people, employers and communities.

Colleges transform lives and are at the heart of communities right across Northern Ireland. They are a fundamental piece of the education and skills system as centres of lifelong learning, and anchor institutions within their communities. Despite all of this, all too often, college resources and expertise can be poorly understood, under-utilised and insufficiently funded in relation to other parts of the education and skills system.

Colleges can and must play a strong and central role in responding to challenges and transformations, from global megatrends like climate change to immediate crises like COVID-19, as well as the changing demands, aspirations and expectations of people, employers and communities. That is why the Independent Commission on the College of the Future is calling for a new vision for colleges.

The College of the Future will empower **people** throughout their lives with the skills they need to get on in life, support better **productivity** and innovation of businesses, and strengthen every community's sense of **place**.

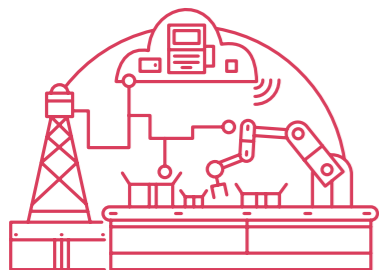




For **people**, colleges will be a touchpoint for everyone throughout their lives as the world changes.

There are many changes and challenges to face in Northern Ireland - from an ageing population, changes in the world of work, digital transformation, the climate emergency, the need to address longstanding issues of social exclusion and the ongoing impacts of the UK's exiting from the European Union. All of these challenges and changes are accelerated and disrupted by the global pandemic.

Taken together, these means transformation to the Northern Ireland skills system, offering a genuinely lifelong service. Citizens need to be able to engage with and benefit from education and training throughout their lives to have the skills and opportunities they need for good jobs and to live well. The college of the future will offer flexible and blended learning and guidance to empower each person to get a job, progress in their career and be an active citizen.



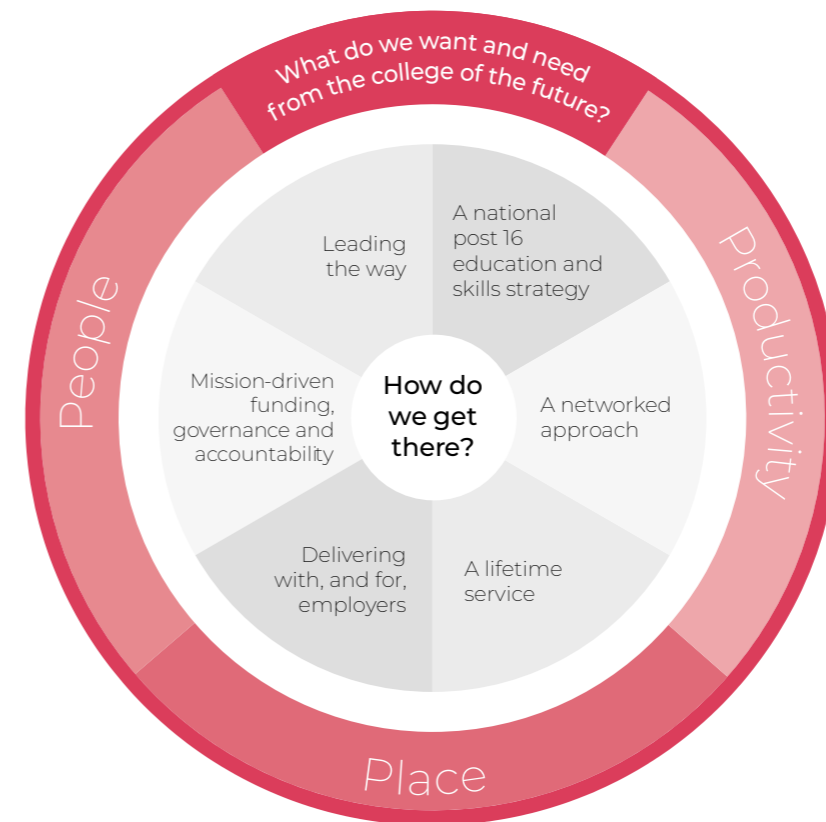
For **productivity**, colleges will provide and convene strategic advice and support for employers to drive business change, innovation, and future workforce planning.

The college of the future will play an expanded role in innovation and knowledge transfer, supporting business to respond and rise to these challenges, whilst also equipping employees with opportunities to develop new skills. This means building on the particular strengths of the Northern Ireland college system, and taking this further.



For **place**, colleges will have the resources and funding to play an even greater role in fostering healthy and connected communities.

Colleges are important anchor institutions in communities right across Northern Ireland, but this dimension needs to have far more recognition and to be incentivised to a greater extent. The college of the future must have this role as a central part of its strategic mission, including for example promoting social inclusion, health and wellbeing - with clear alignment with other partners and areas of strategic priority.



UK-WIDE RECOMMENDATIONS

National strategies for education and skills to support economic growth, industrial change and lifelong learning.

College network strategies to meet local priorities across the tertiary education system.

Colleges as anchor institutions within the wider local and regional ecosystem.

A statutory right to lifelong learning.

Skills guarantee for a post-COVID economy and future labour market changes.

A new strategic partnership with employers.

A new support service to employers.

Stable funding and accountability frameworks for colleges.

A strategic relationship with governments and simplified processes.

An ambitious future college workforce strategy.

Diverse and representative systems leaders.

THE NORTHERN IRELAND COLLEGE SYSTEM



The reforms to the structure, governance and overall purpose of colleges in Northern Ireland mean they are ideally placed to play a central role in the delivery of the new Northern Ireland skills strategy.

The Commission strongly supports the strong positive affirmation of the system and the direction of travel of Northern Ireland's skills system, as set out by the OECD. The reforms to the structure, governance and overall purpose of colleges mean they are ideally placed to play a central role in the delivery of the new Northern Ireland skills strategy. In particular, these reforms provide all the main components from which to establish a more responsive and integrated tertiary system, as recommended by OECD.

In the wider context, we are confident that our own proposals are entirely consistent with the OECD's recommendations as well as providing a clear implementation framework for optimising the contribution of colleges both in the short-term, post-Covid recovery phase and over the longer term.

“In recent years, Northern Ireland has made significant progress in strengthening its skills system and economic and social performance... Northern Ireland has already implemented a range of strategies and reforms... including the 2011-2020 overarching strategy, ‘Success through Skills -Transforming Futures’... to create a skills architecture capable of addressing many of the(future) challenges.”

OECD Skills Strategy, Northern Ireland (June 2020)

Northern Ireland’s economy and productivity challenges

There are critical challenges facing the Northern Ireland economy. Northern Ireland’s economy is smaller per head of population than that of the UK as a whole - measured in gross value added, Northern Ireland’s economy is 75.9 per cent of the UK. In overall terms, it suffers from poor levels of productivity, even relative to other parts of the UK (IPPR 2018) – although it has in recent years been improving faster than the average over the past decade (UUEC 2020).

Alongside this there are wider changes and challenges which employers of all sizes have to respond to - including the climate emergency, ageing population and changing trading relationships across the world. The fourth industrial revolution brings with it the growing use of artificial intelligence and increasing and expansive use of robotics, and the fact of growing task automation (Centre for Social Justice 2017).

In overall terms, Northern Ireland suffers from poor levels of productivity, even relative to the rest of the UK (IPPR 2018) – although it has in recent years been improving faster than the average over the past decade (UUEC 2020).



In 2017, 31 per cent of the working age population had either no qualifications or low qualifications (below level 2), and with only 32 per cent had qualifications at level 4 or above (LWI 2021).

All of these changes must be addressed in the context of an economy dominated by smaller employers – with the 118,000 SMEs in Northern Ireland constituting approximately 75 per cent of turnover in the private sector (IPPR 2018). Most of these SMEs are sole operator businesses - with only 30,000 have employees (FSB 2016). This makes the role of colleges in proactively working both to respond to and to stimulate demand from employers becomes all the more important.

And there is a long-standing issue in terms of economic activity and access to quality jobs. Well before the pandemic, Northern Ireland has suffered from the highest economic inactivity rate in the UK, standing at 28.4 per cent in 2017 (ONS Statistical Bulletin 2018) - sitting 7.1 percentage points higher than the UK rate (IPPR 2018). Equally significantly, for those in work, career progression rates, are particularly low in Northern Ireland - with a rate of 2.5 per cent (on average, per quarter, between 2013 and 2018) compared to a UK-wide rate of 6 per cent (IPPR 2018).

In 2017, 31 per cent of the working age population had either no qualifications or low qualifications (below level 2), and with only 32 per cent had qualifications at level 4 or above (LWI 2021). This compares to the UK as a whole with 26 per cent with having no or low qualifications and 38 per cent with level 4 or above (LWI 2021). The Learning and Work Institute project concludes that, while improving, the present trajectory will see Northern Ireland’s qualifications profile continue to sit significantly below the UK average.

“The potential impact of Brexit is not yet fully known, but it is likely to disproportionately affect Northern Ireland, not least because it is the only part of the UK with a direct land border with an EU member state. With many crossing the border to work and study, the new trading relationship with the EU could have drastic implications for both the economy and skills.”

A Higher Skills Ambition for Northern Ireland, Learning and Work Institute (2021)

TAKING THIS FORWARD IN NORTHERN IRELAND



A long-term cross-government skills strategy

Recommendation 1

Strategic oversight

- To support the effective implementation of the skills strategy, the Northern Ireland Executive should establish:
 - A central oversight body with representatives from all relevant departments and arms-length bodies.
 - A single skills advisory board drawn from the network of employer stakeholder bodies.
- The new skills strategy to form the framework in shaping the remit of colleges as NDPBs and the high-level objectives in a new accountability regime.

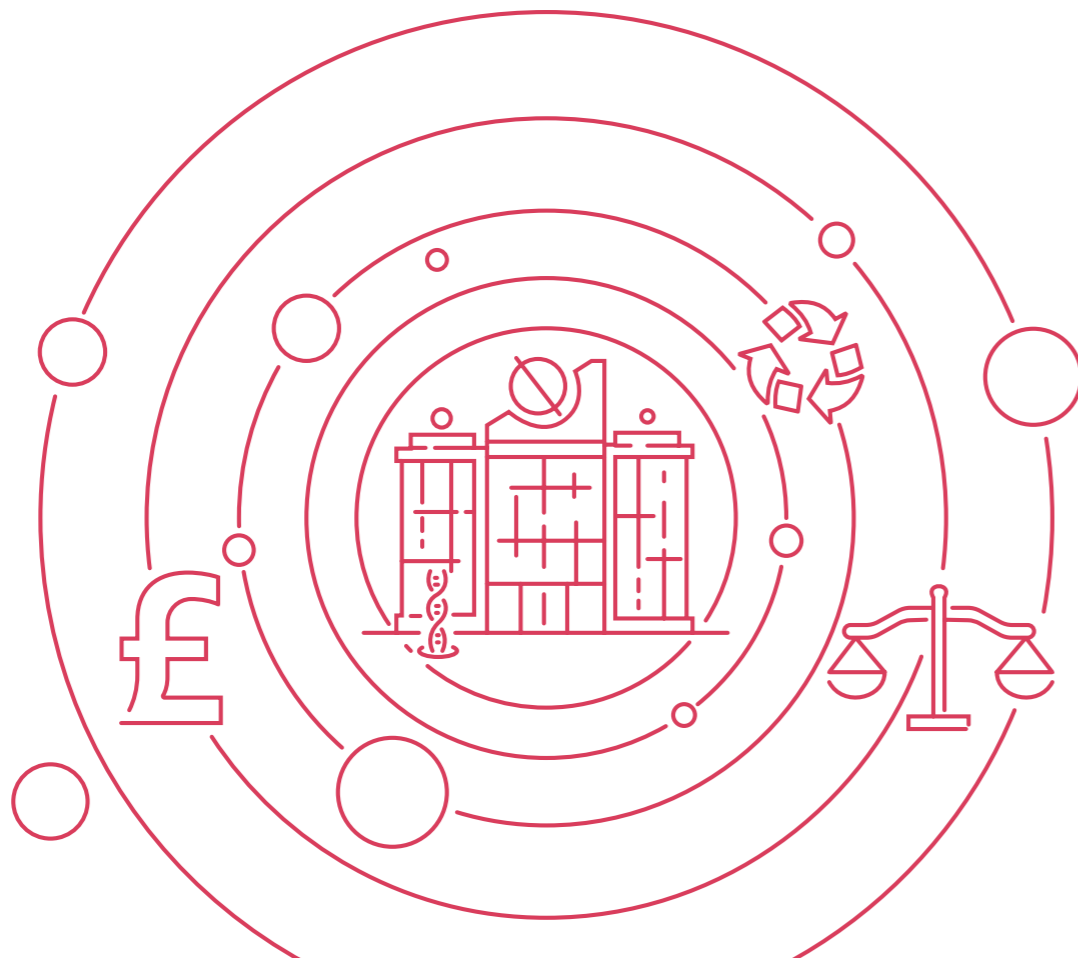
Strategic leadership and oversight

We strongly endorse the OECD's recommendation that, for the effective development and implementation of the new skills strategy for Northern Ireland, there is a need 'to increase co-ordination and information distribution across the whole of government... by introducing a central oversight body with representatives from all relevant departments and arms-length bodies' (OECD 2020). Ideally, this should include other key economic/ business development agencies (such as Invest NI) ensuring that skills and workforce development form an integral part of the overall strategy for growth. This approach is affirmed in the recently published Economic Recovery Strategy (2021).

As the OECD also proposes, this should include bringing together the network of employer stakeholder bodies to form a single advisory body to advise government on skills policy. This should, in turn, provide the strategic framework shaping the remit of colleges, as Non-Departmental Public Bodies and translated into a high-level outcome agreement.

We strongly endorse the purpose and remit of colleges set out in the NI Executive 2016 vision statement which we believe is wholly consistent with our own vision for the college of the future. In particular, the system-led approach Northern Ireland has adopted has already significantly enhanced the contribution colleges make to both the economy and, as public assets, to their local communities. Colleges must be at the centre of the new skills strategy for Northern Ireland. However, with the right adjustments to the accountability framework under which they operate, we believe Northern Ireland's colleges can play an even greater role in improving citizens' life chances, raising productivity and regenerating communities.

The system-led approach Northern Ireland has adopted has already significantly enhanced the contribution colleges make to both the economy and, as public assets, to their local communities.



The Northern Ireland college network

Recommendation 2

A Single Coherent College Structure

- To maximise the contribution and impact of colleges across all aspects of the Northern Ireland economy and the wider public service realm by bringing them into a single governance structure.

Option 1 – A confederation

- Establish a Northern Ireland-wide board, with an independent Chair appointed by the Northern Ireland Executive, comprising all Chairs of governing bodies and principals and based on a new dual and binding accountability of both groups to their college and the whole network, formally set out in the NDPB remit letter. The national board would be responsible for a high-level strategic plan for colleges ensuring a single coherent response to the skills strategy through the right overall mix, balance and distribution of provision, including lead specialisms, the development of an infrastructure plan and, through the remit letter, the priorities for an outcome agreement(s). All responsibility for the day-to-day management of the colleges, including accountability for performance and quality, would remain with the individual college and colleges would retain their individual NDPB status.

Option 2 – A single NDPB

- Bring colleges into a single Northern Ireland-wide structure in the form of an NDPB under a national college board with a single remit from the Executive enabling the comprehensive mobilisation of all the college infrastructure, expertise and resources to the benefit of business, communities and the wider economy. It is assumed that college governing bodies would cease to exist in their current legal form, but that, at least in the short to medium term, principals would remain responsible for the day-to-day running of their colleges reporting directly to the national board.

Colleges – accountability and status

The transfer of responsibilities for colleges to the Economy Department within the Northern Ireland Executive has brought benefits across the college network – including a strong role for colleges at the heart of economic strategy. However, the division of responsibilities for education across departments has led to a degree of fragmentation, especially at the interface between schools and colleges, acting as a barrier to the development of an effective post-school transition strategy and a coherent 14-19 phase.

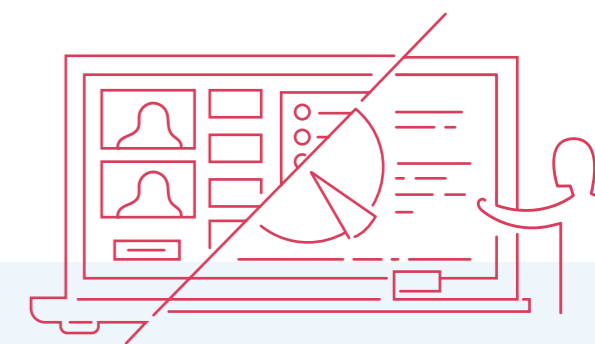
The relationship between colleges and the Economy Department relationship has also been strengthened through the change of status of colleges to Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPB). This change of status has already achieved a much closer alignment of policy and delivery, but could be utilised to further strengthen the collective contribution of colleges as a coherent system. In practical terms, this change has also created some unhelpful bureaucracy and barriers to responsiveness which should be addressed. In particular, an appropriate mechanism should be found to facilitate multi-annual flexibility avoiding a year end ‘cliff edge’ or a race to fully utilise funding regardless of purpose.

College structure – a networked college system

The restructuring of the college network into a regionally based system, combined with their change of status, has substantially strengthened their role in national and regional economic development without diminishing their anchor role in economic inclusion within local communities. In fact, under the umbrella of the Economy Department, they now operate collaboratively on a wide range of areas and services.

The benefits of this system-based approach are manifest, most notably, in the development of Curriculum Hubs, with individual colleges taking on lead responsibility for all aspects of a specialist sector/occupation across the whole network including curriculum and workforce development and accreditation/qualifications. Tangible evidence of the success of this approach is the Queen’s Anniversary Prize to Belfast Metropolitan College for its ground-breaking work in cyber security through the development of the Digital IT Hub.

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CASE STUDY

Leading ICT through curriculum hub

Belfast Met was awarded the Queen’s Anniversary Prize in 2019 in recognition of its excellence in Further Education training in Information and Communications Technology. It was designated Curriculum Hub for the Digital ICT sector in Northern Ireland in 2017, and continues to make a vital contribution to ‘leading the city to work’.

As the designated Curriculum Hub, they are the lead college in Northern Ireland for education and training in ICT and are recognised by the Government and IT sector as a Centre of Excellence.

Alongside the leading-edge delivery of programmes to support business, the College’s outreach programmes include coding clubs for young people and summer technology camps for 16-19 year old female learners. Another example is a partnership with the BBC Academy and Accenture to bring the BBC’s Make it Digital traineeships to Northern Ireland as a way of enabling young people not in education, employment or training to take up career opportunities in the creative industries.

The college has also provided significant support to SMEs in recent years working through the Skills Focus to upskill and reskill employees and through the Assured Skills Programme to place over 1,400 graduates into employment in the professional and financial services sectors in Northern Ireland. Given this success in the digital sector the College has also been working to support the development of the Employability and Skills strand of the Belfast City Deal, worth £850m over the next ten years, which will be a key part of the economic recovery strategy for Northern Ireland supporting digital innovation, tourism and hospitality and advanced manufacturing.

We believe the strengths of colleges operating as a cohesive system can be utilised to further enhance their individual and collective contribution in all areas of economic development, regeneration and the wider development of public services.

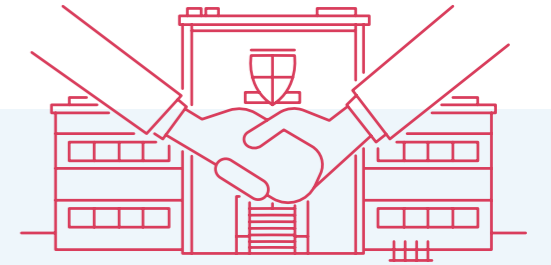
In addition, the system-based approach and scale of operation provides a real opportunity to use the college system to support the development of a new professional and technical qualifications solution for Northern Ireland. The increasingly important role they are playing in the development and delivery of the City Deals in the Belfast Region and Derry City and Strabane in ensuring skills and employment form an integral part of the programme illustrates the scope and potential.

However, to achieve that full potential it would seem timely to embed this systemic model by bringing the governance and oversight of colleges into a single Northern Ireland-wide structure, enabling the comprehensive mobilisation of all the colleges' infrastructure, expertise and resources to benefit business, communities and the wider economy. In addition, this would offer significant mutual benefits for businesses, facilitating their engagement both strategically and practically, and for colleges, enhanced business advocacy and closer alignment to employers' skills needs. In practical terms, the legal status of colleges as NDPBs should make any transition to a single structure relatively straightforward. In the context of education and skills policy, this should also facilitate the development of a fully integrated tertiary system.

Cross-border movement

Northern Ireland colleges and, in particular, South West College, North West and Southern Regional Colleges, face significant challenges in accommodating cross-border movement of both staff and students from the Republic of Ireland as well as operating within wider economic and travel-to-work areas across the border. We support ambitions of the Northern Ireland Executive to develop cross-border innovation collaborations and clusters through the InterTradeIreland Synergy Programme (2021).

We believe the strengths of colleges operating as a cohesive system can be utilised to further enhance their individual and collective contribution in all areas of economic development, regeneration and the wider development of public services.



CASE STUDY

Developing the curriculum through employer engagement in security systems

South Eastern Regional College (SERC) engaged with employers from the Security Systems Industry to develop the curriculum and deliver training that would provide a future workforce while upskilling and reskilling the existing workforce. Employers within the Security Systems industry reported a lack of investment in the industry which resulted in a severe shortage of trained engineers in a sector which was expanding. In addition, technological enhancements had resulted in a different skill set being required. There was no sector specific training in NI, or courses to upskill the existing workforce.

SERC commenced a programme of engagement with employers from the Security Systems Industry. This led to the curriculum being developed and training provided for the sector which would upskill the existing workforce as well as meet their future skills requirements. With SERC's support these employers have established the Northern Ireland Fire & Security Employers Federation (NIFSEF).

SERC's role has been to improve employers' understanding of the qualifications landscape and to collaborate with employers to identify the skills which should be included in qualifications. SERC has provided training for 29 different employers. A total of 210 existing employees have been upskilled on SERC's part-time security systems qualifications, resulting in a significant proportion of the workforce, previously without qualifications gaining accreditation.

An industry which previously had severe skills shortages now has a range of training options available through apprenticeships and Business Services courses. As a result, the future skills requirements of the industry have been secured.

“SERC has proactively assisted the NIFSEF in general and we at Building Protection Systems (BPS) in particular to find, nurture, train, and educate new young apprentice talent. They are to be commended for their dedication to developing modules best suited to our industry whilst adhering to guidelines of the educational aspects in which they are governed.”

**Calvin Adams,
Managing Director,
Building Protection
Systems**

CASE STUDY**College leads on life science specialism**

The Life Science Hub at Southern Regional College is recognised as the lead in the occupational area and manages FE college collaborations with occupational specialists from the six colleges of Northern Ireland. Its aim is to provide a consistent high quality educational provision for learners and employers across Northern Ireland through economic engagement, curriculum review, future scoping, CPD and supporting the Life and Health Science Sectoral Partnership activity.

Its activity focuses on analysis and prioritisation of business needs and curriculum development to support the growth of the Northern Ireland Life and Health sector. The Hub supports progression pathways by reviewing and aligning Higher Education provision, providing clear articulation routes from entry level programmes.

An example of this is the Higher Level Apprenticeship (HLA) in Applied Industrial Sciences. It is the only one of its kind in Northern Ireland and remains current, flexible and fit for purpose for local Life Sciences industry. The HLA supports employment in a variety of industrial science fields and provides articulation to a range of Higher Education pathways upon successful completion.

The Life Science Hub also leads research into the skill set of sector college workforce. Skills gaps identified are addressed with focused continuous professional development (CPD) delivered as contextualised training to directly support the curriculum and embeds effective use of new technical skills relating to the industry.

An integrated wider tertiary system

Recommendation 3

Creating an Integrated Tertiary System

Institutional Roles and Remit

- The Northern Ireland Executive to define the respective roles and remit of colleges and universities in terms of the types of provision and levels/qualifications which they deliver. Key to this will be to confirm the distinctive and exclusive role of colleges in the delivery of higher technical and professional skills programmes at Level 4 and 5, including Foundation Degrees and higher level apprenticeships at Level 4 and 5. While honours degree, degree-equivalent and post-graduate programmes will remain the responsibility of universities it should also be recognised that colleges can play an important role in widening participation at a regional level including delivery of full degree provision at Level 6 in individual specialist technical areas.
- This will avoid unnecessary competition and duplication across the binary divide as well as widening access and facilitating progression for individuals to degree programmes. Colleges have demonstrated a significant level of agility and responsiveness in addressing higher skills requirements of business and industry at a local and regional level. However, there is a need for increased flexibility within the system of HE in FE in NI and this must include the option of allowing colleges to partner with universities across the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

A Northern Ireland Articulation Agreement

- Economy Department, under its oversight of further and higher education, to work with colleges and universities to develop coherent curriculum pathways, progression routes and accreditation criteria across colleges and universities, improving access for individuals who wish to pursue a full degree. This should result in a single articulation framework further strengthening the links to the skills needs of the Northern Ireland economy.
- Develop a national campaign to promote the importance of higher technical and professional qualifications as highly valued career routes and as an integral part of colleges' purpose and brand.

Institutional Roles and Remit

Northern Ireland's colleges deliver a substantial volume of higher education (20% +), chiefly in the form of higher technical and professional skills programmes at Level 4 and 5, including Foundation Degrees, directly linked to areas of skills and labour market need. By custom and practice, this has been an exclusive function carried out by colleges. The current, ongoing review of higher education in further education represents an important opportunity to formalise this position as part of a broader definition of the respective roles of colleges and universities within an integrated tertiary system. This should also include higher level apprenticeships at Level 4 and 5 and the establishment of coherent progression routes to full degrees across the tertiary system.

There is clearly an urgent need to address this issue, given the growing financial pressures on universities caused by the Covid crisis, with the risk of undermining a key strength of the Northern Ireland system through 'mission drift', blurring the boundaries between colleges and universities and resulting in unhealthy competition and duplication.

A Single Articulation Agreement

The forthcoming review of higher education in further education policy should bring together colleges and universities to develop coherent curriculum pathways with clearer progression routes and accreditation criteria across colleges and universities, improving access for individuals who wish to obtain higher level qualifications through to honours degree level.

This should result in a clear differentiated role for further education through a single articulation framework based on higher level professional and technical qualifications. This is key to further strengthening the links to the skills needs of the Northern Ireland economy and maximising the strengths of both Colleges and Universities. The Northern Ireland Executive might here usefully draw on the work of the Scottish Government's 'Leaner Journey' review.

It is important to note that this should not undermine the value of HNC and HND as critical distinctive qualifications with strong links to high-skill technical and professional occupations and a key strength of the Northern Ireland system.

The forthcoming review of higher education in further education policy should bring together colleges and universities to develop coherent curriculum pathways with clearer progression routes and accreditation criteria across colleges and universities, improving access for individuals who wish to obtain higher level qualifications through to honours degree level.

CASE STUDY

Collaborative research between College, University and Industry

The Renewable Engine is a cross-border research and innovation (R&I) programme aimed at facilitating direct knowledge transfer and technology through the provision of PhD level industrial research support in the renewable energy & advanced manufacturing sector. The South West region has a strong presence of advanced manufacturing, engineering and renewable energy businesses. However, enterprises are currently not engaged in R&I activities in a strategic and collaborative way.

Lead by South West College (SWC), Renewable Engine operates across a network of research institutes including Queens University Belfast, Institute of Technology Sligo and the University of Strathclyde's High-Value Manufacturing Catapult. It has strengthened the research, technological development, and innovation capacity within the renewable energy & advanced manufacturing sectors through creation of an internationally recognised cross-border research supercluster. It provides a mechanism for SWC to bridge the gap between public and private R&I and drive better innovation and knowledge transfer between colleges, universities & industry.

For SWC, Renewable Engine has enabled the college to initiate PhD level research, an area of provision which had not been in place prior to the Renewable Engine project. It has strengthened collaboration with the university sector, working directly with world-class research centres to jointly address low levels of innovation within this sector.

The initiative has created a link between the Northern Ireland FE sector & the UK High Value Manufacturing Catapult in the region, bringing their expertise to Northern Ireland where there is currently no Catapult centre positioned. Strategically, it has empowered the College to deliver a dual model of employer engagement, focused on both employers' skills needs and their more advanced innovation requirements. The twofold approach recognises that a combination of both enhanced workforce skills and innovation capability are at the core of economic growth, and that colleges are well placed to deliver more advanced industrial engagement activities.

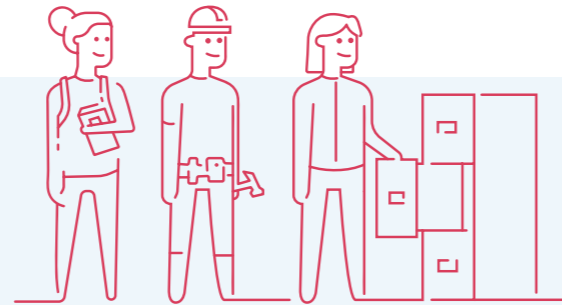


“The knowledge transfer that takes place between education and academia, and is brought into real life commercial environments in terms of industry, we hope will develop a lot more jobs, more exports and more innovation.”

**Stephen Kelly,
CEO,
Manufacturing
Northern Ireland**

CASE STUDY

Place-based approach to skills and employability in Belfast



The Belfast Region City Deal is a partnership of councils and colleges shaping the region's employability and skills proposition, which is led by Belfast Metropolitan College. The UK Government and partners are co-investing £1 billion to help strengthen the region's business offer in growth sectors such as life and health sciences, the digital and creative industries, and advanced manufacturing.

The formation of an Employability and Skills Working Group, which has worked over the last 3 years to shape the proposition document, has also helped to build more collaborative relationships between local authorities, universities and colleges. They are seeking to define a series of opportunities to create skills solutions in priority growth areas.

Colleges are more closely involved in the development of the deal, capitalising on their unique knowledge and understanding of the design and implementation of skills and employability solutions. It has helped to reinforce the role of the FE sector as a valued place based public service, extensively funded by Government, rather than simply another provider procured to deliver services.

"The biggest issues that our businesses had last year was getting digital and technology skills. So, we liaised with our partners in the Belfast Region City Deal to come up with a reskilling programme funded by the Department for Economy for some key sector areas, such as cloud, cyber and software. We are making sure that those who don't have those skills and opportunities are rapidly reskilled, so they can embrace what this revolution brings."

Jayne Brady, Belfast Digital Innovation Commissioner

Funding, governance and accountability

Recommendation 4

Funding and Accountability

Accountability - Outcome Agreements

- Simplify the current accountability regime replacing it with a holistic plan-led approach with colleges' performance reviewed against a framework of high-level impact measures derived from the Northern Ireland skills strategy. These measures would then form the core of the ministerial NDPB remit letter developed with and through a single college board. Use outcome agreements to facilitate the wider development of a tertiary system through a common set of strategic impact measures across universities and colleges.

Regulation and Scrutiny

- Consolidate the individual regulatory and scrutiny mechanisms into a single regime linked to the proposed outcome agreements (see above) avoiding unnecessary duplication in terms of both inspection/audit requirements and processes. This should include two elements:
 - A review the separate regulatory mechanisms between colleges and universities with a view to establishing a common quality assurance framework across further and higher education.
 - Work to adopt common methods of scrutiny for further and higher education within the Economy Department.

Funding

- Northern Ireland Executive to commit support and sustainable funding to colleges, in line with the OECD's recommendations, to enable them to play their full part in the delivery of the skills strategy. In particular, it should address historical inequalities between college funding and that of schools and universities, adopting the principle of equal funding rates for comparable levels/ types of provision.
- Ensure comparable funding is made available to fill the investment gap left by the loss of European Social Fund. This should include two elements:
 - Funding to be uncoupled from the headcount of individual students and qualifications to maximise colleges' contribution to business support and innovation enhancing the utilisation of their physical assets and specialist expertise as a resource for business.
 - Consolidate individual "initiative" budgets into the single line budget mirroring the shift to outcome agreements and a plan-led model.

Governance

- Bring colleges into a single governance structure as proposed in recommendation 2.



Performance and Accountability

The Commission believes that, as stated above, the reforms undertaken by the Northern Ireland Executive should enable colleges to play a central role in its new skills strategy and the achievement of its wider education priorities. However, to achieve this, it will be essential to substantially streamline accountability, performance and funding systems.

Outcome Agreements

Funding should be uncoupled from the headcount of individual students and qualifications to enable them to maximise their potential contribution to business support and innovation as well as providing personalised re-skilling and career change support in a much more volatile labour market. Performance should be assessed on the basis of a series of high-level impact measures built around a strategic plan.

Outcome agreements should also be used to strengthen the development of a tertiary system through a common high-level set of strategic impact measures across universities and colleges.

“To strengthen the governance of skills policies, Northern Ireland should:

- Effect sustainable funding arrangements and commitment for an overarching strategy for the skills system.***
- Commit ...to guarantee support and sustainable financial resources to achieve strategic goals as part of a binding, cross-departmental Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland.”***

OECD Skills Strategy, Northern Ireland (June 2020)

Outcome agreements should also be used to strengthen the development of a tertiary system through a common high-level set of strategic impact measures across universities and colleges.

Regulation and Scrutiny

The move to an accountability model based on outcome agreements provides an opportunity to review and streamline the separate regulatory and scrutiny regimes that apply across the colleges' individual funding streams and diverse areas of provision. Given the colleges' status as NDPBs, the aim should be to create a single accountability framework avoiding unnecessary duplication in terms of both inspection/audit requirements and processes. Key areas for review are:

- separate regulatory regimes for higher education and further education/apprenticeship through QAA the Education and Training Inspectorate respectively employing fundamentally different approaches and methodologies.
- the need for/relationship between the inspection regime and the annual scrutiny of the Economy Department's Quality Improvement Unit.

Funding

The Commission fully concurs with the view of OECD that there is a need for a long-term sustainable investment strategy across the skills system. This will be doubly important in framing an effective post-Covid economic recovery strategy. In practical terms, given the dependency of substantial parts of its skills investment on European Social Fund (ESF), Northern Ireland will need to prioritise skills and employability in the utilisation of the Shared Prosperity Fund to fill the investment gap left by the loss of ESF.

We believe that the forthcoming review of higher education in further education is an opportunity to address the significant funding disparities between universities and colleges through a coherent investment strategy for all higher education which is both fair to the individual and, equally importantly, in acknowledging the critical importance of higher technical and professional skills to the economy.

The fragmentation of funding systems for colleges limits their ability to maximise their potential role, especially in relation to productivity improvement and business support and innovation with an over-reliance on ring-fenced initiative budgets (eg Assured Skills), currently often funded through European Social Fund. Given the NDPB status of colleges, a shift to outcome agreements could be mirrored in a move to a single-line budget without any inherent risk to public funds. A flexible funding regime would, in turn, facilitate a fundamental shift to a focus on lifetime learning - a key recommendation in the OECD report. In that context, active consideration should be given to a Lifetime Entitlement based on a lifetime allowance of funding up to a Level 3 qualification.

More generally, Northern Ireland's colleges have amply demonstrated the important contribution they can make to business support and innovation, especially for SMEs – a particular strength of the Northern Ireland college network. If funding were uncoupled from volumes and based on their overall strategic role, colleges could significantly expand this role, enhancing the utilisation of their physical assets and specialist expertise as a resource for business.

There are significant opportunities to build on the strengths of the Curriculum Hubs model and the developed role colleges play in strategic business support and innovation in alignment with the Northern Ireland Executive's commitment to invest heavily in place-based innovation through City and Growth Deals (2021) – which is an obvious and important point of connection to be made. There are further opportunities to draw on investment here through the UK Government's Levelling Up agenda, which the Northern Ireland Executive is seeking to draw on to contribute to stronger investment in NI commercial R&D capabilities – and again, this should be integrated with skills strategy as an opportunity to build on the existing strengths of the college network.

Targeted capital investment in appropriate equipment and facilities together with shared capability and capacity in on-line learning across the tertiary sector could also make a major contribution to the rapid development of the digital economy.

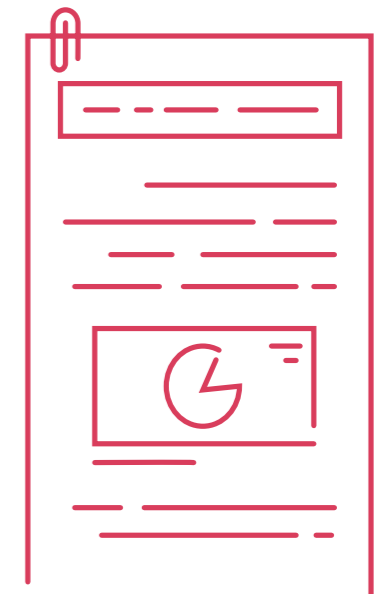
There are significant opportunities to build on the strengths of the Curriculum Hubs model and the developed role colleges play in strategic business support and innovation in alignment with the Northern Ireland Executive's commitment to invest heavily in place-based innovation through City and Growth Deals (2021).

It would seem timely for Chairs of governors to be given a dual accountability to the college and to the collective college group, removing any potential conflict of interest between their college remit and collective action.

Governance

The regionalisation of colleges and their redesignation as NDPBs have enabled them, individually and, increasingly, collectively, to play a much stronger role in the delivery of national social and economic policies. More recently, the development of new traineeships, higher level apprenticeships and the introduction of curriculum hubs mean they can develop effective responses to key sectoral priorities aligned to areas of inward investment and/or indigenous employment growth.

The system-based model is increasingly embedded at a management level, but not reflected in the overall governance structure. It would seem timely for Chairs of governors to be given a dual accountability to the college and to the collective college group, removing any potential conflict of interest between their college remit and collective action. This would also strengthen partnership working both across the network and with the Economy Department and potentially facilitate the embedding of this systemic model by bringing the governance and oversight of colleges into a single Northern Ireland-wide structure. In practical terms, the legal status of colleges as NDPBs should make any transition to a single structure relatively straightforward as well as offering clear benefits in relation to budget flexibility in the utilisation of funds across the network.



A statutory right to lifelong learning

Recommendation 5

A statutory right to lifelong learning

A statutory right to lifelong learning should be established. As set out in our UK-wide report, this should include a free level three entitlement. It should also see funding to be equalised across further and higher education routes, with students able to access the maintenance support they need to engage in education and training, based on the following principles:

- i) Equal maintenance support across loans and grants is available for individuals in further and higher education and advanced skills training, adequate to an individual's needs whether part-time or full-time, so that everyone has the opportunity to pursue the route best suited to them throughout their lifetime.
- ii) Flexibility in the use of the entitlement and any associated maintenance support in grants and/ or loans so that individuals able to build up their skills over time to match both their evolving career development needs and their personal circumstances.
- iii) Unemployed people do not lose their welfare benefits where they use their entitlement to reskill/retrain full-time in areas of identified job opportunities and skills shortages.

Colleges must act as a touchpoint for people throughout their lives. The challenges and changes facing Northern Ireland underscore the clear need for people to be able to reskill and retrain throughout their lives, in response to changes in the world of work, technological change and the need to move towards a carbon-neutral economy and respond to the impacts of climate change.

And as well as a response to economic challenge and uncertainty, this also reflects an ambition regarding the societies we want to live in. A much more holistic lifetime education and training offer is also about supporting people to live full and flourishing lives, to develop their capacities as democratic citizens and to support good ongoing health and wellbeing. This is set out clearly in the UN Sustainable Development goals (4.3) – which says that by 2030 we must ensure that globally everyone has equal access to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic speaks to both these economic and social cases – with the need for colleges to play an expanded role in ensuring a successful skills-led economic recovery, and to play an equally important role for colleges in ensuring greater access to educational opportunities for people suffering from social isolation and ongoing poor health.



CASE STUDY

Delivering social inclusion to support young people's employment opportunities

Northern Regional College have developed and worked with a range of programmes to help young people gain the skills, qualifications and work experience to progress onto FE and employment. Across NI there are 33,623 young people aged 16-24 who have no formal qualifications and are at risk of disengaging from the labour market. The college is providing a platform for all young people regardless of educational background to reach their full potential through qualifications and increasing confidence, self-esteem and resilience.

Programmes delivered by the college include Princes Trust, College Connect and Access2opportunity. Young people take part in enrichment programmes including mindset mental health, Ascertain and learning maths through Crusaders football club. Students also sample a range of vocational areas aligned with Northern Ireland employers' needs and industry needs including hospitality and motor vehicles.

Programmes have clear transition pathways onto FE and employment and offer flexibility and the ability to secure positive progression. Over 80% of students progressed onto FE or employment after completing one of these programmes during 19/20. The programmes have also helped develop close employment, careers and community links as well as collaboration with other FE Colleges in Northern Ireland, benefitting staff through the sharing of good practice.

This means crucially ensuring that financial support is available to people throughout their lives, supporting part-time and flexible learning and ensuring that you receive adequate support whatever path they take – ensuring genuine parity across the post-compulsory education system, and means ensuring that people do not lose welfare benefits because they are engaging in education and training. Crucially, student funding and finance needs to reflect the specific additional support that particular student groups will need – including across childcare costs, travel costs, additional funding to support disabled students as required and support for specific course related costs that could otherwise pose as a barrier to fair access.

A lifetime service for people also requires wider changes, which we set out in detail in our UK-wide report:

- Developing a joined-up lifelong careers information, advice and guidance service.
- A new approach to qualifications, which a developed modular offer, which supports flexible learning and clear pathways across the tertiary system.
- Investment in digital transformation – as is developed in the following section.

“Lifelong learning is particularly important for competitiveness and employability as the continuous development of skills is crucial given technological advancements and that workforce qualifications are relatively uncompetitive in an international context.”

Ulster University Policy Centre (2020)

Colleges must act as a touchpoint for people throughout their lives. The challenges and changes facing Northern Ireland underscore the clear need for people to be able to reskill and retrain throughout their lives, in response to changes in the world of work, technological change and the need to move towards a carbon-neutral economy and respond to the impacts of climate change.



CASE STUDY

Supporting the economically inactive into sustainable employment

Step Up to Sustainable Employment (SUSE) at South West College supports 500 unemployed and economically inactive participants every year to move into or closer to employment. This initiative provides focused mentoring support and access to accredited qualifications to support participants to develop the skills and competencies sought by employers.

The South West area is the most rural area in Northern Ireland. The college co-designed the SUSE initiative along with DAERA to ensure that the programme was aligned with the Department’s Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Policy, ensuring that match funding was leveraged to support the programme.

Mentors select interventions from a menu of provision which includes: personal development planning, career planning; confidence and resilience building workshops, job coaching, job clubs, CV Building, interview preparation, work sampling and a range of industry-related accredited qualifications. Each participant follows an Individual Development Plan developed in conjunction with their mentor, which focuses on their personal growth and movement towards employment.

Since the start of the programme, 2,920 citizens have participated with 30% securing employment and a further 10% progressing to further education and training. The qualifications provided through the programme are aligned with growth sectors in the local economy and this sees significant numbers of participants gaining qualifications in Engineering, Manufacturing, Construction, Health and Social Care and Retail each year. Delivery of the SUSE programme has contributed to South West College establishing itself as the primary talent solutions partner for local employers.

“The SUSE Programme has helped me out so much. I find it hard to motivate myself to look and apply for things, but when someone is supporting you to do something, it helps.”

Michael
(SUSE participant)

CASE STUDY**Establishing a community education hub**

The Community Education Hub at South Eastern Regional College (SERC)'s Newcastle Campus aims to increase the number of adults returning to education. The vision for the hubs is an excellent, current, responsive and inclusive adult return to education programme across the geographical area it serves. The focus for this initiative has been on Newcastle as it represents an area of high economic inactivity in Northern Ireland, including parts that fall within quintile 1 for education and deprivation. The area also has a high rate of lone parent unemployed households.

In 2015 the number of adults returning to education at SERC's Newcastle Campus was minimal. SERC worked with the Murlough Community Group, St Vincent De Paul Charity, Apex Housing, local primary schools and political representatives to identify barriers faced by local adults in returning to education.

Strategies were implemented, resulting in many benefits, including:

- Providing free part-time courses for economically inactive adults.
- Developing partnerships with Sure Start, Home Start and the Citizens Advice Bureau.
- Establishing links with the local Benefits Office to ensure students were financially supported as they returned to education.
- Utilising staff from the learning support team for students who experience additional learning needs.
- Working with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) to enable the Coastal Communities Fund to be used to build an on-campus creche.
- Collaborating with local primary schools to promote learning opportunities to parents.
- Supporting students to regenerate the campus garden through environmental science focused education.

By 2020, provision had expanded to over 50 adults returning to education at the Newcastle campus. Ten of the 11 adults who returned to study at the Newcastle campus in 2016 are now studying at university in areas such as architecture, land planning, child psychology, social work and nursing.



“Learning and teaching is very different now from when I went to school - there was little thought given to different types of learning styles and I felt bored with the teaching, I wasn't engaged and missed out. Returning to education was a challenge but at the College, everyone is supportive.”

Ann Allan, currently completing the Access Course with SERC and recently had an offer to study BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies at Stranmillis University College

Digital transformation

Recommendation 6**Digital transformation**

Economy Department to support the college network in the development and implementation of a digital action plan as a post-Covid recovery priority. This should include:

- Development of the digital infrastructure both in colleges and community outreach centres with capital investment in appropriate equipment and facilities.
- A substantial programme for the development of on-line, blended learning including building shared capability and capacity across the colleges.
- Targeted skills and business support for the further expansion of the digital economy, building on the success the Assured Skills programme.
- Establishment of a network of Community Hubs in disadvantaged communities combining a 'one-stop shop' for a range of community services including health, employment education with a specific role in addressing digital poverty.

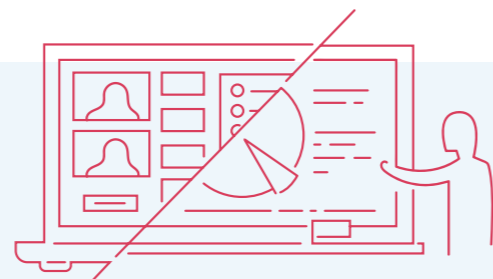
In a post-Covid context, there will be a need to accelerate the development of on-line, blended learning and, in the process, to tackle digital poverty. This would through a collective approach using the curriculum hubs. Through this mechanism colleges would be collectively responsible for the development and implementation of a digital action plan to support the roll-out of digital access, maximising their facilities as a community resource in the evenings and weekends. In disadvantaged communities, colleges could provide community hubs as a 'one-stop shop' for a range of community services including health, employment education.

“Digitisation of the workplace in particular has been transformative, and it is essential that we ensure citizens have the necessary skills to contribute economically and thrive in an everchanging economy.”

Economic recovery action plan, Northern Ireland Executive (February 2021)

CASE STUDY

The first social prescribing college partnership



North West Regional College (NWRC) has joined forces with award winning company, Elemental Software, to revolutionise the way students can access support services and programmes. NWRC will be the first ever Further and Higher College to adopt Elemental's Digital Social Prescribing Platform, which will enhance student wellbeing, build resilience, and promote new ways of working using social prescribing.

The partnership will use a replicable model of social prescribing with co-created referral pathways to ensure students can access support within the college and local community to improve mental health and wellbeing, helping to bridge the gap between education and the wider community.

By introducing Elemental's digital social prescribing platform, NWRC will:

- Connect students with non-clinical services within and beyond the college to support a range of health and wellbeing needs.
- Allow students to self-refer into community support via Elemental's website module.
- Embed a clear referral pathway and provide support when needed.
- Offer referrals to services via chaplains, personal tutors, counsellors, housing, health, funding, and inclusion officers.
- Measure and report on the impact of the Student Wellbeing programmes.
- Reduce avoidable GP appointments and NHS escalations, saving time, cost, and resources.
- Easily manage everything from within Elemental's digital social prescribing platform, meaning a seamless and simplified user journey.
- Produce a sustainable social prescribing model addressing the identified wellbeing needs of all students.

"The partnership with Elemental will provide the college with a clear, high-tech referral pathway to provide support when needed. It marks an important development in the college's commitment to our student wellbeing programme. Not only will the platform allow us to bring all our internal services together, but we will also be able to connect our students to other services that are available in the wider community. The Elemental Platform will also allow us, for the first time, to access baseline metrics in relation to the referral systems, so we can continually update and improve our services."

Finneen Bradley,
Manager, NWRC's
Careers Academy

CASE STUDY

Collaboration between college and employer support business innovation and efficiency



AE Global, mechanical and electrical contracting specialists, collaborated with the North West Regional College (NWRC) to develop a unique business and process management platform called DELA (Database of Engineering and Logistical Analytics) to drive business efficiencies in real-time. The intelligent IT database system tracks and monitors AE Global's complete workflow from design and manufacture through to installation and commissioning.

The NWRC's Business Support Centre (BSC) assisted AE Global to secure Innovate UK and Invest NI funding for the Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) project, where an NWRC Software Development graduate was recruited to develop the novel software platform, under supervision of the NWRC academic supervisors. The project delivered the DELA system, which is now used within AE Global and has streamlined their business process and drive efficiencies. The project has seen the project being awarded an "Outstanding" assessment by InnovateUK.

With the ability to view project workflow from design and manufacture through to installation and commissioning, this system can provide efficiency savings of up to 20% and provide a catalyst for sustained growth. A graduate gained a full-time role in AE Global, guest lecturers were created and 5 student projects resulted from the project. This inspired students of the NWRC while also providing the NWRC academics with an opportunity to apply their knowledge and expertise to a cutting-edge industry project.

"AE Global approached NWRC with nothing more than an idea. From the first meeting, and our introduction to the Knowledge Transfer Partnership, our idea quickly became a plan. The quiet expertise displayed by the team, quickly gave us the confidence that we could actually achieve our goal.... The efficiency savings will allow us at AE Global to be more competitive in our contract bids and to provide our clients with a more professional package, leading to more contracts."

Mark Sweeney,
Operations Manager,
AE Global

Shared Services

Recommendation 7

Shared Services

Initiate a comprehensive review of the scope for shared services across the college network including the potential for streamlining of governance structures and processes (in line with recommendation 2).

As illustrated above, there is already a high degree of collaboration and day-to-day joint working across the colleges. Apart from the collective work on curriculum hubs, the recent joint project on developing common management information systems underlines the commitment to and culture of joint working.

In practical terms, however, the full potential for shared services could only be realised by bringing the governance and oversight of colleges into a single Northern Ireland-wide structure. This should be focussed on improving the quality of provision as well as embedding a well-integrated, cohesive and sustainable offer across the college network and the wider tertiary system.



14-19 Education

Recommendation 8

14-19 Education

Education and Economy Departments to prioritise the completion of the Transition of Young People into Careers (14-19) project with its implementation through the establishment of a cross-departmental skills board with the following aims:

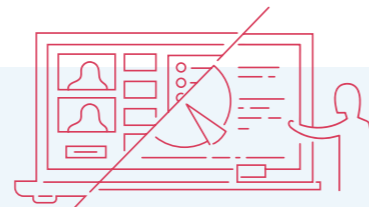
- Developing a coherent shared strategy to improve learner and curriculum pathways between schools and colleges across the 14-19 phase and spanning the breadth of academic and vocational options including the scope for the wider introduction of entitlement curriculum and of vocational options in the 14-16 phase.
- Developing an appropriate funding model that support college-school partnership working.
- Developing clear coherent progression pathways at regional level for 14-19 using the differentiated offer between schools and colleges.
- Redefining the role of area learning communities.
- Reviewing the range of careers education programmes and careers advice and guidance services with a view to establishing a comprehensive and independent careers programme with strong employer/employment focus.

The Commission recognises the particular structural, cultural and demographic challenges of integrating pre- and post-16 education policy and systems in Northern Ireland. However, from both an economic and public investment perspective, there is an urgent need to address the disconnect in policy between these phases and to establish a coherent approach to the role of schools and college systems in local communities.

The DFE-commissioned Independent Review of Education is therefore very welcome and important in this context – and we would underline the importance of ensuring a strong college voice throughout this process, to look at points of alignment that can be developed.

In a specific skills and labour market context, bridging the academic/vocational divide in the education system should be a high priority with a renewed focus on improved learner/curriculum pathways between schools and colleges across the 14-19 phase underpinned by area-based planning to address unnecessary duplication and inefficient provision. It should also encompass the wider twin goals of improving social mobility and cohesion where colleges have a particularly important role to play.

The development of the new traineeship and apprenticeships systems provides a further opportunity to consider a new approach to the development and use of qualifications that address the future needs of Northern Ireland and to ensure that there is clear differentiation between the role of schools and colleges. In the view of the Commission, this work should be taken forward jointly by the Education and Economy Departments with the Education Authority and schools and college representatives under the aegis of the central oversight body proposed by OECD.



CASE STUDY

Providing remote career and progression pathway advice

Working in partnership with The Wallace High School, South Eastern Regional College (SERC) is providing remote career and progression pathway advice, offering guidance and support to-progressing Year 12 students on the post-16 educational landscape.

The Wallace High School in Lisburn identified that some of their progressing Year 12 students were unlikely to be able to access the support needed to make effective decisions about their post-16 futures. The school cited the lack of opportunities to gather information during open days and school visits/fairs and the impact of blended learning as being factors likely to disadvantage this group. This led them to reach out to SERC Careers Service as an open access, Matrix certified community service.

To date 8 pupils have opted into the 1:1 guidance support and have had video calls with SERC Careers staff. A bespoke careers bulletin was also sent out to the wider student body from SERC Careers Service. This is in addition to a video developed by the SERC Marketing team which has also been shared.

Anecdotal feedback suggests that both young people and parents were left with greater knowledge of the post-16 landscape, especially the FE sector which still had some negative associations for many students. Many also reported feeling relieved and more optimistic about their future. Developing and implementing this online approach has enabled SERC to demonstrate the transferability of this approach for providing careers advice to students attending a wide range of schools across a diverse geographical region.

CASE STUDY

Driving local STEM skills in partnership with post-primary schools

Northern Regional College has developed an initiative with local primary schools to address STEM skill shortages. Building on the engineering courses they already ran, they included engineering in the portfolio of choices offered as part of the Entitlement Framework to give more students the choice to study this as part of their school studies at key stage 5. Using their expertise in delivery and state-of-the-art facilities, they stimulated demand from students (and leaders) within the post primary school sector in Magherafelt.

The initiative has capitalised on the skill of lecturers to expand the horizons of students. Lecturers have the opportunity to build relationships with important stakeholders within the post primary sector, as well as share knowledge and build relationships with other education professionals outside of NRC.

Many students from the course have progressed to university courses in engineering-related subjects and vocations. This includes many female students who would not otherwise have had the opportunity to sample the curriculum area, helping to address the gender imbalances.

The college is also addressing STEM skills shortages by offering a Level 3 Engineering qualification as part of their options for Entitlement Framework collaboration to reach as many students as possible.



“Working with the Magherafelt Campus of the NRC has been of immense benefit to the Magherafelt and Rural Partnership (MRLP) schools. The MRLP consists of 8 post-primary schools and one special school. Through this link the MRLP has been able to offer Year 13 pupils three subjects which would not otherwise have been possible. Outcomes for MRLP pupils have always been good which has further underpinned the excellent relationship between the NRC and the MRLP schools.”

Jackson Frew, Area Learning Community Coordinator, Magherafelt and Rural Partnership (MRLP)

Workforce and leadership



Recommendation 9

College workforce and leadership

Develop a long-term system-wide workforce development strategy reflecting the rapidly changing external labour market context and its impact, in relation to skills and employment, on the working age population and the businesses in which they work to include the following:

- Curriculum hubs to create specialist peer practitioner networks in each of the key sectors/occupational areas. This should include:
 - providing regular and systematic skills updating for vocational specialists including through short-term placement and business/industrial secondment
 - creating specialist peer networks ensuring regular and systematic exchange of practice and full engagement in the development of new curriculum models and accreditation
- Creation of new specialist lecturer career roles building a cadre of dual professionals with a critical role in business support, innovation and company workforce development as well as a lead role in internal CPD/workforce development. This should include:
 - leading peer practitioner networks
 - working across institutions to support colleagues through mentoring and coaching;
 - working in teams in devising new upskilling programmes and new modes of delivery and accreditation
- Diversification of the workforce with new roles, complementing the core cadre of teaching and learning professionals. This should include:
 - career/ employment advisory functions to support the increasing demand for career change and individual reskilling programmes
 - specialist technological functions supporting the introduction/application of digital technologies and pedagogy
- Development of leadership strategy with particular focus on succession planning and engagement in the Four Nations College Alliance and the opportunities it presents for peer exchange and joint commissioning of external support.

The ever-increasing pace of technological change and its impact on the economy and labour market will lead to equally fundamental changes to the nature and range of a college's work. The growing need for higher level technical and professional skills highlighted in the OECD review will require significant and sustained investment in staff and leadership development. In the particular Northern Ireland context, the development of curriculum hubs provides a vehicle for ensuring that the college workforce keeps pace with the rapidly changing external labour market environment.

The hubs' lead responsibilities for curriculum, accreditation and workforce development should be exploited to create specialist peer networks, ensuring regular and systematic exchange of practice and opportunities for regular skills updating through short-term placement and business/ industrial secondment. In addition, while recognising the success of Northern Ireland's colleges in skills competitions at a national and international level, curriculum hubs could be further used to embed the use of skills competitions in priority sectors.

Working in conjunction with Worldskills UK the curriculum hubs could be used as a catalyst for further raising the profile of vocational skills across Northern Ireland through the use of regional skills competitions. Due recognition should be given to the specialist staff leading this work with the creation of a new cadre of 'dual professionals' who might then work across institutions, including:

- mentoring and supporting colleagues in the relevant specialist areas.
- working together to provide the capacity to deliver new reskilling programmes and specialist business support and innovation.
- developing new qualifications and new modes of delivery, especially on-line and blended learning.

The increasing focus on lifetime learning and individual support for career change and reskilling will also need a more diverse workforce with career/ employment advisory and specialist technological functions complementing the core cadre of teaching and learning professionals. The workforce as a whole will need to be proficient in the use of technologies and digital pedagogy – a requirement which the Covid crisis has already accelerated.

At leadership level, the Four Nations College Alliance should work with partner organisations across the UK to champion systems leadership capacities and competences including through the ongoing peer development programme. This would build on the highly productive peer exchange network of the Four Nations College Alliance and act as practice and policy exchange for both college leaders and senior government officials.

Equality and diversity

And as set out in our UK-wide report, equality and diversity are core principles which have to be embedded at the heart of the college of the future. In Northern Ireland, data is collected on an annual basis and reported to the Equality Commission, and this should continue to be used to measure progress across protected characteristics. This should also see ongoing focus on developing new pathways into working in the college system and progression routes within the system.



Students' unions are critical not just in embedding student voice at the heart of the system, but also in building healthy, connected communities and in empowering a new generation of future leaders.

Students' unions

As we note in our UK-wide report, students' unions are critical not just in embedding student voice at the heart of the system, but also in building healthy, connected communities and in empowering a new generation of future leaders. This should continue to be supported as a critical element of the college of the future – including through continuing to empower the voice of student governors and ensuring every college has a fully-funded, independent student voice function.

Four Nations College Alliance

The Four Nations College Alliance was established in 2017, and brings together college leaders, college representative bodies and senior civil servants from across the four nations of the UK – to seek to learn from the different policy contexts and institutional practices that exist and to champion systems leadership across the sector. The alliance has received support from the Gatsby Foundation, Edge Foundation and the Education Training Foundation.



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The College of the Future

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