

16 May 2023

Sue McFarlane  
Interim Principal and Chief Executive  
UHI West Highland

Dear Ms McFarlane,

A team of HM Inspectors from Education Scotland visited UHI West Highland on 31st January 2023 to undertake the 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**

All learners are supported well by staff throughout the application process. In preparation for the merger, managers have undertaken a thorough review of curriculum priorities. This is having a positive impact on future planning of provision to meet the needs of learners across the extended geographical footprint of the new college. In response to local demand from employers, the college significantly increased recruitment to Modern Apprenticeship programmes. The Virtual School Programme now includes five Foundation Apprenticeship programmes delivered to senior phase learners in 29 secondary schools across the Highlands and Islands. Staff draw productively on partnerships with local and regional organisations to promote and explain the range of provision and services available through the college. This includes participating in the Love Lochaber campaign to attract employers and learners to the region and the My Future, My Success programme to meet the needs of school-age young people who have become disengaged from learning.

### **Retention**

Overall rates of learner withdrawal from further education (FE) programmes are lower than the sector average. Staff meet regularly to discuss issues related to learner retention and withdrawal from programmes. Course teams involve learners collaboratively in identifying actions to improve curriculum delivery and learner retention and conduct learner focus groups regularly and use questionnaires and surveys systematically to gain feedback on the learner experience. Curriculum staff adjust timetables to enable learners to attend college at times which do not conflict with other commitments, such as employment. This is having a positive impact on learner retention. On-going monitoring of learner attendance by curriculum and support teams is enabling staff to intervene quickly when learner concerns arise. Learners value and make good use of the helpful information and advice they receive from the college on managing the cost of living. They appreciate the college providing free access to resources, such as tea and coffee, to help to alleviate monetary pressures.

## **Attainment**

The overall rate of learner success rate for full-time FE programmes remains higher than the national sector average. Learner satisfaction rates are also higher than the sector benchmark. There are many examples of programmes incorporating achievement of certificates required for working in specific industry sectors, such as the NQ Countryside Skills with Ranger Training. This is enhancing and improving the employability skills for learners on these programmes. Staff in curriculum teams have drawn on their experience of the pandemic to continue to produce recorded lessons and helpful support videos enabling learners to access recordings out with class time and revise or catch-up on lessons they have missed. They provide helpful tutoring at independent study sessions to support school pupils develop skills in information technology, digital skills, and literacy. This is helpful in preparing learners for full-time college programmes.

## **Progression**

Rates of learner satisfaction with programmes and college services are very high. On leaving college, 86% of learners enter a positive destination, many continuing at college, and this has increased in the past year despite the difficulties experienced by learners as a result of the pandemic. Many current learners are employed, and the college makes flexible arrangements to enable learners to access learning at times and in ways, that fit around these employment commitments. Curriculum teams involve employers and external partners productively in supporting and encouraging learners to explore future progression pathways and potential careers. Learners feel confident in their ability to recognise their skills. They value programmed guidance sessions with staff and the availability of centralised services to access advice and support to plan for their next steps in employment or further learning. A strong industry focus across all provision is ensuring college programmes meet the needs of employers and support progression to further study.

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

- A lack of available residential accommodation is preventing potential learners from enrolling on campus-based college programmes.
- Almost 20% of full-time FE learners withdrew from their college programme, most leaving college early to take up employment locally.
- The overall rate of learner attainment for FE programmes has declined in the last year by 6%.

There were no main points for action identified in the visit.

### **What happens next?**

We are confident that the college has made satisfactory progress and has the capacity to continue to improve. We will continue to monitor progress with regular contact through the link HM Inspector.

Peter Connelly  
HM Inspector