

Northern Regional College - Comments

Regional Balance Bill – DfE Assessment

Northern Regional College is a key delivery partner in advancing the Minister's priorities set out in the Economic Vision, supporting the development of a more regionally balanced economy. Operating across four campuses in Ballymena, Coleraine, Magherafelt and Newtownabbey, the College serves four council areas: Antrim & Newtownabbey, Causeway Coast & Glens, Mid & East Antrim, and Mid Ulster. Through campus-based specialisms, the College responds to the distinct economic and skills needs of each locality, ensuring education and training provision is aligned with regional priorities.

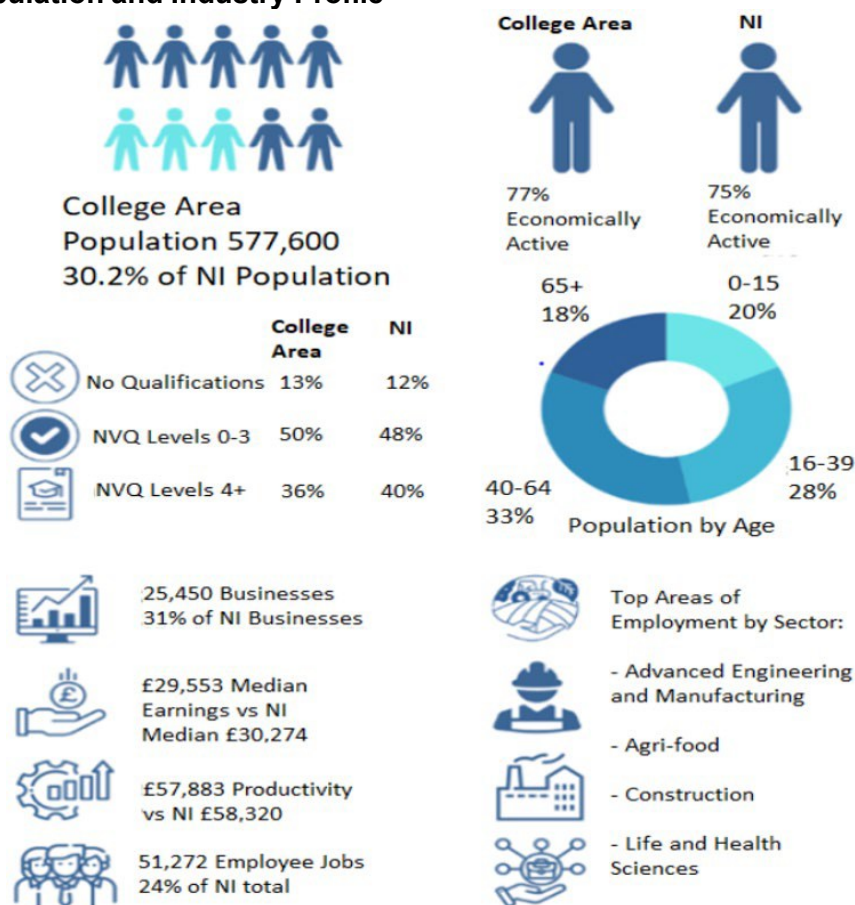
OUR CAMPUSES AND KEY SPECIALISMS		
 BALLYMENA CAMPUS	 Advanced Manufacturing  Engineering  Robotics  Green Technologies  Construction Engineering	 Motor Vehicle  Electrical Installation  Plumbing  Joinery and Technical Trades
 CAUSEWAY CAMPUS	 Digital & Creative Industries  Media Production  Hospitality & Tourism	 Hair & Beauty  Animal Management
 NEWTOWNABBEY CAMPUS	 Digital & Creative Industries  Higher Level Apprenticeships	 Engineering expansion  Computing and Professional Industries
 MAGHERAFELT CAMPUS	 Health & Social Care  Life Sciences	 Enterprise  Regional Skills Development

With more than 14,000 enrolments, Northern Regional College plays a significant role in promoting lifelong learning, with 32.5% of learners aged 25 and over. The College's catchment area represents 30.2% of Northern Ireland's population, serving approximately 577,600 people across the four council areas.

The College is committed to improving social inclusion and economic participation by providing accessible learning opportunities for the 13% of the local population with no formal qualifications. This is achieved through the delivery of Essential Skills provision and targeted programmes that help individuals gain the qualifications and confidence needed to progress into further learning or employment.

Although the region has higher than average levels of economic activity compared with Northern Ireland as a whole, the College continues to work collaboratively with employers and stakeholders to deliver sector-focused academies that support those currently economically inactive to enter and sustain employment. In response to demographic change and an ageing population, the College is also expanding lifelong learning opportunities, including the continued delivery of bespoke Women Returner Programmes that help individuals re-enter the workforce and develop new skills.

Population and Industry Profile



Data Source: Invest NI Council Briefings February 2025

The College plays an active role in supporting regional economic development through its engagement with Labour Market Partnerships and Local Economic Partnerships across its four council areas. These partnerships strengthen collaboration with local councils, employers and key stakeholders, enabling the College to respond effectively to local labour market needs and contribute to strategic initiatives, including the Mid and East Antrim Manufacturing Task Force (MTF) and the Hydrogen Academy project.

Northern Regional College is represented on each of the four Local Economic Partnerships, providing opportunities to shape and deliver skills interventions that support productivity, workforce development and regional economic growth. Local councils are key strategic partners, facilitating engagement with businesses and helping to ensure that education and training provision reflects current and emerging employer needs.

The College also works closely with schools across the region, delivering Entitlement Framework provision exclusively within local Area Learning Communities. This collaborative approach broadens curriculum choice for young people while supporting progression pathways that meet the skills needs of local communities and employers.

Existing Commitment to Regional Balance

The College has KPIs within its College Development Plan that align with promoting regional balance. Rather than creating additional measurement frameworks, the College will continue

to utilise existing performance management arrangements to monitor progress and evaluate impact.

Programme planning and development are informed by labour market intelligence, including the Northern Ireland Skills Barometer, Invest Northern Ireland data and other recognised regional evidence sources. This evidence-based approach ensures that curriculum provision and skills interventions remain responsive to current and emerging economic priorities and employer demand.

Aim/Outcome 1: To increase regional business productivity/growth through the delivery of tailored/bespoke training programmes.

Aim/Outcome 2: To upskill/reskill individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to secure employment, meet employer needs for today and the future and support economic growth of the region.

Aim/Outcome 5: To stimulate economic growth, create jobs, and improve the overall prosperity of the region through City and Growth Deal projects.

Overall perspective:

- The College is broadly supportive of the aim – amplifying the focus on regional balance through statutory recognition i.e. the difference in economic performance and living standards between geographic regions.
- The College welcomes the emphasis within the document on the need for cross-departmental collaboration, in planning and delivery, if existing barriers to change are to be addressed
- The College recognises the call for a “whole of government” approach further emphasised within the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum – this is welcomed and essential.
- The College agrees with point 19 in the EFM document – reference to the need for assessment of strengths of partnerships as a key measurement.
- The College would seek to utilise existing measures as currently reported on.

In terms of impact on college/curriculum:

- Any measures that more closely align skills policy, strategies and funding are welcomed.
- Expect to see increasing emphasis on regional balance/impact within college/sectoral corporate plans and annual CDPs.
- Expect to see increasing emphasis within the DfE “FE, Fit for the Future” project. However, the challenge will be to accommodate regional variations – targets set within the framework will need to take account of the factors that currently contribute to regional disparity. Baselines will differ across regions, and for the College, across catchment areas.
- A further challenge in reporting and measurement of impact will result from workforce mobility. Individuals may train in one regional area, live in a different regional area and travel to work in a different regional area.

Financial Perspective:

- From a financial perspective, additional line to emphasise that a sustainable funding approach will be critical to achieving the Bill's long-term objectives and ensuring meaningful regional impact. Any future regional balance framework should be supported by appropriate investment to enable colleges to respond to local economic needs and deliver targeted skills, facilities and workforce required. It will be important that any new obligations, performance measures or reporting requirements are accompanied by appropriate resources and that funding models recognise differing regional needs, economic conditions, and delivery challenges.

We would anticipate such considerations to be taken forward through the 'DFE FE Fit for Future' programme, which seems the most appropriate forum for aligning the regional balance objectives with future strategic development of the FE sector.

Feedback on Part 2 of the Bill - which outlines the Departmental duty to compile information and to evaluate progress in contributing to the Framework criteria.

- The College supports a legislative framework which places a statutory duty on evaluation and reporting on how regional economic performance and living standards are being addressed.
- In terms of impact on the FE sector, the College already acts as a key driver of regional balance through delivery of further and higher education provision across four council areas and encompassing both rural and urban catchment areas offering diverse levels/types of employment opportunity.
- The College reports on regional disparity within existing KPIs and would seek to continue to report on these, however alternative or similar metrics maybe required for other Departments.
- The College reports on College Development Plans and would encourage utilisation of CDP reporting as the basis for providing DFE Annual report requirements as opposed to introducing additional metrics.
- Clause 5 (2) (a) refers to reducing regional disparity in the preceding 12-month period, the lead in time for educational programmes can be 12 to 18 months and the outcome not seen for a further 12-month period, therefore preceding 12 months is extremely ambitious.
- The allocation of funding to further support regional employers, entrepreneurial start-ups, childcare provision, improved transport links would further contribute to regional balance, and would support the College in delivery of its strategic goals.
- The Bill provides an important context for the "FE: Fit for the Future" programme in determining key performance/success indicators for the sector.
- The proposal to report on impact of the Bill, and its execution, is welcomed.

27 July 2026