

The Corporation of New College Durham

**Minutes of the meeting of the Further Education Quality,  
Curriculum and Students Committee held on 8 June 2023**

**Present:**

Joy Brindle (Chair)  
Christine Warren  
Andy Broadbent  
Megan Poole  
Mark Gomersall  
Davey Benson

**Apologies:**

Emily Baxter

**In attendance:**

Alison Maynard (Deputy Principal)  
Andy Stephenson (Vice Principal)  
Adele Dowson (Vice Principal)  
Colleen Peters (Vice Principal)  
Peter Morrison (Vice Principal)  
Tim Skelton (Lead Practitioner e-Learning/Lecturer) *from 23/15 to 20/19*  
Caroline Winter (Head of Governance & Corporation Secretary)

**Action**

**23/15 Chair's introduction and starred items**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and reminded members to declare their interests in any item of business to be discussed at the meeting. No interests were declared.

Members confirmed they did not require any further discussion about the starred agenda paper G.

The Chair advised members that Paper F was a confidential paper.

**23/16 Apologies for absence** were received from Emily Baxter.

**23/17 Minutes of previous meeting**

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 February 2023 were agreed as accurate and signed by the Chair.

**23/18 Matters arising**

23/06 – qualification reform was discussed at the strategic review session and a further update would be brought to the next meeting on the emerging reforms at Level 2.

23/11 – financial literacy would be incorporated into the Personal Development Framework in the next academic year.

23/11 – no changes were made to the method of appointing the Students' Union President and a new President had been elected for 2023/24.

23/12 – the School Newsletters had been circulated and placed on the governors' portal and it agreed that an overview was no longer necessary.

## **23/19 Curriculum Presentation – Artificial Intelligence**

The Chair welcomed Tim Skelton to the meeting to provide an update on developments in artificial intelligence (AI).

Members noted that AI had developed at pace since initial discussions within the College on its practical implications late in 2022, and therefore consideration of the issues was still very new. The current focus was on Teaching and Learning and how this could be informed by AI, but significant consideration was being given to the implications for assessment and ensuring academic integrity. Members noted that the College had been approached by the DfE to understand the potential for IA within a College setting in a context where attempts had been made by some institutions to ban its use. The College had taken the view that a ban would lead to inequity between students with access to AI outside of the College and those without, and recognising its potential to be the biggest innovation in teaching and learning would allow this to be harnessed in a positive way.

Tim explained there were many different versions of AI but he would focus on the text-based ChatGPT for the purposes of the current discussion. Discussions had been held with staff on how AI could be used in the College with examples including developing quizzes, lesson plans and handouts tailored to a specific group, revision guides and there was also great potential to support students with SEND or other learning needs. Tim gave examples of combining AI with MS forms to provide instant analysis of quiz results which a lecturer could then use to change the course of a lesson and also the production of a multiple-choice quiz with plausible incorrect answers, all of which could be generated in a few minutes. Tim emphasised that whilst AI was an expert with the ability to generate resources to a high standard very quickly, there would always be a need for the skills and knowledge of a teacher/lecturer to verify that the output was fully valid. The current advances were groundbreaking and potential benefits included improving staff mental health and wellbeing, supporting industry experts new to teaching with ideas and support, freeing up staff time to undertake pastoral activity, marking or other preparation and a further improvement in quality of lessons. Members observed a demonstration of how AI could be used in teaching and learning to develop a quiz, review the output and adapt the parameters using ChatGPT.

Members discussed the potential risks associated with using AI within the College and noted that both a free and paid version were used by the College. The risk of a significant increase in the charges to use the service after it became embedded was a concern and so a cost/benefit analysis would be required should

this occur. Members recognised that AI would be a useful tool in teaching but expressed concern in relation to media reports over inaccuracies in content and noted the current limitations on up to date content post-September 2021. The importance of AI being used by teachers as experts in their field was emphasised so that output would be checked, personalised and adapted before use. Members were also concerned at the potential loss of dialogue and discussion within the classroom and Tim confirmed that whilst staff were learning how to deliver in a different way post-Covid, the importance of face-to-face learning and interaction with and between students would remain, with teachers as the experts in their ability to deliver an outstanding lesson. Tim advised that the ability to use AI would also be an employability skill for NCD students giving them an advantage in the labour market. Employers were starting to use the technology and there was a gap in students leaving education with the digital skills to meet employer need. It was therefore essential that staff could show students how to use AI correctly and effectively whilst understanding its flaws and limitations.

In response to a member's question about how widely AI was currently being used, Tim confirmed there was no current measure but anecdotal evidence provided a number of examples that already suggested widespread use among staff and students.

Members were keen to understand the rules and parameters to be applied moving forwards and it was noted that the DfE had published guidelines in this respect and a paper was being prepared for initial consideration by the Senior Leadership Team. It was recognised that the position was evolving rapidly and the Committee agreed to receive ongoing updates. The Chair thanked Tim for an informative presentation.

*Tim Skelton left the meeting.*

## **23/20 Curriculum Planning Update (Paper B)**

Alison Maynard presented Paper B, which provided an overview of the curriculum planning process for 2023/24.

The curriculum planning process was coming to a close and whilst it had evolved into a sophisticated process that reviewed past provision to inform future planning, it was increasing in complexity in light of the numerous changes in education and external influences, including post-16 qualification reform and the need to reflect external priorities including the North East LEP and the three Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) across the region.

The process considered contributions to the College across courses and departments, and whilst there was an expected minimum of 50%, other considerations included contribution to local and regional priorities, benefits to students, and staff workload. These issues could provide the rationale for a new

course that could initially be a loss leader but with further potential opportunities. It was noted that Corporate Services teams had also made a significant contribution in developing the College's plans.

Members noted the College offered a very challenging curriculum and reviewed the key changes and outcomes outlined in the report in respect of T Levels, Foundation Studies, Sixth Form, Higher Education and Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs), Apprenticeships, International students, unviable courses and changes to the curriculum offer.

Members welcomed the report in assisting their understanding of the curriculum planning process. In response to a question on the use of data and intelligence, Alison advised that labour market information was used in forecasting to avoid areas where there was either a saturated or no market and that managers attended employer advisory panels to discuss proposals and seek advice and endorsement on areas that should or should not be included. There was still a challenge of stabilising the College within a period of significant change and members noted as an example that there was still a significant proportion of stakeholders that did not understand T Levels.

Members commented on the robustness of the process and highlighted the level of collaboration with employers. In response to a member's question about a reduction in delivery hours in Access to HE and ESOL provision, Alison confirmed that this would address potential duplication and repetition at no detriment to the students and was likely to have a positive impact on retention as learners gained more enjoyment from their programme.

In response to a member's question about planned numbers in the context of 16-18 population growth, Alison advised that recent growth had followed a period of decline that required initial recovery. A cautious approach to target setting had therefore been taken whilst adapting to qualification reforms and other changes with a view to increasing growth and the College's market share in future. The College had commissioned external support to plan the next three-to-five-year cycle with a focus on skills and market share to support future growth in key areas. Members asked about the impact of changes in the approach to Functional Skills and GCSE maths and English and noted that any staffing changes would be absorbed and even out across courses, with the priority to ensure students were on the right course for them. It was noted that there was an expectation that all students would cover digital skills through an innovative blended learning approach.

Members noted the report.

## **23/21 Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (Paper C)**

Peter Morrison presented Paper C, which updated on progress against the student mental health and wellbeing strategy (the strategy) since its introduction in August 2020.

Members noted the significance of mental health and wellbeing issues in the lead up to and following Covid-19. The strategy aligned to the Association of Colleges (AoC) Mental Health Charter and members noted a wide range of initiatives had been introduced under the action plan and in response to emerging issues. This included a focus on mental health and wellbeing and building resilience as part of the Personal Development (PD) framework, the employment of Level 5 Counselling students to provide one-to-one therapy for students, employment of a Health and Wellbeing coach to plan and deliver a comprehensive enrichment programme which contributed to the Ofsted assessment of Outstanding and implementation of an early intervention strategy including workshops for students. Whilst a reduction in student absence was yet to be seen, an improvement was expected moving forwards. Members also noted the input from experienced specialist services and various events to educate students and raise awareness about mental health, the introduction of a Fitness to Study Policy and provision of CPD sessions for teaching and support staff to equip them in managing health and wellbeing for students. A whole-college approach was taken to mental health and wellbeing and the students' mental health and wellbeing strategy dovetailed with the corresponding staff strategy and action plan. Peter advised that it was now proposed to align the support for staff and students under a single mental health and wellbeing strategy, but with two distinct action plans for the respective groups.

Members complemented that College on the very good work to date but emphasised the need to remain focused on these issues. It was noted that the revised strategy and action plans would be considered by the Further Education, Higher Education and Finance and Resources Committees.

Members asked how the College's experience and response compared with others attending the recent training with the DfE and Peter confirmed that attendees were a mix of education providers, but it appeared that the College was more proactive and advanced in its approach and had also received enquiries about the PD framework following publication of the Ofsted report.

Members noted the progress on mental health and wellbeing and approved the proposal to develop a combined staff and student strategy.

## 23/22 Update on Key Performance Indicators (Paper D)

Alison Maynard presented Paper D, which updated on performance against key performance indicators (KPIs) for 2022/23.

**College targets** The Ofsted judgement of 'Good' met KPI for 2022/23. The College was meeting five of the Gatsby benchmarks but the difficulties in meeting the remaining three in relation to independent advice and guidance and student placements were noted due to their assessment against an 'all students' measure that was developed for schools and was now being reviewed in the context of FE.

**Education and Training** Based on prediction point (PP) 2, an achievement rate of 83.9% was predicted. Meetings with Heads of Schools had taken place to set clear expectations around improving the figure, which was significantly below target and a further PP was introduced to monitor progress. Performance continued to be affected by students' mental health and students leaving to take up full time employment. Staff had embraced the challenge and introduced a series of initiatives which had already made an impact with an anticipated 5% improvement in performance by end of year. The College was expected to meet the KPI for adult education budget provision and members noted the positive external delivery by partners as this element of provision continued to grow following the establishment of the Business Sales and Growth team.

The increased number of students undertaking Functional Skills maths at Level 1 presented an in-year challenge and significant work was underway to improve performance and maximise achievement. Alison explained that National Achievement Rates (NAR) confirmed this was a national issue and that a number of colleges had moved away from or reduced the number of students studying Functional Skills as this was more challenging to achieve and had poorer performance. Discussions with the AoC had confirmed a shift across the sector to GCSE which had secured higher achievement rates, and the College was also seeking views from other colleges as well as discussing with the North East LEP, with the feedback being fed into curriculum planning.

Due to a higher than expected predicted performance for apprenticeships (79.4%), additional modelling was undertaken to provide a more accurate picture, taking into account delays in end point assessments and students being made redundant. This resulted in a revised figure of 75%, which was still excellent performance exceeding the previous year's figure and was one of the highest nationally for apprenticeship provision.

Members reinforced management's concerns about performance and welcomed the action already taken to address this. The very

good performance against the NAR for apprenticeships was noted, but that the overall achievement rate was below NAR.

Alison advised that curriculum planning was considering the approach to provision of digital skills to address LSIP requirements as well as reviewing maths and English provision and the outcome would be brought back for the Committee's consideration.

Members asked for examples of non-regulated qualifications and asked how these were used, emphasising the need to ensure that any changes to provision were of benefit to students. Alison provided assurance that the intention was to address what was a very challenging curriculum and introduce courses that would support students' employability, but incorporating this in a way that was manageable for learners. The Principal confirmed a clear approach had been discussed by the Senior Leadership Team to ensure that accurate comparisons were being made to other providers and that any changes to address a downward trend in core achievement needed to demonstrate impact. Members welcomed this assurance and agreed it was essential to understand the impact of introducing any changes to courses. It was noted that the predicted rate excluding non-regulated qualifications was 85.4% compared with last year's end of year position of 81% demonstrating that core achievement was improving.

In response to a member's question on the decline in the ALPs grade, Andy Stephenson confirmed that the starting point for this cohort was based on teacher assessed grades (TAGs) rather than exam experience. Members sought assurance on the confidence in the accuracy of predictions and noted that staff were very experienced and well-informed to undertake the process as well as having the benefit of last year's exams and the progress made in-year which provided an indication. Members asked about comparison with other colleges however due to the range of courses included within the NAR it was difficult to make comparisons at that level. Members felt this demonstrated the value in measuring performance against the College's own trends and targets to avoid inaccurate comparisons where data was interpreted in different ways. Members noted that the discussion would continue at the next meeting and that this would also be considering exam results.

The Principal gave a verbal update on work that was underway to review the strategic KPIs that would be used to monitor performance across the College's strategies. The original strategies were being reviewed to map activity and progress to date with teams assessing which KPIs were strategic and which were operational. The aim was to produce a dashboard for each committee that would provide an update to each meeting on an agreed set of KPIs. The remaining KPIs would continue to be monitored within individual teams. It was proposed to use the members' training session before the Corporation meeting in July

to discuss the outcome of this work in detail, consider the distance travelled to date and establish the framework for the following year.

Members noted the report and verbal update.

### **23/23 Update on FE Quality Development Plan (Paper E)**

Andy Stephenson presented Paper E, the update on the FE Quality Development Plan (QDP).

In areas for improvement, members noted the achievement rate position and the issues relating to Functional Skills following the previous discussion. Attendance was a key area for improvement due to a decline over the year following an initial improvement. Mental health remained a key factor and the steering group established to tackle attendance had begun to establish key fundamentals in dealing with the issue and had developed a new process for 2023/24. In relation to improving the recruitment and retention of specialist staff, members noted the work to attract high quality staff with a strong offer to new staff. The significant challenge in recruiting dental staff and other niche areas remained, as faced by other providers. Strong progress had been made in support for high needs funded students with new staff appointed and the use of the new ProMonitor system to share key learning and support information.

Considering areas for development, members noted the impact of learning visits was not yet consistent although improvements were being seen as a result of the significant changes made in the quality approach to teaching, learning and assessment. The College was embedding an improvement culture with an excellent CPD offer. The College had continued to review and refine the outstanding PD model to ensure consistency around the tutorial element next year. Progress was noted on the apprenticeship reviews which were intended to enhance the quality and consistency in completion of reviews and underpinning documentation. The final area for development was the ongoing review of staff workload. Management were conscious this was an ongoing issue and action plans had been developed by all departments with impact being monitored through performance meetings. Following their earlier presentation, members noted the potential impact of AI on workload by saving staff time, with a focus on improving processes within corporate functions to reduce duplication and improve quality of work.

Members commented on the clarity of the report in updating on progress and looked forward to seeing the impact in future updates. Members noted the report.

### **23/24 Curriculum & Quality monitoring – discussion report (Paper F)**

Adele Dowson and Colleen Peters presented Paper F, the Curriculum and Quality monitoring discussion report.

Members reviewed the update on emerging themes in relation to attendance, student mental health and behaviour, recruitment and retention challenges and qualification reforms, noting the content of their discussions on these issues earlier in the meeting.

The forecast for apprenticeship income was £4.9m following a growth in learner numbers and members noted the achievement position as discussed earlier. The College continued to be proactive in its work with employers and members reviewed the new initiatives on which the apprenticeship team was working in collaboration with a range of employers.

Adele advised that a cultural shift had been seen in the time invested by leaders and managers in the approach to quality and practice across the College in the current year. Members noted that 64% of learning visits had been judged as good or better, eight of which were outstanding and 12 judged as inadequate. 69 members of staff had been signposted to individual teaching learning and assessment support and allocated a member of the Teaching & Learning Innovation team to provide further development following their learning visit. Members were updated on the continuing partnerships with Elvebakken in Norway and Neils Brock in Denmark to enable international students to study at the College and the plans to widen the network of Homestay providers.

Members recognised the positive outcomes of learning visits and that this was expected to improve further towards the year end due to the risk-based approach in the order that visits were scheduled with the data from stronger teachers built into the end of year update. Members asked about the lower than expected levels of staff attendance at CPD sessions considering the quality of the sessions available. Andy Stephenson advised that there was still work to bring some staff along with the cultural shift in curriculum processes, however there were a number of staff that had emerged having benefitted from the process which would help build confidence and trust in the process. Where staff did not attend this was being addressed by Curriculum Managers and Line Managers. Exceptional staff were encouraged to share their experience and good practice, showcasing this through the recent Teaching and Learning Fair, however some staff were still to engage.

Members welcomed the report which clearly identified the key areas of focus for further activity and improvement and discussed the timing of approval of the Quality Development Plan and how this related to the SAR process in the Autumn Term. Whilst the SAR process provided validation to the key themes identified, it was recognised that the work was ongoing regardless of when the plan was approved.

The Chair thanked the team for an excellent report highlighting the detail of the strengths being identified in the classroom, which was very reassuring. Members noted the report.

**23/25 Curriculum & Quality Monitoring – information report (Paper G)**

Members reviewed the Curriculum and Quality Monitoring information report, which updated on the Learner Support Fund, student discipline in Term 2 and FE and Corporate complaints in Term 2.

Members noted the report.

**23/26 Students Union Report (Paper H)**

Megan Poole presented Paper H, the Students Union report. Members were updated on the College's annual Equality, Diversity and Inclusion week which had again been very well-received and included an orchestra event with a band whose members all had SEND or physical disabilities, a visit from a Chief Inspector of Police as part of International Women's Day, a range of activities as part of Mental Health Awareness Week including a mall event, tea and talk sessions, a journalling session, counselling drop-ins, a staff quiz and enrichment activities. Level 2 Performing Arts students were also supported in their social action project in which they were visiting care homes to sing for residents and a period poverty campaign was in development. The last FE student forum had taken place the previous week and members noted that no major issues had been raised, the lunchtime issues were being discussed with the Head of Procurement and other issues picked up with individual Curriculum Managers or Heads of School as appropriate.

The Chair commented on the amount of work involved in organising and delivering the programme for mental health week and thanked Megan for her report.

**23/27 Proposed Schedule of Business for 2023/24 (Paper I)**

Members reviewed the proposed Schedule of Business for 2023/24. The Chair explained that the Schedule provided the skeleton of the Committee's work programme and would retain flexibility to accommodate issues arising during the year. Presentation topics would be developed as key issues emerged but there would be an opportunity to consider potential topics during the Committee Effectiveness Review which would follow the formal meeting.

Alison Maynard advised that developments in relation to the Accountability Agreement would need to be reflected as more information emerged for future years' agreements, along with other key developments relating to skills and regional devolution.

The Chair emphasised that significant progress had been made in reducing duplication in meeting papers and members and

management would work together to ensure this continued moving forwards.

Members endorsed the proposed Schedule of Business for 2023/24.

**23/28 Any other business**

None.

**23/29 Date of next meeting: TBC**

*Alison Maynard, Andy Stephenson, Adele Dowson, Peter Morrison and Colleen Peters left the meeting.*

**23/30 Annual Review of Committee Effectiveness 2022/23**

Members were asked to complete a questionnaire in advance of the meeting. In addition to reviewing the summary of responses the following areas were discussed:

- The committee may benefit from a wider membership with private sector and FE experience, although there was merit in having a balance between experts and non-experts
- Allocating a buddy from the committee for new committee members could assist in familiarisation with the agenda and provide support leading up to the first meeting
- The proposed data dashboard was welcomed although it was felt the refinement of KPIs would mainly impact on Corporate Services measures
- Risks were discussed appropriately as part of committee business
- Whilst it was difficult to measure due to the time restrictions on meetings, the Committee had a good balance in how it focused its time between scrutiny and strategic discussion and the presentations received during the year had ensured consideration of key strategic matters
- Members had mixed views on how to support all members to contribute during meetings and welcomed the update on a training session for all members
- Reviewing the timing of the meeting in the Autumn term may be helpful given the level of activity at the start of the year and length of time to the first meeting at which the 2022/23 end of year reports and 2023/24 targets would be considered. It was recognised however that this would be a very busy period from a curriculum perspective and an issue for the Senior Leadership Team to consider.

Signed.....Date.....