

28 March 2023

Joanna Campbell
Principal and Chief Executive
Dumfries & Galloway College

Dear Ms Campbell,

A team of HM Inspectors from Education Scotland visited Dumfries & Galloway College in January 2023 to undertake a Progress Visit. During our visit, we talked to learners, staff, and stakeholders, and worked closely with the senior managers.

The team found the following major strengths in the college's work.

Recruitment

Staff have developed and implemented a range of interventions to improve recruitment arrangements, including maintaining regular contact with successful applicants to the point of enrolment. The number of applicants who enrol on programmes has increased by around a third as a result. Curriculum staff have worked productively with staff in secondary schools to review and improve the range of learning opportunities available to young people and the number accessing senior phase programmes has increased. A newly introduced 'virtual' induction programme is supporting learners well to navigate college facilities and systems. Learners value being able access to key information in advance of starting their programme. All learners feel well supported throughout the application process which they describe as simple and straightforward. They value the quality of pre-course information in helping them make informed choices about their programme of study, how to access support and engage in learning. The Students' Association (SA) contribute well to recruitment and induction activities. Representatives took an active role in college open days and led campus tours for potential learners. This had a positive impact on recruitment.

Retention

Overall rates of learner withdrawal for all part-time programmes are lower than the national average and have improved over the last three years. The college has undertaken useful work with local partners to better understand the reasons for learner withdrawal. This is helping to shape plans in relation to learners who withdraw due to financial pressures or to enter employment. Staff and the SA have introduced a range of helpful initiatives to alleviate the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and support learners experiencing poverty and financial hardship. These include access to hardship funds and a food bank, and free or subsidised canteen facilities. Course teams use the recently introduced Performance Improvement Programme (PIP) arrangements to identify challenges and actions to improve retention and attainment. Each week the staff from the Student Journey team contact learners that have not attended the previous week and coordinate interventions to support them to re-engage with their learning. This is contributing to improved retention. The Services to Support Learning team meets weekly to review and analyse retention data and action interventions to support learners at risk of withdrawal. This has increased the

number of learners accessing additional support and is contributing to an overall improvement in learner retention. Almost all class representatives and lead class representatives have undergone appropriate training for their role. This has improved the quality of feedback from learners. Staff are increasingly making use college self-evaluation arrangements to focus on actions to improve retention.

Attainment

Rates of attainment for part-time programmes are above the national average. Rates of learner partial success for all modes of delivery are better than the national average. Staff participation in a helpful mentoring scheme is supporting them well to develop skills and widen understanding of the needs of learners. They discuss and develop approaches to pedagogy and any cross-college issues that may impact on learners. As part of the college management transformation programme, improved availability of technology in classrooms and the introduction of arrangements to support staff to evaluate learning and teaching through classroom observation are helping to develop staff practice. However, it is too early to evaluate the impact of these developments. Student advisors and education support workers have recently been assigned to work with individual curriculum teams to identify learners at risk of disengagement and coordinate appropriate interventions. However, it is too early to measure the impact of this work on retention and attainment. Senior managers undertook an extensive evaluation of senior phase provision and drew on their findings to develop joint plans with the local authority. This has supported an improved, shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities in planning and delivering provision for school-age young people.

Progression

The college offers a range of options for learners to progress from FE level programmes to higher levels of study. Rates of learner progression to positive destinations are high and have remained steady over the last three years. Curriculum staff provide learners with helpful support and information on the range and types of progression opportunities available to them. The college curriculum provides guaranteed internal progression options. This is motivating and encouraging for learners. Skills Development Scotland careers services staff are available on-campus weekly. Learners benefit this access to careers information, advice, and guidance to explore their progression options. Senior managers previously identified a decline in the number of learners applying for degree programmes and introduced a range of actions to address this, including the delivery of helpful UCAS workshops. This was welcomed by learners and the number of applications for university places has increased as a result. The majority of learners feel well supported in making informed choices, including applications to university or employment. Within curriculum areas, learners benefit from interaction with employers to raise their awareness of career opportunities.

The following areas for improvement were identified by the team and discussed with the senior managers:

- The college has recently introduced a range of well-considered initiatives to improve recruitment and induction. However, it is too early to measure fully the impact of these initiatives on improving retention and attainment.

- Rates of learner withdrawal for full-time programmes, having improved recently, remain higher than the national average.
- Arrangements for the review of curriculum performance and future curriculum planning are not yet securing improvement in overall rates of learner retention. However, there are early indications of improvement in retention for full-time programmes.
- The overall rate of attainment for senior phase learners is low and overall attainment rates for full-time programmes have remained consistently below the national average over a three-year period. Rates of attainment for care-experienced young people are below the national average.
- The college has not yet embedded the development of meta skills consistently across all curriculum areas. This is limiting learners' awareness of these important skills and their ability to identify and promote them to prospective employers.

The following main points for action are required:

- College managers and staff teams should continue to evaluate and measure the impact of new quality arrangements on learner recruitment, retention, and attainment.
- College managers should take action to improve rates of learner attainment across all curriculum areas, and for care-experienced learners.

What happens next?

We recognise the progress made against most aspects for improvement, however further progress is required in a number of areas. We will ask for a report on progress on these areas for improvement to be provided to the college link HM Inspector within agreed timescales. Taking account of the progress report, we will then decide what further engagement with the college may be required.

Barbara Nelson
HM Inspector