

North Highland College UHI - review w/c 22/2/16

Student Team Member Report

Lorraine Simpson

The College Context

Over the course of the week 101 learners were spoken to, across 8 subject areas. The learners spoken to were Full time, Part-time, School Link, Block Release and Apprentices, and were from all campuses: Thurso, Dornoch, Alness and Dale Farm. Evidence was gathered through speaking to learners across these campuses in break out/canteen areas, video conferencing with the HISA President, and attending one meeting with class reps at Thurso and one meeting with class reps at Alness.

The college is very welcoming and inclusive, and staff are very helpful and friendly. Outlying campuses Alness and Dornoch do not feel they are left out and still integrate themselves into North Highland College overall by speaking to staff and the Depute President at course rep meetings and by attending Links2Life events. Dale Farm does come across as slightly isolated with regards to the main campus and attendance at any events. However, learners have not raised this as a concern and are happy with their campus. One issue that was identified was with sign posting for the outlying campuses; this seemed to be minimal and made the campuses difficult to find.

A Learner Council took place on the 24th of February, chaired by the Quality & Learner Engagement Co-ordinator and attended by approximately 22 learners. The Principal was also in attendance.

High Quality Learning

The college has a very good relationship with its learners: almost all learners have commented on how helpful and supportive their lecturers are. Learners spoke about various methods of teaching including: presentations; demonstrations; group work; independent study and written work. Good examples of independent learning were given in a NC Child, Health & Social Care class where learners spoke about how they had to individually pick a case study to write about, describing a person in a care setting and what their needs are. An example of peer learning was also mentioned in a NC Music Production/ Sound Production class where learners spoke about how they learned skills from each other such as playing instruments or editing media clips. The teaching environments are suitable for almost all learners, with the Music and Performance class stating their equipment is "top of the range". Some level 2 hairdressers did comment on their equipment in the salon being old or broken and the NC Equine Studies group noted that they would like more equipment like shovels and brushes. A recurring issue across all campuses was the lack of computers. Learners noted that unless they were assigned to a computer classroom there were no additional computers that could be used during 'free study' time.

The majority of learners spoken to did not use the Blackboard VLE. However the learners who do use it (NC Early Education & Childcare, Higher Sociology, NC Child, Health & Social Care groups) said it was a good resource for obtaining course notes, extra points of research and presentations.

Feedback on progress seems to be done informally throughout the year for most learners, and they are happy with this approach. A few have given examples of their tutors or course team leaders having one-to-one discussions with them around how they are progressing on the course which they have found very helpful.

Almost all learners noted that the application process was very easy and straightforward. The majority have had the same experience with receiving their funding with a few exceptions where there has been delays due to evidence still being required or evidence being requested more than once. The college was supportive in these instances. However, some payments were delayed up to two months.

Almost all learners have said they are well prepared for assessments with plenty of notice given, usually two weeks, and that they know what is expected of them to pass the assessments. Feedback is given in multiple ways including written, verbally to the group or on a one-to-one basis. The learners are happy with these methods and also commented on how staff will still give them notes on 'extras' they could have said or done, even if they have passed, which is helpful.

Four learners spoken to disclosed that they had dyslexia and that the college and lecturers are very supportive of them. Two of them, one based in Thurso, one in AIness, attend an hour slot once a week with a support member of staff which they have both said is very helpful for them. Another learner disclosed a serious medical condition which her lecturers are aware of. She was very grateful for the staff support at the college and said it is a relief that staff understand her situation and that she is able to leave the room or get a drink of water without anyone asking questions.

Most learners identified that they did some form of personal development planning after prompting or examples being given. However, some still did not acknowledge this at all.

Most groups spoken to identified they have discussed their Next Steps with regards to the next level of course or employment. All groups in the Care subject area spoke of how they have had information on the HNC courses and about employment. They have also had people from the industry come in and speak to classes. The Equine Studies group are prepared for employment by coming in on weekends over the winter to look after the horses. They also have access to information on the next level course too because they are in the same environment as the HNC/D group. The level 1 Hospitality Services group gave examples of career days, employers coming to speak to them and Level 2 information chats with their lecturers. A few groups, such as the NC Engineering systems and Carpentry & Joinery Apprentices, said they have not had much information on next level courses, and only small pieces of information on employment.

There were some strong examples given of Life/Core Skills from groups from NC Mechanical Engineering Systems, Access to Construction & Engineering, Hairdressing Level 2, NC Child, Health & Social Care, MA Gamekeeping and NC Music Performance. Learners across these groups noted they were learning skills such as IT, reading/writing skills, numeracy, presentation skills, working with others and enterprise skills. However a few learners from groups such as Level 1 Hospitality Services and NC Equine Studies did not identify with the term 'Core Skills' at all.

Learner Engagement

Almost all learners identified that they had a class rep. The reps are invited to attend meetings where they can discuss any ideas or issues from their class. Almost all learners were aware of the role of their rep and knew that they attended these meetings. The meetings take place monthly on a Wednesday afternoon at the Thurso and Alness campuses for the reps. However, this can sometimes be an issue for learners from Dale Farm to attend and they would like it if a meeting could be held there once in a while. The Hairdressing Level 2 class Reps also mentioned that if they have clients when the meeting is taking place they are unable to attend. There is only one SPARQS course rep training session available at Thurso and one at Alness which Dornoch learners are invited to attend. This means learners who miss this training are not able to access any additional sessions and therefore cannot receive accreditation for their role from SPARQS.

The Student Association are well supported by staff. The Depute President sits on three college committees: Learning, Teaching & Quality; Student Services group; and the Board of Management. Other course reps sit on committees such as the Health & Safety committee and the Further Education Regional Council. A second student member was recently elected onto the Board also. The Learner Council meetings are attended by the Depute President, the Quality & Learner Engagement Co-Ordinator, the Director of Learning & Teaching and at times the Principal.

Class reps have a good understanding of the Student Association at the Thurso campus and reps across all campuses had an awareness of the Quality & Learner Engagement Co-Ordinator. Dale farm, Alness and Dornoch based class reps did not know much about the Association or were unsure about who the Depute President was. All reps, including those at Dale Farm mentioned that lecturers are very understanding if they need to attend the main campus for any duties.

Examples of changes made as a result of course rep meetings were given. These include: a list of available classrooms with computers being made available so learners could access these during 'free study' time (Thurso); a lunch monitor volunteer role being created to monitor the canteen during high traffic times (Thurso); umbrellas being made available to learners in the absence of a smoking shelter (Alness); and more recycle bins being added to the campus (Alness).

Quality Culture

There is a lack of awareness among learners with regards to representation on college committees and at Board level. Most learners could identify the Depute President after prompting. However, there was still a low awareness level of what his role is or that he sits on the committees listed previously. Almost all learners are aware of what the class rep role is and are informed that they attend meetings and provide feedback to the class about anything raised at these meetings.

There was a low level of engagement around Course Unit Evaluations (CUE) and a lack of understanding of what these are. Only a few learners mentioned the CUE process, but they had not had any feedback on these or were unsure of how they would get this. The majority of learners did indicate that they tend to have informal discussions with other students and staff on changes that could be made, so it may be the case that suggestions are taken forward but not recorded.

Some examples were given from a range of subject areas on how feedback about enhancing learning has been taken on board. Fabricating & Welding SVQ level 2 commented that they has asked for lower and more workbenches in their workroom which was done, allowing them more time to work rather than having to share the benches with others. Carpentry & Joinery Year 2 Apprentices also noted that they were being taught how to make stairs by three different lecturers in three different ways which was confusing, after speaking to the lecturers they agreed on one teaching method. A NC Child, Health & Social Care group spoke of how they had one 4 hour class on Care Practices which was really long and in depth and they found it hard to concentrate. After discussions with their lecturer the class was then broken up into two 2 hour sessions which they found much easier to digest.