

CHAIR APPROVED

**The Corporation of New College Durham**

**Minutes of the meeting of the Further Education Quality Curriculum  
and Students Committee held on 13 June 2024**

**Present:**

Joy Brindle (Chair)  
Andy Broadbent  
Emily Baxter

Suzanne Slater  
Alice Tomlinson  
Mark Gomersall

**Apologies:**

Moss White  
Davey Benson

**Observing:**

Ben Fisher (*via MS Teams*)

**In attendance:**

Alison Maynard (Deputy Principal)  
Andy Stephenson (Vice Principal)  
Adele Dowson (Vice Principal)  
Colleen Peters (Vice Principal)  
Peter Morrison (Vice Principal)  
Caroline Winter (Head of Governance & Corporation Secretary)

**Action**

**24/14 Chair's introduction and starred items**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting including Sharon Bennett (Assistant Principal Partnerships and Skills) and Ben Fisher, the Chair of the HEQCS Committee who was observing the meeting virtually. The Chair reminded members to declare their interests in any item of business to be discussed. No interests were declared.

The Chair advised that this would have been the last meeting for Moss White as her term of office was due to expire on 30 June 2024. It was also noted that this was the last FEQCS meeting for Alice Tomlinson as her term of office was also due to expire on 30 June. The Chair asked that the Committee's thanks be placed on record for the contribution of both student governors over the last year.

The Chair also noted that it was her last meeting as Chair and as a member of Corporation. Joy thanked the committee members for their participation in discussions, which were focused on the College's core business, and emphasised the value of members' contributions as governors with a range of different backgrounds and perspectives.

Members confirmed they did not require any further discussion about the starred agenda Paper G and agreed to re-order the agenda to consider the additional Paper J (Freedom of Speech) after the curriculum presentation, to ensure this important area received the necessary discussion time.

**24/15 Apologies for absence** were received from Moss White and Davey Benson.

**24/16 Minutes of previous meeting**

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 February 2024 were agreed as accurate and signed by the Chair.

**24/17 Matters arising**

24/07 – the GCSE high-grade maths predictions were reported to Corporation in March and a further update would be considered as part of the current agenda.

**24/18 Curriculum Presentation – National Battery Training and Skills Academy (Presentation)**

The Chair welcomed Sharon Bennett to present on the developments in relation to the National Battery Training Academy.

Sharon provided an overview of the project which was a collaboration led by Newcastle University to deliver industry aligned training and skills development targeted at Levels 2 and 3. The project was integrated with the growing activity in the region around electrification and would provide a potential pathway for a range of qualifications and accreditation. Members were briefed on the project funding and reviewed a video demonstrating the equipment this had funded. Sharon explained the skills challenges faced due to a shortage of talent against the need for a significant growth in the workforce over the next few years. Members noted that the project had developed specialist and bespoke training for the needs of AESC as well as the wider battery industry. Whilst the focus was on advanced manufacturing, training on soft skills as well as technical areas was being provided at pace to support new and upskill existing staff. The College was providing support in relation to funding options to assist in providing apprenticeships and bootcamps as part of the project. Members were interested to learn that the AESC team were co-delivering the bootcamps and that the richness of this dual approach between employer and training provider had been positively noted by the DfE in its recent visit to review bootcamp provision. In light of the benefits of this way of working the College were planning to roll out the approach more widely with other external training providers and employers. Sharon summarised the regular project communications with Newcastle University and AESC and updated that the College had been asked to present on this work at various national sector events.

Members commended the College for its leading role in this work and asked how it would be embedded in future years following the initial pump priming funding. Sharon confirmed that whilst the initial project funding had enabled the development of the Academy, other funding sources were available and would be

pursued to ensure the provision was sustainable. As the equipment was multi-functional, it would support wider advanced manufacturing in a range of the region's emerging key sectors such as space and semiconductors. Members also noted that the College would be reviewing the adult offer including exploring potential areas of this work that could be delivered through AEB and other strands of funding to embed the provision within the curriculum. Members commented that regional funding was likely to be increasingly available for this area of activity and noted that the College was well placed to influence future discussions and developments.

The Chair thanked Sharon for her presentation.

#### **24/19 Consultation on proposed regulatory advice and other matters relating to Freedom of Speech (Paper J)**

Peter Morrison presented Paper J, which updated on new legislation due to come into effect for Higher Education providers in relation to Freedom of Speech. Members noted the recent Office for Students (OfS) consultation on proposed guidance to accompany the new legislation and that the College was looking ahead to its approach to compliance. Both the College (via the AoC) and the Students' Union had responded to the consultation and members noted the AoC response appended to the report. Whilst the potential impact of the forthcoming general election was recognised on the implementation of the new responsibilities, Peter summarised the key areas under consideration: how to support the Students' Union in light of the significant responsibility placed on the President, a new complaints scheme managed by the OfS giving students a further (third) route to complain, the need to ensure students were aware of their rights and that staff were fully trained on their rights and responsibilities, the implications for all individuals on the College site and the need to align with existing related College policies and procedures. Peter advised that it was proposed to develop a Freedom of Speech Policy and Code of Practice in advance of the 2024/25 academic year.

Members observed that the OfS consultation had closed only recently and there was potential that the draft guidance would change before implementation, however the College would retain flexibility to amend its policy and procedures as required. Members also commented that the OfS guidance and examples were focused around some very sensitive current issues and that the guidance did not demonstrate an understanding of the FE perspective. Peter advised that personal development sessions covered difficult topics and freedom of speech within the law so the College was well placed in dealing with these types of difficult issues. Members felt that managing the risks associated with Freedom of Speech would be key moving forwards and emphasised the importance of regularly reiterating the rules and procedures through communications and training. Members emphasised the importance of support and training for the

incoming Students' Union President in light of their responsibilities and expressed concern at reports that some colleges may dissolve their students' unions due to the pressure the legislation would place on them.

Members noted that the draft Freedom of Speech policy had been circulated separately to the meeting papers and that the Code of Practice was still to be developed. As members had not been able to consider the draft policy before the meeting it was agreed that any comments on the draft policy or views on areas to be included in the Code should be forwarded to the Head of Governance and Corporation Secretary.

Members confirmed their endorsement of the approach to implementation as proposed in the report.

#### **24/20 Accountability Agreement update (Paper B)**

Alison Maynard presented Paper B. It was noted that the 2024/25 Accountability Agreement (AA) was approved by Corporation in May and the focus of the current update would be progress against the 2023/24 action plan.

Alison explained that some areas would be reported to the next FEQCS Committee meeting following the summer achievement results. Members noted that the majority of objectives in the plan had been achieved and that achievement rates in FE and apprenticeships were predicted to be met. Maths results remained an area of concern but progress was being made.

In response to a member's question on whether progress against the current year's AA was expected to be reported anywhere, Alison advised that this had not been made clear to date and DfE focus was now on next year's agreement. The Principal reiterated that the AA provided a layer that sat between and linked the College's strategic and operational plans and therefore remained a useful document for its own purposes.

Members noted the progress to date.

#### **24/21 Curriculum Planning Update (Paper C)**

Alison Maynard presented Paper C, which provided an overview of the curriculum planning process for 2024/25.

Members noted that the objective of the process was to review and enhance the curriculum offer, while addressing funding and timetabling concerns and align with various regional plans and priorities and forthcoming qualification reform. Alison highlighted the involvement of employers and stakeholders and particularly the input from Corporate Services to shape the curriculum offer.

Alison talked through the key changes to the curriculum relating to T Levels, mainstream FE provision, Foundation Studies, internal and partner Higher Education, Apprenticeships, Bootcamps and cohorts of international students as well as unviable courses and changes to the curriculum offer around maths and electrical engineering.

Members commented that the paper was helpful in setting out the process behind curriculum planning and Alison advised that this was undertaken working closely with the budget process. In response to a member's question, Alison confirmed that the courses identified as unviable were due to previous low numbers but that due to its importance to the County Durham hospitality sector, food and beverage would run as a progression route. Members welcomed the ongoing monitoring of student numbers and contribution and asked about the impact on the plan if there was a change in government. Alison advised that the College's 3-year planning approach enabled planning over a longer term and that the plan was flexible and able to respond quickly if changes were required. Members asked whether attitudes to T Levels had progressed more recently and Alison confirmed that whilst the removal of alternative options had been a factor, over the last six months employers were increasingly talking about T Levels and how this could provide a talent pipeline. The College was doing all it could to be prepared to respond. Members sought clarification on routes for students that may not be suitable for T Levels in relation to early years and plumbing and were advised that progression routes were still available via employers. Members asked about the risk of not having like for like qualifications in some areas and noted that this national debate had been paused in light of the forthcoming general election.

Members noted the report.

#### **24/22 Strategic Monitoring – Update on 2023/24 Strategic KPIs and proposed targets for 2024/25 (Paper D)**

Alison Maynard presented Paper D, which updated on Strategic KPIs and targets.

##### **2023/24 Performance update**

Members noted the maths and English predictions and asked about achievement rates on their main programme. Noting that the majority of students had passed their course, members felt it was importance to recognise this achievement, that these learners would progress and that there were more students with maths and English qualifications than at any time in recent years as a result of the FE sector. Members noted the comparison with national achievement rates and acknowledged that the College and Corporation had high standards and expectations and therefore set challenging targets. In relation to attendance figures, members noted the limitations in using national rates as a comparator and

also that national targets did not take into account learners' history in levels of attendance at school.

Members sought clarification on the impact of the strategic decision on which maths qualification students would be entered for as a key factor in determining whether to accept the targets being proposed. Members were updated that a significant volume of students were sitting exams in the current round and thanked all of the curriculum and corporate staff for their contribution throughout the period. Members praised the very strong performance in relation to apprenticeship growth and achievement rates, emphasising that this was a very difficult area of provision.

### **Proposed targets for 2024/25**

Members reviewed the proposed targets for 2024/25 and Alison highlighted areas where there was a proposed change. Members queried whether the proposed Functional Skills target was achievable and Adele Dowson updated on the range of targeted interventions to support improvement including the establishment of a steering group to oversee progress, a change in process to identify low level learners at an early stage and direct them to additional coaching support, focused engagement by the Maths team on their own learners to avoid reliance on the curriculum teams and booster sessions for students that needed extra support. Additional support would also be provided for those students on the borderline of a high-grade GCSE. Members commented that the Ofsted inspection had highlighted this area as a concern and it was recognised that this had informed the College's current approach. The importance of understanding the impact of the strategic decision about the choice of maths qualification on both Functional Skills and high-grade GCSE performance in setting targets was reiterated. The Principal advised that the College recognised the achievement rates needed to improve and that there was a current push to address the issue. Whilst there may not always be clear and direct comparisons, there were other organisations with a similar delivery profile with better results and the College was keen to learn from their approach. It was important to understand the root cause of current levels of performance and although some areas were beyond the College's control such as the change in grade boundaries, the steering group was focused on what was within its of control, emphasising that nothing was off the table for review.

The Principal drew attention to the 2025/26 recruitment target and advised that whilst this appeared to be a plateau, the target reflected the anticipated fall in school leavers in that year so that achievement of the target would be an improvement in real terms. Members noted the close working between curriculum teams and the finance department on the recruitment, funding and income targets.

Members noted the latest College performance for 2023/24 and approved all of the proposed KPI targets for 2024/25.

## **24/23 Update on FE Quality Development Plan 2023/24 (Paper E)**

Alison Maynard presented Paper E, which updated on the FE Quality Development Plan for 2023/24.

Members were updated on the areas for improvement including: the review of functional skills curriculum alignment, interventions to improve GCSE maths high grades, staffing developments in engineering and electrical installation which had made significant progress and moved out of steering group intervention and continued efforts to improve attendance. Alison advised that overall good progress had been made over the year but focus was being maintained in areas where further development was needed.

Members discussed the attendance position and suggested that in the context of the DfE threshold on persistent absence, it would be helpful to consider the detail behind the proportion of students with lower than 90% attendance to understand whether there was a small cohort with very low attendance or a wider spread of more students just below the threshold. It was noted that some students had shown a significant improvement on their previous attendance levels at school even where this had not reached the 90% threshold and that the position had evolved to the position that some students whilst not attending College were still learning by engaging at home. Alison advised that the College was sharing data with Durham County Council to assist in identifying at risk learners at the earliest opportunity.

Members welcomed the innovative development activity within the plan since the focus was extended to incorporate development alongside improvement activity.

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

Adele Dowson presented Paper F, which updated on emerging themes in education and training including progress on the curriculum of the future, attendance, student mental health and behaviour, apprenticeships, enhanced learning, employer engagement, closure of ESF projects, the Local Skills Improvement Fund and international student cohorts.

Members sought clarification on where the national bootcamp contract was reflected in the KPI targets and it was confirmed that this was located within the sub-contracting measures.

Members thanked Adele for the report commenting that the emerging themes section was particularly useful in understanding current issues facing the College.

**24/25 Curriculum & Quality Monitoring – information report (Paper G)**

Members received the Curriculum and Quality Monitoring information report, which updated on the Learner Support Fund, Student Discipline (Term 2) and FE and Corporate complaints and compliments for 2023/24.

**24/26 FE Student Forum feedback – Overview of issues raised and progress update (Paper H)**

Alice Tomlinson presented Paper H, the FE Student Forum feedback. Alice reported that the last meeting of the year had been very well attended. The key issues raised were food pricing and litter around campus with students being encouraged to dispose of their litter appropriately. It was welcomed that students had responded positively on the issue of litter and noted that the College was often complemented by external visitors at the cleanliness and presentation of the campus. Overall the meeting had been very positive.

Members received the FE Student Forum minutes and noted the Issues and Actions document.

**24/27 Review of Proposed Schedule of Business for 2024/25 (Paper I)**

Members reviewed and endorsed the proposed Schedule of Business for 2024/25.

**24/28 Any other business – none.**

**24/29 Date of next meeting:** To be confirmed.

**24/30 Annual Review of Committee Effectiveness 2023/24**

Members were asked to complete a questionnaire in advance of the meeting. Members reviewed the summary of responses which highlighted:

- the need to reflect on committee membership for the forthcoming academic year in light of changes to existing membership
- meeting papers were well-presented and provided all necessary information and strategic discussions had been a welcome addition, with relevant and important topics
- the balance between monitoring, decision-making and strategic debate had improved as a result of changes over the last two years and the mix of executive and scrutiny functions worked well
- the most strategically important work undertaken by the Committee included the strategic monitoring of performance to drive quality standards, the SAR process

and impact on improvements in functional skills maths and English

- there was a need to consider strengthening committee decision-making responsibilities

**Signed**.....**Date**.....