

30 July 2024

Mr Martin Jones
Principal
UHI Argyll

Dear Mr Jones

A team of HM Inspectors from Education Scotland visited UHI Argyll College in June 2024 to undertake an Annual Engagement 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:

Learner progress and outcomes

The overall withdrawal rate for learners on part-time further education programmes is lower than the sector norm. The successful completion rate for care experienced learners is higher than the sector norm.

College managers work well to foster effective partnerships with leadership teams in local secondary schools. They collaborate well to provide a curriculum offer which meets the needs of the region and creates a meaningful pathway for young people into employment or further study. All learners value highly the regular support they receive from college staff. A wide range of individual needs are met by teaching staff, student advisors and other centre staff, to support retention and attainment concerns. Student Advisors attend Interim Progression Boards where staff track and monitor learner attainment. This new approach is showing early signs of having a positive impact on learner retention. Student Services staff respond well to learners' financial hardship concerns. They put in place effective measures, such as cost of living payments, for those in receipt of Education Maintenance Allowance, and uplift payments to learners in receipt of benefits. These actions are welcomed and support learners to remain on their programmes.

Approaches to assuring and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching including professional updating

Senior managers hold annual curriculum planning meetings with Curriculum Leaders (CLs) to evaluate programmes and agree actions. At the end of each semester, CLs meet with teaching staff, to agree actions leading to improvement and agree adjustments to programmes. Senior managers review the outputs from this self-evaluation process. Guidance staff support learners well to track the development and improvement of their meta skills which can be shared with potential employers. Teaching staff make helpful reference to meta-skill development when giving feedback to encourage learners to discuss the skills they are developing. College staff host successful schools link activity weeks where employers, including local distillers, energy companies and nurseries, hold informative workshops for senior phase pupils. This introduces school-age learners to a range of employment opportunities and supports discussions of career pathways.

Learner Engagement

The Highlands and Islands Students' Association (HISA) is represented well at college board meetings and across all strategic forums. HISA officers feel well supported to participate and that their contributions are listened to and valued. Student voice representatives (SVRs) are selected through a formal online arrangement, which has resulted in an increase in numbers. Current post holders are positive about their role and experiences. However, some classes do not have a representative.

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

- The successful completion rate for learners on full-time FE programmes was significantly below the sector norm.
- The successful completion rate for learners on part-time FE programmes was lower than the sector norm.
- The withdrawal rate for learners on full-time FE programmes was above the sector norm.
- Personal Learner Support Plans are not in place for all learners at the commencement of their programme. This impacts negatively on some learners as they are not able to participate fully during teaching sessions.
- Senior staff do not have a college wide strategy to enable all staff to effectively track and review the performance of all learners.
- Employers do not have sufficient opportunity to engage in the college self-evaluation arrangements.
- Senior managers do not have a college wide strategy which ensures that all teaching staff are adopting a range of teaching approaches to improve learner engagement across all programmes.
- Student Satisfaction and Engagement Survey (SSES) satisfaction rate is below the sector norm and has declined from the previous year.
- Currently, only 56% of programmes have an SVR.
- Learners are not aware how HISA contributes to arrangements for reviewing, evaluating, and improving the quality of provision.
- Opportunities for learners to evaluate and improve the design and delivery of their programme are limited.

Main points for action

- Senior managers should take action to address the high rate of learner withdrawal on full-time FE programmes.
- Senior managers should put in place arrangements to support consistent self-evaluation and communicate to staff strategies for improvement.

What happens next?

We recognise the progress made in most aspects for improvement, however further progress is required in a number of areas. We will require a report on progress on the 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 is required.

Margaret Rose Livingstone
HM Inspector