

25 April 2023

Dr Gillian Munro
Principal and Chief Executive
Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (SMO)

Dear Dr Munro,

A team of HM Inspectors from Education Scotland visited SMO 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

The college continues to recruit well to the Gaelic language Further Education (FE) programmes. College staff take good account of local, national, and regional priorities to inform curriculum design. The college plays a pivotal role in supporting the national priorities for Gaelic as set out in the National Gaelic Language Plan (2018-2023). Managers are growing the number of online, residential short courses and special programmes to increase the reach of the college. College managers have developed close relationships with several local secondary schools. Marketing staff recognise the value in making increased use of social media in promoting programmes. College staff have revised the website which now provides a simpler and clearer platform to promote engagement with SMO FE programmes. Learners report that overall, they are satisfied with application and enrolment approaches and how staff engage with them. A few learners mentioned that the An Cùrsa Inntigidh programme handbook required updating to make it more user-friendly. Staff recognised the need to ensure that materials on the website are suitable for users to access via mobile devices.

Retention

Tutors support learners well through online tutorial groups. College managers implement a well-structured programme to support the induction of teaching and support staff. Tutors monitor learner progress consistently throughout their courses. This results in learners being highly motivated and knowing exactly what they need to do to progress to the next stage in their learning. Learners report that learning materials are of a high quality and are easily accessible. They are well designed to support learners to study at a pace or place that suits their needs. A few learners on the recently introduced FA programmes are gaining valuable work experience with local employers. Support for wellbeing and counselling onsite or online is appropriately resourced, allowing learners access to support when they need it. College managers have provided financial support for the Student Association (SA) to organise social events. These took place over the summer and were successful in helping to stimulate the sense of community. Most learners receive good feedback on their learning from staff, although a few reported that tutors are not always responsive out with the timetabled

provision. Learner feedback is used well. Staff have built on the experience of college closure during the pandemic to offer support to learners at a time that suits their needs.

Attainment

The overall learner attainment rate for learners on part-time FE programmes is 6% above the sector norm, with 80% of learners successfully completing their programme. Managers have designed the college curriculum to include learner transition points at levels 4, 5 and 6 in the An Cursa Inntigidh programme. This is helping to support high levels of learner attainment. College managers implement a well-structured Career Long Professional Learning programme aimed at developing tutor skills in immersion teaching methodologies, language intensive pedagogies and the use of ICT in teaching and learning. “Language buddies” have been established to help learners to practice conversing with more competent Gaelic speakers and become more confident and fluent in their language.

Almost all learners are satisfied with both their preparation for assessment and the feedback they receive on their progress. Staff have good relationships with employers regarding learners on apprenticeship programmes. Staff collate information from learner feedback forms and share appropriate actions for improvement with learning and support staff teams. Staff have developed their skills well in delivering learning remotely. This is resulting in additional resources being made available to learners through online delivery.

Progression

The majority of learners are progressing onto the next level of course within SMO. Effective employer engagement supports learners to progress to employment or further study at university. For example, Foundation Apprenticeship learners can progress to teacher training or early years child development training. College staff have designed several short courses in partnership with local employers who have demand for Gaelic language speakers. Current students are encouraged to participate in summer schools, aimed at encouraging them to continue their studies, and to prepare them well for the next level of learning. Senior staff are supporting the SA in the current year to establish a Gaelic learner’s network across all tertiary education providers in Scotland. Although this work is at an early stage it is beginning to engender a sense of community and give learners more opportunity to practise and become more fluent Gaelic speakers. Tutors provide learners with helpful information regarding the next steps available to them. They also make them aware of a range of industry links and how to progress to further study. Senior staff work well with a wide range of partners to ensure the relevance of the curriculum leading to an appropriate range of useful destinations. Good information is given to learners as they enrol on programmes regarding the next steps in learning. As fluency in Gaelic is the long-term aim of almost all FE learners, this signposting from the start of programmes helps to give clear information and motivates learners to progress.

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

- The learner profile for programmes does not fully reflect the full range of potential learners. Approaches to marketing therefore need to reflect SMO and Scottish Government priorities more fully.

- Learners are not sufficiently aware of safeguarding arrangements or the procedures in place to support them whilst studying in an online environment.
- The overall rate of learner withdrawal rate for part-time FE programmes 4% higher than the sector norm.
- A few learners would welcome more on-course opportunities to provide feedback and suggest changes that could be made timeously.
- More than a few learners describe the quality of learning and teaching across tutorial groups as inconsistent.
- The attainment rate of learners on Foundation Apprenticeship programmes is low.
- A few learners commented that they would welcome an increase in the number of conversational classes available to support the development of their language skills.

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.

Margaret Rose Livingstone
HM Inspector