

The Corporation of New College Durham

**Minutes of the Education Quality, Curriculum and Students
Committee meeting held on 20 November 2025**

Present:

Suzanne Slater (Chair)
Andy Broadbent
Helen Golightly
Rhiannon Hiles
Nigel Harrett

Stephen King
Kathryn McCloghrie
Mark Gomersall
Matthew Gamsby
Hayley Farrell

Apologies:

None

In attendance:

Alison Maynard (Deputy Principal)
Andy Stephenson (Vice Principal)
Adele Dowson (Vice Principal)
Colleen Peters (Vice Principal)
Peter Morrison (Vice Principal)
Rob Grainey (Vice Principal)
Suzanne Crane (Assistant Principal)
Caroline Winter (Head of Governance & Corporation Secretary)
Chloe Freeman (Administrator)

Observing:

Bethany Robson – *to and including 25/05*

Action

25/19 Chair's introduction and starred items

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting noting that this was the first meeting for Nigel Harrett, Stephen King, Matthew Gamsby and Hayley Farrell since their appointment to the Committee.

The Chair reminded members to declare their interests in any item of business to be discussed. No interests were declared.

Due to the volume of business on the agenda, the Chair proposed treating Paper B3 as a starred item as the content was previously included in the Curriculum and Quality Monitoring information report. Members **confirmed** they did not require any further discussion on this report.

25/20 Apologies for absence – none were received.

25/21 Minutes of previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 June 2025 were agreed as an accurate record.

25/22 Matters arising not appearing elsewhere on the agenda

25/28 – an update on the outcome of the maths SAR re-evaluation was provided at the July Corporation meeting.

25/23 HE Teaching and Learning (Presentation)

The Chair welcomed Claire Newton, Assistant Principal (Quality) to the meeting, for the presentation on Higher Education Teaching and Learning.

Peter Morrison introduced the presentation explaining it would provide the current position on teaching and learning within HE since the start of term. Peter articulated the importance of high-quality teaching and learning in HE in driving forward high standards and positive graduate outcomes and progression destinations, alongside the need to ensure value for money for students. Members noted this was an area of increasing focus for the Department for Education in recent years, with the quality of teaching tested through the Office for Students Condition B1 (Academic Experience). Peter explained the key features of high-quality teaching and learning, covering planning and sequencing, up to date content and informed by research, providing challenge and being engaging, pitched at the right academic level, enabling student interaction, demonstrating breadth and depth and encouraging development of higher skills.

Claire Newton briefed members on the current position, detailing the outcome of drop-in sessions carried out to date in the current term. Whilst acknowledging the need for improvement, Claire highlighted subject knowledge and curriculum sequencing and the positive culture and professional relationships as key strengths on which to build. Members noted that teaching strategies and development of 'hard thinking' were areas that needed more work. Members were updated on the new policy introduced in the current academic year, which provided continuous support and dialogue to staff through regular drop-ins, which enabled progress and impact to be measured and re-visits arranged if needed. Staff were engaging positively and embedding HE into the college-wide framework was ensuring a consistent approach. Claire provided an overview of the NCD Enhanced Learning Model, which had been enhanced and embedded this year and was designed to provide a common professional language and support dialogue to promote high standards in teaching and learning. Members noted the planned next steps, from continuing quality improvement measures including drops ins, sharing best practice, focused support and coaching and also embedding the new CPD model, developing communities of practice, promoting a positive improvement culture to deliver the overall aim of a supportive professional culture delivering sustained improvements in teaching quality and student outcomes.

Nigel Harrett joined the meeting at 4.14pm.

Members were keen to understand support for teachers in activating hard thinking and asking good questions so that as a committee it was understood what good would look like in practice. It was suggested that further detail of the model could be shared along with the slides from the session. Members acknowledged the internal improvements to teaching and learning practice and asked about external or peer assessment of quality of delivery at Levels 4, 5 and 6. It was noted that this was provided through a range of activities including the provision of student feedback to external examiners, external reviews, access to reports from other providers enabling comparison of delivery and expectations, peer learning through teaching triangles, work with universities and other key partners to share good practice and the College had also arranged a teaching and learning conference earlier in the year to build on communities of practice and showcase good teaching and learning. Peter confirmed that assurance from external examiners confirmed that the College was delivering outcomes to the expected standard.

**AM /
CN**

Members asked how issues with HE teaching and learning had been identified and Peter explained that a change to the process since last year was that lesson drop-ins were now unannounced. With no preparation time for a lesson to be observed, the new approach set a strong expectation around consistency in providing high quality lessons. Whilst there were no major issues, the approach had identified some gaps and developmental issues where additional support could be provided. In response to a member's question about ensuring staff kept up to date with industry knowledge and practice, Peter confirmed that Heads of School carried out a training needs analysis and as well as supporting attendance at conferences and hosting guest speakers, staff were encouraged to work with their advisory boards to arrange opportunities to go back into industry. The College also encouraged and supported staff to obtain HE fellowships. These activities were underpinned by Head of School attendance at Academic Board and Curriculum Manager attendance at the HE Teaching and Learning Committee, where regular updates on outcomes were provided to drive forward expectations. Peter confirmed that as Vice Principal for HE, he was responsible to ensure this professional development was taking place.

Members reflected on the recent SAR validation process in which they had participated and queried whether a similar approach was in operation in HE as they were keen to receive a similar level of assurance. Peter confirmed that each HE programme had an annual report covering key themes, strengths, areas for development, interaction with employers and professional development of staff. It would be possible to develop this into a position statement at school level providing context and including retention and completion rates, CPD and giving a holistic view from a Head of School perspective. Members emphasised the value of the SAR process from both a governor and staff perspective and commented that they felt slightly more distanced from HE in terms

of knowledge and understanding. Whilst members were clear there were appropriate processes and measures in place in HE, they felt that governor involvement in HE processes was also important and a SAR style approach would allow governors to bring question and challenge providing a more rounded understanding of the full College position. From a student perspective, the importance of addressing the issues identified was welcomed to ensure continued engagement and attendance with their programme.

Members expressed concern about the fall in retention rate and asked about the reason for the decline. Peter explained that the HE annual report provided the overall retention data covering Durham, the London School of Commerce, CECOS and Oxford Business College (OBC). The Secretary of State's decision to remove designation from OBC programmes immediately impacted on the in-year retention rate. Peter confirmed the fall was not attributable to teaching and learning issues however it remained important to provide assurance that provision was high quality considering the link to outcomes.

Members thanked Peter and Claire for the presentation.

25/24 Closing Achievement Rate analysis (NCD on One Page) (Paper B1)

Andy Stephenson presented Paper B1, the closing achievement rate analysis. It was noted that the College's overall performance had strengthened further in 2024/25 with the College maintaining its position as a high performing college significantly above national averages. Members reviewed the overall achievement rate, achievement across education programmes for young people, regulated qualifications, Functional Skills maths and English, GCSE maths and English, Adult learning, apprenticeships and provision for learners with high needs, all of which exceeded the relevant national achievement rate (NAR).

Members asked if achievement data was available by ethnicity and gender. Andy confirmed that historically this had been included in the Equality for Students report and was currently being explored to ensure the information was meaningful. It was confirmed that a breakdown of achievement among different groups would be included in the Equality for Students paper reported to the next meeting of the Committee. Members requested that the report included information on disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged groups and asked if this could be shared as soon as possible if it was already available.

AS

Members queried whether the NAR was also increasing and asked about the implications if this continued and effectively caught up with the College rate. Andy confirmed that there had been improvements in the NAR over time however it was not expected to get beyond 90% without exceptional circumstances.

Members congratulated the College on the achievement rates, commenting on how difficult it was to achieve this level, which demonstrated the strength of the College's position.

25/25 English and Maths analysis (Paper B2)

Rob Grainey presented Paper B2, which summarised progress in English and maths over the last academic year. Rob recapped the position reported to the Committee in November 2024, which highlighted key areas for improvement across both subjects. Members noted the key performance outcomes, learner progress and the impact of targeted interventions which had delivered the significant improvement in achievement and drawn national recognition.

Members congratulated the wide range of staff involved for a phenomenal outcome, with one member commenting that this was the strongest level of improvement they had seen throughout their significant time in Further Education. Members recognised that the improvements were achieved over what would have been an extremely challenging year for all the staff involved and were keen to ensure the board's thanks were passed on and the achievement celebrated. Rob confirmed that one of the most significant challenges had been to retain the staff in the maths department given that they were in high demand in the sector. Driving their motivation and keeping the team engaged had been key and in recognising the need to sustain the achievement, the team were very much data driven and motivated to improve on the outcomes delivered this year.

Members highlighted the significant improvement in apprenticeship performance in maths. It was noted that this had followed an earlier decision to change the delivery structure to block weeks, which had clearly been a successful move. As well as the commitment from individual schools, members highlighted the challenges faced from a student perspective in engaging with maths when this was not their main course. Members commented that the level of improvement demonstrated the result of engagement with students and around maths, which could often be very difficult.

Alison Maynard explained that the achievement had been a significant team effort and thanked Rob Grainey for his leadership role through a very difficult time and the Steering Group for their support to the staff. It was noted that the Head of Maths was now being approached by other colleges and he was providing support for their improvement.

Members asked how the excellent performance was being used to motivate current students as well as promoting to future students the excellent service they would receive at NCD. Rob confirmed that the results were giving current students belief that they had a

greater chance of achieving and very positive feedback was already being received through learner forums on maths and English classes. In recruiting future students the College was able to promote an outstanding maths department with a reputation of quality teaching and learning with more learners achieving. The Principal reflected on the shift since the previous year when the Committee discussion had been around letting students down on maths, to the current discussion being around a transformative piece of work by a strong curriculum team and supportive steering group that had turned the position around and was creating real opportunities for learners. It was agreed this also presented a significant marketing opportunity and reiterated that the focus now was to maintain the position and keep moving forwards.

Members congratulated the team again on a fantastic achievement.

25/26 Equality for Students and Student Discipline (Paper B3)

Members received and noted Paper B3, which provided an update on Equality for Students and an overview of student discipline in Term 3 of the academic year 2024/25, and an annual analysis.

25/27 Emerging Themes (Paper B4)

Members received and noted Paper B4, which provided an analysis of the emerging national FE reform agenda and updated the Committee on the College's strategic position in response.

25/28 Annual update on academic malpractice (Paper B5)

Andy Stephenson presented Paper B5, which provided an overview of the College's position and activity relating to Academic Integrity and Academic Malpractice during the 2024/25 academic year. Members were briefed on cases of academic malpractice in higher education across Durham and its HE partners, in apprenticeships and in further education.

Members referenced the plagiarism detector software Turnitin and asked how the College was dealing with this in the world of artificial intelligence (AI). Andy advised that academic malpractice processes must now recognise the increasing use of AI and that whilst the College still used Turnitin, it was ineffective in detecting the use of AI. Members noted that tackling the issue required consideration of the nature of assessment and that some awarding bodies were looking at moving towards assessment by exam as a way of restricting access to AI. The College had taken a forward-looking approach that allowed some use of AI by students in a way that would be permitted in the workplace, particularly in HE where students were allowed access to AI tools to use responsibly.

Members emphasised the need to be aware of the issue as it continued to evolve and keep the approach under review.

Members asked about availability of software that could detect AI use and Andy advised that whilst there had been many attempts, there were effective ways to beat such software and so the focus needed to remain on the method of assessment and the importance of academic integrity and responsible use. Members noted that the College's approach extended across its partners to ensure consistent compliance.

Members welcomed that the College was embracing AI for students to use responsibly and asked if a further update could be provided on the College's approach.

**CW /
AS**

25/29 Enhanced Learning update (Paper B6)

Members received and noted Paper B6, which provided an overview of the quality of teaching, learning, and assessment across the College during 2024/25, drawing on evidence from learning visits, drop-ins, CPD participation and coaching.

The report highlighted significant progress in improving teaching quality, while identifying key priorities to strengthen consistency, planning, and engagement in professional development.

25/30 Annual Update on Student Surveys (Paper B7)

Andy Stephenson presented Paper B7, which provided an overview of student satisfaction results for 2024/25. Members noted that in FE, College performance met or exceeded sector benchmarks in six out of seven areas, with support slightly below benchmark. Apprenticeship satisfaction remained excellent and HE also achieved outstanding satisfaction levels and exceeded sector benchmarks.

Members noted that the lowest scoring area related to regular reviews informing Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) and asked about the impact on student achievement. Andy confirmed that an impact had not been seen coming through in end of year achievement data, however the importance of ensuring consistency in this area had been raised with curriculum managers in line with the expectations in the Ofsted toolkit.

25/31 Accountability Agreement - Year-end report on 2024/25 action plan (Paper C)

Alison Maynard presented Paper C, which provided a final update on the performance outturn of the College's Accountability Agreement for 2024/25. Members noted that all eight objectives agreed for the year had successfully been met.

25/32 Update on College Self-Assessment report 2024/25 and FE Quality Development Plan 2025/2026 (Paper D)

Alison Maynard presented Paper D, which provided a progress update on development of the College's 2024/25 Self-Assessment Report (SAR) and 2025/26 Quality Development Plan (QDP). Alison advised that the SAR reports had demonstrated fantastic provision at the College and the overall report would be considered at a governors' workshop at the end of November. The College SAR would be proposing a judgement of Outstanding in line with the 'best fit' approach under the Enhanced Inspection Framework and it was noted that no areas were graded 3 or inadequate and a number of areas at grade 2 were very close to grade 1.

Alison confirmed that following completion of the 2024/25 SAR process, work would begin to transfer processes over to the new revised inspection framework.

Adele Dowson updated on the hard work undertaken by Curriculum Managers with their teams and confirmed they had identified their areas for development and were striving to get to the next level. The process had been very positive however there were a couple of recruitment gaps. Members commented that their experience of the SAR validation sessions was consistent with an overall grade of outstanding and that there was confidence that the College had the right structures in place and ability to put in place the right plans in place for further development.

It was noted that governors would have more time to discuss the position at the forthcoming SAR workshop.

25/33 Update on 2025/26 Strategic KPIs (Education & Training, Apprenticeships and Higher Education) (Paper E)

Andy Stephenson presented Paper E, which updated on progress against the 2025/26 curriculum key performance indicators.

Andy highlighted the only red rated performance figure in education and training, which related to the internal attendance of adults on ESOL and Access to HE programmes. Andy explained that the ESOL SAR validation panel had demonstrated the life changing potential of this provision and highlighted the increasing diversity in this group. This brought additional challenges as some of these students would go missing and so it was important to note that this was an area with some care around it, although improvements were being seen.

In higher education, Andy reiterated the impact of individual partners' data on the overall college position. Performance of the Durham provision was varied across individual courses and it was noted that partner provision covered much greater volumes of students. Performance at CECOS across all areas had been very positive as was general engagement in teaching and learning.

Members noted progress against the KPIs at this very early stage in the year.

25/34 Review of HE Annual Report 2025/26 and revised Quality Development Plan (QDP) (incorporating 2024/25 end of year review of strategic KPIs and aims) (Paper F)

Peter Morrison presented Paper F, the Higher Education Annual Report and revised Quality Development Plan.

Peter explained the process to prepare the report and talked through the key headline performance over the year relating to recruitment, retention, continuation and completion for both full time and part time provision. Peter confirmed the College level judgements that Academic Standards, Information and Enhancement of learning Opportunities all meet UK expectations and that Quality of Learning Opportunities is Commended. Members reviewed the five key areas for inclusion in the 2025/26 QDP and Peter advised that some actions would be carried forward from the previous year.

Part of this item is recorded confidentially under confidential minute 25/34a.

In response to a member's question about addressing the decline in numbers at a time that universities would be stepping up their recruitment, Peter advised that the College had commissioned external research last year to look at the HE market and recruitment. Part-time recruitment had been a particular concern in recent years and the College was looking at engaging with different methods of delivery, for example to support individuals wanting to upskill and reskill but being unable to come into college. It was noted that the HE partners recruited well to blended delivery and the potential of a market for distance learning was being explored but this would need to be competitive and high quality. There were options to engage with international recruitment and a further update on this would be brought in the new year. The College had a focus on internal progression and was also monitoring the number of students interested in higher apprenticeships. Members were assured by the level of activity in hand to address HE numbers and welcomed confirmation that a further update would be provided in the near future.

25/35 Curriculum & Quality Monitoring report (HE) (Paper G)

Peter Morrison presented Paper G, the Curriculum and Quality Monitoring Report for Higher Education.

Members were briefed on the National Student Survey results, external quality assessment, teaching and learning, the implications for HE of the Post-16 Education and Skills White paper, the forthcoming OfS condition E8 (oversight of franchised provision) and condition E6 (harassment and sexual misconduct) which was implemented at the start of August, the relicensing and expansion of the North East Institute of Technology and the recent

successful bid for Turing funding to provide international placements.

Members discussed tuition fees and whether charging the maximum fee in line with universities may impact on student numbers. It was noted that the College's experience to date suggested that HE was not a price sensitive market and that lower fees were associated with lower quality provision. Members commented that a move to degree apprenticeships could potentially be linked to cost and emphasised the need to maintain an overview of the market and student feedback.

25/36 Partnership Update (Paper H)

Suzanne Crane presented Paper H, which provided a summary of the current position in respect of each of the College's HE partnerships.

Members were updated on the transfer of OBC students to CECOS which was now complete, and noted the latest retention position for those transferring, as well as retention rates at London School of Commerce which was in its final teach out year. The CECOS partnership was progressing well with high retention, continuation and completion rates. Suzanne advised that student feedback indicated they were happy with the experience across all three partners' provision.

Members noted that a response had been submitted to the OfS consultation on the proposed new condition of registration governing sub-contractual oversight and the College was progressing preparations for this coming into effect in early 2026.

Suzanne updated on the recent internal audit review of the College's HE partnership arrangements, which was due to be considered by the Audit and Risk Committee the following week. The review had provided strong assurance with one low grade recommendation for improvement.

Members commented on the risk of having all partnership provision with one partner and asked about the appetite to expand this moving forwards. Suzanne acknowledged the risk presented by the current situation but highlighted the continued uncertainty in the external landscape relating to the direction of travel at both the DfE and OfS. It was noted that the College continues to be approached by organisations looking for partnership work. In response to a member's question about the risk associated with the consultation proposals, Suzanne confirmed this would potentially be added to the risk register when the final position was confirmed and advised that sub-contracting arrangements were already included. In response to a question about the additional financial information being requested, Suzanne confirmed that the wording of the proposals indicated publication of this information would enable transparency and oversight on what providers were charging and

level of profits, in light of recent media articles on the profits of private providers.

Alison Maynard updated that senior leaders had undertaken an unannounced visit to the CECOS site in Birmingham while in the area for the AoC conference and had been impressed with the very calm atmosphere on site, feedback from staff and students and levels of attendance on the day. The visit assisted with an understanding of their approach and what was happening in classes and it had been positive to see this in action.

25/37 Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy Update (Paper I)

Peter Morrison presented Paper I, which updated on progress and impact of the College's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy. Peter explained that the strategy was aligned with the AoC charter for mental health which provided a good practice framework for the sector and that a separate update focused on the action plan for staff was due to be considered by the Finance and Resources Committee the following week.

Members were briefed on the College's proactive approach including several cross-college initiatives, personal development sessions, enrichment activities, guest speakers, trips and visits, supplemented by counselling services and strong wraparound support. The College's MyConcern system had recorded a rise in safeguarding concerns and the withdrawal rate of students as a result of mental health issues was broadly in line with the previous year.

Members reviewed the progress detailed against the 2024/25 action plan and Peter confirmed that a new set of actions had been added for 2025/26 which would be closely monitored. The College was in a strong position and this would be key for any forthcoming Ofsted visit.

Members considered the student survey feedback and noted that responses from students had reversed between the agree/strongly agree categories on being encouraged to look after their mental health and on whether there was a good programme of enrichment. Peter explained that after covid, it had been difficult to engage with a number of students, with some lacking confidence to travel on a bus to college or attend an external visit, however student perceptions did vary year on year. The enrichment offer was increasing each year and work with the Students' Union President and student forum representatives was informing what the offer should be. Attendance at sessions was being monitored but some students still lacked sufficient confidence to engage with the wider offer.

Members commented that the majority of students had engaged proactively with the survey and although the number not answering was a little high, the strategy itself was quite strong. In response to

a question on how the College knew whether enrichment was supporting student mental health, Peter advised that the offer was promoted at induction and Welcome Fest and by the Students Union President through student forums and feedback to student representatives. The College was continuing to strive to increase the number engaging with the offer and feedback through learner voice and forum meetings emphasised the importance of recognising different interests in different types of activity, for example participation in physical activities as opposed to attendance at the various societies. Members suggested that understanding student activity outside of the College could also be captured to assist understanding of how this may impact on wellbeing. Alison Maynard updated that an increase in volunteering activities was emerging and students felt that this was having a positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing. The enrichment programme was being expanded throughout the College week and there had been a focus on foundation students with extra activities to get them involved. It was also noted that some students were also trying to balance the demands of part time work. The Students Union President advised that recent discussions on improving engagement were considering how to improve the advertising strategy and make it more accessible as it was clear some students were still unaware of what was available. Work was ongoing to develop case studies of students giving their perspective on how enrichment had impacted on them. Members were keen to receive more information on students' views and commented that this had been a hot topic at the recent AoC conference in the context of supporting student mental health. A learning point from the conference was that a number of students were not asking for help so a key issue was how to identify and provide them with support.

Members commented on the strength of the update but noted that there was much more activity that was not captured in the report and that for example, information on the number of students accessing the College's counselling service should be included. Members requested that additional information should be added where available.

PM

Members noted the significant progress made against the strategic aims during 2024/25 and the action plan for 2025/26.

25/38 FE/HE Student Forum feedback Overview of issues raised and progress update (Paper J)

Matthew Gamsby presented Paper J, which summarised feedback from the latest FE and HE student forum meetings. Matthew reported on compliments received on quality of teaching in both FE and HE, a presentation to the HE forum on the OfS condition around harassment and sexual misconduct and updated on a range of issues raised in the forum discussions covering access to the College wifi, access to kitchen facilities in the University Centre, vandalism in some of the toilets by a small minority of students,

canteen pricing and student lanyards. Members noted the actions being taken to address areas of concern including support for students in how to connect to the wifi, swift actions by the senior leadership to tackle incidents of vandalism, a forum meeting with Aramark to discuss catering issues and pilot activity to trial student lanyards. Members sought clarification on the concerns around lanyards and noted that this had been under discussion for some time as a method of addressing low level behaviour concerns in the Hub by restricting access to students that would not usually use the building. Alison Maynard updated that behaviour this year was exceptional, which had been commented upon by a number of external visitors to the site and members commented that it was positive that the College was discussing lanyards to deal with security issues rather than barriers as seen in some colleges.

Members discussed the issue around facilities in the University Centre and whether there was a need to address concerns that the experience may be different to a university. It was emphasised that there was a need to understand whether genuine differences existed or whether the issues were perception based. The College would explore this further and involve students in these discussions. Peter Morrison confirmed that efforts had been made to differentiate the University Centre experience and that ultimately the vision was for a totally self-contained building.

Members emphasised the importance of continuing to listen to student feedback on these issues and thanked Matt for the paper.

25/39 Any other business

Members discussed whether to hold either of the remaining meetings of the Committee in person and it was agreed to keep both meetings online.

25/40 Date of next meeting: 19 March 2026