

8 August 2023

Roddy Henry  
Principal and Chief Executive  
Newbattle Abbey College

Dear Mr Henry,

A team of HM Inspectors from Education Scotland visited Newbattle Abbey College in May 2023 to undertake an Annual Engagement Visit (AEV). 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**

College managers have extended their engagement with potential applicants by making better use of social media. This has raised the college profile and improved learners' awareness of progression routes into college programmes. Curriculum staff meet with applicants during information sessions where they discuss programme choice options which take account of individual needs and interests. Staff take good account of prior learning, aspirations, and individual circumstances, to help learners make informed choices about their college programme. Support service staff prioritise financial and funding application advice for all learners. This helps reassure them about their level of financial support, which is particularly important when planning to study away from home. Student Ambassadors promote the benefits of college life well to potential applicants through use of social media and video clips. This is part of the college's revised marketing strategy and increases learner awareness of study options at college. Staff use learner feedback effectively to plan improvements to the application, enrolment, and induction processes. For example, the content of college open days, induction activities and marketing approaches, have all been improved recently.

### **Retention**

Overall, rates of learner withdrawal for all modes of study were better than national performance levels. Curriculum staff offer flexible timetabling and a family-friendly approach to planning learning activities to help learners balance work and caring responsibilities. This is supporting learners to remain on their programme and accommodate their other commitments. All learners benefit from face-to-face and online counselling sessions. This helps build their resilience and confidence levels and is having a positive impact on reducing withdrawal rates. Support staff work well with curriculum teams to manage the increase in demand for mental health support. Wellbeing, self-care, and resilience workshops are timetabled weekly to support learners with stress reduction and mental health concerns. The Student Council and class representatives have positive working relationships with curriculum staff. Most learners value the level of support they receive from teaching and support staff to help them make progress with their studies. College staff use learner feedback well to explore and understand the reasons for learner

withdrawal from programmes. They develop interventions and support approaches to help learners remain at college. Examples include the wider use of assistive technologies and referrals made to counselling staff.

## **Attainment**

Overall, rates of learner success for all modes of study are better than national performance levels. Around half of learners enrolling at the college have a disability. The success rate for these learners is four percentage points above national performance level. Most curriculum staff use blended learning and contextualised assessment opportunities well to reduce the assessment burden for learners and improve attainment rates. Teaching staff reflect well on their delivery approaches using class feedback to inform their professional development needs and improve their pedagogy. They share their practice with other colleges. Themes covered include support for learners with additional learning needs such as autism and dyslexia. Care experienced learners receive helpful support from peer mentors, social workers, and course tutors. This holistic approach has increased engagement levels of these learners in college activities and improved their attainment rates. Managers have recently renewed the college strategic plan and quality assurance processes. This is supporting curriculum staff with the planning of improvements and strategies to increase attainment across all college programmes.

## **Progression**

Learner progression to a positive destination is high. The college has established successful partnership arrangements with local colleges and universities. These provide a good range of opportunities for learners to progress to higher level programmes and degree study. Support service staff provide a high level of support to learners who are applying for college or university courses. This includes assistance with CV writing, job applications and mock interviews. Almost all learners report that they receive helpful information regarding industry links and progression into further study. They are encouraged to attend university open days and employer events, to raise awareness of the progression routes available to them. Curriculum and support staff make good use of feedback received from employers and industry links to inform and influence curriculum design changes that support learner progression. Feedback from universities about the performance of learners that have progressed to degree level study indicates that these learners are achieving well.

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

- The approach to monitoring and recording of learner feedback does not systematically support college wide self-evaluation and action-planning for improvement.
- Most curriculum staff do not have sufficient opportunity to build their digital skills, confidence, and expertise or share best practice in digital delivery.
- There is no systematic approach to recording and evaluating the engagement in and impact of, professional development of staff across the college.

No main points for action were identified.

### What happens next?

We are confident that the college has the capacity to continue to improve. We will continue to monitor progress through on-going engagement with the college link HM Inspector.

Ian Beach  
HM Inspector