

## Addressing the missing middle – reskilling, upskilling, progression and life-long learning pathways

Libby Shackels, Director of Curriculum, Southern Regional College

### Background and curriculum hub model

Northern Ireland has led a transformative approach to further education (FE) that addresses regional skills gaps, supports economic development and fosters lifelong learning.

Northern Ireland's six regional colleges operate across 30 campuses, serving both urban and rural communities. These institutions are non-departmental public bodies reporting to the Department for the Economy (DfE), with a dual mandate: to reduce the skills deficit and widen access to education. The colleges play a pivotal role in economic development, knowledge transfer and social inclusion, offering education and training from Level 2 to Level 6 across a wide range of sectors.

A curriculum hub model was introduced in 2018 in response to the DfE's [Further Education Means Success](#) strategy. Each college leads a designated hub aligned with a key economic sector, such as Life Sciences or Construction, and is tasked with developing responsive, industry-informed curricula. These hubs focus on curriculum review, progression pathways, digital innovation, economic engagement and future-proofing provision.

7 curriculum hubs have been established in 3 phases:

- Digital Information Technology (Belfast Metropolitan College)
- Hospitality & Tourism (Belfast Metropolitan College)
- Entrepreneurship (Northern Regional College)
- Health & Social Care (North West Regional College)
- Construction (South Eastern Regional College)
- Life Sciences (Southern Regional College)
- Engineering & Advanced Manufacturing (South West College)

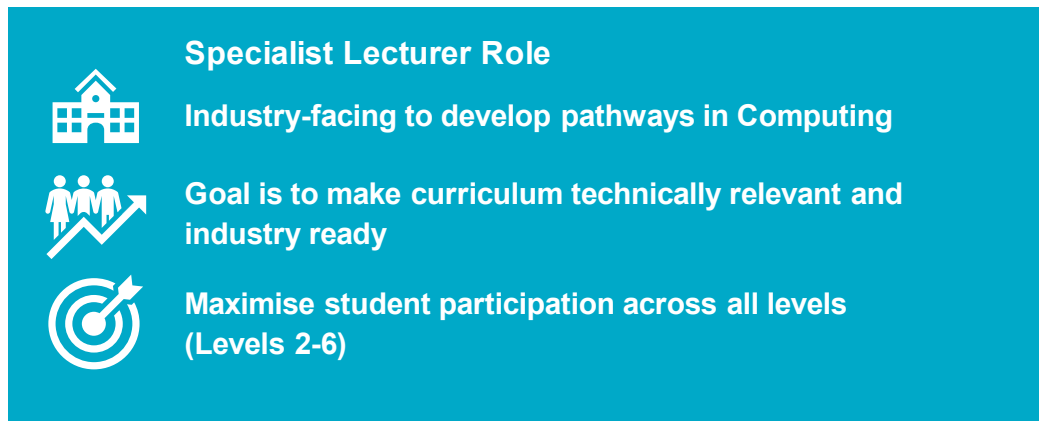


### Specialist Lecturer model: A case study in IT




In 2021-22, Southern Regional College (SRC) introduced the Specialist Lecturer role to deepen industry engagement and co-design curriculum. These lecturers dedicate significant time to working directly with employers, developing accredited, bite-sized training aligned

with industry needs. In IT, for example, SRC has created over 15 Level 4 and 5 technical pathways in areas such as blockchain, AI, virtualisation and cybersecurity, all fully endorsed by industry and attracting over 250 learner applications.

SRC's IT Specialist Lecturer collaborates with around 140 employers, including small and micro-enterprises, to ensure the curriculum is technically relevant and employment-ready. This includes partnerships with awarding bodies like OCN NI and universities such as Ulster and the Open University. Through skills academies and CPD initiatives, learners gain industry recognised certifications (e.g. Microsoft, AWS) and are prepared for roles in high-demand sectors.



**Specialist Lecturer Role**

-  Industry-facing to develop pathways in Computing
-  Goal is to make curriculum technically relevant and industry ready
-  Maximise student participation across all levels (Levels 2-6)

### Impact and innovation

This model has enabled SRC and its partner colleges to deliver flexible, modular learning that supports upskilling, reskilling and progression. It also aligns with government priorities such as regional balance, productivity and net-zero goals. The colleges' involvement in WorldSkills and inter-campus competitions further enhances learner engagement and readiness for employment.

By embedding industry collaboration into curriculum design and delivery, Northern Ireland's colleges act as catalysts for regional economic transformation and are equipping learners with the skills needed for the future workforce, while supporting employers and communities alike. The Specialist Lecturer and curriculum hub models offer replicable frameworks for responsive, inclusive and impactful education.

This case study was presented at the QAA Cymru webinar 'Micro-credential postcards from the Nations: Practice-sharing event with a focus on micro-credential development around the UK' on 3 June 2025. The webinar formed part of the work of the Medr-funded Micro-credentials Special Interest Group (MIC.SIG).

Find out more about the MIC.SIG on the QAA Cymru [website](#).

