

## **MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EDUCATION & STANDARDS COMMITTEE HELD ON WEDNESDAY 24 MARCH 2021 AT 3 PM VIA ZOOM**

Present: Lesley Rollason (Chair), Alan Aston, David O'Neill, Karen Dobson  
In attendance: Francis Tunney, Shelley Brown (Director of Curriculum and Performance), Andy Bailey (Head of Compliance and Governance), Gavin Barker (Assistant Principal), Joy Smith (Deputy Clerk)

Andy explained that Francis Tunney's membership was due for renewal at next week's Corporation meeting and it was agreed that he should be recorded as "in attendance" for this meeting.

### **21.1.1 Update on Awarding of Grades in 2020/21**

Gavin advised that GCSEs and A Levels will this year be awarded as teacher assessed grades (TAGs) and the College has been tasked with working out what that grade will be using a wide variety of robust assessment results and other evidence in order to fully support the decisions made.

More complex are the vocational qualifications which are split into 3 categories and members noted the types of qualifications which sit into each area and the approach the College will take to each.

Gavin highlighted the importance of matching the assessment grades to the content delivered and advised that grades will be determined as late as possible in the year in order for all possible coursework and assessments to be included. Staff have been asked to present all types of students' work for consideration in order to provide as wide a range of evidence possible.

Traditional results days have been brought forward with a 2 week period to follow when staff will be available to answer queries from exam boards etc prior to the results being confirmed.

Members noted that there could be some quality assurance measures from the awarding bodies who are likely to look at our grade profiles against previous years. Any discrepancies could result in further quality assurance testing from them although at this stage we are unsure of the approach and rationale they will use.

Lesley expressed confidence in the College's own internal quality assurance processes, but noted that other organisations may not be in the same position and asked what affect this might have on the national figures? Karen confirmed that awarding bodies are likely to require information on our own internal processes, which we are confident in, but the findings in other colleges and schools and the effect of this is unknown.

In response to David's enquiry, Karen advised that attendance will not be used as a measure and those issues which are more subjective have been removed which does make things a little more straightforward to deal with. For students with EHCPs Gavin confirmed that we would apply the adjustments that they would usually be given for exams etc.

One key point is that appeals will come to the College, not awarding bodies, which underpins the need to have robust evidence, operate transparently and ensure that there are no surprises for learners/parents when the grades are released. We are, therefore, hopeful that we are not going to be inundated with appeals. Alan asked about the actual process for appeals and it was noted that this will be confirmed once the guidance has been released. We will have internally satisfied ourselves by that point that teachers have given appropriate grades using the appropriate objective evidence.

We are currently working with teaching teams to ensure clarity about assessments to use, possible weightings to apply and we are also trying to fit in 2 more assessments which will contribute towards the final grades.

Regarding information on required grades from students' institutions of choice, specifically the Honours students with Oxbridge applications, Karen confirmed that those with offers have already had interviews and done appropriate tests, and they are now awaiting confirmed grades. What has been different throughout this lockdown is that students have been made very aware of the need to continue to engage with learning and assessment, whereas March was the cut-off date last year. Karen referred to the Catch Up Funding and explained that its application goes beyond lower level learners as some of the most able learners have also suffered.

Karen confirmed that there will be further guidance released towards the end of March at which point we will plan our detailed approach going forward. We have to submit everything to the awarding bodies by 18 June which, factoring in all the work still required, makes the timescale tight.

Members noted that everything possible will be done to ensure the students get the best grade they can whilst ensuring that our own quality assurance processes are robust so that we are confident in the decisions taken. Karen advised that bringing the A and GCSE results days forward has also created an issue as this cuts into the traditional staff holiday period and this year more than ever staff really do need and deserve a break.

Members considered the information contained in the Student Dashboard which provides the current working at grades for students and parents to view. In addition, Gavin drew attention to the tables which highlighted the the quality assurance reporting process internally undertaken which highlights any anomalies and allows for clear discussion within the teams concerned.

Gavin was thanked for a very comprehensive report and members commented on the significant task facing the College between now and June.

#### **21.1.2 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies were received from Lesley Morrey and Ian Hookway. Members noted that Denise Haney was attending on behalf of Lesley.

#### **21.1.3 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **21.1.4 Minutes of the Meeting held on 9 December 2020**

Approved as a true record of the meeting.

#### **21.1.5 Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

#### **21.1.6 Learner Data Report March 2021**

Shelley introduced the latest Learner Data Report and took members through the key points to note.

She confirmed that overall retention is higher compared to this point last year although she cautioned that the decision was taken not to withdraw students who were not engaging as normal during lockdown, therefore, there may now be small number of withdrawals to come through the system. Members noted retention by subject area and Shelley advised that there has been an increase in starts across most programmes for 16-18 learners. At Newcastle retention at 19+ is slightly down and at Stafford it is slightly up. Part time retention remains high. Members were pleased to note this very strong picture and Shelley advised that action plans to address the issue have been put into place for areas where we are seeing a dip. It was noted that in some cases, this drop reflects the year 1 to year 2 retention rather than in-year withdrawals.

Members noted the predicted whole college achievement information which continues to be strong, although Shelley indicated that the levelling off of the pass rate may be due to staff being cautious at this point.

Attendance was considered and members noted that 16-18 students have made an excellent start to the year, despite the restrictions of lockdown. At 19+ there are a few areas falling below 90% and Shelley confirmed that this situation is being closely monitored. This is also the case for part time students. Shelley drew attention to the HE attendance which is challenging but clarified that the numbers of those in scope for monitoring are small.

Gavin explained the latest initiatives to ensure that high quality teaching and learning continues across the College. Virtual and physical lesson walk throughs have been undertaken with some very pleasing feedback received. Following comments made at the Student Conference, Gavin and Rob Millward shadowed an A Level student through a week's study and were happy with their findings. A Student Teaching and Learning Forum is being established to gather information from students on their experiences with remote learning which will help us to take steps to make further improvements wherever possible. Lesley added that she had managed to join the virtual Student Conference and she commented that the way students were dealing with the new situation so positively was remarkable and that their resilience in taking the new systems and processes on board should be acknowledged. Karen added that this has been a difficult time for young people considering all the restrictions they have had placed upon them and their resilience should be commended.

Gavin advised that from speaking to students over the past weeks, they are very positive about being back in college and trying to get back to some form of normality.

Shelley referred to the Student Surveys recently undertaken and picked out the key issues. Regarding how students feel about their progress, this is a very subjective issue and it is acknowledged that the fact that the students undertaking the survey may have been sitting alone behind a screen at home and this could have impacted on responses. Francis expressed his surprise at the number using mobile phones to access their work and Shelley added that this could have been due to how the question was phrased and that some do have access to other resources. Karen added that they choose to use their phone which is not ideal but we are aware that there are some issues relating to IT skills which could explain this. Lesley asked if there was any correlation between satisfaction rates and the medium of accessing lessons and Shelley indicated that this has been investigated but is not the case. She added that now that the students have returned and had everything explained about the progress they have made etc, their perceptions are a lot more positive.

Regarding the Staff Surveys, members considered the issues arising from not being in the same room as the students and noted that, now they have students back in the classroom, the staff are increasingly confident about progress made during lockdown. Francis commented that virtual lessons will never be able to take the place of face-to-face teaching. Members were pleased to note that staff had been sharing ideas to try to break up the sessions both for themselves and for the students.

David asked if we have measures to identify how staff feel and any associated mental health issues. Shelley confirmed that staff wellbeing is better now we are back, but it has been conveyed to staff that when they are working remotely, they are not expected to sit in front of the screen talking constantly, but should set tasks for students and provide a break. Gavin confirmed that towards the end of lockdown it became apparent that there was less teaching and more learning going on which was pleasing.

Members noted that the survey responses provide some very useful data on which to base future strategies. Karen added that Student Surveys do generate a relatively small number of responses, c10%. She confirmed that a strong theme from the Parent Survey was the requirement for in-college attendance.

Members noted that some very useful talks/Q & A sessions, alternative activities etc had been arranged as a result of the comments made during the Student Conference. Karen was pleased to report that everyone she had contacted with a request to assist us had confirmed they would be happy to help and the manner of operating the sessions remotely had been a very positive and would be very useful to replicate going forward.

Members noted some of the very positive experiences students have had undertaking virtual work placement activities.

Gavin referred to the fantastic level of detail that the English and Maths team have in relation to their cohort. Student engagement in these areas has been positive through lockdown with excellent levels of attendance and strong grade profiles, particularly in maths. The team are working with lots of external projects and some really useful ideas and initiatives are coming forward. Francis commented that the results in the November resits were excellent and congratulated everyone involved.

Denise Haney went on to provide the latest Safeguarding information and explained that Lesley had reflected on the current position and the fact that numbers are similar to this time last year is a pleasing position, especially considering the lockdown situation. The College's Student Welfare Officers maintained contact with their learners throughout and did an excellent job in supporting them remotely, although Denise added that this past week, since returning, has been a very busy one.

Members noted that the level of student financial support provided is a little lighter compared to the end of last year, despite the introduction of direct bank payments and a change to the threshold criteria.

Regarding EHCP students, Denise confirmed that this year we have seen an increase in numbers and, pleasingly, not too many withdrawals; again these learners received very strong levels of support during the lockdown.

Lesley commended the Student Support Team for the wonderful work they carry out throughout the year. Karen added that during lockdown Denise and members of her team were continually onsite supporting the learners who attended for the 3-day week.

Members considered the latest Apprenticeships information it was agreed that last year's achievements were very good considering the situation. The ongoing challenges relating to Covid and the work required to rebuild this area were noted. Gavin advised that we are currently c50 starts down due to new vacancies being put on hold. He added that some employers do not

want their apprentices coming in to College and this has led to concerns relating to functional skills in some areas. In terms of progress, current apprentices are actually doing well considering the landscape we are operating in and the numbers of areas where employers are actually closed due to Government legislation, eg hospitality and hair and beauty.

Recruitment and the latest applications information were considered and Shelley advised that we are around 400 down at the moment compared to last year, mainly at the Newcastle site. We are working hard to address this with various initiatives organised through the Schools Liaison Team and curriculum areas. Shelley added that in normal circumstances we would see some movement from initial A Level choices into vocational programmes, but this is not currently happening. In addition, the actual experience of coming in to the College to view the facilities is a very positive aspect of the recruitment process in areas such as Sport and Public Services, but this is also not currently possible and numbers are, therefore, down in these areas. Shelley added that we are planning in-College activities such as face-to-face taster sessions at the end of June and we are hopeful that numbers will increase and the distribution of applications will alter at that point.

Applications from Stoke schools are currently lower compared to previous years. Anecdotally we have learned that schools are finding supporting students completing their applications remotely a challenge and they are also feeling vulnerable about providing predicted grades in the absence of the full guidance. Karen advised that in the recent KPI meetings some departments within College have expressed their wish to resume face-to-face interviews, whereas others prefer telephone interviews. It is generally acknowledged, however, that coming in to College is key and Karen confirmed that we will restart that asap.

Members noted the numbers of student lateral flow tests undertaken on site since returning, supported by staff, in order to arrive at the point where students are confident to home test from wc 29 March. Members noted the scale of this operation which has taken up a significant amount of staff time and expressed thanks to everyone involved. Karen advised on some of the issues we have experienced over the deliveries of the huge amounts of testing equipment and the need to ensure that students take home sufficient to undertake 2 tests per week from 29 March, through the Easter holidays and the first week back, by which time we expect to have received further guidance.

Shelley outlined the latest curriculum planning initiatives and confirmed that we are proceeding with the work towards introducing T Levels and she has spoken to our ESFA contact about the challenges in relation to work placements. Gavin added that meetings will be held after Easter to plan the second year of the RQF qualifications with the teams. Members noted the latest update relating to the use of Catch Up Funding.

Lesley thanked Shelley and Gavin for a very comprehensive Learner Data Report.

#### **21.1.7 Risk Register Extract**

Andy drew members' attention to the excerpts from the Risk Register which fall under the remit of the Education and Standards Committee. He explained that the contents of the Risk Register would normally fall primarily under the remit of the Finance and General Purposes Committee. However, due to the challenges of lockdown, one of the key risks relates to remote learning and the red rating is applied because, despite our efforts, the experience of remote learning will not be as good as face to face and, therefore, the risk remains significant.

Andy explained that the Risk Management Group meets and considers the risks affecting all areas of the College on a termly basis and the colours will change as each risk and its effect on the College moves. Regarding the issue of the College's reputation in point 2.1, Karen advised that this is a serious issue and is, therefore, a red rated significant risk, however, the green shading in the further columns reflects the impact of the actions we take in mitigation resulting in the issue being moved to the low-risk category.

Members agreed their satisfaction with the excerpt from the Risk Register presented to them for consideration, noting that the full Risk Register will be presented to the Corporation for approval.

#### **21.1.8 Any Other Business**

There were no items of other business.

#### **21.1.9 Date and Time of Next Meeting**

29 June 2021 at 3pm via Zoom