

9 May 2023

Neil Cowie  
Principal and Chief Executive  
North East Scotland College

Dear Mr Cowie,

A team of HM Inspectors from Education Scotland visited North East Scotland College in March 2023 to undertake a Progress Visit (PV). 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**

Overall recruitment for part-time further education (FE) and full-time higher education (HE) programmes has increased in the last year. Staff well uses social media platforms well to promote programmes and celebrate learner achievements. Almost all learners report that the online application process is easy to understand. They are satisfied with the content and quality of information they receive about their programme prior to enrolment. Almost all learners value opportunities provided to acquaint themselves with staff, learn about college facilities and get to know their peers. Almost all learners make good use of the Digital Futures Toolkit to access support. A few curriculum teams make effective use of transitions days to ensure learners are enrolled at the appropriate level. The findings from a Students' Association (SA) survey of learner views regarding induction arrangements have been used constructively by staff to improve the quality and accessibility of pre-induction materials.

### **Retention**

Across all modes of delivery, rates of learner retention are high and retention across the college is 4% better than the national sector average. Curriculum managers (CMs) make effective use of a range of systems to track learner progress and identify those at risk of withdrawal. Most curriculum areas make good use of hybrid and blended-learning opportunities to help learners overcome barriers to attending classes on campus. Staff and the SA provide helpful support to learners that are experiencing significant financial hardship, including offering access to free breakfast and a foodbank. A free digital support service is supporting learners experiencing digital hardware and software issues. Almost all learners know who to contact for pastoral and academic support and report that curriculum and support staff are helpful. Class representatives are in place for almost all programmes and benefit from the training they receive to carry out their duties. The college use a range of mechanisms to gather learner views and teaching staff draw on these productively to support improvement at curriculum level.

## Attainment

The overall rate of part-time HE learner attainment is high and is 2% above the national sector average. Curriculum staff make good use of labour market intelligence (LMI) to align the content of lessons to projected industry needs and skills shortages. Most teaching teams provide learners with good work-based opportunities to widen their knowledge and understanding of industry and support attainment. Learners on most programmes engage productively in work placements to develop and apply practical skills and explore employment options. The SA contributes well to evaluation and review arrangements and learner representatives are confident that the student voice is heard and responded to. A recently introduced online platform provides academic staff with easy access to useful information and guidance on implementing quality arrangements, including instructional videos featuring curriculum staff.

## Progression

Most learners progress to a positive destination on successfully completing their programme. Curriculum staff work well with university partners to maintain articulation arrangements for HE learners to progress to degree level study. Almost all curriculum teams draw on strong partnerships with employers to incorporate field visits to industry and presentations from guest speakers into programme delivery. Learners on software development programmes gain useful and relevant work experience with the college's learner digital support service. Staff provided helpful support for learners to make UCAS applications, produce curriculum vitae, and prepare for interviews. Learners value interaction with industry professionals during on-campus careers events to learn first-hand about the attributes and skills required to achieve their career aspirations. The response rate and overall learner satisfaction rate from the national SSES is higher than the national sector average.

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

- Recruitment to full-time FE programmes has declined by almost 10%.
- Overall, learners do not have sufficient awareness of changes or improvements made as a result of their feedback, for example through the student satisfaction and engagement survey (SSES).
- The Academic Personal Skills and Development (APSD) unit has been contextualised for use in a few subject areas. However, this is not yet consistent across the curriculum or for all learners.
- Rates of attainment for learners on FE programmes are low and are below the national sector average.
- Too many learners do not complete their programme successfully. Rates of completion with partial success are high and significantly above the national sector average.

## Main points for action

The following main point for action was identified:

- College managers should take action to improve rates of learner attainment, and in particular address the number of learners who complete with partial success.

## What happens next?

We recognise the progress made against most aspects for improvement, however further progress is required in improving outcomes for learners. We will ask for 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.

Joe Mulholland  
HM Inspector