

Circular Number: FE 03/26

Date of Issue: 14th April 2026

Subject: INNOVATEUS PROGRAMME

Target Audience:

- Principals and Chief Executives of Further Education Colleges
- Chairs of Governing Bodies
- FE College Finance Officers
- FE College MIS Officers
- Members of Economic Engagement Working Group
- Members of Skills Focus and InnovateUs Steering Group

Summary of Contents:

This circular provides guidance and funding arrangements for the InnovateUs Programme, covering the period from 1st April 2026 to 31st March 2027.

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Related Documents: FE Circular 02/25

Superseded Documents:

Expiry Date: 31 March 2027

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Aid provided to deliver this programme is granted either as State aid in compliance with European Commission regulation (EU) 2023/2831 of 13 December 2023 or will be a subsidy which complies with the [Subsidy Control Act 2022](#).

Contents:

1. Introduction
 2. Strategic Context
 3. Programme Aims and Objectives
 4. Programme Delivery
 5. Innovation and Eligibility
 6. Budget and Monitoring
 7. Funding Options and Payments
 8. Claims
 9. College Obligations
 10. Compliance Process
 11. State Aid/Subsidy Control
 12. Provision of Information, Monitoring and Evaluation
 13. Observance of Legal Requirements
 14. Dedicated Cost Centre
 15. Inspection
- Annex A** – College Guide to InnovateUs
- Annex B** – Annual College Objectives, Outputs and Outcomes
- Annex C** – Eligibility Checklist and Baseline Audit
- Annex D** – Delivery and Evaluation Report
- Annex E** – 12-month Impact Assessment
- Annex F** – College End of Year Report
- Annex G** – Compliance Process

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The focus of InnovateUs is to enable small businesses, with fewer than 50 employees, to acquire the skills necessary to engage in innovation activities. It also aims to encourage small businesses to undertake further forms of upskilling or development to enhance their learning and innovation capacity and it promotes collaborative working between small businesses and Further Education (FE) colleges.
- 1.2 The programme provides training which is tailored to the requirements of small and micro businesses. It is delivered by the Further Education (FE) Colleges, as the Department's Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs), increasing FE's role in economic development.
- 1.3 This circular establishes guidance on the eligibility, funding arrangements and operation of the InnovateUs programme with effect from 1st April 2026. It should be read in conjunction with the College Guide to InnovateUs which is attached at Annex A.

2. STRATEGIC CONTEXT

2.1 Economic Vision

The Minister's Economic Vision sets out four key objectives to:

- Increase the proportion of working-age people in Good Jobs;
- Promote Regional Balance so that everyone, no matter where they live, should have the same opportunity to earn a living;
- Raise Productivity because productivity is a fundamental driver of overall living standards; and
- Reduce carbon emissions as this is both a legal requirement and moral obligation to reach net zero by 2050 at the latest.

Within the objective of Raising Productivity, are aims to improve work-relevant skills, upskill workers, drive innovation through collaboration across government, academia and the private sector and to work with businesses to adopt productivity-improving technology such as Artificial Intelligence and robotics.

InnovateUs contributes to these aims and objectives by upskilling employees to drive innovation within small businesses. The programme is founded on collaboration between those businesses and our local FE Colleges, increasing the innovation capacity of local industries while increasing FE's role in economic development. The wide range of support offered by the programme includes upskilling in the use of technologies such as Computer Aided Design, Augmented Reality, 360 video imaging, robotics and Artificial Intelligence.

[DfE website - Economic Vision](#)

2.2 Programme for Government 2024-2027

On 3 March 2025, the Executive agreed a Programme for Government (PfG) for 2024-2027 titled 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most'.

One of the nine immediate priorities identified in the PfG is the need to “Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy” underpinned by skills and technology. The PfG aims to tackle low productivity, help businesses to thrive and boost employee wages through trade, innovation, and our key sector strengths. Vital to harnessing economic potential will be supporting employers and workers to build the skills needed both now, and in the future. InnovateUs will contribute to this identified priority by mentoring small business in skills and technology which encourage innovation.

[NI Executive website - Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most](#)

2.3 Skills Action Plan for Northern Ireland

In October 2025, the Department launched a three-year Skills Action Plan. The plan sets out the key agreed actions that the Department will focus on to ensure that everyone has a pathway to enhance their existing skills and contribute to the Minister’s Economic Vision.

The action plan covers three themes:

- collaborating with industry and education partners to develop new ways of working;
- improving the skills systems by building on the success of our institutions, interventions and programmes; and.
- creating an inclusive, forward-looking skills ecosystem that empowers individuals and supports economic transformation

InnovateUs will contribute to the Action Plan through FE sector collaboration with industry. Using one to one mentoring, the programme will empower small

business owners and employees to improve their skills and embrace innovative technologies.

[DfE website - Skills Action Plan](#)

2.4 The Northern Ireland Skills Barometer 2023-2033

This iteration marks the fifth NI Skills Barometer publication from Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) since 2015, providing a detailed understanding of the skill requirements for the Northern Ireland Economy up to 2033. The barometer identifies that skills should remain at the core of economic development policy and highlights how lifelong learning can play an important part in the 'good jobs' agenda, driving innovation and supporting sustainable economic growth. InnovateUs drives innovation by upskilling small businesses and it is aligned to the seven priority sectors the Department has targeted for growth (Agri-tech; Life and Health Sciences; Advanced Manufacturing, Materials and Engineering; Fintech/Financial Services; Software; Screen Industries; and Low Carbon).

[DfE Website - Skills Barometer 2023 - 2033](#)

2.5 Department for the Economy Innovation Policy

Innovation is central to economic prosperity, as it is a fundamental driver of productivity and a key Ministerial priority for the Department for the Economy. The Department has identified three areas of focus to drive innovative growth among local companies: supporting comprehensive innovation across the wider business base; accelerating research and development; and delivering more and better innovation driven enterprises. Alongside these priorities, Inclusive Innovation and Access to Finance is also a key focus.

Collaboration and partnership are at the heart of the Department's approach. Supporting innovation across the wider business base, particularly in sectors that have traditionally demonstrated lower levels of innovation and productivity, as

well as in regional areas, is fundamental to achieving productivity growth across the North.

The Department's 2025/26 Business Plan includes two indicators relevant to Comprehensive Innovation: Innovation Active Businesses and Innovate NI's Innovation Recognitions. InnovateUs brings together businesses and Further Education colleges to actively target and support small businesses at the early stages of their innovation journeys. All InnovateUs projects focus on the development of new products, processes, or services, and all participants are directed to complete the Innovate NI Innovation Recognition self-assessment.

[DfE website - Innovation and Research and development](#)

3. PROGRAMME AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The overall Aims and Objectives emphasise the programme's core focus of upskilling and promoting innovation within small businesses.

3.1 InnovateUs aims:

- To facilitate small businesses in developing the skills necessary to engage in innovation activities;
- To encourage small businesses to undertake further forms of upskilling or development to enhance their learning and innovation capacity; and
- To promote collaborative working between small businesses and FE colleges, increasing FE's role in economic development.

3.2 InnovateUs Objectives:

- To deliver tailored training for small businesses, with fewer than 50 employees, which will help them progress an idea for a new product, service or process;
- To encourage businesses to become actively innovative and raise their innovation level; and
- To develop FE's contribution to economic development by;
 - enhancing FE engagement with business and industry;
 - *informing the development of FE colleges' industry-related knowledge and skills;*
 - *informing and updating curriculum development to meet the current and future needs of employers and industry; and*
 - *encouraging employers to progress to further innovation or upskilling by signposting them appropriately after InnovateUs.*

4. PROGRAMME DELIVERY

4.1 To deliver InnovateUs and achieve the above Programme Aims and Objectives, the Colleges must engage with eligible businesses and comply with the following:

- adherence to the College Guide for InnovateUs (see Annex A);
- adherence to the Annual College objectives, outputs and outcomes for InnovateUs (see Annex B)
- completion of an Eligibility Checklist and Baseline Audit with each small business for each proposed project (see the College Guide and Annex C);
- completion of a Delivery and Evaluation Report (DER) for each completed project and assisting businesses to complete the InnovateNI Innovation Recognition self-assessment. (see the College Guide and Annex D);
- completion of a 12-month Impact Assessment with businesses for 30% of the projects completed in the preceding year (2025/26) (see para 7.4 and the College Guide and Annex E);
- input of all required information on the Client Relationship Management (CRM) system and;
- completion of an overall End of Year Report (see the College Guide and Annex F).

4.2 The Department has the right to make further changes to the programme, if it deems appropriate, throughout the period of this circular. The Department will consult with Colleges if any issues arise and if further changes to the programme are required.

5. INNOVATION AND ELIGIBILITY

- 5.1 The innovation activity undertaken via InnovateUs must focus on the development of a new product, process or service. Products, processes or services which are not new to the market, but which are new to the business are eligible providing they can demonstrate a clear potential to address and support the overall strategic context and aims of the InnovateUs programme.
- 5.2 **The InnovateUs programme is for small businesses.** To participate, a business must have fewer than 50 employees and be an existing business prior to the completion of a Baseline Audit. **InnovateUs is not intended as business start-up support and Colleges must ascertain the status of the business when determining eligibility.**

Definitions of innovation and full details of project eligibility are listed in the College Guide (see Annex A). The combined Eligibility Checklist and Baseline Audit form is attached at Annex C.

Colleges must ensure that InnovateUs is the most suitable intervention for the business before proceeding, always bearing in mind that innovation is a strategic basis of the programme. InnovateUs should only be used to deliver skills to engage in innovation activities, and these must be delivered through project-based mentoring. It should not be used to address other training, retraining or business development needs.

InnovateUs funding support is limited to a maximum of three project opportunities (three funding options) per business. Where businesses do undertake more than one, each project must be distinct from the other(s). A product, process or service which forms the basis of a project may, where suitable, be further developed in a subsequent project(s) but colleges must demonstrate that such projects are for a different stage of development and that new skills are being transferred in each project.

Section 7 explains the funding options available, and Colleges can contact the Department if they have a query about a business having previously participated in the programme.

6. BUDGET AND MONITORING

- 6.1 We are awaiting information on the budget spending plans covering the period from 01 April 2026 to 31 March 2027. Colleges will be notified once this has been confirmed. Associated parameters and Annual College Objectives are set out in paragraph 6.4 and Annex B respectively. Reallocation of budget across colleges, in year, may be made by the Department on the basis of delivery against target.
- 6.2 In accordance with the FE NDPB planning and funding model, Grant in Aid payments for InnovateUs will be incorporated within the overall monthly resource block grant payment made to each college. In line with this model, each college agrees an annual College Development Plan (CDP) with the Department which includes targets in relation to InnovateUs delivery. Performance against CDPs is discussed at college Accountability meetings. Performance against agreed work commissioned by the Department will be assessed during the year and at the end of the year and Partnership Agreements set out the partnership arrangements between a college and the Department. In particular, it explains the overall governance framework within which a college operates, including the framework through which the necessary assurances are provided to stakeholders. Roles/responsibilities of partners within the overall governance framework are also outlined.

[DfE Website - Partnership Agreements with FE Colleges](#)

- 6.3 InnovateUs activity should be delivered across all curricular areas, as defined in your College Development Plan (CDP). Best practice dissemination via curriculum hubs, should support this aim and will further support increased delivery and reporting against the priority sectoral areas particularly in relation to the Economic Vision.
- 6.4 InnovateUs 2026/27 should be delivered within the following programme parameters:

1. Each College may deliver a maximum of 25% of their 2026/27 InnovateUs budget allocation on projects in the following areas related to Utilising Advanced Web Based Technologies:

- Payment Integration
- E-commerce integration
- Asset Control
- Online Booking Systems,
- Basic Image Editing
- CRM implementation
- Data Analytics
- Integrating systems and platforms

Projects delivered in these areas are limited to an Option 2 or one phase of an Option 4. Further information on this is available in the Project Eligibility section of the College Guide at Annex A.

The 25% cap is in place to ensure that the programme's delivery does not become concentrated on this area of development. The inclusion of such support through the InnovateUs programme will be reviewed on an ongoing basis.

2. Colleges must deliver, complete and claim for InnovateUs projects consistently throughout the period covered by this circular. Delivery spend by each college will be closely monitored by the Department on a monthly basis.

Colleges are expected to have delivered and claimed for a minimum of 30% of their allocated InnovateUs budget by 30 September 2026.

Where satisfactory progress is not being demonstrated, consideration will be given to the reallocation of programme funds to another college(s) during Departmental Financial Monitoring Rounds.

6.5 The allocated budget to each college for 2026/27 includes funding for InnovateUs projects which the college has carried over from the 2025/26 InnovateUs Programme.

Projects carried over from 2025/26 must be completed, and a Delivery and Evaluation Report (DER) submitted on CRM by 31st August 2026. Carry over projects not completed within this timeframe may not be credited with a DER payment.

6.6 Colleges are required to complete a monthly budget forecast for the Department. Ongoing monitoring of actual delivery against budget is essential. Colleges must notify the Department as soon as possible of any issues that will affect the achievement of full delivery against their allocated budget.

6.7 InnovateUs Programme outturn and performance in the 2026/27 period will inform and influence decisions on the funding levels for future years.

7. FUNDING OPTIONS AND PAYMENTS

- 7.1 The funding options will enable a business to secure support to develop the skills of one or more employees (including owners/managers) and cover all costs associated with the delivery of the project providing it meets the programme eligibility criteria.
- 7.2 A standard Baseline Audit payment of £600 (subject to the conditions detailed in para 8.1) will apply to each funding option where engagement leads to an InnovateUs intervention.
- 7.3 The appropriate funding option must be determined and confirmed by the College when completing the Baseline Audit with the business. If a change to the selected option is subsequently proposed, the College must first inform the Department. The hours associated with each funding option relate to training delivery and practical progression of the business' idea for a new process, product or service. **Initial meetings and outline project planning should be undertaken at the Baseline Audit stage and not included in the delivery hours assigned to a project.**

For 2026/27, all InnovateUs projects will be for a minimum anticipated delivery duration of 20 hours (i.e. an Option 2).

Where delivery has commenced on an Option 2, 3 or 4 project but had to be curtailed at between 10 and 19 hours due to exceptional circumstances, Colleges may, by application to the Department, request to reduce and re-categorise to an Option 1 project. In effect, Option 1 funding will act as a safeguard payment for colleges when delivery of a longer project has had to be unexpectedly reduced after at least ten hours of the delivery has taken place. **Colleges must contact the Department for approval before submitting a claim for an Option 1 project.**

The value of each funding option available is outlined below:

Option 1 - £1,000

Only available in the scenario described above. Option 1 funding will include the Baseline Audit payment of £600 for the planned project (Option 2, 3 or 4) followed by a DER payment of £400 for hours delivered before that project was reduced. In this situation, a minimum of 10 hours of face-to face/online delivery activity to the business must have taken place.

Option 2 - £3,000

Option 2 funding will include a Baseline Audit payment of £600 and a DER payment of £2,400. It is expected that Option 2 will equate to a minimum of 20 hours to a maximum of 30 hours of face-to face/online delivery activity to a business (dependent upon business requirements).

Option 3 - £6,000

Option 3 funding will include a Baseline Audit payment of £600 and a DER payment of £5,400. It is expected that Option 3 will equate to a minimum of 50 hours to a maximum of 60 hours of face-to face/online delivery activity to a business (dependent upon business requirements).

Option 4 – Phased Projects - £6,000

A business may be permitted to receive funding to engage in a phased approach to innovation support under InnovateUs. It is intended that this option would be utilised where the support required includes providing skills to either;

- undertake one project with two distinct training phases (with separate and distinct training needs); or
- undertake two similar and related innovation projects (with separate and distinct training needs). **Colleges must clearly identify and adequately document the need for a phased option within the Baseline Audit.**

Option 4 funding will include a Baseline Audit payment of £600 and a DER payment of £5,400 on full completion of training. It is expected that Option 4 will equate to a minimum of 50 hours to a maximum of 60 hours of face-to face/online delivery activity to a business (dependent upon business requirements).

- 7.4 The purpose of the Impact Assessment is to capture any measurable effects that an InnovateUs project has had on the business.

During 2026/27, colleges are required to seek completion of an Impact Assessment for 30% of their projects completed in the previous year (2026/27).

Assessments will be completed by contacting businesses approximately 12 months after their relevant DER was completed and going through the questions on the assessment with them. A standard payment of **£250** is payable for the satisfactory completion and submission of an Impact Assessment on CRM. Further details are included in the College Guide at Annex A.

8. CLAIMS

8.1 Project funding for the 2026/27 programme may be claimed in up to three stages:

Stage 1 – Baseline Audit:

A standard payment of £600 (where applicable*) for the satisfactory completion and submission of a Baseline Audit for Option 2, 3 and 4 projects. A phased project (Option 4) will be eligible for only one Baseline Audit payment.

*Note: For three years following the completion and payment of a Baseline Audit (for InnovateUs or Skills Focus) any subsequent Baseline Audits completed (for InnovateUs or Skills Focus) with the same business will not attract a further £600 payment. College staff must therefore ask the business suitable questions to ascertain if they have previously worked with any college on either InnovateUs or Skills Focus, as a Baseline Audit payment may have been made to another college. Where there is any doubt about previous participation, the college should approach the Department to check for any baseline audit history on CRM.

Stage 2 – Delivery and Evaluation Report (DER):

Payment of the following on satisfactory completion and submission of a DER:

- Option 1 - £400
- Option 2 - £2,400
- Options 3 and 4 - £5,400

Stage 3 – Impact Assessment

A standard payment of £250 for the satisfactory completion and submission of an Impact Assessment 12 months after completion of the corresponding DER. In 2026/27, colleges are required to seek completion of an Impact Assessment for 30% of their projects completed in the previous year (2025/26).

8.2 Colleges must ensure the following are entered and confirmed on CRM by the last working day of each month:

- A fully completed list of all Baseline Audits for the month;
- A fully completed list of all DERs for the month;
- A fully completed list of all Impact Assessments for the month; and
- All associated supporting information and documentation.

Following the final working day of each month, the Department will check CRM and correspond with each college to verify the breakdown and total of their monthly claim. Compliance checks on claims will be carried out in accordance with paragraph 10 of this circular. **Once the claim has been agreed between the College and the Department, the college must not make any retrospective changes to the information on CRM.**

8.3 The DERs for projects undertaken should be completed when the outputs, outcomes and achievements of the completed project can be accurately reflected. In some cases, this may mean the funding available for the DER may not be paid until the next financial period/year i.e. a project not completed by 31 March may be carried over and the DER completed and claimed for in the next year. As outlined at paragraph 6.5, all InnovateUs projects carried over from the 2025-26 InnovateUs programme must be completed and fully recorded on CRM no later than 31st August 2026. Carry over projects not completed within this timeframe may not be credited with a DER payment.

Whilst carry over is permitted, Colleges should work to ensure that as many projects as possible are completed within the financial year in which they were commenced. Although the project may be carried over, the funding cannot be carried over and the DER payments for any projects carried over from this 2026/27 financial year will be paid out of the College's 2027/28 InnovateUs budget.

9. COLLEGE OBLIGATIONS

- 9.1 Colleges shall deliver the programme in accordance with the provisions contained in this circular and the attached Annexes. The Annexes shall be deemed to be incorporated within, and form part of, this circular.
- 9.2 Colleges must carry out any checks necessary to ensure that businesses are eligible to participate and that all training interventions developed within the programme meet the Aims and Objectives of the programme in full. The Department reserves the right, following checks, to withhold payment relating to any project it deems is not in compliance with this circular or with the Aims and Objectives of the programme.**
- 9.3 CRM will be used by the Department to extract all relevant programme data to monitor delivery and to inform internal and external reporting including Assembly Questions and College Development Plans. Colleges must ensure that all information held on the CRM system is current and accurate to ensure the accuracy of reports extracted by the Department.
- 9.4 Colleges shall assist the Department in ensuring that any processes associated with the awarding of State aid are carried out. From January 2026, this includes providing information to the Department on any awards of State aid (*de minimis*) as a priority so that the Department can update the EU e-Aid register within the required 20 working days of granting the aid (see para 11).
- 9.5 Colleges shall permit authorised Employer Skills staff full access to the CRM system, and any other relevant records or supporting documentation, for the purposes of the random sampling of projects, the compliance process and for management information purposes including Ministerial and Assembly correspondence and Departmental returns and reports.

- 9.6 Colleges must ensure that participating businesses agree to the Department contacting them directly for the purposes of managing, monitoring and evaluating the programme and for promotional/marketing activities as required.
- 9.7 Colleges shall agree to give publicity to the Department's primary role in, and support of, the programme, and to have early and prior consultations with the Department about any publicity, publications, or public announcements, associated with the programme, and should endeavour to ensure that the Programme branding and Departmental logos are used and displayed appropriately. (Guidance on the use of DfE logos is available from the Department).
- 9.8 Colleges shall obtain the Department's written consent for any proposed changes to their InnovateUs delivery. If during the funding year a college establishes that it will not be able to deliver projects to the full value of its allocated InnovateUs budget, then it must inform the Department immediately. This will facilitate the potential reallocation of funds to another college(s) to maximise delivery against the overall programme budget.
- 9.9 Colleges shall manage any conflict of interest between a staff member involved in the InnovateUs programme and a business receiving support from it. No college staff member/representative with any business or family connection to the participating small business should be involved in the recruitment of that business to the programme or in the mentoring delivery of the subsequent project(s). Where such a conflict occurs, it should be declared and noted in college records and alternative staff members allocated to the business/project. Where the mentoring cannot be delivered by another staff member/representative of the college (for example due to a need for specific industry expertise) the business should be signposted accordingly to another college for support. Examples of a conflict of interest include, but are not restricted to, direct financial gain or benefit (i.e. funded mentoring support) to the individual, a relative or business associate. Where there is any doubt regarding

a potential conflict of interest, the College should contact the Department for advice before proceeding with the project.

10. COMPLIANCE PROCESS

- 10.1 It is the responsibility of the Colleges to ensure that each InnovateUs project undertaken complies with the requirements of the programme as set out in this circular, the College Guide, and associated annexes.
- 10.2 A 20% formal compliance check of completed InnovateUs projects claimed by each College will be carried out by the Department each month utilising CRM. The compliance process and checklist which will be used by the Department is attached at Annex G.
- 10.3 The Department will also carry out sampling of projects undertaken throughout the year in order to monitor and manage the programme effectively.
- 10.4 An unsatisfactory compliance check will result in the initiation of the non-compliance process outlined in the Compliance Process at Annex G.
- 10.5 Compliance/Non-Compliance will be confirmed to the College's Business Engagement Teams following the completion of the 20% formal compliance check.

11. STATE AID/SUBSIDY CONTROL

11.1 Now that the United Kingdom has left the European Union, the Subsidy Control Rules that apply depend on whether the enterprise¹ being supported falls within the scope of the Windsor Framework. Since 4 January 2023, all subsidies² provided by public authorities in Northern Ireland must comply with either the European Union's State aid Rules³ or the UK Subsidy Control Act 2022⁴.

Note: The Windsor Framework details that the European Union State aid Rules still apply when financial assistance measures have a material effect on trade between NI and the European Union. UK Government and European Commission guidance on Article 10 of the Windsor Framework can be accessed via the links below.

[UK Government Guidance on the scope and application of Article 10 of the Windsor Framework](#)

[European Commission Notice to stakeholders on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom and EU rules in the field of state aid 2023/C 202/04](#)

11.2 If the enterprise engages in manufacturing or trades goods, including the production of and trade in agricultural products, or is involved in the production of electricity for the wholesale market, the EU's State aid Rules will apply. The UK Subsidy Control Act 2022 applies to all other subsidies to enterprises that provide services on a market.

11.3 When a participating business is within the scope of the Windsor Framework (i.e. the business manufactures goods or potentially could trade goods into the EU's

¹ An enterprise (which also known as an 'undertaking' in EU State aid law) is defined in [Section 7 of the UK Subsidy Control Act 2022 - UK legislation website](#) and is a person (or group of persons) who is engaged in an economic activity that entails offering goods or services on a market, to the extent that the person (or group of persons) is engaged in such an activity.

² A subsidy provided by a UK public authority (which is commonly referred to as State aid under EU law) is financial assistance that satisfies all four 'limbs' of the UK's or the EU's subsidy test. See [Section 2 of the UK Subsidy Control Act 2022 - UK legislation website](#)

³ [The Windsor Framework - GOV.UK website](#)

⁴ [UK subsidy control regime - GOV.UK website](#)

Single Market), InnovateUs support must comply with the applicable EU 'de minimis' aid Regulation⁵. It is expected that most of the InnovateUs projects which are within the scope of the Framework will fall within the scope of the general / industrial *de minimis* Regulation - [European Commission Regulation \(EU\) 2023/2831 of 13 December 2023](#).

11.4 When a participating business is not within the scope of the Windsor Framework, legal cover for the InnovateUs support is provided by a Subsidy Scheme that has been registered on the UK's Subsidy Database. This Scheme (Reference Number [SC10887](#)) complies with the seven principles of the UK Subsidy Control Act 2022⁶.

11.5 To ensure compliance with UK and EU Subsidy Control requirements, Colleges must first determine which regime applies, by determining whether the business:

- manufactures or trades in goods that might be traded into the EU Single Market (if so, the EU State aid Rules and the *de minimis* regulation applies); or
- is operating in the service sector (then the UK Subsidy Control Regime applies).

11.6 If the EU State aid Rules apply the College must:

- Write to the business and inform it that the InnovateUs offer is EU *de minimis* aid (and detail the applicable European Union *de minimis* Regulation Number and date of publication) and detail the value of the *de minimis* aid that is being offered⁷.

⁵ The EU has four *de minimis* Regulations. A [general \(€300k\) *de minimis* Regulation - EU law website](#), a [primary agriculture *de minimis* Regulation](#), a [fisheries and aquaculture *de minimis* Regulation](#) and a [Services of General Economic Interest *de minimis* Regulation](#).

⁶ [UK legislation website - Subsidy Control Act 2022](#)

⁷ *de minimis* aid must be offered as a gross grant equivalent - see Article 4 of the industrial *de minimis* regulation - [EU law website - Commission Regulation \(EU\) 2023/2831 of 13 December 2023](#)

- Ask the business to inform the college (in writing*) how much other *de minimis* aid⁸ it has received in the last three years.
- Check that, in granting the business this new *de minimis* aid, that it will not exceed the applicable three-year aid threshold – which in the case of the ‘general / industrial’ *de minimis* Regulation is currently €300,000.
- Once the *de minimis* aid has been awarded, the College should write* to the business to advise it that, if required, within the next three years, it must declare this *de minimis* aid to any public authority that considering awarding it further *de minimis* aid.
- Also, from 1 January 2026, as detailed in [Article 6 of the *de minimis* Regulation](#), specified information on *de minimis* aid granted must be registered on the EUs eAid register (eAIR), within 20 working days following the acceptance of the aid. **To facilitate this, if a *de minimis* declaration/acceptance form has been completed with a business as part of the Baseline Audit process (Annex C), it should be uploaded to the CRM system and the Department notified by email on the day that the grant offer has been made. Notification e-mails should be sent to both paul.mulholland@economy-ni.gov.uk and catherine.kidd@economy-ni.gov.uk.**
- If the business is engaged in primary agricultural activities, fisheries or aquaculture, the general / industrial *de minimis* Regulation does not apply and the Colleges will need to comply instead with the relevant agricultural or fisheries/aquaculture *de minimis* Regulation. For example, the business is also a farmer or connected to a family farm or a fish farmer or operated a trawling boat. If so, the Colleges should be aware that the *de minimis* rules for primary

⁸ Note, as *de minimis* aid, only cumulates with other *de minimis* aid, the business only needs to inform the College about *de minimis* aid it has been awarded in the three-year period. This should be clear from the aid award documentation. Other types of State aid, that are not *de minimis*, should be identifiable by their State aid Scheme or EU decision reference number (e.g. SA.123456). These other types of State aid do not cumulate with *de minimis* aid. If the business is not sure whether the other aid awards are *de minimis*, it should start by asking the public authority that provided the aid.

agriculture and fisheries have lower maximum ceilings⁹ and, to complicate matters further, the fisheries *de minimis* Regulation has a different (3 fiscal year) cumulation period. InnovateUs support can still be provided, but this must be provided in accordance with the applicable *de minimis* Regulation for primary agriculture¹⁰ or fisheries and aquaculture¹¹. If this situation occurs, as the *de minimis* rules for primary agriculture and fisheries differ from the industrial rules, the College may wish to contact the Economic Analysis and State aid Policy team in the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) for further advice.

***Note** - A combined form for declaring previous *de minimis* support, detailing the value of support being offered for the proposed InnovateUs project and confirming the business acceptance of that offer is included with Annex C and should be completed as part of the Baseline Audit. That combined State aid form should be retained by each College for 10 years for audit purposes, from the last date of payment of InnovateUs grant support.

11.7 When the UK Subsidy Control Regime applies (i.e. the business operates in the services sector only), if the business is eligible, no further Subsidy Control checks should be required. The InnovateUs Scheme has been assessed against the UK Subsidy Control Act 2022 and has been found to comply with Part 2 of the Act and, in particular, the seven principles in Schedule 1 of the Act. The scheme has been registered on the UK's Transparency Database and its reference number is SC10887¹².

11.8 The InnovateUs support to services sector businesses is NOT being provided on the basis of the Act's Minimal Financial Assistance (MFA) exemption.

⁹ €50,000 for companies involved in primary agricultural production, and €30,000 if they are involved in the fisheries or aquaculture sectors which can be increased to €40,000 if the Member State has in place a national central register in accordance with Article 6(2).

¹⁰ [EU law website - *de minimis* in Agriculture Commission Regulation \(EU\) No 1408/2013](#)

¹¹ [EU law website - *de minimis* in Fisheries and Aquaculture - Commission Regulation \(EU\) No 717/2014](#)

¹² [GOV.UK website - UK Subsidy Database - scheme SC10887](#)

Consequently, there is no requirement to check what other *de minimis* or MFA subsidies have been received by the company previously, unless these are seen as being related subsidies¹³.

11.9 However, the College must still advise the company that the support they are receiving is a Subsidy, as defined in section 2 of the Subsidy Control Act, and that should detail that the InnovateUs Subsidy Scheme reference number is SC10887.

11.10 Finally, in determining whether a business is eligible for InnovateUs support, the colleges must also check that none of the prohibitions and other requirements in Chapter 2 of Part 2 of the Subsidy Control Act 2022 apply to the Subsidy¹⁴. In particular, the College must check and confirm that:

- The InnovateUs Scheme is not providing support to ailing or insolvent enterprises (see Sections 19 to 26 of the Act);
- The InnovateUs Scheme has no conditions that relate to 'export performance' as detailed in Section 16 of the Act and paras 5.11 – 5.13 of the Statutory Guidance¹⁵)
- The InnovateUs scheme does not have any conditions that require the businesses to use domestic over imported goods or services as detailed in Section 17 of the Act and paras 5.14 – 5.22 of the Statutory Guidance.

¹³ See Section 5 of [the Subsidy Control \(Subsidies and Schemes of Interest or Particular Interest\) Regulations 2022](#)

¹⁴ [UK Legislation website - Subsidy Control Act 2022](#)

¹⁵ [Department for Business and Trade Guidance for UK Subsidy Control Regime](#)

12. PROVISION OF INFORMATION, MONITORING AND EVALUATION

- 12.1 As a requirement of delivering the programme, Colleges will need to ensure appropriate mechanisms are put in place to update CRM (see Paragraph 9.3). They shall also maintain adequate records to monitor expenditure, covering all aspects of InnovateUs funding.
- 12.2 Each College shall provide an End of Year Report, with case study examples, demonstrating how its InnovateUs provision during the year has delivered the Annual College Outputs and Outcomes (see Annex B). A template for the report has been included at Annex F. The report should be signed off by the College Accounting Officer and submitted to the Department no later than 30th April 2027.
- 12.3 Colleges shall furnish the Department, upon request, with any additional financial and other information as may be required.

13. OBSERVANCE OF LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

13.1 The Colleges shall comply with all applicable fair employment, equality of treatment, and anti-discrimination legislation, including, in particular, the Employment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002, the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, the Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Orders 1976 and 1988, the Equal Pay Act (Northern Ireland) 1970, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, the Employment Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, and the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and shall use its best endeavours to ensure that, in its employment policies and practices, and in the delivery of the services required of the College under this agreement, it has given due regard to the need to promote equality of treatment and opportunity between:

- a. persons of different religious beliefs or political opinions;
- b. men and women, or married and unmarried persons;
- c. persons with and without dependants (including women who are pregnant, or on maternity leave, and men on paternity leave);
- d. persons of different racial groups (within the meaning of the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997);
- e. persons with and without a disability (within the meaning of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995);
- f. persons of different ages; and
- g. persons of differing sexual orientation.

13.2 Each College shall take all reasonable steps to ensure the observance of the provisions of the above clause (13.1) by all servants, agents, employees, consultants and sub-contractors of the College.

13.3 Colleges must ensure that all information collected and handled in the delivery of InnovateUs is done so in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018 and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

14. DEDICATED COST CENTRE

- 14.1 Each College shall provide a clear audit trail, with regard to all aspects of InnovateUs funding, by creating a separate cost centre within the College's current financial management system.

15. INSPECTION

- 15.1 Regular Departmental inspection requirements include the random sampling of projects, the formal monthly compliance process and the training delivery verification process with participating businesses.
- 15.2 The Colleges shall permit duly authorised staff or agents of the Department or the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), to examine the accounts, and other records, at any time, and shall furnish appropriate oral or written explanation, if required. The Department reserves the right to permit such staff or agents to carry out the examinations into the economy, efficiency and effectiveness, with which a College has used the Department resources in the performance of this circular. The Colleges shall have regard to the need for economy in all expenditure.

COLLEGE GUIDE TO INNOVATEUS 2026/27



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InnovateUs

This guide has been developed to assist colleges in the completion of programme documentation and in decision making processes. Any queries regarding the contents of this guide should be forwarded in writing to paul.mulholland@economy-ni.gov.uk and catherine.kidd@economy-ni.gov.uk

Contents

1. Definitions of Innovation

2. Project Eligibility

3. Eligibility Checklist and Baseline Audit

4. Delivery and Evaluation Report

5. Impact Assessment

6. End of Year Reports

1. Definitions of Innovation

Below are the definitions of innovation for the purposes of the InnovateUs programme in 2022/23. These outline what potential product, process or service projects should entail. However, when considering any potential project, the college must always question whether it will meet the strategic aims of the programme, primarily, whether it will enable the small business to develop the skills necessary to engage in innovation activities.

It is important to remember that calling every change made within a business an innovation, devalues the scale of progress. It is not the case that all training which may lead to the provision of, for example, a new/changed service or process is suitable for InnovateUs support. The programme is about project-based upskilling for innovation through the development of a business's idea for a new product, process or service. InnovateUs should not be used to address training or business development needs which are not innovation centred, even if addressing those needs may lead to a service/process change.

Innovation

Innovation is the development and implementation of a new or improved product, process or service which will be made available to the market or implemented within the business to create value.

Product Innovation

Taking a new or existing concept or idea and improving it, through a process of developmental stages.

Service Innovation

A new or **considerably** changed service concept, service delivery system or technological concept that, individually or in combination, leads to new service functions that change the service or goods offered.

Process Innovation

The implementation of a new, or **significantly** improved production or delivery method, including changes in equipment and/or software.

2. Project Eligibility for the InnovateUs Programme

InnovateUs is focussed on increasing the innovation awareness and capacity of small businesses in Northern Ireland through project-based up-skilling. Every InnovateUs project, regardless of funding level or project type, should meet the strategic Aims and Objectives and eligibility requirements stated within the FE Circular 03/26 (paragraphs 3 and 5 respectively). The Department reserves the right to withhold funding for any projects it deems were not delivered in compliance with this circular.

Please note: The following are not considered innovations - Minor changes or improvements, an increase in production or service capabilities through the addition of manufacturing or logistical systems which are very similar to those already in use, ceasing to use a process, simple capital replacement or extension, business expansion such as moving to a different or additional premises, changes resulting purely from changes in factor prices, customisation, regular seasonal and other cyclical changes, the trading of new or significantly improved products which have not been developed by the business.

Below are examples of projects which are **not** eligible for the InnovateUs programme plus information to aid determination of which projects are eligible under conditions.

PROJECTS NOT ELIGIBLE

Projects falling under the general categories below are **not** eligible for InnovateUs funding.

- Standard training/upskilling or business development: **Projects under InnovateUs must demonstrate that the upskilling of the employees is for the purposes of enabling the small business to engage in innovation activities**. Standard upskilling of employees and generic business development

activities should be considered under Skills Focus or other provisions rather than InnovateUs;

- Compliance with statutory or legal requirements;
- Activities undertaken by college staff: The project must be based on a transfer of skills to the business through training and mentoring. College staff must not undertake the activities of the project or produce outcomes on behalf of the business;
- Training in the use of equipment which will not be used in innovation activities;
- Training which displaces internal staff training;
- Generic support for business start-up; and
- Training that has already been funded via another government or publicly funded programme.

PROJECTS ELIGIBLE UNDER CONDITIONS

Utilising Advanced Web Based Technologies

Many digital support needs can be met via Skills Focus or other provisions, and these should be considered first for any eligible businesses who require upskilling in such areas.

However, if the business need cannot be met via Skills Focus or another provision, the project may be eligible for InnovateUs providing the college can detail why it is the most suitable intervention and can also demonstrate how the project meets the strategic Aims and Objectives of InnovateUs. It is not sufficient for colleges to describe project support as “bespoke” or “tailored” to the needs of a business. Details must be provided to explain:

- why InnovateUs is the appropriate intervention; and
- how the project is providing the business with the skills to undertake innovation activities.

InnovateUs should not be used for fundamentals such as website development, website optimisation, search engine optimisation, video marketing¹⁶ or social media training. These elements may be touched upon as a component part (fewer than 10 hours) of a wider more technically complex project, but they should not in themselves be the basis of an InnovateUs project.

Utilising Advanced Web Based Technologies projects are eligible for InnovateUs support in 2026/27 but are capped at 25% of college budget. That is, each college may spend a maximum of 25% of their 2026/27 InnovateUs budget allocation on projects related to the following areas:

- Payment Integration,
- E-commerce integration
- Asset Control
- Online Booking Systems
- Basic Image Editing¹⁷ (including creation/editing of images for the web, social media or other forms of digital marketing)
- CRM implementation
- Data Analytics (Should not include social media stats)
- Integrating systems and platforms

Projects delivered in these areas are limited to Option 2 support. Inclusion of one of these areas as a phase within an Option 4 project is possible, providing the hours allocated to it do not exceed the equivalent of an Option 2. The spend equivalent to any such phase will be included in the college's 25% cap and the Department will monitor progress against the cap during monthly claims checking.

The cap is to ensure that the programme delivery for this year does not become concentrated on one area of development. The delivery of such projects through InnovateUs is being reviewed on an ongoing basis.

¹⁶ Video marketing includes short, straight to camera video and creating material for social media or social media marketing.

¹⁷ Basic image editing is within the capped categories and limited to Option 2 support. Advanced image creation, editing and processing such as 360/AR/Drone technology is not capped and may be delivered under Options 2, 3 or 4.

In both cases (Option 2 or 4) colleges should use the available tick box indicator on CRM to identify which of their digital projects fall into the categories above. This will help both the College and the Department to monitor spend levels against the cap.

FOOD AND DRINK PROJECTS

For small businesses seeking InnovateUs assistance with a food/drink project:

- Registration with their local Environmental Health Officer is required if the business is selling its product commercially; and
- Level 2 Basic Hygiene certificate is recommended (but not a requirement).

3. Eligibility Checklist and Baseline Audit

A Baseline Audit, including Eligibility Checklist, must be completed at the initial business engagement stage. If it is deemed a business is not eligible for InnovateUs funding, appropriate signposting to other potential sources of support should be provided by the College.

The Baseline Audit process will establish the context the business is working in including existing skills, how it currently views and engages in innovation and its future potential for scalability and innovation activity. It will also aid agreement of a clear innovation plan for the project with links to the strategic aims and objectives of the Department. The form must therefore be completed during an in-person meeting between the college and business representatives. This is to help ensure full and accurate information is exchanged and recorded. In circumstances where a meeting in person cannot be facilitated, the Department will accept a Baseline which has been completed via an online meeting, providing suitable electronic/e-mail signatures from the business can be obtained and uploaded to CRM as proof of agreement.

Eligible businesses should be advised at this stage that, should their project proceed, it is a required part of the process that they complete a Delivery and Evaluation report with the college after the project delivery phase has completed. They should also be advised of the potential for achieving recognition of their innovation activities through InnovateNI's Innovation Recognition Scheme. Completion of InnovateNI's online Innovation Self-Assessment should take place during the Delivery and Evaluation Report process.

The Baseline Audit should be completed in plain English. Acronyms or jargon should be kept to a minimum and clearly explained where they are being used.

Further information has been provided below for certain areas of the Baseline Audit and Eligibility Checklist where the Department felt that clarification may be required.

Eligibility Checklist

<p>Has the upskilling/development content in the proposed project been funded by any other forms of Government or Public Sector funding?</p>	<p>It is recognised that in developing some innovation ideas through the different development phases from concept to realisation, some businesses may avail of support from more than one source of Government/Public funding. The purpose of this question is to confirm that the business has not received any other Government or Public Sector funding for the same learning/development that will be covered within the proposed InnovateUs project.</p>
<p>What is the likelihood of the proposed product/service/process having an impact on the business and its contribution to the Northern Ireland economy?</p>	<p>At the outset it is expected the business will have a clear expectation of the viability/impact of the new/modified product/service/process.</p> <p>The Department is aware that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • InnovateUs may be used as a small part of an overall innovation aim (and potentially a starting point as a first innovation activity); or • That the InnovateUs intervention may be the only vehicle the business needs to enable the product/service/process to be commercially viable. <p>It is imperative that colleges (along with the business) identify the overall/long term aim of the business to which this innovation activity will contribute.</p> <p>If the overall innovation aim of the business is not clear and/or if the College identifies risks attached, this may indicate that InnovateUs is not an appropriate option for the business at this time.</p> <p>The College may then take steps to signpost the business to more appropriate interventions prior to undertaking an InnovateUs project (E.g. researching the idea further, market research or developing/proving the basic concept)</p>

4. Delivery and Evaluation Report

The Delivery and Evaluation Report (DER) must be completed following delivery of the project and when the College are in a position to verify and accurately reflect the initial outputs, outcomes and achievements of the completed project. It is to ascertain the initial impacts of the InnovateUs support on the business including its openness to, and understanding of, innovation, business performance and any effects on employment and turnover. It will also assess the effects on the College/business relationship and how the College has embedded learning and shared the project experience.

This assessment includes the recognition and acceptance that not all InnovateUs projects will be commercially successful e.g. the project may identify an idea/concept as not being viable and therefore prevents the business from incurring further costs on non-viable innovation activity.

As part of the DER process, businesses should be directed to complete the online InnovateNI Innovation Self-Assessment.

Further information has been provided below for certain areas of the Delivery and Evaluation Report where the Department felt that clarification may be required.

5. Impact Assessment

An Impact Assessment should be completed with businesses approximately 12 months after DER completion in order to capture any longer-term effects the project and upskilling has had on the business. This requires re-engaging with businesses and going through the questions on the assessment with them. **The assessment should not be issued out for the business to complete on their own and return.** It is recommended that assessments are completed and claimed for on a regular monthly basis throughout the year (see target details at para 4.1 of the circular document) .

When completing assessments with businesses, it is recognised that not all InnovateUs projects will have led to the successful implementation or commercialisation of the product, process or service worked on. However, it remains very important to capture feedback from the business on outcomes and any impacts the programme and upskilling have had. For example, a valuable outcome of the project may have been in learning that the idea was not viable, thereby saving further expenditure by the business. Also, the business may have been able to use the skills learned during the project to work on the development of another idea.

6.End of Year Report

The purpose of the End of Year Report (template at Annex F) is for each college to present evidence of how their InnovateUs delivery during 2026/27 has met the College level Outputs and Outcomes specified in Annex B. The report should focus on case study examples of how support provided has impacted upon participating businesses and the effects the overall programme has had on:

- business performance, capacity, and innovation measures;
- business employment, turnover and wider business costs and exporting behaviours and;
- any impacts on the college through new industry learning, curriculum developments

Colleges must ensure that the End of Year Report is signed off by College Accounting Officers and submitted to the Department no later than **30th April 2027**.

ANNUAL COLLEGE OBJECTIVES, OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES

Colleges should aim to achieve the following annual objectives, outputs and outcomes during the 2026/27 programme year. Performance against the objectives will be recorded by the CRM system. Performance against the outputs and outcomes will be evidenced by colleges in their End of Year report (Annex F).

OBJECTIVES:

1. A minimum of 60% of small business participants should not have previously engaged with an FE College on an innovation-related activity.
2. A minimum of 20% of small business participants engage in an InnovateUs Project, which offers the potential for the business to undertake an innovation project which is 'New to the Market'.
3. A minimum of 80% of small business participants state that they are 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with the quality of support that was provided to address their business' needs.
4. A minimum of 90% of small business participants suggest that the support provided through their respective InnovateUs Project has appropriately upskilled them to undertake the innovation activity within their business.
5. A minimum of 80% of small business participants state that they have increased confidence to engage in new/enhanced and/or more complex level of innovation.
6. A minimum of 80% of small business participants state that they have a greater confidence and willingness to engage with other businesses, knowledge providers and academic institutions on innovation activities.

OUTPUTS:

1. Embed learning from the projects undertaken by updating the delivering College's curriculum and sharing the project experience within the College (and other Colleges) to ensure College industry related knowledge and skills are maintained and to meet the needs of employers and industry.
2. Create and maintain good relationships between business and the college as a result of the project undertaken with a view to further innovation or upskilling engagement and, where appropriate, collaboration with other bodies.
3. Effective signposting of InnovateUs participants to other forms of support.

OUTCOMES:

Formal outcomes are limited due to InnovateUs focussing on Colleges providing skills to businesses via support of an innovation project.

Although not quantifiable within the context of every project undertaken, information relating to the following programme level outcomes must be included within the College InnovateUs End of Year Report.

The effects the overall programme has had on:

- business performance, capacity, and innovation measures;
- business employment rates, turnover and wider costs; and
- business exporting behaviours.

InnovateUs
Eligibility Checklist and Baseline Audit
April 2026 – March 2027

Aid provided to deliver this project is granted either in compliance with European Commission Regulation (EU) 2023/2831 of 13 December 2023 or in compliance with the Subsidy Control Act 2022.

Business Name:

Project Title:

Date Baseline Completed:

Author:

InnovateUs Manager:

College:

CRM Project Reference Number:

Note: The college representative must complete this form with the business.



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InnovateUs

Contents

1. Business Information

2. Eligibility Checklist

3. Project Information

4. Innovation & Development

5. Business Impacts

6. Charity and Social Enterprise Declaration

7. Client and Author Agreement

8. State aid/Subsidy Declaration

1. Business Information

Name	
Address	
Sector Business Operates In	<input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing <input type="checkbox"/> Mining & Quarrying <input type="checkbox"/> Manufacturing <input type="checkbox"/> Electricity, gas, steam & air conditioning supply <input type="checkbox"/> Water Supply, sewerage, waste management & remediation activities <input type="checkbox"/> Construction <input type="checkbox"/> Wholesale & retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation & storage <input type="checkbox"/> Accommodation and food service activities <input type="checkbox"/> Information & Communication <input type="checkbox"/> Financial & insurance activities <input type="checkbox"/> Real Estate Activities <input type="checkbox"/> Professional, Scientific and technical activities <input type="checkbox"/> Administrative and support services activities <input type="checkbox"/> Public administration and defence; compulsory social security <input type="checkbox"/> Education <input type="checkbox"/> Human health and social work activities <input type="checkbox"/> Arts, entertainment and recreation <input type="checkbox"/> Other service activities <input type="checkbox"/> Activities of households as employers; undifferentiated goods and services producing activities of households for own use <input type="checkbox"/> Activities of extraterritorial organisations and bodies
Telephone Number	
Email Address	
Website	
How long has the business been trading?	<input type="checkbox"/> Less than 1 year <input type="checkbox"/> 1-3 years <input type="checkbox"/> 3-5 years <input type="checkbox"/> More than 5 years

2. Eligibility Checklist

This Eligibility Checklist and adherence to the annual programme Circular and Guide to InnovateUs will determine projects which are eligible for funding under this programme.

The following questions should be completed in conjunction with the business.

All questions should be completed in full, and the information updated on the CRM system for those proceeding onto the programme.

Is this an existing small business?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No (do not proceed)
Has the business fewer than 50 employees?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No (do not proceed) Number of employees ____ Full time permanent ____ Part time permanent ____ Full time temporary ____ Part time temporary ____
Is the business a charity or community group that has no commercial or business function as part of its revenue raising activities?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes – do not proceed (business not eligible for InnovateUs support) <input type="checkbox"/> No
Is the business a charity or community group that does have a commercial or business function as part of its revenue raising activities?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes - College must ensure that the company meets the definition of eligible charity outlined at Section 6 and sign the accompanying declaration). <input type="checkbox"/> No
Is the business a social enterprise?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes – College must ensure that the company meets the definition of a social enterprise outlined at Section 6 and sign the accompanying declaration). Note: Only social enterprises that meet the definition provided are eligible to apply for InnovateUs support.

	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Have the Subsidy Control Regime rules and conditions been discussed with the business?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No – do not proceed until the Subsidy Control Regime rules and conditions have been discussed, as business may not be eligible for InnovateUs support.
<p>Has the business previously engaged with any FE College in Northern Ireland? (describe the engagement*)</p> <p>*Before recording this form on CRM, the College representative must check if the previous engagement included the completion of a Baseline Audit.</p>	
Is the planned project within one of the following sectors? Please indicate which.	<input type="checkbox"/> Financial, Business & Professional Services <i>(including: Fintech / Financial Services - providing innovative solutions to the global capital markets, insurance and banking industries including underpinning technologies)</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Digital & Creative Industries* <i>(including: Software and Cyber - developing, implementing and supporting software-based functionality, products and services and: Screen Industries -Encouraging implementation of new screen technologies and techniques that will maintain an economically and environmentally sustainable screen industry)</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Agri-Food <i>(including Agri-Tech: - product and service solutions to a range of end users across six Agri-Tech sub-sectors - advanced materials and supply chain; agri engineering; food processing; information and communications; life sciences; and nutrition and animal feeds.)</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Construction & Materials Handling <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced Manufacturing, Materials & Engineering <i>(including Low Carbon/Net Zero: Innovation in net zero technologies, processes, and products.)</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Life & Health Sciences <input type="checkbox"/> Tourism & Hospitality

<p>*If Digital and Creative, is the proposed activity within the capped areas of Utilising Advanced Web Based Technologies. (See specific list in <i>College Guide to InnovateUs</i>)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Other – do not proceed</p>
<p>Has the upskilling/development content in the proposed project been funded by any other forms of Government or Public Sector funding?</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> <u>Yes (please state funding received) – do not proceed</u></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p>
<p>If the business has participated in InnovateUs before, please confirm the number of previous projects undertaken (including any with other FE Colleges).</p>	<p><u>Provide information on previous project/s including confirmation of College involved:</u></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1 _____</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 2 _____</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 3 – not eligible</p>
<p>Is the proposed project eligible for InnovateUs support considering the list of project areas specified as not eligible in the <i>College Guide to InnovateUs</i>?</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No – do not proceed</p>
<p>Please indicate the activity the business is intending to engage in, which requires this skills training? (more than one may be selected)</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> New/Modified Product Development</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> New/Modified Service Development</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> New/Modified Process Development</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> None of the above – do not proceed</p>

How would you categorise this activity?	<input type="checkbox"/> New to my business <input type="checkbox"/> New to the market in which I operate <input type="checkbox"/> New to the world <input type="checkbox"/> None of the above – do not proceed
Can you confirm that the project activity, for which the business requires new skills, is innovative? <i>(Please refer to the College Guide to InnovateUs)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No – do not proceed.
What is the likelihood of the proposed product/service/process having an impact on the business and its contribution to the Northern Ireland economy?	<input type="checkbox"/> Very likely <i>(please demonstrate how including approximate timescales)</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Likely <i>(please demonstrate how including approximate timescales)</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Unlikely – do not proceed <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure - <i>(consider if InnovateUs is the appropriate programme for the business at this time)</i>

3. Project Information

Describe the business' day to day operations.	
What activity does the business want to engage in? (more than one may be selected)	<input type="checkbox"/> New or Modified Product Development <input type="checkbox"/> New or Modified Service Development <input type="checkbox"/> New or Modified Process Development
Please describe clearly the new or modified product, service or process the business wishes to engage in. Please include details of the market need.	

Explain how the proposed product/service/process is innovative. *(please refer to “The College Guide to InnovateUs” for the definition of innovation for this programme)*

Please tick the relevant linkages between the project and the:

- **DfE – Economic Vision**

[DfE website - Economic Vision](#)

- **Programme for Government 2024 - 2027;**

[NI executive website - Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most](#)

- **Skills Action Plan for Northern Ireland**

[DfE website - Skills Action Plan](#)

- **The Northern Ireland Skills Barometer 2023-2033;**

[DfE website - Skills Barometer 2023 - 2033](#)

- **Department for the Economy – Innovation Policy**

[DfE website - Innovation and Research and development](#)

Please detail the new skills the business/employees require to allow them to begin engaging in the innovation activity.

--	--

How many employees will receive skills training?

--	--

Please complete the following information relating to each employee receiving skills training including:

- any on-the-job experience relevant to the training; and
- a rating for each employee’s current skill level in the proposed training area

Employee Name	Relevant-Experience	Skill Rating in training area (1 – no skill level, 2 – basic skill level, 3 – good skill level, 4 – proficient skill level, 5 expert skill level)
		○ 1 ○ 2 ○ 3 ○ 4 ○ 5
		○ 1 ○ 2 ○ 3 ○ 4 ○ 5
		○ 1 ○ 2 ○ 3 ○ 4 ○ 5
		○ 1 ○ 2 ○ 3 ○ 4 ○ 5
		○ 1 ○ 2 ○ 3 ○ 4 ○ 5

Will this project be delivered:

At the business premises In the college Online Other (please specify) _____

In the table below, provide a breakdown of

- the training to be delivered;
- the hours to deliver each element of training; and
- how this links to the new or modified product/service/process

Details of Skills Delivery in line with the overall objectives	Hours Assigned
Total Project Time (hours)	
<p>Based on the information provided by the business, and the assessment by you, please confirm the option required and associated DER amount.</p>	
<p><input type="checkbox"/> Option 2 - £2,400 – a minimum of 20 hours and up to a maximum of 30 hours</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Option 3 - £5,400 – a minimum of 50 hours and up to a maximum of 60 hours</p> <p>Phased Option (please refer to guide)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Option 4 - £5,400 – a minimum of 50 hours and up to a maximum of 60 hours for the same project with two distinct training phases or two related projects with separate and distinct training needs</p>	
<p>What investment have the business made, or do they need to make, to ensure this project is a success? (i.e. investment in software or machinery, staff resourcing etc.)</p>	

In which market/s does the business currently operate?

- Northern Ireland
- Great Britain
- Republic of Ireland
- Europe (please specify) _____
- International (please specify) _____

4. Innovation and Development

Please select which of the following is most representative of your business.

- We have a formal process for innovation and development within our business, and we can bring new ideas to the market rapidly and effectively
- Although informal, we have good working processes for innovation and development and a model to bring new ideas to market
- We have had some success at bringing new ideas to market but our approach to innovation and development can be ad hoc/reactive
- We struggle to convert ideas into new products/services/processes.

As a business have you engaged with an FE College on an innovation related activity before?

- Yes
- No

If yes, please give brief detail.

As a business how would you currently rate your approach and confidence to engage in innovation activity including engagement with other businesses, knowledge providers and academic institutions? (1 being no confidence, 2 being partly confident, 3 being confident, 4 being more than confident and 5 being very confident)

- 1 2 3 4 5

As a business how would you currently rate your understanding of the role of innovation within your business to grow and develop? (1 being poor understanding, 2 being some understanding, 3 reasonable/good understanding, 4 being very good understanding and 5 being excellent understanding)

1 2 3 4 5

As a business how would you currently rate your relationship and interaction with the College? (1 being not at all satisfied, 2 being partly satisfied, 3 being satisfied, 4 being more than satisfied and 5 being very satisfied)

1 2 3 4 5

- Not applicable – first interaction with the College

Please indicate the percentage of your annual turnover which is set aside for research, innovation and development activities

- 0%
- 1-5%
- 6-10%
- 10% and above

At the present time do you feel your business could have the potential to scale up as a result of undertaking the proposed project?

- Yes (please explain) _____
- No (please explain) _____

Please indicate your annual revenue

£

Please indicate your annual operating costs

£

Please indicate your annual export sales (where applicable)

£

5. Business Impacts

As a business, what impacts are you expecting to see following your engagement with the college?

Tick all which apply and provide further information when required.

Impacts	✓	Further Information
Development of new products/services/processes		
Increased Sales <i>(how much % and in which markets e.g. NI/GB/ROI)</i>		
Cost Savings <i>(how much %)</i>		
Skills will allow for further innovation and development activity in the business. <i>(Explain how)</i>		
Creation of new jobs <i>(how many)</i>		
Safeguarding of existing jobs <i>(how many)</i>		
Entering new markets <i>(please specify which)</i>		
Further innovation and development of the product/service/process <i>(via what method)</i>		

6. Charity and Social Enterprise Declaration

The following definitions should be read by any business seeking InnovateUs support if it has a Social Enterprise and/or charity arm to the organisation. Where appropriate, the relevant declaration(s) should be signed:

Charities:

Organisations with charitable status seeking support from Skills Focus must fall under the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 and must also have a commercial or business function as part of their revenue raising activities. It is important to note that participation is only available to employees of the commercial/business side of the organisation and not to volunteers of the charitable arm.

I declare that (insert business name) is a charity which falls under the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 and operates as a commercial enterprise.

Social Enterprise:

A social enterprise is a business whose primary purpose is based on social objectives. Any surpluses generated are principally reinvested in the business to further advance that purpose, or in the wider community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners. A social enterprise does however have a business focus and operates as a commercial enterprise'.

I declare that (insert business name) is a social enterprise within the above definition and operates as a commercial enterprise.

I understand that it is the sole responsibility of (insert business name) to ensure that participation in the InnovateUs programme does not negatively impact on our eligibility for other public sector initiatives, funding or support.

Client Signature: _____

Business name & position: _____

Date: _____

7. Client and Author Agreement

The InnovateUs programme is financed and managed by the Department for the Economy. The College has been contracted by the Department to deliver the InnovateUs Programme. Please refer to the College Privacy Notice (see College website) which will explain in more detail how personal information is handled, and to the Department's Privacy Notice at [DfE-Privacy Notice](#).

By signing this document, we, the signatories, confirm that the information contained herein is an accurate representation of the project, its objectives and anticipated outcomes and that the accompanying training is proportionate to these, and has been agreed by the college and the participating business.

I understand that by signing this document I am providing confirmation that I am content for the Department and/or College to contact me or any participants of this project directly and use information for programme management, monitoring and evaluating purposes. I can confirm that the participants have been informed accordingly.

I also understand that the Department and/or College may wish to use details of the intervention in future marketing or promotional material and will liaise with me about this beforehand.

I agree that as part of my participation, I will work with the college to complete:

- a Delivery and Evaluation Report and the [InnovateNI Innovation Self-Assessment](#) after completion of my project; and
- an Impact Assessment approximately 12 months later.

Client Signature: _____

Business name and position: _____

Date: _____

Author's signature: _____

College and position: _____

Date: _____

InnovateUs Manager's signature: _____

College & position: _____

Date: _____

8. State Aid/Subsidy Control

A) Declaration of previous *de minimis* aid

NOTE: THIS DECLARATION OF PREVIOUS AID AWARDED IS ONLY TO BE COMPLETED BY BUSINESSES THAT MANUFACTURE OR TRADE GOODS THAT COULD BE TRADED INTO THE EU SINGLE MARKET (i.e. WHEN THE WINDSOR FRAMEWORK (FORMERLY THE NI PROTOCOL) APPLIES).

IT SHOULD NOT BE COMPLETED BY BUSINESSES OPERATING IN THE SERVICES SECTOR).

As required by the EU's '*de minimis*' Regulation your business must provide the Department with details of all other *de minimis* aid received in the last three years. A false declaration by you, resulting in the EU '*de minimis*' maximum amount of €300,000 being exceeded, could later give rise to the aid being recovered with interest.

Please note there are lower *de minimis* aid ceilings for the primary agriculture sector¹⁸ and the fisheries and aquaculture sector¹⁹. There is also a different cumulative period for the fisheries and aquaculture sector.

The Agricultural *de minimis* Regulation²⁰ (ADMR) applies to aid provided in favour of the primary production of agricultural products. Agricultural products refer to those products listed in Annex 1 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)²¹. **Primary production refers to production by way of soil and livestock farming without the performance of any further operation changing the nature of resultant products.**

If you think your business may be involved in primary agricultural or primary fisheries and aquacultural activities, please discuss with the College before completing this *de minimis* declaration.

Please therefore provide any relevant details in the table below including the Name of the Grant/Aid scheme, the Awarding Body, the Amount(s) Received and the Dates received. Please note only EU '*de minimis*' Aid subsidies need to be declared. If you are not sure whether the award is EU '*de minimis*' Aid, please check with the Awarding Body.

¹⁸ [EU legislation website - *de minimis* in the agriculture sector](#)

¹⁹ [EU legislation website - *de minimis* in the fisheries and aquaculture sector](#)

²⁰ [EU legislation website - *de minimis* in the agriculture sector](#)

²¹ [EU website - Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union - Annex 1](#)

Type of <i>de minimis</i> aid ²² approved and Awarding Body	Amount £/€	Date
TOTAL:		

<p>Is the business active in any of the following industry sectors:</p> <p>Fishery and Aquaculture or Primary Production of Agricultural Products*? These sectors have specific lower ceilings of <i>de minimis</i> aid. *Please note: The industrial <i>de minimis</i> Regulation allows aid for the processing and marketing of agricultural, fishery and aquaculture products, providing the aid does not benefit a primary processor. If the business is active in the Primary production (as defined above) of agricultural or fishery products, then the college must contact the Department before proceeding with the project to ensure the ADMR limits will not be exceeded.</p>	<p>Yes / No</p> <p>(if yes please specify in the box below and indicate the end of your accounting (fiscal) year)</p>
<p>If your business is active in the fisheries and aquaculture sector, what is the date of the end of your accounting (fiscal) year (dd/mm)?</p>	

B) Acceptance of new *de minimis* aid offered

The costs payable by the Department for the Economy to the college for delivery of the training/support outlined in the Baseline Audit document constitute new aid offered to your business under *de minimis* rules. It is important to note that as part of new *de minimis* protocols, the Department is obliged to upload details relating to the aid you are accepting to the online EU eAid register. The eAid register will retain records of all *de minimis* aid provided to a business by any awarding body under a unique Beneficiary ID number for that business. IDs can include a Company Registration Number, sole trader's National Insurance Number (NINO), Charity Number, National VAT Number or Other Country Number such as or Unique Tax Reference (UTR) . Any personal data used

²² The type of *de minimis* aid is either (1) industrial (2) primary agriculture (3) fisheries or aquaculture or (4) Services of General Economic Interest. This should be explicit on the letter of offer from the aid awarding body.

as an ID (such as a NINO or UTR) will be masked upon upload, meaning these will not be visible on the public-facing side of the register.

Please see also the College Privacy Notice (see College website) which will explain in more detail how personal information is handled, and to the Department’s Privacy Notice at [DfE-Privacy Notice](#).

The amount of aid offered on this occasion and the Beneficiary ID of the business must be completed in the table below. It is critical that the business uses the same ID type and ID number when applying for or accepting all *de minimis* awards and that the aid detailed below is declared on any *de minimis* applications made in the next three years. Furthermore, where a business forms part of a group of companies, the *de minimis* award is recorded at the level of the parent company. As *de minimis* aid is cumulative, all companies within the same group (under the same parent company) draw from a single *de minimis* ceiling.

Type of <i>de minimis</i> aid approved and Awarding Body	Amount £/€	Type of ID Used to Record Claim (e.g. NINO, UTR, Company Registration Number)	ID Number

C) Signature

<p>I confirm that the details provided at Section A above in relation to previous aid awarded are current and accurate to the best of my knowledge.</p> <p>I accept the new offer of aid as set out in Section B above and I understand that the Department is required to upload details of the award, including ID details, to the EU eAid Register.</p> <p>I am authorised to sign on behalf of the business.</p>			
Signed on behalf of applicant		Print Name	
Position		Date	
Business Name			

InnovateUs
Delivery and Evaluation Report
April 2026 – March 2027

Aid provided to deliver this project is granted either in compliance with European Commission Regulation (EU) 2023/2831 of 13 December 2023 or which complies with the Subsidy Control Act 2022.

Business Name:

Project Title:

Date Baseline Completed:

Date Delivery and Evaluation Report completed:

Author:

InnovateUs Manager:

College:

CRM Project Reference Number:

The college representative must complete this form with the business.



InnovateUs

The Delivery and Evaluation Report must be completed jointly by the College and the Business following the culmination of the Innovation Projects and when those projects can demonstrate the outputs, outcomes and achievements as laid out in the FE Circular 03/26.

Contents

1. Business Information

2. Project Information

3. Innovation and Development

4. Business Impacts

5. Client and Author Agreement

1. Business Information

Name	
Address	
Telephone Number	
Email Address	
Website	

2. Project Information

Please provide a summary of the project undertaken. (Please describe clearly the new or modified product, service or process the business engaged in.)

Was the new or modified product, service or process:

- New to the business
- New to the market in which the business operates
- New to the world

Which Funding option was selected for this project?

- Option 1 (£400) Option 2 (£2,400) Option 3 (£5,400)
- Option 4 (£5,400)

Please confirm how many participants received training within this project?

Please detail the skills transferred and rate individual skill levels in the project training area following participation. Please confirm if any participant has embarked on any formal training to further enhance their skill level.

Participant	Skills Transferred	Skill Rating in training area (1 - no skill level, 2 - basic skill level, 3 - good skill level, 4 - proficient skill level, 5 expert skill level)
		<input type="radio"/> 1 <input type="radio"/> 2 <input type="radio"/> 3 <input type="radio"/> 4 <input type="radio"/> 5
		<input type="radio"/> 1 <input type="radio"/> 2 <input type="radio"/> 3 <input type="radio"/> 4 <input type="radio"/> 5

		<input type="radio"/> 1 <input type="radio"/> 2 <input type="radio"/> 3 <input type="radio"/> 4 <input type="radio"/> 5
		<input type="radio"/> 1 <input type="radio"/> 2 <input type="radio"/> 3 <input type="radio"/> 4 <input type="radio"/> 5
		<input type="radio"/> 1 <input type="radio"/> 2 <input type="radio"/> 3 <input type="radio"/> 4 <input type="radio"/> 5

Please confirm where the project was delivered:

At the business premises In the college Online Other (please specify) _____

Please explain any change against the plan agreed within the Baseline Audit.

Confirmation of skills delivered by the College.

Please provide a breakdown of the actual hours (including dates) of skills training delivered within the project.

Description of Skills Training Delivered	Hours Assigned	Hours completed	Completed date

Please explain any differences relating to the Skills Training delivered, against the plan agreed with the business, and detailed within the Baseline Audit.

How has the College embedded the learning and shared the project experience within the College and with other colleges?

Please provide details and confirmation of changes (if any) to the College curriculum as a result of this activity?

Business Feedback on College Delivery

As a business how would you rate the quality of delivery/support provided by the College through this project to address your business needs? (1 being not at all satisfied, 2 being partly satisfied, 3 being satisfied, 4 being more than satisfied and 5 being very satisfied)

1 2 3 4 5

Would the business use the College services again?

If Yes, please provide details

If No, why not?

If the support received from the College through this project had not been available, would you have been willing to invest in this innovation activity?

Yes

No

3. Innovation and Development

Please select which of the following is now most representative of your business following this project.

- We have a formal process for innovation and development within our business, and we can bring new ideas to the market rapidly and effectively
- Although informal, we have good working processes for innovation and development and a model to bring new ideas to market
- We have had some success at bringing new ideas to market but our approach to innovation and development can be ad hoc/reactive
- We struggle to convert ideas into new products/services/processes.

As a business how would you rate your approach and confidence to engage in innovation activity including engagement with other businesses, knowledge providers and academic institutions following the completion of this project? *(1 being no confidence, 2 being partly confident, 3 being confident, 4 being more than confident and 5 being very confident)*

1 2 3 4 5

As a business how would you rate your understanding of the role of innovation within your business to grow and develop following the completion of this project? *(1 being poor understanding, 2 being some understanding, 3 reasonable/good understanding, 4 being very good understanding and 5 being excellent understanding)*

1 2 3 4 5

As a business how would you rate your relationship and interaction with the College following completion of this project? *(1 being not at all satisfied, 2 being partly satisfied, 3 being satisfied, 4 being more than satisfied and 5 being very satisfied)*

1 2 3 4 5

Please provide details of any plans to further engage with innovation activity (including details of funding options, in-house activity, business own investment)

Please provide an assessment of the potential for any future collaboration for innovation activity (including FE, HE, Council, InvestNI, cross border)

4. Business Impacts

Please provide details of investment which the business has undertaken/plans to undertake as a result of the project? (e.g. machinery, staff)

Please confirm the market the business now operates in as a result of the project.

- Northern Ireland
- Great Britain
- Republic of Ireland
- Europe (please specify) _____
- International (please specify) _____

As a business, what impacts did you experience following the completion of the InnovateUs project?

	✓	Further Information
Development of new products/services/processes		
Increased Sales (<i>how much % and in which markets e.g. NI/GB/ROI</i>)		
Cost Savings (<i>how much %</i>)		
Skills that will allow for further innovation and development activity in the business. (<i>Explain how</i>)		
Creation of new jobs (<i>how many</i>)		
Safeguarding of existing jobs (<i>how many</i>)		
Further innovation and development of the product/service/process (<i>via what method</i>)		

As a result of the project undertaken, is the business now in a position to scale up? If so, please provide details of signposting and how this is being taken forward.

Please provide a value for money assessment for this project. This assessment should include recognition and acceptance that not all InnovateUs projects will be successful.

As a result of the project undertaken, has the business been appropriately upskilled to undertake the planned innovation activity?

Yes No

If Yes, please provide details.

As a result of the project undertaken, do you feel more confident to engage in new/enhanced/more complex levels of innovation?

Yes No

If Yes, please provide any details known at this time:

Has the business been signposted to any other form of upskilling or developmental support?

Yes No

If Yes, please provide details:

- Invest NI Innovation Voucher application
- Full cost recovery training with the College
- Skills Focus
- Connected
- Productivity Booster
- Knowledge Transfer Partnership
- Other Higher Education learning
- Council supported programme
- Other (please provide detail)

Has the business completed the online [InnovateNI Innovation Self-Assessment](#) ?

Yes No

If No, the assessment must be completed before this Delivery and Evaluation Report is signed off and submitted to the Department.

5. Client and Author Agreement

This project has been financed by the Department for the Economy's (DfE) InnovateUs Programme. The College has been contracted by the Department to deliver the InnovateUs Programme. Please refer to the College Privacy Notice (see College website) which will explain in more detail how personal information is handled, and to the Department's Privacy Notice at [DfE-Privacy Notice](#)

By signing this document, we, the signatories, confirm that the information contained herein is an accurate representation of the project, its objectives and outcomes and that the accompanying training is proportionate to these, and has been agreed by the College and the participating business.

I understand that by signing this document I am providing confirmation that I am content for the Department and/or College to contact me or any participants of this project directly and use information for programme management, monitoring and evaluating purposes. I can confirm that the participants have been informed accordingly.

I also understand that the Department and/or College may wish to use details of the intervention in future marketing or promotional material and will liaise with me about this beforehand.

I agree that I will work with the college to complete a short Impact Assessment in approximately 12 months, to assess if/how the project has affected my business.

Client Signature: _____

Business name and position: _____

Date: _____

Author's signature: _____

College and position: _____

Date: _____

InnovateUs Manager's signature _____

College & position _____

Date _____

InnovateUs
12-month Impact Assessment
April 2026 – March 2027

Business Name:

Project Title/Summary:

Option: Option 1 Option 2 Option 3 Option 4

Project type: Product Service Process

Date Delivery and Evaluation Report completed:

College:

CRM Project Reference Number:

Previous projects: 0 1 2

Note: The college representative must complete this form with the business.



Department for the
Economy
An Roinn
Geilleagair
www.economy-ni.gov.uk

InnovateUs

The InnovateUs project completed 12 months ago was funded by the Department for the Economy and the questions on this assessment are designed to help the Department understand and measure the impacts the mentoring has had on the business.

If the business which completed the InnovateUs project is no longer trading, it is important to still complete as many of the questions as possible to help the Department evaluate and develop InnovateUs.

Business Information

Name	
Address	
Telephone Number	
Email Address	
Website	
Is the business which completed the project still trading?	Yes/ No

Progression of idea

1. At what stage is the new product, process or service worked on during the InnovateUs project:

Product:

- Development still ongoing (see question 2)
- After further development/testing, product did not proceed to market (see question 3)
- Product has made it to market

Process:

- Development still ongoing (see Question 2)
- After further development/testing new process not implemented (see Question 3)
- New process was implemented but has since been replaced or altered
- New process was implemented and is still in operation

Service:

- Development still ongoing (see Question 2)
- After further development/testing, new service not implemented (see Question 3)
- New service was implemented but has since been replaced or altered
- New service implemented and still in operation

2. If development of the new product, process or service is still ongoing, have any of the following barriers delayed implementation? (select any applicable):

- Further testing required
- Time/staffing resources
- Difficulties sourcing suitable materials/supply chain
- Capital investment required
- More skills mentoring needed
- Other (please specify) _____
- N/A

3. If the idea for the new product, process or service is not going to be implemented, which of the following barriers contributed to this decision? (select any applicable)

- Not financially viable due to production or implementation costs
- Idea was found to be technically non-viable
- Anticipated demand for the product or service did not materialise
- Capital investment required
- Alternative idea being pursued
- Other (please specify) _____
- N/A

Innovation and Development

4. Have you continued to use the skills learned during your InnovateUs project?

- Yes No

5. As a business how would you now rate your approach and confidence to engage in innovation activity including engagement with other businesses, knowledge providers and academic institutions? (1 being no confidence, 2 being partly confident, 3 being confident, 4 being more than confident and 5 being very confident)

- 1 2 3 4 5

6. A year after completion of your project, how would you now rate your understanding of the role of innovation within your business to help it grow and develop? (1 being poor understanding, 2 being some understanding, 3 reasonable/good understanding, 4 being very good understanding and 5 being excellent understanding)

- 1 2 3 4 5

7. As a result of your engagement with the InnovateUs programme and the college, did your business progress to undertake any other form of innovation, upskilling or developmental activity?

- Yes No

If Yes, please tick as many as are appropriate:

- Another InnovateUs project(s)
- Invest NI Innovation Voucher
- Skills Focus Programme
- Connected Programme
- Productivity Booster
- Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP)
- Council supported programme
- Other learning/courses with the FE College
- Other Higher Education learning
- In-house innovation activity (e.g. other new products/processes/services developed or adopted within your own business – please provide details below)
- Other (please provide details below)

<hr/>

Business Impacts

8. Have you made any innovation related investment as a result of the project?

Yes

No

If Yes, please tick as appropriate:

– new or upgraded machinery/equipment

– additional staff

– new or extended premises

– new computer software

– other (please provide details below)

9. Have you entered into any new markets following your InnovateUs participation?

Yes

No

If yes, please confirm the market(s) the business now operates in.

Northern Ireland

Great Britain

Republic of Ireland

Europe (please specify) _____

International (please specify) _____

10. As a business, what impacts did you experience following the completion of the InnovateUs project?

	✓	Details
Development of other(?) new products/services/processes		
Increased Sales (<i>how much % and in which markets e.g. NI/GB/ROI</i>)		
Cost Savings (<i>how much %</i>)		
Skills that will allow for further innovation and development activity in the business. (<i>Explain how</i>)		
Creation of new jobs (<i>how many</i>)		
Safeguarding of existing jobs (<i>how many</i>)		
Further innovation and development of the product/service/process worked on during the project (<i>via what method</i>)		

<p>11. Has your business been able to scale up its operations as a result of your InnovateUs project?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes (please quantify) _____</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p>
<p>12. Please indicate the percentage of your annual turnover which is now set aside for research, innovation and development activities</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 0%</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1-5%</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 6-10%</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 10% and above</p>
<p>13. Please indicate your annual revenue</p> <p>£</p>

<p>14. Please indicate your annual operating costs</p> <p>£</p>
<p>15. Please indicate your annual export sales (where applicable)</p> <p>£</p>
<p>16. Please provide any comments or feedback you would like to offer on your experience of the InnovateUs programme and its impact on your business?</p>
<p>17. Would you like to be contacted again by the Further Education College about other opportunities for support?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p>

Your project was financed by the Department for the Economy’s (DfE) InnovateUs Programme. The College is contracted by the Department to deliver the InnovateUs Programme. Please refer to the College Privacy Notice (see College website) which will explain in more detail how personal information is handled, and to the Department’s Privacy Notice at [DfE-Privacy Notice](#)

<p>I understand that by signing this document I am providing confirmation that I am content for the Department and/or College to contact me or any participants of this project directly and use information for programme management, monitoring and evaluating purposes. I can confirm that the participants have been informed accordingly.</p> <p>I also understand that the Department and/or College may wish to use details of my project in future marketing or promotional material and will liaise with me about this beforehand.</p> <p>Name: _____</p> <p>Business name and position: _____</p> <p>Date: _____</p>
--

College representative signature _____

College & position _____

Date _____

**InnovateUs
End of Year Report
April 2026 – March 2027**

College name:

Report prepared by:

Section A - Summary

- 1. Please provide a short summary of how the college performed in delivering the programme against its allocated budget.**

Section B - Outputs

Each answer should be supported by examples or case study evidence where possible:

- 2. Please detail how experience gained from the delivery of InnovateUs this year has been shared and embedded within the College (or the wider College network) including any influences on current or planned curriculum.**

- 3. Please explain how the overall programme has created and maintained good relationships between business and the college as a result of the projects undertaken. Include examples of any further innovation, upskilling engagement or collaboration.**

4. Please provide examples of effective signposting of businesses to other forms of support.

Section C - Outcomes

5. Please provide examples or case study evidence of the effects the overall programme has had this year on:

Business performance, capacity and innovation measures.

Business employment rates, turnover and wider costs.

Business exporting behaviours.

Section D - Programme Development

6. Please provide details of any areas of concern within the InnovateUs Programme.

7. Please outline any potential areas for improvement within the InnovateUs Programme.

InnovateUs – Compliance Process

Aim of using the compliance checklist

1. This checklist will be used by the Department to support the management, monitoring and evaluation of InnovateUs through monthly compliance checks. It is aligned to programme requirements and processes outlined in FE Circular 03/26 (including Annexes).
2. It is the responsibility of Colleges to ensure that their InnovateUs projects comply with the programme requirements, and it is recommended that Colleges use this checklist as a self-assessment tool to ensure compliance.

Compliance Process

3. Each month a formal compliance check will be carried out on 20% of the projects for which each College is claiming a Delivery and Evaluation Report (DER) payment. In the event of low numbers in a College claim, the Department may compliance check 100% of the DER projects included.
4. The result of the compliance check will be confirmed to the College's Business Engagement Team along with feedback on any minor remedial action required. Feedback provided relates only to those projects included in the percentage sample.

Non-compliance

5. If the 20% check raises concerns of non-compliance, then a 100% compliance check may be undertaken of all projects undertaken by the College within the month.
6. The Department reserves the right to withhold funding for any projects it deems were not delivered in compliance with this circular.
7. The Department will consider entering a period of 100% formal compliance checks for all further projects undertaken by the College within the InnovateUs Programme for 2026-27 until the Department determines a return to 20% formal compliance is justified.
8. The Department reserves the right to suspend future college InnovateUs Programme engagement with businesses following non-compliance with the requirements of the programme.
9. The Department reserves the right to suspend InnovateUs funding and reallocate funds to be utilised by other colleges following non-compliance with the requirements of the programme.

InnovateUs – Compliance Checklist

CHECK	Yes	No
Business		
Has the college confirmed that the business has fewer than 50 employees?		
Has the college confirmed that the business has not already undertaken the maximum number of InnovateUs projects?		
Has the subsidy declaration been fully completed and signed by a representative of the participating business?		
If the Business has a Social Enterprise (SE) or charity arm, has the required Declaration in the Eligibility Checklist been completed?		
Project		
Is the project activity within the permitted priority sectors?		
Was the project correctly categorised on CRM to reflect the priority sector it applies to?		
Is the project eligible according to the list of ineligible projects?		
If this project relates to digital transformation/online optimisation, is there evidence to why InnovateUs was the appropriate intervention and has it been completed within the Option 1/2/4 and 25% limitations?		
Was a new skills need identified for the project?		

Are linkages between the project and the strategic context of the programme clearly demonstrated?		
Programme Administration		
Were all questions contained in the Eligibility Checklist, Baseline Audit and DER report fully completed, clear and easily understood?		
Is the Funding option determined within the Baseline Audit reflective of the actual hours of training delivery stated by the college at the DER stage?		

