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**College Development Plan 2021-22**

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6. **STRATEGIC CONTEXT**

Northern Ireland Further Education (FE) Colleges are required under Article 20 of the Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 to produce and publish annual business plans (College Development Plans).

The six FE colleges (collectively the FE sector) are Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPB) and a key delivery arm of the Department for the Economy (DfE). The FE sector is unique in that it has a dual mandate, taking a pivotal role in generating a strong and vibrant economy through the development of professional and technical skills, increasingly at higher levels, and by helping employers to innovate; and supporting social inclusion by providing those with low or no qualifications, or who have other barriers to learning, with the skills and qualifications needed to find employment and to become economically active.

It is vital that the Northern Ireland skills system supports economic growth that is socially inclusive and builds the skills base necessary to fulfil the [Executive’s draft PfG](https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/publications/programme-government-draft-outcomes-framework-2021-downloadable-consultation-response-documents) aspirations. The FE Sector directly contributes to the following draft PfG Outcomes -

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| * *Our children and young people have the best start in life*
* *Everyone can reach their potential*
* *Everyone feels safe – we all respect the law and each other*

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The FE sector will support the ‘New Decade, New Approach’ deal which outlines a series of priorities and ambitions for a reformed Executive including the development of “an enhanced approach to careers advice, curriculum, training and apprenticeships to enhance employability and support economic growth” and the development of “a regionally-balanced economy with opportunities for all”. In addition, the sector plays a key role along with other education and training providers in helping to address the links between deprivation and lower educational outcomes. FE Colleges continue to contribute to the development of a more joined up approach to education and training provision for 14-19 year olds with the aim of enhancing the 14-19 education and training landscape so that our young people reach their potential and maximise their contribution to our economy and society.

The global pandemic, COVID-19, has completely transformed the way we live, work and learn. The FE Sector quickly adapted to the pandemic with a move to on-line teaching and has developed and enhanced the existing digital platforms to provide learners with a flexible delivery model taking into consideration the capacity and capability of the learner and the needs of the specific course. This flexibility will allow the sector to respond quickly to future changes in restrictions.

Creating a dynamic ecosystem where Government, Industry and Education providers can work in partnership is a key priority. The FE Sector will support delivery of the Department’s ‘[Economic Recovery Action Plan](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/economic-recovery-action-plan)’ which sets out a range of actions to kick-start economic recovery in Northern Ireland and build a more competitive, inclusive and greener economy. It reflects the colleges’ contribution to raising skills levels and increasing productivity of the future workforce and aligning study to the needs of the economy in supporting a highly skilled and agile workforce’. This includes the introduction of the following new programmes from September 2021, replacing Training for Success:

* Skills for Life and Work programme, to help increase essential skills in English, Mathematics and ICT, together with technical and employability skills that participants need to progress to Traineeships, Apprenticeships, Further Education or employment; and
* The Northern Ireland Traineeship programme, a level 2 Vocational Education and Training programme delivering industry and / or sector relevant skills and knowledge, integrating work-based learning (WBL) along with core literacy and numeracy skills. The programme sets to provide learners with a solid foundation of skills, experience and qualifications that are recognised and valued by employers and relevant to opportunities in today’s labour market, improving outcomes for up to 1,900 young people from its launch in September 2021 and the production of 20,000 traineeship places in Northern Ireland over the next seven years.

The following visions and strategies have been published by the Department, building on the ‘Economic Recovery Action Plan’ which the FE Sector is a key partner in taking forward:

* [A 10x Economy](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/10x-economy-economic-vision-decade-innovation) – an economic vision for a decade of innovation in delivering a ten times better economy that will ultimately result in a ‘positive impact on our economy, societal and environmental wellbeing’ ‘creating jobs’, ‘increase incomes’, ‘improve productivity levels’ and ‘provide opportunities for all’.

Through focusing on the five priority clusters identified in ‘10x Economy’, the FE Sector will support the Department’s economic vision to ‘recover, rebuild and rebound back stronger than ever’, meaning ‘better jobs with better wages, in a more flexible working environment and a better overall quality of life’. The five priority clusters identified are:

* Digital, ICT and Creative Industries (e.g. Cyber Security);
* Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering (e.g Composites);
* Agri-Tech;
* Life and Health Sciences (e.g. Personalised Medicine); and
* Fintech / Financial Services.
* [Trade and Investment for a 10X Economy](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/trade-and-investment-10x-economy-priorities-northern-irelands-inward-investment-trade-and-exports): focus on equipping individuals and business with the information and skills to exploit emerging trade and investment opportunities in the priority clusters and in providing ‘a world class talent offering’.
* ‘[Tourism Recovery Action Plan](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/tourism-recovery-action-plan-TRAP.pdf)’: The FE sector supported the development and continues to support the implementation of phase two of the action plan to support the development of a solid foundation for the recovery of the Northern Ireland tourism industry and hospitality industry, and the development of Northern Ireland as a sustainable and competitive tourism destination that meets the needs of both future visitors and local communities alike.
* [Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland, - Skills for a 10X Economy](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/consultations/skills-strategy-northern-ireland-skills-10x-economy): is currently out for consultation. This strategy replaces “Success through Skills – Transforming Futures”, addressing the skills needs across Northern Ireland over the next decade. FE Colleges have played a key role in the development of the strategy. Despite the change in economic circumstances and uncertainty created by the pandemic, the underlying key policy objectives over the next period remain consistent:
* Investing in our Digital skills across all sectors of our economy;
* Creating a culture of learning for all ages to include upskilling and reskilling in addition to innovation; and
* Reducing the skills imbalances in the workforce, with a particular focus on those with low or no skills.

Aligned with the ‘Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland – Skills for a 10X Economy’, the FE Sector will deliver Skill Up – The Flexible Skills Fund across multiple levels and sectors, focused on the priority sectors and accredited qualifications at level 3, 4 and 5 where there is the greatest need, as highlighted by the Skills Barometer. Through Skill Up, we aim to upskill and reskill individuals to meet the needs of the economy as we emerge from the pandemic and continue to grow the economy whilst also boosting participation in lifelong learning and reduce key skills imbalances in areas such as digital, leadership and healthcare.

In full support of the priority clusters, the Department’s establishment of the seven Curriculum Hubs in key occupational areas (Engineering & Advanced Manufacturing, Digital IT, Construction, Health & Social Care, Life Sciences, Hospitality & Tourism and Entrepreneurship) focussed on priority skills and growth sectors of employment. The Curriculum Hubs concept aims to ensure as a result of the activity driven by the Hub Action Plans, the curriculum delivered is high quality, consistent, current and responsive to the needs and demands of each industrial area thereby increasing opportunities for economic development and performance in each field.

The FE Sector will continue to contribute to the Department’s ongoing review of Level 4 and 5 provision and HE in FE via representation on the Stakeholder Advisory Group and membership on task and finish groups which includes ensuring that HE in FE qualifications and progression pathways through HE remain appropriate for meeting the needs of learners and the economy.

The FE Sector is represented on the recently established Tertiary Education Sector Senior Leaders Forum. The core purpose of the Forum is to foster greater collaboration between all those involved in education post-compulsory school-age and to help move towards a unified tertiary education sector in Northern Ireland. The Forum seeks to advance the principal aims of supporting all learners to reach their potential and in doing so, support the skills needs of the Northern Ireland economy.

Throughout, the FE Sector will provide support to those who face particular challenges and barriers to engaging in education. This includes learners with a learning difficulty and or disability and learners in the 3 prisons in Northern Ireland.

Aligned to the Northern Ireland Adult Safeguarding Partnership statement “Safeguarding is everyone’s business” colleges’ Safeguarding, Care & Welfare Policies are built upon a foundation of ‘zero tolerance’ and have a shared objective to keep children, young people, adults at risk of harm and adults in need of protection safe from harm. The FE sector is committed to ensuring that all students, staff and stakeholders of the Colleges, experience an inclusive, enjoyable and safe environment, in which they feel respected and valued.

The Department is investing £223 million in delivering seven new Further Education (FE) campuses providing modern facilities from which to deliver new and evolving curriculum provision addressing the needs of learners, industry and the wider economy with new campuses at Armagh, Banbridge, Ballymena, Craigavon, Coleraine and Enniskillen along with expansion of existing Newry East campus via re-development of the former Newry Sport Centre. The new iconic Erne campus in Enniskillen is being constructed to the highest environment standard of Passiv Haus Premium, a world first for an educational building.

In conjunction with City Deals programme, capital projects are being taken forward for North West Regional College and South West College.

The FE sector is an essential component to supporting delivery of the Executive’s PfG Outcomes and the Department’s vision and strategies outlined above. We remain committed to maintaining standards and will contribute towards the recovery of the NI economy through developing a highly skilled, motivated and agile workforce that will be at the core of Northern Ireland’s economic recovery through the provision of the highest quality, economically relevant professional and technical education and training.

1. **CURRENT OPERATING ENVIRONMENT IN LIGHT OF COVID-19**

The FE Sector has been hugely impacted by COVID-19: social distancing has changed the delivery of college provision. However, the FE sector has demonstrated its agility in responding to shifting economic demands and employers’ need. While not without its challenges, the FE sector moved swiftly to online delivery and more than 75% of FE students engaged in remote learning.

A significant majority of the jobs which supported our economy during the lockdown were vocational, and remain essential to continued growth, particularly at levels 3-5, across all sectors of the economy.

These sectors will be central to economic recovery and are dependent on the FE sector to provide their talent pool. This CDP details how the FE Sector will capitalise on the achievements to date to ensure the needs of students, employers and communities are met as NI responds to, recovers from and renews itself following the pandemic.

Expert analysis for the recovery of the NI economy is currently optimistic:

* Ulster Bank Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) July 2021 reported a further increase in output and new orders although rates eased from June. The rate of job creation also accelerated due to a pick-up in hiring within retail and manufacturing.
* Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (Summer 2021) noted NI growth prospects still relatively good with anticipated growth of 5.8% in 2021, following a contraction of 10.4% in 2020, and a return to pre-COVID levels of GVA in 2023 and a return to pre-COVID employment in 2024.

This CDP is set in the context of the **Recovery** phase, focusing on ensuring the skills ‘infrastructure’ is maintained as has been the case over the past 18 months.

NI’s future economic and social success is predicated on its ability to access a highly skilled, talented and flexible workforce to deliver a vibrant economy and inclusive society. Further Education Colleges will play a crucial role in supporting NI to move through the Recovery to the Renewal Phases. We will realign delivery models and adopt a digital first approach that will maximise reach, provide value for money and close potential inequality gaps.

1. **GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

The following guiding principles have been developed to set the direction for the 2021/22 CDP in light of the current operating environment:

1. Social distancing will be maintained as far as is possible to reduce impact of track and trace/self-isolation of close contacts. Delivery will be structured to reflect this. Classes will be balanced across the college week to optimise opportunities for students to enjoy face to face learning in a safe environment, in line with the agreed set of principles and guidelines developed through the work of the Departmental Advisory and Oversight Group on the safe resumption of onsite delivery.
2. The FE Sector will deliver the planned curriculum to the maximum number of students that is achievable in the current circumstances and will adopt a range of approaches including face to face.
3. Level one and Level two programmes will take place through on-campus delivery where possible. However, all programmes will include some online delivery to prepare students for progression and help prepare students for a return to alternating models of delivery should this be needed during the year.
4. Level three and Higher Education programmes will adopt a blended model of delivery for year 1 and year 2 where possible and suitable.
5. High quality and accessible on-line delivery will continue, where appropriate, to be used during the return of on-site provision to deliver teaching and learning, provide student pastoral support, provide support to businesses, and upskilling programmes for individuals who wish to retrain or upskill.
6. Work with local employers will continue to provide apprenticeship and placement opportunities whilst ensuring the safety of staff and students.
7. We will engage with businesses to:
* Support employers through the provision of fully funded, tailored solutions through the Skills Focus Programme and Flexible Skills Initiative to increase the skills levels of the workforce; and
* Facilitate small businesses in acquiring the skills to innovate, by delivering up to three InnovateUs upskilling projects per business, through which they work on developing new products, services or processes.
1. FE Sector recognises that every student will not have the same access to broadband and IT facilities to support remote learning from home and as such we will explore appropriate interventions to ensure that these students are not disadvantaged.
2. The FE Sector will continue to support the most disadvantaged in communities across NI by ensuring access to learning opportunities that lead to sustainable career pathways.
3. The FE sector will continue to support local schools in the delivery of the Entitlement Framework through on-site delivery and in accordance with DfE guidelines on safe resumption.
4. The Curriculum Hub Action Plans, if required, will be reviewed and revised in agreement with DfE, to ensure that actions are reflective of the most pertinent needs of the economy in each curricular area. The quarterly reporting of progress against targets will continue to provide the Department with robust assurance of each Hub’s performance.
5. **REGIONAL OPERATING CONTEXT - CHALLENGES**

As the Further Education College for the capital of Northern Ireland and the Belfast City Region, we respond to the opportunities afforded by growth, jobs and diversity, alongside dealing with the challenges of areas that have some of the highest levels of poverty, economic inactivity and deep-rooted social problems in the country.

The labour market for Belfast differs to that of wider Northern Ireland, and that in turn shapes what skills are needed and what we, as an FE College, provide. In essence, Belfast is more skills intensive than the rest of Northern Ireland, has a greater diversity of industrial sectors, and will continue to demand a more highly skilled workforce. Belfast is home to many of Northern Ireland’s high productivity and high skilled jobs and has a high concentration in sectors forecast to experience the most rapid growth over the coming decade.

Despite the pressures on FE enrolments from a number of quarters, in some specific areas, Belfast Met is seeing the potential for increasing demand (eg. In Traineeships).One of the key challenges for Belfast Met, which is highlighted in our newly approved Strategic Plan “Choose Success”, is to ensure that we have developed a more flexible delivery model to meet this demand, as part of a wider ecosystem and Partner of Choice. Despite the emerging opportunities we are at the same time struggling with the challenges associated with attracting talent into our workforce and are witnessing some serious skills shortages in key sectors across the FE Sector which is reflected in the work of the sector HR Working Group.

Despite the size and complexity of the labour market in the City Region and the diversity of employment opportunities available, Belfast ranks consistently amongst the lowest-performing local government districts in educational attainment relating to young people, such as in school performance and participation in tertiary education. Low performance is concentrated within certain areas of the city. This means that there are additional challenges for the Belfast City Region in terms of achieving economically inclusive growth.

***Economic and Social Context for Belfast Met***

* ***Jobs:*** in Belfast, up until 2027, 3,540 jobs will need to be filled each year from education and migration.[[1]](#footnote-2)
* ***Productivity and growth sectors*:** Belfast local government district has the second fastest job growth, with 36% of the total NI job growth over the 2012 to 2017 period.[[2]](#footnote-3)
* ***Skills levels:*** There is an oversupply of low-level skills at NQF Level 2 and below. In the future, 56% of the labour force will require a degree-level qualification.
* **Skills imbalances**: only 28% of Belfast City Council residents are qualified to Level 4+, compared to 44% of the Belfast city workplace employees.[[3]](#footnote-4)
* ***Occupations:*** in Belfast, administrative occupations are the largest occupational group in the workforce, accounting for 14% of total employment, compared to 10% for Northern Ireland.[[4]](#footnote-5)
* ***Businesses:*** Belfast hosts the largest number of businesses in Northern Ireland, with 11,065 (14.5%) registered businesses out of a total of 76,090.[[5]](#footnote-6)
* ***Digital economy:*** 64% of the total workplace jobs in Northern Ireland in IT are situated in Belfast. The IT sector is expected to grow by 4.7% between 2017 and 2027.[[6]](#footnote-7)
* ***Population changes:*** up to 2042/43, Belfast’s population will grow from 342,058 to 344,474.[[7]](#footnote-8) There will also be an increase in those aged 15–19 between 2017 and 2027.
* ***Poverty*:** 25% of the Belfast population are in the bottom income quintile for the UK.[[8]](#footnote-9) 50% of the poorest 100 areas in Northern Ireland in terms of the measures of multiple deprivation are in Belfast, the highest proportion of all local government districts.
* ***School leavers:*** Belfast, at 66.4%, has the lowest proportion of school leavers who achieve five GCSE’s including English and Mathematics, as compared to 70.8% for Northern Ireland.[[9]](#footnote-10)
* ***Unemployment and economic inactivity*:** unemployment has increased to 3.7% in Northern Ireland. The economic inactivity rate in Northern Ireland remains high at 28% and 30.5% in Belfast[[10]](#footnote-11),[[11]](#footnote-12).The figure for those aged 16–24 who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) has risen to 13.9%, the second highest of the four UK regions.[[12]](#footnote-13)
* ***Health and wellbeing:*** Northern Ireland is reported to have a 25% higher overall prevalence of mental health problems than England.[[13]](#footnote-14)

**Challenges facing the FE Sector**

As with other FE Colleges in NI, Belfast Met faces a number of pressures which are resulting in a decline in enrolments to Colleges. Total FE College enrolments have decreased by a net 14.0%, from 153,817 in 2015/16 to 132,354 in 2019/20.[[14]](#footnote-15) The cause of this decline partly due to the diminishing numbers of 18-year-olds, but there are a number of additional factors including:

* **Expansion of HE:** Over the last 30 years, the number of learners going to HEIs has significantly increased and the lack of agreed approaches in respect of the development and delivery of HE in FE has created instability and lack of clarity in terms of progression pathways from FE to HE. It is hoped that the newly appointed team in DfE and Tertiary Education Forum will begin to work through some of these challenges to develop mutually beneficial solutions.
	+ Between 1990/91 and 2019/20, the number of enrolments on HE courses at NI HEIs and NI Further Education colleges more than doubled, from 29,495 to 69,400.[[15]](#footnote-16) But in the same period, the number of enrolments on HE courses at NI Further Education colleges decreased from 10,705 to 10,325, a decrease of 3.6%.
	+ Between 2014/15 and 2019/20, the proportion of school leavers going to HEIs has risen from 42.4% to 47.9%.In the same period, the proportion going to FECs has declined from 35% to 29.2%.[[16]](#footnote-17)
* **Possible grade inflation:** Facilitating these trends above, are reports of grade inflation. Over the last two years there has been significant grade inflation at A Level which has resulted in more students going to university for academic degrees. In 2021, 50.8% of all A levels awarded were at A\*and A grade. This is a record and a rise of 7.5% from 2020.[[17]](#footnote-18)
* **Schools retaining pupils at Sixth Form:** An increasing number of schools are providing vocational qualifications. Often these schools lack industry qualified staff and or facilities. Schools are delivering academic modules of these vocational qualifications and there is minimal skills development. There has also been a significant increase in students carrying out repeat years.

As a result, FE Colleges such as Belfast Met need to compete harder for enrolments to FE as well as HE courses. The College has identified this as a key challenge for the years ahead and is looking at a range of interventions - as a College, across the FE Sector and in discussion with DfE - to reverse this trend, so that the existing undersupply of skills at levels 3-5 in NI, as identified in the Skills Barometer is not further exacerbated.

**Working to strengthen the economic and social success of the Belfast City Region to fully support the ambition of the Northern Ireland Executive**

Our provision must be fully aligned with the key Government policies which set the policy and delivery context for Belfast Met.

Together with the other FE Colleges in Northern Ireland, we will support the *‘New Decade, New Approach’* deal which outlines a series of priorities and ambitions for a reformed Executive including the development of “an enhanced approach to careers advice, curriculum, training and apprenticeships to enhance employability and support economic growth” and the development of “a regionally-balanced economy with opportunities for all”.

The Department for the Economy (DfE) will hold us to account for our contribution to one key outcome which is ‘Everyone can reach their potential.’ However, we contribute to other important outcomes and the following four complement each other.

* **Our children and young people have the best start in life:** Skills and attainment – delivering a high-quality curriculum and an enhanced approach to careers advice, improving educational achievement and life chances, addressing persistent underachievement, and supporting children with specific needs, such as SEN and those with English as an additional language to access the curriculum.
* **Everyone can reach their potential**: Skills and attainment – addressing underachievement alongside skills shortages, aligning Further Education and Higher Education to labour market demand, supporting vocational training and apprenticeships, as well as qualifications and tertiary education and continuing professional development.
* **Our economy is globally competitive, regionally balanced and carbon-neutral**: Growth – growing the economy to attract and stimulate investment across Northern Ireland, including building sustainable investment, encouraging business start-ups and development through City and Growth Deals and supporting sustainable development of rural industries.
* **We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment**: By supporting the development of a digital technology-driven College committed to UN Sustainable Development Goals and building on our research in building technology and hydrogen we will contribute to the Green Growth approach and manage our resources efficiently and effectively, ensuring our people are encouraged to make environmentally responsible choices.

The DfE and Department of Education’s Transition of Young People into Careers (14–19) project will have implications for the College and its operating environment, particularly in relation to how we work and compete for learners with schools, funding and careers advice and guidance. We will also engage with the team leading on the new independent Review of Education to ensure that the transition from school to College can be improved in the future.

The change in economic circumstances and uncertainty created by the pandemic places skills at the centre of economic and innovation policy. As set out in the 2021 *Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland: Skills for a 10X Economy,* the policy objectives for skills over the next decade are:

* **Enhancing our digital skills:** to develop a unique, competitive proposition, Northern Ireland is intrinsically reliant on advanced digital skills; bolstering the supply of such skills will be key to success;
* **Creating a culture of learning**: supporting individuals to achieve higher level qualifications; qualifications which have real labour market relevance and provide access to quality jobs; and
* **Addressing skills imbalances**: increasing emphasis on the qualifications that businesses need to drive growth and support innovation, including more women into STEM subjects and more people becoming apprentices.

The 10X Strategy emphasises that ensuring everyone has an opportunity to develop skills will be a cornerstone of success, and this should include opportunities for those furthest away from the labour market, and those with low or no formal skills in those areas, to enable them to thrive.

Learning from other small, advanced economies, the Department for the Economy’s economic strategy has also identified five economic clusters - digital, ICT and creative industries; agri-tech; fintech/ financial services; advanced manufacturing and engineering and life and health sciences. Belfast Met will help support the development of those clusters where we have inherent technical expertise by providing a pipeline of suitably qualified, work-ready talent for the jobs created by employers in these areas. The College is keen to work on the development of a new Hydrogen Skills Hub, having led the Hydrogen GenComm project in Europe for the last 4 years and is already collaborating with Councils, QUB and Northern Regional College to support curriculum development of Hydrogen Qualifications. To enhance the work which we have been leading on through the Assured Skills Programme placing over 1,500 graduates into the professional services and technology sectors in recent years the College would also be keen to work with DfE to support the establishment of a new Professional Services Sector Partnership to help inform developments in respect of qualifications and apprenticeship frameworks.

The ‘*OECD Skills Strategy Northern Ireland (United Kingdom)’*, which underpins the new Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland, highlights the importance that skills have on the economic recovery of the region, through increasing productivity, competitiveness and innovation.[[18]](#footnote-19) High-quality and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning will need to be accessible for everyone to enable full participation in society and to manage the transitions in the labour market successfully. More adults will need more opportunities to retrain and upskill, particularly in the face of potentially challenging circumstances associated with economic recovery.

As a College, we will need to create more flexible, blended forms of learning. People will need stronger and a more comprehensive set of skills, be able to progress to the higher levels of skills required to compete in Belfast’s regional labour market, and in turn to make the Belfast City Region competitive. The College is already a leading partner in the Belfast Region City Deal, working to deliver a series of interventions to support skills, employability, apprenticeships and careers enhancement, which in turn will underpin significant capital investments in innovation, tourism and regeneration over the next 10 years. There are remaining challenges in understanding how the work which has been developed as part of the Belfast Region City Deal can be more fully integrated into College Development Plans, both at a local and regional level with support from Councils and connecting into the evolving Labour Market Intermediary Partnerships (LMIPs) which in turn will connect with the new Northern Ireland Skills Council.

**COVID-19 has completely transformed the way we live, work and learn**

Social distancing in 2020 and 2021 immediately changed how we delivered teaching and learning. The College demonstrated its agility in responding to shifting economic demands and employers’ need. It placed immediate pressures on Belfast Met to help re-skill and upskill individuals, particularly above a Level 2 qualification, in sectors where demand remains strongest and has the best chance of growth, across a range of technical and employability skills. The immediate impacts of furloughing and redundancies meant that Belfast Met had to move swiftly to provide new opportunities for people to re-skill, working through the Department for the Economy’s Short-Term Interventions programme

The pandemic both exposed and exacerbated the social and economic challenges of Belfast and the wider region, and in turn, those facing the learners and employers that the College is there to support.

Of the 35,000 jobs lost in 2020, 25,000 were self-employed, mainly in Construction and Other Services (close contact services such as hairdressers and beauticians) and of the 10,000 employee jobs lost, 75% have been from the Hospitality and Retail sectors.[[19]](#footnote-20).

Proportionally, these impacts are smaller than in other parts of Northern Ireland.[[20]](#footnote-21) There are some sub-sectors that are at higher risk of economic decline and which have the largest share of employment in Belfast. These are real estate and arts and recreation. Despite wholesale and retail trade being one of the most badly affected by COVID-19, Belfast’s share of this sector is the lowest of all council areas. The city is therefore better placed for recovery – the largest, but not the hardest, hit by the pandemic.

The distributional impact of COVID-19 on jobs has also been impacted by social distancing policies. With lower levels of formal qualifications and lower incomes, younger workers, males and part-time workers remain the most vulnerable groups to changes in social distancing and lockdown restrictions.[[21]](#footnote-22) Many of these people would seek and find jobs in retail, hospitality and administration. As the economy moves into a period of recovery, Belfast Met needs to help them avail of the opportunities and help them to compete in the labour market with the necessary skills and qualifications.

The UK Government’s short- to medium-term approach to exiting COVID-19 charts three phases**: Response, Recovery, Renewal.** As a College, we played our part during the response phase, focusing on maintaining the skills ‘infrastructure’ so that that all learners were not disadvantaged and moving as much delivery as possible online. The pandemic provided an opportunity to expand and deepen our application of digital tools and resources to enhance teaching and learning, which enabled the vast majority of learners to continue with their studies. The inability to teach face to face mainly impacted on those learners studying apprenticeships and close contact courses e.g. catering, beauty and aspects of STEM courses, involved some work to catch up on lost learning for a mix of full and part-time FE provision with no HE students impacted or in delay in completing their qualifications.

Many sectors of the economy and basic service require people with skills at levels 3-5 across services, production, manufacturing and distribution will be central to economic recovery. As we move through the recovery and renewal stages, Belfast Met is well placed to support the skills needs of those employers so they can remain viable and grow.

**Our role in promoting economic inclusion**

As an FE College, we have a dual role in supporting economic development and social inclusion. We do this by working with businesses to create new employment and apprenticeship opportunities, helping those entering the labour market to acquire the necessary skills to access employment, and promoting social inclusion (i.e., helping those furthest from the labour market) through the creation of progression pathways from entry level up to HE. The dual role is set out in the new Skills Strategy:[[22]](#footnote-23)

*The FE sector has a ‘dual mandate’ in Northern Ireland’s skills system. It is the primary provider of education at Levels 4 and 5 and vocational qualifications at Level 3. From a resource perspective, this must always be balanced against the need to maintain provision of entry level education to adults and school leavers. Addressing the mid-level ‘skills deficit’ must be balanced against the need to provide progression pathways to those who have not reached their potential in school-based education. From both an economic and social perspective, it is essential that the FE sector is properly resourced to deliver this dual mandate.*

The College needs to help Northern Ireland move out of the low skills equilibrium and the impacts of the pandemic to contribute to the promise of skills development for all, set out by the PfG, and the ambition of growth through innovation and for this growth to be inclusive, as set out in ‘*A 10X Economy: Northern Ireland’s decade of innovation’*.

We know from UUEPC’s Skills Barometer that there is an undersupply of skills at Level 3–5 in Northern Ireland and that more work is required to ensure our HE offer is closely aligned to the evolving needs of employers. Employers also report the lack of skilled workers is a major and increasing bottleneck for their operations, affecting their capacity to innovate. At the same time, a stock of individuals do not meet the minimum standards of education to avail of the opportunities in the labour market, putting themselves at risk of unemployment and economic inactivity.

The cumulative impact of achieving our objectives, and one that defines our approach needs to be promoting **economic inclusion and** helping everyone to reach their potential. Skills development enhances individuals’ employability and productivity and helps the region to become more competitive. It helps individuals to achieve qualifications that enable them to fully participate in the economy and society, by getting into and succeeding in work. This means that the entirety of what the College delivers is about the **progression from low to intermediate skill levels and supporting the development of vocational and higher skills**. It means that access to high-quality education and training, and the wider support provided by the College through our careers support, assessment and learner services, are about helping people to get into work.

The main business of the College is therefore to offer a **range of programmes for learners at Levels 3–5**, equipping learners with qualifications that enable them to succeed in the labour market and mitigating the risk of unemployment or poorly paid work for those with lower levels of skills. Furthermore, equipping learners to get a job in priority sectors which support growth in Northern Ireland is critical, as is supporting them with the necessary digital and soft skills so they are work-ready. Ensuring **alignment of our curriculum with the needs of employers in growth sectors** will remain an ongoing focus. This requires the ongoing development of the professional skills of academic as well as technical and support staff.

One of the ways in which we ensure that the curriculum remains relevant will be the continued work of the Curriculum Hubs. Belfast Met is the lead FE College for two Curriculum Hubs – Tourism & Hospitality and Digital ICT. The Hubs are collaborative groups of staff from the six FE Colleges working together to deliver curriculum excellence. In co-ordinating the Hubs, Belfast Met will continue to lead on shaping the content and innovation in the curriculum in response to employer needs. The work of the Hubs will ensure the delivery of a consistent, high quality provision for learners and employers across NI in the tourism and hospitality sector and those requiring cutting edge digital ICT skills. Having secured agreement for the first ever jointly agreed FD in Hospitality as part of the Tourism and Hospitality, the College is currently working with UU and the other Colleges to develop a more commonly agreed approach with the various FD Software Engineering programmes and to support revalidation with UU.

For the College to support economic inclusion, this also involves delivering on Level 1 and 2 programmes – those that help people with low or no qualifications, including supporting those in prison. As the qualifications and funding landscape changes in Northern Ireland, the College needs to **work with partners to deliver the curriculum offer at these levels**. This collaboration will be aligned to the delivery of work-based learning and other programmes as the curriculum and products change in the reform of Training for Success and the introduction of Level 2 Youth Training and new Level 1 programmes. The College will further invest in our workforce and will further develop our delivery partnership ecosystem to support the delivery of the Level 2 Traineeship programme in order to meet the demand for Level 1 and Level 2 provision in Belfast. This will include delivery of the agreed Traineeship curriculum in the 2021/22 academic year and also in preparation for the implementation of an expanded Traineeship curriculum in preparation for the 2022/23 academic year. We will ensure alignment between our curriculum planning and our supporting infrastructure and resource planning to ensure delivery of the provision in line with market demand.

We need to provide accessible education and training to those with **barriers to learning –** for example, people with health and disability issues, specifically those with severe and moderate learning difficulties and disabilities, and those with literacy and numeracy problems. The number of ESOL learners enrolling at the College has declined due to the pandemic, and prior to this, competition from other providers in the region. The impact of social distancing meant a move to online learning, an approach which did not suit many of these learners because of the level of their English language ability, exacerbated by barriers such as access to technology.

However, given our existing support to Syrian refugees to date, the scale (and scalability) of ESOL provision and networks with local community groups, the College is well positioned to play its part in supporting the resettlement of Afghan refugees, in terms of language support, training and helping them access services.

We need to provide **support for the long-term unemployed and economically inactive in partnership with other providers, as part of a sustainable College.** The College has always offered programmes to support those with minimal qualifications and/or job experience to gain skills, qualifications and employment. With the challenges that both COVID-19 and Brexit have brought, it is vital that the College works with the DfE, partner organisations and other funders to enhance and grow our work with the long-term unemployed and economically inactive.

Belfast Met, together with NWRC, also provides **access to learning and skills for those in prison**. The pandemic, and the challenges that social distancing presented, led to the suspension of this area of provision in the latter half of 2020 until this new academic year. We finalised a new five-year SLA with NIPS and implemented the new provision under the ‘One Lead College Model’ with Belfast Met as the Lead College in partnership with NWRC from April 2021. The relevant strategic governance structures are in place for the SLA and are fully supported by all partners. Due to the impact of Covid-19 and mitigating measures, and to support the continuation of delivery at Maghaberry, Hydebank Wood College and Magilligan, a number of actions and mitigations were put in place to support continuity of provision during the period April to June 2021.

From July 2021 we have transitioned to a Return to Campus plan in partnership with NIPS colleagues, and in line with agreed Risk Assessment and Health & Safety Covid-19 mitigation measures, supported by a structured action plan of teaching and learning activity with a phased safe resumption of face-to-face teaching from July 2021 in line with agreed control and monitoring measures to support staff and learners.

We will continue to enrol learners onto subjects that contribute to **Priority Sector Areas and STEM**. However, this year, the proportion of our provision is anticipated to decline slightly with a decrease at levels 2 and 3 and a slight increase at level 4+. This is an estimate based on our expectations of demand for courses across the whole curriculum, which also reflects initial application profiles showing an increase in non STEM areas including Health and Social Care which is not a priority sector although significantly important in terms of socially inclusive labour market opportunities across Belfast. The projected growth in enrolments in other part-time provision for additionality programmes for learners in employability and other short – courses in the community also tends to be in non STEM areas and is in line with the priorities mapped out the in the SkillsNI draft strategy which highlights the importance of supporting growth in adult lifelong provision.

**How is the College going to promote inclusive growth?**

Northern Ireland’s future economic and social success is predicated on its ability to access a highly skilled, talented and flexible workforce to deliver a vibrant economy and inclusive society. As a College we need to demonstrate our leadership across the tertiary education and skills sector to deliver the skills in the workforce that are needed.

Belfast Met will contribute towards the recovery of the Northern Ireland economy by being *the* **College** for all learners, providing the highest-quality, economically-relevant professional and technical education and training provision and delivering the skills needed for the economy. Belfast Met will be agile in the way we help employers to innovate and grow, developing suitable skills and business development interventions that assist all sectors to adjust to the impacts of COVID-19, thereby increasing competitiveness and sustainability across the region.

The DfE has made it clear that creating a dynamic ecosystem where Government, industry and education providers work in **partnership** will be key. Belfast Met can only meet the ambitions for the PfG in collaboration and partnership with others.

The commitment and ambition of the College’s **employees**, both our academic employees and those in technical and support roles, is fundamental to the College’s ability to deliver the best outcomes for learners and employers. We aim to recruit and retain the best through rewarding jobs and careers.

With Belfast City Region the area with the most potential for recovery, there is without doubt a case for significantly scaling up delivery of education and training in the sub-region. This can only be achieved through investment in high-quality skills provision, including a renewed focus on **digital skills**, particularly for those already in the workforce who will need to adapt to new working practices post COVID-19. Our ability to scale up will be influenced by the levels of funding available through core grant and other sources of income, our capacity to innovate to develop new solutions which meet the needs of employers, and our success in attracting talented staff and partners to build our capability.

To ensure that Belfast Met supports learners and employers as we move through to the recovery and renewal phases, we will seek to develop different delivery models and adopt a **digital by design** approach that is fully **sustainable by nature**. This is so we can maximise reach, provide value for money and close inequality gaps.

1. **PLANNED ACTIVITY**

The tables below set out the College’s planned activity for the 2021/22 (in-light of a DfE budget allocation of £49mn year) in support of the draft PfG Outcomes.

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| **Residual Qualifications** |
| **Area of Planned Activity****(Data source: CDR)** | **Residual Activity**  |
| **2019/20**  | **2020/21** |
| **FE Activity:*** L0-3
* FT & PT
* Excluding Essential Skills
 | 2 | 8  |
| **HE in FE** – Full timeL4-6 | 0 | 0 |
| **HE in FE**:- Part Time* L4-6
 | 0 | 0 |
| **TfS:*** L0-3
 | 0 | 0 |
| **AppsNI**:* L2 - 3
 | 0 | 22 |
| **HLAs** * L4-5
 | 0 | 0 |
| **Essential Skills*** Whole College Provision
 | 0 | 0 |

| **2021/22 Qualifications[[23]](#footnote-24)** |
| --- |
| **Area of Planned Activity****(Data source: CDR)** |  **Planned Activity****For 21/22** | **20/21 In-Year** **Activity** |
| **FE Activity:*** L0-3
* FT & PT
* Excluding Essential Skills
 | 14,602 enrolments equating to 7,275 individuals | 14,794 enrolments equating to 6,813 individuals |
| **HE in FE – Full time**:* L4-6
 | 1,487 enrolments equating to 1,487 individuals  | 1,260 enrolments equating to 1,260 individuals  |
| **HE in FE – Part time**:* L4-6
 | 1,096 enrolments equating to 953 individuals | 1095 enrolments equating to 932 individuals |
| **TfS:*** L0-3
 | 32 enrolments equating to 32 individuals | 159 enrolments equating to 159 individuals |
| **Skills for Life and Work*** L0-2
 | 100[[24]](#footnote-25) | N/A |
| **Traineeships:*** L2
 | 134 enrolments equating to 134 individuals | N/A |
| **AppsNI**:* L2-3
 | 968 enrolments equating to 968 apprentices registered for training 82% of AppsNI apprentices who remain on the programme for at least 4 weeks after initial registration and go on to remain on the programme for more than 52 weeks. | 975 enrolments equating to 800 apprentices registered for training 82% of AppsNI apprentices who remain on the programme for at least 4 weeks after initial registration and go on to remain on the programme for more than 52 weeks. |
| **HLAs** * L4-5
 | 229 enrolments equating to 229 HLAs  | 181 enrolments equating to 181 HLAs  |
| **Essential Skills** | 2,100 equating to 1,500 individuals | 1,931 enrolments equating to 1,377 individuals. |
| **Priority Sector Areas and / or STEM (PSSA)[[25]](#footnote-26):** | 9,627 PSSA enrolments equating to 5,801 individuals enrolled in one or more PSSA subjects4,750 final year students enrolled in one or more PSSA subjects | 10,967 PSSA enrolments equating to 6,260 individuals enrolled in in one or more PSSA subjects6,195 final year students enrolled in one or more PSSA subjects |

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| **Overall NI Prison Service Delivery****(BMC Lead College – Compiled in conjunction with NWRC)** |
| **Area of Planned Activity** |  **Planned Activity for 21/22****Financial Year** |
| Prisoners undertaking College-led courses  | 437 enrolments equating to 437 individualsMaghaberry: 347 enrolments equating to 347 individualsHydebank: 90 enrolments equating to 90 individuals  |

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| **Employers** |
| **Area of Planned Activity** | **Planned Activity** **for 21/22** | **20/21 Activity** |
| **InnovateUs** * 1st April 2021 – 31st March 2022
 | 69 projects delivered through the InnovateUs programme £300,000 of projects completed (budget spend)  | 75 projects delivered through the InnovateUs programme £290,000 of projects completed (budget spend)  |
| **Skills Focus** * L2+
* 1st April 2021 – 31st March 2022
 | 300 enrolments undertaking a Level 2 (and above) qualification through the Skills Focus Programme | 235 enrolments undertaking a Level 2 (and above) qualification through the Skills Focus Programme |
| **Assured Skills**:* L0-8
* 1st April 2021 – 31st March 2022
 | 21 Academies with 320 enrolments with 320 individuals | 16 Academies with 382 enrolments with 376 individuals  |
| **Other Programmes** |
| **Fusion Projects** | N/A | N/A |
| **Bridge to Employment Programme** | N/A | N/A |
| **Innovation Voucher Scheme** | 13 vouchers | 16 vouchers |

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| **Social Inclusion**  |
| **Area of Planned Activity****(Data source: CDR)** | **Planned Activity** **for 21/22** | **20/21 In-Year****Activity** |
| Enrolments within Quintile 1 and 2 | 7,372[[26]](#footnote-27) | 7,555[[27]](#footnote-28) |
| Enrolments declaring a disability / long term health problem | 2,065[[28]](#footnote-29) | 2,123[[29]](#footnote-30) |
| Enrolments on Entry Level and Level 1 Programmes (including Essential Skills) | 4,238[[30]](#footnote-31) | 4,333[[31]](#footnote-32) |
| Enrolments on Targeted Programmes e.g. College Connect, Prince’s Trust, Futures etc | Total: 769ESF (College Connect and Skills for Industry 77)Futures 45Prince’s Trust 42Skill Up 605 | Total 751ESF (College Connect and Skills for Industry 133)Futures 596Prince’s Trust 22Skill Up N/A |
| Enrolments on ESOL Programmes | 1,200[[32]](#footnote-33)  | 1,588[[33]](#footnote-34) |
| Overall number of individuals supported by above measures | 6,408 learners[[34]](#footnote-35) | 6,565[[35]](#footnote-36) |

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| **Overall College Performance**  |
| **Performance Indicator** | **Planned Performance Rate for 21/22** | **19/20****Performance Rate[[36]](#footnote-37)** |
| **Retention Rate:** The proportion of the number of enrolments who complete their final year of study to the number of final year enrolments.  | 91.6% | 91.6  |
| **Achievement Rate:**The percentage of the number of enrolments who completed their final year of study and achieve their qualifications to the number of enrolments who completed their final year of study.  | 87.7% | 87.7% |
| **Success Rate:**The proportion of the number of enrolments who complete their final year of study and achieve their qualification to the number of final year enrolments.  | 80.3% | 80.3% |

1. UUEPC (2019) Sub-Regional Skills Barometer: Belfast City Council. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. UUEPC (2019) Sub-Regional Skills Barometer: Belfast City Council. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. UUEPC (2019) Sub-Regional Skills Barometer: Belfast City Council. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. UUEPC (2019) Sub-Regional Skills Barometer: Belfast City Council. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. NISRA (2020) Interdepartmental Business Register (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. UUEPC (2019) Sub-Regional Skills Barometer: Belfast City Council. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. NISRA (2020) 2018-based Population Projections for Areas within Northern Ireland. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Department for Communities, Households Below Average Income Northern Ireland 2018/19 (published September 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Department for Education. (2020) Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers 2018/19 School Leavers. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. NISRA (March 2021). Labour Force Survey. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. NISRA (2019) Labour Market Structure: Employment Activity and Qualifications by LGD 2009–2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. NISRA (March 2021) Labour Force Survey. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Mental Health in Northern Ireland: Fundamental Facts (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. DfE (2021), Further Education Activity in Northern Ireland: 2015/16 to 2019/20  [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. DfE Higher Education Statistical Fact Sheet 7:Enrolments Time Series: 1990/91 to 2019/20 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. NISRA (August 2020), Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers 2019/20 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Joint Council for Qualifications website: examination results 2021/A levels. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. OECD (2020) OECD Skills Strategy Northern Ireland (United Kingdom) Assessment and Recommendations. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. UUEPC (2021) Outlook Summer 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. UUEPC (May 2020) Potential economic consequences of COVID-19 in Northern Ireland: Revised estimates and a Council-level view. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. UUEPC (July 2020) COVID-19 and the NI Economy: Which jobs are vulnerable and how do social distancing relaxations help? [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Note that at the time of writing, the Skills Strategy is currently a draft and published for consultation. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. All contracted/sub-contracted delivery is already included in the numbers in the ERC and CDP [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Delivery will be in line with the SFLW approved Method Statement The Priority Sector Area and/or STEM performance measure incorporates not only the Priority Sector Areas as previously measured, but also STEM subjects. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. 40.7% of total enrolments (as per previous year) [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. 40.7% of total enrolments [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. 11.4% of enrolments (as per previous year) [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. 11.4% of enrolments [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. 23.4% of total enrolments (as per previous year) [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. 23.4% of total enrolments [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. 8.6% of total enrolments (as per previous year) [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. 8.6% of total enrolments [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. An estimate of the total number of learners for 20/21 has been based on the same proportion of learners to enrolments (58% of total enrolments) and then, further to removing duplicates, (61%) of that learner group to identify socially excluded learners. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. DfE FE Bulletin 2019/20. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)