

23 May 2023

Joanne Wallace  
Interim Principal  
UHI Orkney College

Dear Ms Wallace,

A team of HM Inspectors from Education Scotland visited UHI Orkney College in February 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**

Improved collaboration between college curriculum teams and staff from local secondary schools has resulted in significant growth in recruitment of school-age learners and the overall number of learners aged 16-19 has increased. Teaching departments have adjusted the curriculum portfolio to provide senior phase learners with improved entry and progression routes from further education (FE) to higher education (HE) level programmes. Teaching staff and support departments coordinate a range of helpful activities to maintain engagement with successful applicants prior to the start of programmes. College leaders work collaboratively with Skills Development Scotland (SDS), Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) coordinators and the local employability hub to raise awareness of the range of curriculum pathways available to young people. Learners feel well supported by staff during the recruitment process and they report the college website and information provided by the college prior to application is helpful and informative.

### **Retention**

The overall rate of withdrawal for learners on both full-time and part-time FE programmes is significantly lower than the sector norm. Teaching staff encourage learners to build positive relationships with staff and peers from the start of their programmes. This helps to create a supportive environment for learning and is contributing to overall learner retention. The revised induction process is ensuring learners are well-informed about the full range of support services available to them from the start of their programme. Increased collaboration with curriculum areas is enabling support staff to respond quickly to address learners' needs and improve retention. Access to free breakfasts and a college foodbank is enabling learners experiencing significant financial hardship to stay at college. Learners feel comfortable about contributing their views to teaching staff and are confident that change is implemented in response to their feedback. All curriculum and support teams proactively seek feedback from learners on their college experience and involve learners in decision making to improve curriculum delivery and support services.

## Attainment

Overall rates of attainment for learners on full-time and part-time FE programmes are higher than the sector norm. Overall rates of learner success for those an ethnic minority background and those with a disability are higher than the sector norm. Most curriculum areas implement alternative assessment arrangements that take good account of individual circumstances. This is contributing to high levels of learner attainment. Meta skills are embedded well within the curriculum with some programmes including employability awards and work-based experiences that support learners well to develop skills and attitudes that are advantageous in a range of employment sectors. Staff embed awareness of the world of work within most FE programmes and curriculum teams have begun to map Career Management Skills (CMS) within programmes. Most curriculum areas make effective use hybrid delivery to expand learning opportunities and develop learners' skills and experience of using different learning platforms. The data services team worked collaboratively with curriculum staff to implement new arrangements to improve attainment. This is providing a stronger focus on programme set-up and analysis of performance indicator data. However, it is too early to evaluate the impact of improving learner outcomes. Almost all learners report that staff plan programmes well and provide learning experiences that help them to attain. College managers facilitate a range of professional reflection and evaluation activities that engage curriculum managers productively in improving outcomes for learners. Increased opportunities for curriculum teams to share experiences are helping to share examples of best practice.

## Progression

Learner progression to a positive destination on leaving college is high. Learners are supported well by staff to engage in discussions to understand, recognise and articulate their skills. This provides learners with confidence and insight to explore progression opportunities and future career pathways. Curriculum managers work well with industry partners to offer a curriculum that meets the needs of local employers and make good use of Labour Market Intelligence and employment trends to inform lesson content. This is helping to address the current and projected challenges in the region and address skills gaps and shortages. Almost all learners speak positively of the information and support they receive from staff to explore and select progression routes to further learning or employment.

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

- There has been a 17% decline in recruitment of learners over the age of 26.
- Class representatives are not yet in place across all FE programmes and learners are not sufficiently aware of the role of Highland and Islands Student Association (HISA).
- New arrangements for programme set-up and analysis of performance indicator data have not yet been evaluated to measure impact on attainment.
- Partial success rates for FE are higher than the sector norm.

## Main points for action

The following main points for action are required:

- The college should ensure that all FE programmes have a class representative in place.
- HISA should work with the college to ensure FE learners are made aware of their role and function.

## 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 through on-going engagement with the link HM Inspector.

Barbara Nelson  
HM Inspector