

26 September 2023

Ms Debbie Murray
Principal
UHI North Highland

Dear Ms Murray,

A team of HM Inspectors from Education Scotland visited UHI North Highland in March 2023 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.

Recruitment

Increased collaboration between programme teams and colleagues in other UHI partner colleges is improving recruitment of learners. Staff work productively with local and regional employers to ensure the curriculum and recruitment arrangements meet current and future skills requirements.

Managers work quickly to take advantage of new funding opportunities to support employers and have significantly increased the number of employers seeking to recruit MAs in 2023/24.

Most curriculum teams host useful events that provide potential learners with information about the range and content of programmes available to them. These include taster sessions, open days, and drop-in sessions.

Admissions staff encourage potential learners to disclose additional support needs, and care-experienced learners to identify early to ensure effective pastoral support is in place prior to the start of programmes. All learners are satisfied with the level and quality of information they receive from the college before they commence their programmes.

Retention

An increase in delivery of shorter, more condensed programmes has contributed to an improved retention rate for further education (FE) learners. Rates of learner withdrawal from full-time FE programmes are significantly better than the sector average.

Curriculum managers, Personal Academic Tutors (PAT) and support staff monitor learner attendance and progress well. They draw productively on findings to put actions in place to support learners to stay on course. All learners value the responsive support they receive from teaching staff and course tutors to meet their individual needs. PATs provide an accessible first point of contact for learners with personal issues. They work well within curriculum teams to initiate and action support for individual learners and provide signposting and referral to more specialised support.

Learners have good access to a range of services that support wellbeing. Learners experiencing severe financial hardship benefit from the provision of free breakfasts and lunches to alleviate the impact of the cost-of-living crisis to enable them to engage productively in learning activities.

Attainment

The overall rate of successful completion for full-time FE learners is 6% above the national sector average and the rate of learner satisfaction is very high.

Curriculum team staff ensure that learners have access to work placements that are relevant and appropriate to their vocational programme. Staff and local stakeholders work well together to benefit the college and wider community.

In many curriculum areas, learners benefit from peer mentoring from learners on more advanced programmes to support meta skills development. This is supporting learners to recognise the value of these skills in contributing to success in work and learning contexts.

Support staff work collaboratively and productively with curriculum staff to coordinate actions to help learners stay on course and attain their qualifications.

Learners highly value the level of support they receive from all staff to help them remain on their programme and attain their qualifications.

The college quality team work well with staff to address actions raised at course team meetings. This includes meeting with learners and hosting focus groups to identify actions for improvement.

Progression

The overall positive learner destination rate is well above the sector average. Staff support learners well to make informed decisions about progression to work or further learning.

There are high levels of internal learner progression from FE to Higher Education (HE) programmes.

Teaching staff draw on their strong links with local employers to secure appropriate work placements, promote relevant employment options, and support learners into employment.

Curriculum staff engage learners at an early stage of their programme in exploring and identifying progression pathways and support them well to complete University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) applications.

All learners value the support they receive from staff to make the transition to more advanced learning or to enter employment.

Areas for improvement

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

- Overall rates of learner withdrawal rates for part-time FE programmes are 7% higher than the sector average.
- Learner support staff are not consistently or sufficiently involved with course teams to support improvements in learner retention.
- Learners engagement with representatives of Highlands and Islands Student Association (HISA) is limited and learners do sufficient understanding of the role of HISA.
- The overall rate of learner successful completion for part-time FE programmes is 9% lower than the sector average.
- Learners in hospitality, construction and engineering reported that the use of older equipment and unsuitable resources detracted from their otherwise positive learning experience.

There are no main points for action required.

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.

Peter Connelly

HM Inspectors