Northern Regional College Curriculum Strategy 2022-2025

Delivering Innovation and Excellence through Curriculum

NORTHERN
Regional College

Contents

Executive Summary

This curriculum strategy covers the period 2022-2025 and is set against the context of significant budgetary pressures which will impact on all FE Colleges. The direction set for curriculum over the lifetime of this strategy takes account of a changing landscape and focuses on key priorities to support achievement of strategic goals as outlined in the College's 3-Year Strategic Plan. Detailed priority actions and success indicators are provided in Appendices, however those which reflect high level curriculum direction are shared below:

By 2025:

- 100% of curriculum will be aligned to the Department for the Economy 10X Skills strategy balanced across the three pillars of innovation, inclusion and sustainability.

- Over 50% of enrolments will be at Levels 3 and above

- 7 formal employer forums will be established, aligned to industry groups, 10X skills strategy, council priorities and professional and technical areas

- At least 5 new Higher Education courses will have been launched through partnership with Open University

- Curriculum reform at Levels 2 and 3 will be implemented and aligned to DfE strategy

- Apprenticeship provision will have increased through extension to new vocational areas, including at Higher Level

- Level 0 – Level 2 enrolments will be sustained at 2022/23 levels

- Average class sizes will have increased to reflect improved efficiencies in delivery

- Success rates of at least 80% and a rating of very good in the SER process validated by ETI will be achieved

- All professional and technical areas will improve by one performance level

- Delivery of HE-specific CPD, aligned to HE curriculum development will be embedded

- Competition activity will extend across all full-time FE provision

- 95% of our learners will rate their experience at the College positively across the full range of learner feedback mechanisms

▷

- All curriculum will meet the guiding principles as outlined at Appendix 2

Introduction

The Curriculum Strategy is set against the context of the College's 3-year Strategic Plan 2022/3 – 2024/5, with its stated vision "to be the FE College of choice, providing lifelong learning opportunities for all though innovative and excellent education and skills training, supporting the NI economy to be globally competitive". Three key pillars provide the framework for delivery through learners, partners and professional services, with learner goals providing direction for this strategy. The overarching aim of this document is to provide a framework for decision-making in relation to curriculum development and delivery, clarity of purpose for all stakeholders and to detail a range of key commitments for accountability. In a challenging current, and anticipated future, operating and fiscal environment, it is critical that priority goals and associated actions are clearly articulated, with alignment to the College Strategic Plan, to the annual College Development Plan, to the Whole College Quality Improvement Plan and to the associated Teaching & Learning Strategy to ensure effective and efficient planning processes at every level.

The learner goals, as set out within the 3-year Strategic Plan, form the basis for this curriculum framework:

▷ To provide an agile, responsive, sustainable curriculum aligned to the 10X Strategy and local business and community needs
▷ To equip learners with the skills to make a positive impact in the workforce and wider community
▷ To improve academic standards and associated learner outcomes
▷ To provide learners with an enriching experience during their studies with the College.

Our Operating Environment

The FE sector is facing a period of both significant opportunity and challenge. Delivery against the 10x Economic and Skills Strategy, establishing a clear, differentiated and understood position within the education landscape, all within the context of budgetary constraints, creates an imperative to focus on core purpose and on impact. FE Colleges providing life-changing opportunities for all, regardless of social and economic background, enabling learners to get a job and/or get a better job. Our dual mandate of economic growth and social inclusion places access to training at the heart of our curriculum, including for those furthest from the labour market, those with learning difficulties and those with disabilities. Closing the attainment gap in literacy and numeracy remains key to unlocking opportunity to meaningful employment, with digital skills development now added as an essential ingredient. Progression to higher level professional and technical qualifications and skills development is critical to addressing the undersupply of skills in priority sectors as identified in the NI Skills Barometer in areas such as Advanced Manufacturing, IT and Creative Industries – all areas where Northern Regional College has strength in capability and potential impact. The FE sector also has a key role to play in the development of entrepreneurial attributes and those transversal skills which are highly sought after by employers, and which underpin adaptability and resilience in the modern workforce. Through our lead role as Entrepreneurship Hub, we will continue to prioritise the development of next-generation entrepreneurs, working in collaboration with the sector. Achievement of a 10x better economy through focus on innovation, social inclusion and sustainability relies on harnessing the talent and potential across the full working population, channeled through relevant vocational education and training provision.

The College is currently fulfilling a long-standing plan to move from six campuses to four through two new builds at Ballymena and Coleraine. They have been designed to enhance the College's ability to deliver priority skills provision in an innovative and sustainable way.

Ongoing reform of professional and technical education in England, including the introduction of T-Levels, will have an impact on Awarding Organisations and on the range of qualifications on offer in future. The extent and pace of change is yet unknown; however it is reasonable to expect that over the next few years we will see a reduction in the number of Awarding Organisations and/or their NI offer, amplifying the

importance of collaborative working across the six colleges to ensure an appropriate range of qualifications continue to be available.

It is impossible to reflect on the current environment without reference to the Covid pandemic, which had a significant impact on the whole of society over the period 2020-2022, and which the FE sector continues to experience in terms of "aftershock". The impact on learners, their resilience and ability to cope with the challenges of study continues, evidenced in increased need for academic and pastoral support at all levels. This, coupled with the impact of the cost-of-living crisis, increases the challenges associated with study and in turn the level and type of support required from colleges. Over the lifespan of this strategy, the expectation is that these challenges will continue, resulting in the need to position where we are, and will be between now and 2025, as recovering and rebuilding – with measurable and meaningful impact potentially to follow.

Current and expected future budgetary constraints, impacting across the entire public sector, must also be recognised, requiring colleges to become more innovative in curriculum offer and delivery model, and to take greater advantage of the full range of alternative funding sources e.g. business support programmes such as Flexible Skills Fund (Skill Up). Over the lifetime of this strategy, the College expects to see growth in enrolments under such initiatives, across multiple levels and aligned particularly to those skills gaps at Levels 3-5, identified in the Skills Barometer and Skills Strategy. Budgetary constraints will inevitably impact on available resource, resulting in an increasing need to prioritise, with potential implications for delivery of qualifications which sit outside of those priorities.
The College recognises the need to work collaboratively to ensure the most effective and efficient delivery of service to its stakeholders, and through the lifespan of this strategy expects to see initial progress and embedding of a formal Strategic Alliance with NWRC and SWC, which in terms of curriculum development and delivery will seek to maximise benefit for both colleges and learners. The outworking of the Review of FE will also impact on forward planning, both as an individual college and a member of the Strategic Alliance.

The table below summarises the key strategic drivers for the College, providing an overview of context for this curriculum strategy and priorities:

| Contribution to delivery of 10X Skills strategy Northern Ireland, underpinned by dual mandate	Impact of New Campuses	Outworking of Review of FE
Budgetary Pressures	Qualifications Reform – locally and nationally	Policy Consideration- e.g. implementation of 14-19 years strategy

Current Position

In terms of current position, there is much to celebrate and a strong foundation to build upon. By 2025 the College will have transitioned from six campuses to four, with the opening of two new campuses in Coleraine and Ballymena, representing a DfE investment of £85 million in our learning environments, plus additional investment planned for Magherafelt and Newtownabbey of circa £57million over 10 years. Post-Covid, we have achieved enrolment targets with 14,769 total enrolments in 2021/22 ranking the College as third in sector in terms of increase from 2020/21 when the pandemic impact was at its height. Organisational structures have been reviewed to enable a more cohesive response to self-evaluation and planning for continuous improvement, with impact already evidenced in positive outcomes from external evaluations, including for Level 3, Higher Level Apprenticeship and Entrepreneurship Hub. Our External Engagement Strategy and team are enabling income and curriculum diversification across a range of

upskilling/reskilling programmes, supporting a wide range of individuals and organisations, as well as strengthening our reputation as a training provider of choice. We are sector-leading in development and delivery of robotics systems integration curriculum, evidenced in our WorldSkills competitions record of success, and are the first college to offer a Level 3 Hydrogen qualification, positioning us as a key stakeholder in the development of "green tech" curriculum.

The Department for the Economy Statistical Bulletin (published December 2022) provides our baseline for breakdown of enrolments 2021/22, and a basis for target setting and measurement of achievement over the lifespan of this strategy. For regulated enrolments, with 23% full-time and 77% part-time, the breakdown per level is shown below:

Level 0-1 ▪ Level 2 ▪ Level 3 ▪ Level 4-6
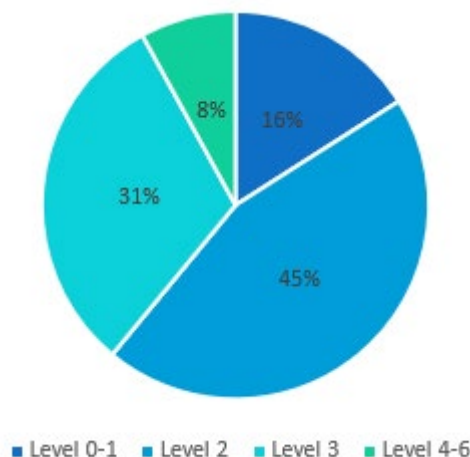
Whilst the percentage of enrolments at Level 0-1 has reduced over the past three years (from 26% to 16%), we must recognise the remaining high percentage of enrolments at lower levels (61% at Levels 0-2) and challenge alignment with the focus on the "missing middle" undersupply of skills at Levels 3-5 (Skills Barometer 2021). In consideration of alignment with the 10x Strategy, to serve the interests of the economy, our learners and the College, we must establish a roadmap to rebalance and increase participation from Level 3 upwards over the lifetime of this strategy and across a diverse range of funding streams. Cognisant of our dual mandate and the critical need to widen access to training for those furthest from the labour market or who face barriers to learning, our entry-level/level 1 offer can be maintained through development of effective partnerships including with our regional councils through discrete funding initiatives as these become available.

Curriculum Reform – Our Enablers

The College will continue to recognise government strategic priorities in the design, development and delivery of all curricula aligning all current provision and committing to work with DfE to deliver the vision of a new transformational system of learning. This will include the expansion of Traineeships and Advanced Technical awards which will increase over the lifetime of the strategy. Sustainability will be embedded throughout all curriculum, designed to raise awareness among our learners about the UN Sustainable Development Goals, motivating the next generation of change agents to take action to achieve a better and more sustainable future for everyone.

The College will increase the level of employer engagement in the design and delivery of all qualifications aligned to priority sectors through curriculum led employer forums coupled with cross-sector collaboration to development and deliver new curriculum. Curriculum will be aligned to the 10x pillars through deep reform, led by sectoral curriculum hubs with innovation and sustainability as integral themes in all full-time courses.

We will embrace and promote equality and provide an open and welcoming environment for all, inclusivity is key in providing curriculum. The College remains committed to widening participation of learners including those with difficulties and disabilities, those from under-represented groups in society and those not in employment, education and training, and woman returners. We will access alternative funding to

support social inclusion in partnership with other Colleges where appropriate. We will remove barriers to provide accessible and inclusive opportunities, remaining committed to raising literacy and numeracy competency of the wider population, including provision of English Language Skills for those where English is not their first language.

Our strategy is to continue to broaden lifelong learning opportunities, ensuring flexible and geographically local innovative courses are developed around micro-credentials and Access programmes focusing on upskilling in priority skills areas to include level 3 and 4+ qualifications. We will increase Higher Education provision, with particular focus on Higher Level Apprenticeships and Part-time provision by establishing new partnerships with Higher Education institutions to launch new Higher-Level provision including progression to Level 6 pathways aligned to local/regional demand in line with DfE criteria for approval.

Curriculum Strategic Goals 2022-2025

By 2025 Northern Regional College will continue to prioritise provision and development against strategic actions for learners. Learners are the centre of everything we do, and this will continue to be reflected across our curriculum portfolio.

Under the theme of Learners, we have four main strategic goals:

Appendices 1.1-1.4 detail our priority actions and success indicators for each of the four strategic goals under the theme of learners.

Commitment to Delivery

By 2025 the College, in line with the sector and DfE direction, will improve the ability to measure impact, not just in terms of achievement but in terms of contribution to individual lives, careers, and wider society, and will embed in all public-facing information.

We have outlined success indicators for each of our priority actions in order to drive progress toward achievement of our strategic goals by 2025. They will allow us to assess and report ongoing progress, as well as understand what success looks like.

The success indictors are detailed in Appendices 1.1-1.4 against the corresponding priority action.

Implementation

While we will be embedding the curriculum strategy into all aspects of curriculum design and decision making, we have created a one-page resource (Appendix 2) for staff outlining guiding principles. This will provide an accessible framework for Departmental management teams in consideration of opportunities and their alignment with this strategy.

Consistent application of these principles, coupled with continued reference to key objectives as outlined in this document, will provide a cohesive framework for development of annual departmental operational plans, ensuring continued and sustainable transformation of curriculum offer and delivery models within allocated budget to benefit our learners, the NI economy and wider society.

Monitoring

In order to ensure integration and success of our Curriculum Strategy we must have a clear plan on how to ensure it remains relevant and adaptable, as well as assess its performance. We are launching this strategy during a period of budgetary uncertainty and widespread public funding cuts, necessitating more regular review in light of resources available and decisions around future provision.

There are interdependent documents and actions plans across curriculum which we must be mindful of and work simultaneously with including:

▷ CDP targets and achievement – reporting through to DfE
▷ Strategic plan and WCQIP
▷ SER/QIP annual process
▷ Published College annual report
▷ Progress review through Education Committee and GB, feeding into T&L Directorate and Corporate Risk Register
▷ ETI/QIT Evaluations and reports.

Appendix 1

Appendix 1.1

Strategic Goal 1: Providing an agile, responsive, and sustainable curriculum aligned to the 10X Strategy and local business and community needs.	
Priority Actions	**Success Indicators**
Review curriculum provision against the 3 pillars of 10x as a framework for decision making regarding new curriculum and withdrawal of curriculum offer, ensuring integration of future skills needs resulting from e.g. AI, environmental sustainability etc	100% of curriculum will be aligned to the Department for the Economy 10X Skills strategy balanced across the three pillars of innovation, inclusion and sustainability.
Increase level of employer engagement in design and delivery of curriculum	Launch of 7 formal employer forums aligning to industry groups, 10X skills strategy, council priorities and professional and technical areas providing intelligence for curriculum planning to identify new courses for delivery within 3-5 years
Align curriculum development and associated resource allocation to regional economic needs and employment opportunities	Campus identities will be established by September 2025 which reflect the economic priorities of the 4 regional Councils in NRC's catchment area.
Rebalance of provision through an increase to the percentage of college enrolments at Level 3 and above	Over 50% of College enrolments will be at Level 3 and above by September 2025
Increase HE provision through development of HLA Apprenticeships and skills initiatives at Level 4+, and through new partnership with Open University.	HE programmes will increase to include a minimum of 5 new HE programmes developed and launched with Open University by 2025/26. Targeted increased in HLA programmes across priority skills areas.
Implement DfE strategy in respect of L2 and L3 curriculum reform	Alignment with sector in launch of new qualifications for non-employed and employed (Apprenticeship) pathways
Improve efficiency in curriculum delivery	Increase in average class sizes from 2022/23 baseline of 8 and in consideration of level of study and mode of attendance. Increase in online and blended provision, with part-time Higher Education Courses to have a minimum of 25% blended delivery
Maintain L0-L2 provision across all campuses	Enrolment numbers will be maintained at 2022/23 levels of approx. 7,000 excluding essential skills

Appendix 1.2

Strategic Goal 2: To equip learners with the skills to make a positive impact in the workforce	
Priority Actions	**Success Indicators**
Review current progression pathways available to support career aspirations, enabling progression to high level study at local and/or regional levels.	Career and study roadmaps to be developed and embedded in promotional and study support activity

	Destination data will evidence 80% of our learners as progressing to further or higher education/training or into employment
Increase employability and work-readiness through enhanced work placement opportunities and embedding of Transversal Skills	All L2 and L3 full-time programmes will include an element of work experience, aligned to implementation of curriculum reform Improved tracking of work placement to embed in self-evaluation and action planning. 80% of courses will have project based learning and transversal skills embedded throughout
Work in collaboration with the sector Essential Skills Working Group to develop and deliver action plans to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes	Implementation of revised qualifications specifications and assessment models Improved tracking and reporting of outcomes Improved outcomes from 2022/23 baseline
Develop and embed digital skills across all qualifications	100% of relevant programmes will meet a minimum silver standard on CANVAS (our digital platform) A 10% increase in fully online courses to support lifelong learning in line with DFE Skills strategy.
Develop and support a creative and entrepreneurial mindset for Northern Ireland, as the lead for Entrepreneurship across the FE sector.	All full-time programmes will embed Entrepreneurship and innovation in delivery

Appendix 1.3

Strategic Goal 3: To improve academic standards and associated learner outcomes: striving for excellence in Teaching and Learning	
Priority Actions	**Success Indicators**
Regularly review curriculum viability and sustainability with excellence unpinning everything we do.	We will seek and achieve recognition of our approach through achievement of external accreditation standards (e.g. Matrix, Beacon)
Launch of T, L&A strategy, incorporating Technology Enhanced Learning goals to further develop blended learning capabilities and range of programmes	Launch and embedding of Strategy framework by September 2024
To nurture excellence, all courses will be expected to demonstrate effective systems of self-evaluation and quality improvement planning. Performance and quality as defined by Retention, achievement and success to apply across all programmes, irrespective of funding source, to be built into ongoing review and decisions regarding programme sustainability	We will achieve and sustain success rates of at least 80% and a rating of very good in the SER process validated by ETI All professional and technical areas will improve by one performance level over the lifetime of the strategy.
Progress a talent framework that will review staffing, taking into consideration skill set and upskilling opportunities.	Alignment of CPD budget to curriculum priorities, QIP actions and departmental and individual needs
Launch of CPD plan for academic staff, aligned to priorities and to include HE-specific CPD	Delivery of HE-specific CPD during 2023/24, aligned to HE curriculum development

Development and delivery of staff development programmes targeting upskilling in pedagogy e.g. in project-based learning/in effective use of AI to enhance classroom delivery	Programme delivery, staff feedback and classroom observations to evidence impact

Appendix 1.4

Strategic Goal 4: to provide learners with an enriching experience during their studies at Northern Regional College	
Priority Actions	**Success Indicators**
Celebrate our learners' successes through participation in national and international events and ensure that the impact made by them is recognised throughout our College community.	We will increase competition activity across all areas, with a focus on L2 Traineeships where competitions can be effectively integrated into skills development and assessment. We will have increased recognition through external awards for our students
Deliver a rich learner experience through Project based learning, work-based learning and development of entrepreneurial mindset and attributes.	95% of our learners will rate their experience at the College positively
We will listen to our learners and to employers through regular feedback activities and continue to raise the profile of the learner voice, ensuring our teams implement plans to address issues identified by learners.	95% of our learners will rate their experience at the College positively SER/QIP activity will evidence actions identified through feedback
Provide an annual calendar of enrichment activities for all learners to support their progress on their chosen vocational qualification and, where appropriate, provide opportunities to gain additional qualifications.	Increased enrichment activities reflected through feedback with 95% of our learners will rate their experience at the College positively through SSCMs and surveys
Improve differentiation of HE learner experience working in collaboration across our Estates function.	HE learner feedback – 95% of our HE learners will rate their experience at the College positively

Appendix 2

Curriculum Guiding Principles

Principle	Description
Programme rationale	▷ Meets an identified need aligned to 10x strategy, plus regional economic and labour market intelligence ▷ Is aligned to DfE and College strategic priorities ▷ Provides opportunity for development of areas of specialism within the NI FE sector, particularly at regional level
Progression/impact	▷ Programmes are designed to build on prior learning and skills development, within a framework which enables transfer across full-time, part-time and work based modes of attendance. ▷ A range of progression routes are available, with alignment of entry criteria appropriate to the level of course, providing access to further study within the college, in other colleges/universities, or into employment. Evidence of impact will be a key indicator going forward
Content	▷ Uses a partnership approach where possible, working in collaboration with other colleges, through Curriculum Hubs, University partners, and Awarding Organisations to co-create content which meets required academic standards and the needs of employers. ▷ Provides learners with opportunities to develop essential, digital and transversal skills to enhance employability, including the development of entrepreneurial skills ▷ Enables flexible modes of delivery, including face to face, online and blended delivery to meet the needs of a wide range of learners
Skills Development	▷ Programme design and delivery strategy which maximises vocational relevance through access to realistic working environments, work placement and opportunities for learners at every level to build confidence as well as occupational competence ▷ Provides a clear focus on developing core skills to support employability through innovative approaches to pedagogy including project and work-based learning, fully integrated into course design and assessment ▷ Embeds digital skills development within course design and delivery ▷ Provides opportunities for those furthest from the labour market, those seeking to return to work, to change career and to upskill through a diverse curriculum offer, delivered flexibly to meet learner needs

Socially inclusive	▷	Widens access to learning, including access to Higher Education, through provision of academic and vocational readiness programmes targeting adult learners/returners
High Quality	▷	Quality, as defined by retention, achievement and success (RAS), must be used to inform the curriculum offer. These KPIs are used by both ETI and DfE to help judge the quality of our provision, and the educational standing of the College.
Awarding Organisation alignment with sector and delivery of DfE strategies	▷	Decisions regarding Awarding Organisation/Higher Education Institution collaborative partnerships must be robust and provide for operational and strategic cohesion across curriculum.