

28 March 2023

Jackie Galbraith
Principal and Chief Executive
West Lothian College

Dear Ms Galbraith,

A team of HM Inspectors from Education Scotland visited West Lothian College in November 2022 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

Staff consult extensively with stakeholders and make good use of labour market intelligence and trend data to plan and design the curriculum. This is helping to ensure that the range of provision offers potential learners with appropriate opportunities to access a programme that meets their specific needs and aspirations. The college has worked proactively to improve recruitment of male learners. This has resulted in an increase in the number of young males undertaking college programmes, including on programmes that traditionally attract female applicants, and has reduced its gender recruitment gap by 3%. Curriculum Teams are working well with external stakeholders, including industry advisory groups, to reshape and enhance their programmes. This collaboration is helping to identify employer needs and increasing the range of pathways available for learners. Prior to the start of programmes, staff hosted helpful sessions to maintain contact with learners, and younger learners in particular. Some learners received helpful financial support prior to enrolling through funding from the Young Persons Guarantee. These arrangements have improved recruitment rates and increased conversion rates from recruitment to enrolment. Almost all learners are satisfied with the revised approach to application and enrolment processes and with the level of communication they received from staff through follow-up emails and calls.

Retention

Overall learner withdrawal rates for part-time further education (FE) programmes have decreased but remain above the sector average. Course teams take responsibility for keeping learners on track to achieve programme goals. They make effective use of tracking tools to monitor attendance, engagement, and progress of learners, and communicate promptly with tutors and support staff when concerns are identified. This is supporting early intervention and raising retention rates. All curriculum and support staff have received training in trauma informed practice awareness. This has been very effective in providing staff with a college-wide and collective approach to improving retention and attainment. Support teams work well together to share information and ensure early intervention.

The services to support learners team identifies learners at risk of non-engagement and makes effective use of a risk register to communicate concerns to all relevant staff. This internal communication and referral approach provides learners with swift access to appropriate support services. Curriculum teams reflect well on feedback from learners to adapt delivery approaches and enhance the learning experience. They draw constructively on learner views to incorporate wider experiences such as field visits to industry and opportunities to engage with external partners. These activities inform and motivate learners to progress through their programme

Attainment

The number of part-time learners who successfully completed their programme has improved. Attainment for male learners on FE programmes has improved and is above sector average. Attainment for male learners on higher education (HE) programmes improved but remains below the sector average. Course teams carried out a thorough review of the positive and negative impact of online learning on learners and staff. They drew constructively on their analysis to plan approaches for delivery of learning, teaching and assessment. Staff teams are monitoring closely the impact of these approaches on learner retention and attainment. The college has invested significantly in the wellbeing of staff and learners. A number of external agencies, including a drugs and alcohol support worker, provide in-house, support services. All classes have learner representation. Class representatives, class ambassadors and class champions contribute to curriculum team meetings and provide feedback on cross-college facilities and processes to help shape improvements. The college has introduced a group tutor role across all full-time FE programmes with responsibility for providing ongoing pastoral support and liaising with support services to improve retention and attainment. A helpful professional learning programme is in place to support and equip new group tutors to carry out their role.

Progression

Learner progression to a positive destination is high. The college works in partnership with West Lothian Council and NHS Lothian to offer Project Search provision to young people aged 16-19 with additional support needs. The work-placement element of the programme supports learners well to develop confidence and employability skills and most of participants were still in employment after 6 months. Curriculum teams have developed very effective partnerships with a range of local and national employers. These partnerships have informed and assisted the redesign of programmes to ensure the curriculum meets the current and future needs of industry. Staff have reflected on arrangements to support learner progression and now provide more comprehensive information about the range of opportunities available. A roadmap has been created for every programme showing clear entry and exit points. This is being used effectively with learners to stimulate discussion and decisions about progression routes.

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

- Overall withdrawal rates for learners on full-time programmes have increased and are above the sector average.
- Overall withdrawal rates for learners on part-time HE programmes have increased and are now above the sector average.
- 60% of full-time FE learners successfully completed their programme, a decrease of five percentage points from the previous year

Main points for action

There were no main points for action identified:

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 ongoing engagement with the college link HM Inspector.

Barbara Nelson
HM Inspector