

25 July 2023

Mr Jim Metcalfe
Principal and Chief Executive
Fife College

Dear Mr Metcalfe,

A team of HM Inspectors from Education Scotland visited Fife College on 31 May 2023 to undertake the Annual Engagement Visit at the college. During our visit we spoke to learners, staff, stakeholders, and managers of the college.

The team found the following strengths in the college's work:

Recruitment

Staff have revised the on-line applications process and as a result, applications for higher education (HE) programmes were received at the college earlier than in previous years. Learners confirm that offers are communicated promptly after applications are made and this is supporting improved learner retention. All prospective learners are offered an on-line digital readiness programme to help them to develop appropriate levels of digital skill before they first attend college. All learners engage in a useful induction period prior to commencing, and during their programme. This is helpful in setting out expectations, and ensuring learners become familiar with college support services. Guidance advisors offer a range of bespoke induction activities to support care experienced learners before starting college. The Attendance Monitoring Team has been expanded to respond to attendance issues and share information with staff. In the current session, the Student Association has increased the number of class representatives to 512, and over 200 have completed initial training.

Retention

The overall withdrawal rate for part-time further education (FE) learners is 1.7% lower than the published sector norm. The recently updated digital learning standards are well understood by staff. They understand the requirements in relation to the use of remote learning in their delivery and to ensure digital resources are available to support learners. In response to learners' mental health concerns, staff have implemented a variety of college-devised units aimed at helping learners build their resilience. These new units are designed to provide students with the tools and strategies they need to manage their mental health and well-being and to help them stay at college and achieve their academic goals. Professional services staff and curriculum teams work well to respond to learners requiring additional support. Ongoing monitoring of learner attendance by curriculum and support teams enables staff to intervene when concerns arise. Learners indicate high levels of satisfaction with the quality of guidance and support delivered by the college.

Attainment

The overall rate of learner success for part-time FE programmes is 78.3%, 2% higher than the published sector norm. Rates of partial success for full-time programmes are lower than the sector norm. Staff have introduced a range of well-designed curriculum adjustments to help address low levels of attainment. These include changes to course design, sequencing of units and integrated assessment opportunities across subjects. Most curriculum areas use a hybrid delivery model, which integrates face-to-face and remote learning methods to expand learning opportunities for learners. This provides learners access to different learning environments which helps develop their full learning potential. Professional services staff monitor vulnerable learners continuously to ensure they receive the necessary support. Effective collaboration between support and curriculum staff helps identify and address potential issues early. The college has recently introduced a robust data dashboard using Power BI which will make analysis of key performance indicators easier for curriculum teams.

Progression

The rate of learner progression to a positive destination is high, with 97.6% entering a positive destination on leaving college. The college has well-defined articulation routes for every HND programme into degree provision. The college works closely with university partners to devise and implement articulation routes. The employability team provides effective guidance and advice on the next steps for learners, delivering group work and individual support to build learner confidence and develop skills to prosper in future employment opportunities. Staff engagement in evaluation and reflection with employers and partner agencies has encouraged more industry placements, and greater development of career management skills.

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

- The overall withdrawal rate for full-time learners is higher than the sector average.
- The overall rate of learner success for full-time FE programmes remains below the sector average.
- Feedback to learners on their assessment results and progress is inconsistent and some learners do not receive feedback within college agreed timescales.
- The college has not yet been able to systematically evaluate learning and teaching approaches to ensure standards of delivery are consistent across the college.
- In a few programme areas, performance indicator data has not been analysed sufficiently to identify the reasons for poor performance over time and to implement actions for improvement.
- The college has in place a range of platforms for remote delivery and learners indicate that this can lead to confusion and inconsistency in approach.

There following main point for action was identified during the visit.

- The college should ensure that all staff analyse programme performance indicator data systematically to support action planning for improvement in rates of learner withdrawal and partial success.

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 require a report on progress on the agreed 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.

Peter B Connelly
HM Inspector