Access & Inclusion Plan
2020–2023

NORTH EAST
SCOTLAND
COLLEGE

Introduction

Student success is at the centre of everything we do at North East Scotland College and we strive to make the learner journey as accessible, positive and seamless as possible. This begins with our vision to support people from a wide range of backgrounds to access a high-quality educational provision and ultimately improve their positive destinations in life.

This Access and Inclusion Plan outlines the inclusive service that we provide for students and demonstrates our commitment to enabling a culture of collaboration through a commitment to partnership in the design, evaluation and evolution of our student-support services.

In addition the plan outlines the stretch objectives that we have set ourselves in relation to developing and improving the student experience and learner journey, and identifies specific ambitions relating to student recruitment, success on course, and post-course transitions leading to positive destinations. The Plan details our whole-College approach to access and inclusion and outlines how we support the achievement of regional economic and community priorities, Government objectives, and comply with our legislative duties whilst working within the constraints of available resources.

A whole College approach has been adopted in the development of this Access and Inclusion Plan. This included involvement of all levels of support and curriculum teams, Students' Association and students. Feedback from a range of student surveys and focus groups was also key in the development of the plan.

Mid-way Update

The Access & Inclusion Plan has been refreshed to include updates outlining the key advances and changes made since the Plan was published, taking stock of our current position and looking ahead to focus our collective attention on what has still to be achieved within the scope of the Plan.

Strategic objectives

1   To increase participation of learners from the 10% most deprived (SIMD10%) postcodes within our region

2   To ensure that there is equal representation and equivalent positive outcomes for learners from within all protected characteristic groups, with a particular focus on reducing the attainment gap for disabled students and gender imbalance in specific curriculum areas

3   To support improved outcomes and progression to positive destinations for care experienced students and carers

4   To promote positive health and wellbeing, including good mental health, among the student body, via the delivery of an appropriate advice, support and counselling service

5   To form strategic alliances with key regional partners to maximise the impact of services and resources aimed at supporting access and inclusion

6   To support the learner journey and widen access to education by ensuring that students with no or low qualifications have a pathway into college

7   Use of data to measure the impact of equalities mainstreaming across the College and against sector benchmarks

Inclusive service provision

In 2018 the College implemented a change-management programme, "Towards Excellence" to further our commitment to continuous improvement in the provision of quality support services. A crucial part of this initiative involved the review and restructure of our student information, advice, support and guidance service to enable a refined and sustainable whole-college approach to student support to be introduced.

This new whole-college approach comprises the following functions:

1. Academic Tutoring

The College made a significant investment in establishing the Academic Tutor role and now has a team of over 300 Academic Tutors who provide students with timetabled "Academic Tutoring" support throughout the year. Academic Tutoring is a vitally important function as it plays a crucial role in helping to deliver a positive student experience, encouraging positive attendance and retention, and ensuring that all students are enabled to achieve their full potential as successful learners, ready to transition to future learning, life and work.

Lecturers performing the academic tutoring role are expected to be the first point of contact for academic, welfare, wellbeing and support for students. At induction, staff ensure that all students know who their Academic Tutor is and the advice and support available from them, but also what support is available from the Student Advice Centre (SAC), and how they can access these services. Teaching staff can access support from the SAC in two ways:

a. *Referring Individual Students*

Where specialist information, advice and support is required, students can be referred individually to the Student Advice Centre where a needs assessment can be carried out and a Personal Learning and Support Plan created if necessary.

b. *Commissioning Targeted Support*

There are sometimes occasions when a number of students within a course group all require additional support of a similar nature, for example where there is a high number of class members with a known additional learning support requirement, the nature of the class and the planned activity means that some classroom assistance is required, or if a specific course has experienced particularly poor KPIs for a number of years.

In circumstances such as this, Curriculum Managers will work with teaching staff to identify 'at-risk' groups and formally 'commission' additional in-class support from the Student Advice and Support team.

Mid-way Update

A new curriculum facing Student Advice & Support Team Bookings system was introduced in session 21-22 to more efficiently manage the process for commissioning classroom sessions.

The system encompasses all sessions offered within the Student Advice & Support Team's Bank of Resources as well as offering a bespoke option. The bespoke option recognises that there may be topics identified as being of benefit to a class group that are not currently resourced, allowing for collaboration between the Student Advice & Support Team and the curriculum to develop a session tailored to the specific needs and level of the class.

2. The Student Advice Centre

As a consequence of the new whole-College Support model, a one-stop-shop Student Advice Centre (SAC) was established at each major campus. The SAC brings together all front facing support services to one location providing ease of access for learners. The SAC is home to three teams; the Student Advice and Support team, the Student Admissions and Funding team, and the College Administration and Examinations Team, each of whom play a different role in supporting access and inclusion. Partnerships forged with local partners including SDS, the two local universities, Open University, Foyer, MCR Pathways have led to their presence within the Student Advice Centres. Creation of the SACs has been a major innovation and investment for the College and its students, transforming the student and staff experience and how they access the wide range of internal and external support.

3. Student Support Referral System

In academic session 2018/19 a new online referral system was developed to create an efficient mechanism for College staff to refer students for the wide range of support available in the Student Advice Centre. In the first year (2018/19) after its launch 636 student support referrals were recorded. 614 referrals were made in the following academic session 2019/20 demonstrating the success of the implementation of this system and the extent to which it has become embedded in the new whole-college approach to support provision.

Mid-way Update

Following a bedding in period after the initial build as well as feedback received from curriculum colleagues, a number of refinements have been made to the SIP based Student Support Referral System. Notably, referrers now receive automated email updates as their referral is assigned to a member of the Student Advice & Support Team, when the status of their referral is updated and when notes/commentary are added. Not only does this automation reduce the admin burden and volume of emails exchanged, it also helps to ensure GDPR compliance.

4. The Student Advice and Support Team

The Student Advice and Support Team (SAST) works with curriculum staff, key external partners and students across all campuses to provide advice and support aimed at ensuring that all students have the opportunity to become more independent learners and successfully complete their chosen course.

The team has responsibility for supporting transitions and the development and promotion of inclusive practice across the College, and it strives to support students to become more self-reliant in all aspects of their studies via the provision of the following range of services:

a. *Support Needs Assessments*

Early identification of learning and or support needs is crucial if individuals are to make informed choices about their futures. Students can identify a specific support need at the application stage, self-refer at any time during their programme of study or be referred to the team by teaching staff or by an external partner/agency. 162 needs assessments were undertaken in academic session 2019-20 and Alternative Assessment Arrangements agreed and implemented for 225 students.

Mid-way Update

New for session 21-22 the Personal Learning and Support Plan (PLSP) and Support Needs Assessment process and documentation has undergone extensive redevelopment.

Having consulted with and canvassed opinion from key curriculum stakeholders and taken cognisance of leading sector approaches, the business process, content and design has been significantly overhauled to provide for a more student centred, meaningful and user-friendly approach to this key aspect of support provision.

Needs Assessment Reports can now be accessed by curriculum staff via a student's SIP profile, with push notifications alerting staff to new uploads for students within their area of responsibility. This advancement again ensures our GDPR compliance whilst reducing the volume of emails being exchanged.

b. *Study and core skills support*

One of the key services the team provides is one-to-one and targeted small-group core and study skills support to students. The team can help with key skills such as communication, numeracy and IT, and a range of essential study skills.

Furthermore, the team provides advice and guidance in the use of assistive digital technologies e.g. text-to-speech, mind mapping, voice recognition etc.

c. *Information, Advice and Support*

In addition to learning support, the SAST provides impartial advice and support to students relating to student welfare including money management and careers support including employability and UCAS information and advice. Student study visa information, advice and support is also provided.

d. *Targeted In-Class Support*

The SAST provides a range of targeted learning support to students in the classroom environment on both mainstream and Learning Opportunities courses including:

- Additional core skills support
- Supporting students in making notes/research
- Clarifying/reinforcing lecturer explanations and instructions
- Supporting the reading/understanding of complex text/instructions
- Supporting practical work, reinforcing any health and safety requirements
- Helping students keep focused on their task

This support can be commissioned by curriculum teams alongside a range of other bespoke support initiatives and activities relating to learning, student welfare, money management and careers/employability/UCAS advice and support.

Mid-way Update

The Student Advice & Support Team's Ready, Steady, Study! Transitions Days translated well into a remote offering, and later into a blended offer, as the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions allowed. With considerations such as capacity and staffing resources mitigated by virtue of the format, the reach of the event has been far greater than in previous years, which will inform planning as to how the offer may evolve over time. Furthermore, usually only offered during the summer months to support those commencing their studies in August, in 2021 and presently in 2022, Ready, Steady, Study! has been rolled out for January/February start courses to ensure that all full-time students, where beneficial, have a supported transition to College irrespective of their course start date.

A further advancement has been the introduction of a targeted appointment booking system for applicants. The Applicant Booking System offers a range of pre-entry appointment options alongside appointments to introduce applicants to key systems including Office 365 and Blackboard.

Student Story

Jake has been a student at NESCOL since 2015 when he started on a School Links course. Jake has cerebral palsy, processing and motor skills issues, a visual impairment and is a wheelchair user. Following the links course, a bespoke course was created to enable Jake to achieve qualifications in Administration at his own pace. He loves coming to College twice a week and working with the curriculum and support staff in achieving his ambitions. Jake has received additional support from the Student Advice and Support Team across his time in the College. The level of support he has required has significantly reduced with each academic session, and he is finding great confidence in his growing independence as he progresses through the units at College, safe in the knowledge that extra academic and targeted support are available should it be required.

"I am privileged to be here at NESCol – I have succeeded brilliantly. I came to College from Anna Ritchie School in Peterhead and I'm studying Introduction to Business and Administration. I get extra support from the Student Advice & Support Team which is really helpful. College has opened up a whole new world of possibilities for me."

e. *Care Experienced and Carers Support*
    The SAST works closely with students identifying as being care experienced or carers to ensure that their College journey is a positive and successful one. It also works with a number of external agencies to support transitions and signpost students to the support services available to them.

Mid-way Update

Significant work has been undertaken by the SAST to enhance Care Experienced student support provision across session 2020 – 2021 with the launch of 'Our NESCol SPACE', a CE student peer support group, proving amongst the most well received. CE named contact, Gwen Watt has developed a student facing Wakelet of targeted information and resources complemented by CE newsletters issued across the session. CE applicants have also been invited to book an introductory appointment with the SAST ahead of commencing their College course to ensure their access to enhanced transition support where beneficial.

Work is also underway, led by named contact, Lianne Marriott, to develop an effective support provision for Estranged Students and Student Carers. In February 2021 NESCol took the Stand Alone Pledge to demonstrate its commitment to supporting Estranged Students throughout their College journey. An internal working group has been established to drive forward change, informed by focus groups with students and staff with lived experience, to shape how NESCol provides targeted information, advice and meaningful support for these two distinct cohorts to meet students at their point of need. Central to this will be NESCol's bid to successfully achieve the Carers Trust's Going Further for Student Carers Award.

f. *Mental Health First Aid Support and Safeguarding*

The SAST provides a student mental health emergency or crisis situation support service and works closely with Academic Tutors and other curriculum staff in the support of students who experience mental health issues.

The Safeguarding Team comprises a Director of Learning, Student Advice and Support Manager and Student Access and Inclusion Manager. The team has a responsibility for safeguarding across all College campuses and ensures the safety and welfare of all College students in accordance of national guidelines and legislation.

Mid-way Update

Launched in February 2021, the Report + Support system provides staff and students with a mechanism to report physical or sexual violence, harassment, racism or any other form of discrimination. Reports may relate to issues the student or staff member has experienced themselves or can relate to a concern they have for a classmate or a colleague. Developed by specialist provider Culture Shift, Report + Support has been successfully introduced at universities and colleges throughout the UK and encompasses a promotional platform for campaign work and awareness raising.

The Safeguarding remit has recently been extended to include the Heads of Sector as additional points of contact.

g. *Student Counselling*

In October 2019 the SFC released new guidance to the Sector in relation to the provision of counselling services to students. As a consequence of this, numerous models of delivery were investigated with key partners, and the College introduced the new service at the beginning of academic year 20-21.

An effective triage system is in place in order to utilise the additional services effectively whilst at the same time not undermining the current support structure and importance of staff roles within it.

The service is managed by the Student Advice and Support team.

Mid-way Update

Since the Access and Inclusion Plan 2020 – 2023 was published over 1,050 hours of therapy has been provided to NESCol students by practitioners with ACIS Student. Despite being introduced amidst the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the very real need and value for such ongoing provision cannot be underestimated, with student mental health continuing to be a very real concern to the sector.

The counselling service provided by ACIS Student is complemented via Togetherall's Live Therapy, a bolt-on, fully remote, counselling service the College can triage to.

Where staff are concerned about a student's mental health and wellbeing they may submit a wellbeing referral to the SAST who will arrange to meet with the student to discuss their support needs further, which, as appropriate, may result in a referral to either ACIS Student or Togetherall's Live Therapy.

Both staff and students are encouraged to sign up with Togetherall, an anonymous, online community as a means to share experiences and coping strategies, to access a creative outlet to help manage feelings and to access self-assessment tools and short self-help courses.

h.   *College initiatives and external partners collaboration*
The SAST has a remit to develop and actively support College-wide student focused strategies, policies, approaches, initiatives and annual priorities in order to improve student retention, attainment, resilience, confidence and wellbeing.

The team builds in conjunction with the Students' Association and external partners the capacity for student engagement particularly in relation to employability, equality and diversity, inclusion and wellbeing.

i.   *BSL Plan*
The College's BSL Plan was published in 2018. Written in consultation with members of the D/deaf community and external partners, the Plan outlines the College's commitment to the D/deaf community and includes an action plan in relation to accessibility and the inclusion of these learners.

Mid-way Update

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about some significant changes and improvements to accessibility with the introduction of more recorded and captioned classroom and learning sessions. Whilst this was always planned, the pandemic expedited prevalence of captioning. In session 21-22 a BSL Working Group will be formed to collectively gather opinions and data from staff and students to improve service provision at NESCol. The themes this group will focus on will be determined by the results of the Staff and Student BSL Survey in addition to working on a solution to the Region's significant lack of BSL interpreters and access to them.

Mid-way Update

j.   *Assistance and Therapy Animal Policy*
NESCol is committed to supporting all students and recognises that some students will need to bring an Assistance Animal onto campus to assist them in carrying out their day-to-day activities within College.

In exceptional circumstances and when there is clear medical evidence, consideration will also be given to requests by students to bring therapy animals to College.

Any queries or requests should be directed to the Student Advice & Support Team in the first instance.

5.   The Student Admissions and Funding Team

The Student Admissions and Funding Team provides information, advice and guidance across a range of student funding and finance related support issues including bursary entitlement, course fee eligibility and discretionary funding.

Being mainly based in the Student Advice Centres means that all students looking for or referred for support are funnelled through the Centre. Part of the function of the team is to 'triage' enquiries to ensure the best person is allocated to support the student, giving a 'one-stop shop' experience. Feedback from students and staff confirms that this model is an improvement on previous services.

The team provides information in different formats – face-to-face, digitally and paper to ensure their services are accessible to all. The team also provides support during extended opening hours on Thursday evenings and Saturday mornings.

6.   The College Administration and Examinations Team

The College Administration and Examinations Team supports access and inclusion via the provision of essential support to the curriculum and supports teams in work associated with monitoring student attendance and absence, bursary payment and progress meeting management. This vital support is key in the retention and achievement of students particularly those who have additional support needs including those who are care experienced, carers and from deprived backgrounds.

7.   Corporate Parenting

The College's Corporate Parenting Plan was published in 2016 and since then the College has developed close collaboration with the two local universities and local authorities which has proved invaluable in data sharing and transition arrangements from school to further and higher education to allow for targeted support, forecasting and planning to improve the positive destinations for learners who are care experienced. College representation on Aberdeen City Council's Care Experienced Champion's Board and Aberdeenshire's Corporate Parenting Steering Board enables liaison and networking with all key Corporate Parenting partners such as the NHS, Fire and Rescue Service, Police Scotland, Social Work, Housing, Schools and Children's Panel.

The College supports a nationwide project, MCR Pathways, by allowing staff to be involved as mentors for Care Experience school pupils across the region and facilitate College taster sessions across a range of curriculum areas.

8. Universal Design for Learning

In keeping with the College's inclusive learning and teaching strategy, the College seeks as far as possible to meet the needs of the learner within its inclusive learning environment. Particular emphasis is placed on the promotion of inclusive teaching practices which reduce/remove the requirement for interventions/ adjustments for individual learners. Should, however, the learner require any support which falls outwith that which the College is able to provide in-house, consideration would then be given to bespoke individual support packages and possible alternative sources of support for that learner which might include partnership working with external professionals. Alternative sources of funding may also be considered for the learner e.g. College bursary or Additional Support Needs for Learning Allowance in the case of non-advanced level course learners, and Disabled Students Allowance funding through Student Award Agency Scotland (SAAS) in the case of learners on advanced level courses.

Mid-way Update

The Accessibility Regulations and legislation enacted in September 2020 will inform the College's ongoing approach to Universal Design for Learning and content creation. Following the survey issued to mark Global Accessibility Awareness Day to help benchmark NESCol's collective, current understanding of accessibility and to help shape our next steps, further College-wide guidance will be issued by the Digital Accessibility Working Group.

9. Supported Programmes

The College recognises that for some individual learners the nature of their learning need is such that dedicated provision is necessary as a prelude to progression to other provision.

a.   *Learning Opportunities*

The Learning Opportunities Team offers a range of supported education courses to learners with additional learning support needs. These courses provide school leavers and older adults with the opportunity to consolidate and enhance the basic skills they learned in school and to develop new skills for progression onto vocational training in the wider college, or employment. Close working partnerships have been developed with the schools in both Aberdeen city and Aberdeenshire, including special schools and some independent and community schools. This relationship ensures that essential information regarding the support needs of individuals is passed on to the College, and that every student is placed on the most appropriate course for successful progression and to ensure their support needs can be met.

b.   *Project Search*

A one-year Internship programme supporting young people between 16-25 years of age with additional needs to gain skills and experience to go on to employment. Project SEARCH Aberdeen commenced in September 2013 and is hosted by the University of Aberdeen and delivered in partnership with North East Scotland College, Inspire (Partnership Through Life), Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeenshire Council and the Scottish Consortium for Learning Disabilities.

The programme enables up to twelve Interns per year to receive support to undertake 3 work placements (internships) within the University (or other partner organisations), whilst studying to attain vocational qualifications. Upon graduation, the Interns receive support to source and sustain paid employment.

c.   Aberdeen Foyer Partnership

NESCol has worked in partnership with Aberdeen Foyer on a variety of personal development and employability programmes for over 20 years across the North East from Aberdeen to Banff. Programmes include Prince's Trust Team Programme, REACH (Recovery, Employability, Achievement, Challenge, Hope), Employability Skills (Level 1 City & Guilds Qualifications – SCQF Level 4) and Discovering Talent (Core Skills) are delivered to over 300 learners each year. Many have come from chaotic or challenging backgrounds and these programmes provide a real opportunity for change, re-engaging with formal education and hope for the future.

10. **ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages)**

The College strives to remove barriers for international students who choose to live and work in Scotland and to help them integrate into the Scottish culture, become confident individuals, be aware of their rights and responsibilities as citizens and contribute to society. This is achieved through mandatory Citizenship, Employability, Working with Others units etc. and extracurricular cultural activities including visiting museums and various places of interest.

The College offers a range of levels, on a part-time basis both day and evening, and works with a range of community partners to ensure access and support to ESOL students. The College has established good working relationship with the two local authorities supporting the nationwide Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS) introduced by the UK Government with the aim of providing smooth admission and funding processes for Syrian refugees and contextualised admission and progression into mainstream courses.

11. Library +

At each site, the Library+ is at the heart of the campus, providing learners with access to a wide range of services and facilities to help support learning and teaching. The library team helps to address NESCol's strategic ambitions to develop staff and student digital literacy, to support the development of key employability skills essential to promoting learner progress and achievement, and the enhancement of efficiencies within the learning, teaching and assessment process.

The Library+ has a vast digital offer for students and staff including over 21,000 e-books, 34 databases, online journals and access to news articles. These resources are selected by library staff with input from teaching staff to ensure all aspects of the curriculum are covered. Having resources in digital form means they can be accessed from any device in any location.

Digital resources also include many accessible features:

- Ability to increase the text size
- Ability to change the background colour of page
- Read aloud functionality
- Dictionary function

12. Digital and Assistive Technologies

The College aims to assist all learners to identify and access appropriate digital and assistive technologies that will enable them to become confident individuals and successful learners, with the skills necessary to be successful in learning, life and work.

13. Office 365

In addition to a range of specialist assistive technologies, all staff and students have access to MS Office 365 on their own device or by staff on their personal device at home. The MS Office provides access to the full software applications (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook, OneNote, Teams, Access, Publisher) as well as 1Tb of OneDrive storage which means they coursework can be accessed on-demand from wherever they choose to work.

There has been 7853 activations for Office 365 ProPlus software for staff and students since March 2019 and over 7500 active users for Office 365 services in the academic session 2019/20.

14. Student Portal - MyNESCol

Students can access all essential information, advice and support services via the College's Student app, MyNESCol. The app provides students with a portal to key links such as their timetable, absence forms, discretionary payments information and the student mental health toolkit.

15. Blackboard – Virtual Learning Environment

All students and staff have access to an updated version of the College's Virtual Learning Environment, "Blackboard" featuring a slick new user interface, Blackboard Ultra, that is more user friendly across a range of mobile devices, the new system comprises a range of fantastic new tools including:

a. *Blackboard Collaborate*

A real-time video conferencing tool that lets users add files, share applications and use a virtual whiteboard to interact online from any computer or mobile device. This enables students to attend online lectures should travel be difficult and catch up with classmates in real-time webchat.

b. *Blackboard Ally*

This tool automatically checks all uploaded teaching and assessment material for accessibility issues and allows students to generate alternative accessible formats using advanced Machine Learning Algorithms. It is integrated into Blackboard and it analyses the accessibility and content added to the Blackboard Content Editor within Blackboard courses. It also provides institution-wide reporting on course content accessibility and provides teaching staff with instructors on how to improve the accessibility of their course content and alter future behaviours.

A substantial investment for NESCol, the purchase of the tool is considered ground-breaking in the FE sector and since it was launched it has been widely used across the College by both staff and students with training events held to promote the product along with self-service instructions on Blackboard itself.

Mid-way Update

72,635 alternative file formats have been downloaded since 1st August 2020 with tagged PDF proving the most popular. 76% of students in session 21-22 to date who click to investigate the alternative formats available, have gone on to download their materials in an alternative format. This is compared to a 56% conversion rate in session 20-21.

	20-21	21-22 (Block 1 to date)*
Alternative Format Downloaded	24,442	48,193
Beeline	723	323
Braille	289	106
Epub	2,117	1,511
Html	4,234	9,359
Ocred Pdf (Portable Document Format)	303	609
Tagged Pdf	13,185	36,137
Audio	591	148
Courses Where Alternative Format Was Downloaded From	940**	931
Unique User Downloads	3,328	3,696
Instructor Document Fixes	1,146	244

*Data accurate as of 21st January 2022.
**Less courses offered with no unit-level courses.

Further promotion of Blackboard Ally to highlight the accessibility features available to both student and staff user groups is planned for session 21-22 – staff should be sure to check the Learning Technologies Team's Training Catalogue, COLIN and Newsletter for upcoming sessions or contact the team to request a bespoke session. Further information and training can be accessed via the Digital Futures Toolkit.

16. **BYOD – Bring Your Own Device**

The College creates enabling IT environment for its learners by providing laptops to eligible non-advanced students across a number of curriculum areas which are either fully bursary funded, partially funded or paid in full/in-part by the student. So far in 2019-20 the College has distributed 1148 laptops to non-advanced students via the Student IT Helpdesk at both City Campus and Fraserburgh Campus.

17. **Student Information Portal**

An in-house Student Information Portal (SIP) has been developed to enable teaching and support staff to improve their experience and outcomes by providing them with access to all essential student information by pulling together key data and making it available to staff via a new user interface. The portal gives staff access to core information required to support students including personal details, enrolment information, student progress details and absence information. The successful outcome of this project will contribute towards the College's key strategic indicators. The project is being delivered using a phased approach with phase one delivering the new SIP platform/ interface containing the high priority functional requirements in academic session 2019/20. The phase two launched at the beginning of the academic session 2020/21 allowing for a more joined up, holistic and efficient way of working and of sharing information between support and curriculum staff, enabling a more targeted and informed approach and consequently more effective and meaningful support provision. The platform is currently being used by all teaching staff and subsequent phases will build greater functionality into the solution for support and curriculum staff. Solutions must be easily configurable and the platform needs to be accessible and simple to use, delivering time savings, support efficiencies and ultimately improve student outcomes.

Mid-way Update

Session 2020 – 2021 saw the relocation and expansion of the Student Support Referral System to SIP. Having taken in to key feedback, SIP allows the referrer to actively track and monitor the progress and outcome of their referral to the Student Advice & Support Team.

Subsequent phases of the SIP build have seen advances allowing the Student Advice & Support Team to upload Needs Assessment Reports to a student's SIP profile. It is hoped that these operational changes will provide a more efficient and streamlined stakeholder experience for curriculum colleagues.

18. The Students' Association

The role of the Students' Association (SA) is to ensure that the learner voice is represented at local and national level to improve the learner experience, to facilitate learner engagement and contribute to the college quality mechanism. In shaping the life and work of the College and encouraging learner participation the ambition is that we can empower all learners to be responsible and active citizens and encourage an inclusive environment that respects, encourages and advances equality and diversity.

To do this the Students' Association will work collaboratively with support services and curriculum teams and will:

- Operate democratically to recruit Officers
- Undertake to support learners to be actively involved in Clubs, Groups, Societies and Volunteering Opportunities within the Association ensuring equality of opportunity.
- Will seek advice from its partners, NUS and SPARQS, to ensure that materials used in training etc. are appropriate for delivery to all learner groups including ESOL and Learning Opportunities.
- Will ensure that opportunities to take an active role in the Association through the course rep system, events, clubs and societies, campaigns and elections are promoted to all learners and participation is encouraged and facilitated.
- Will seek to contribute to create a safe and Inclusive environment for all learners and while campaigning on behalf of all learners will seek to ensure that on-going awareness raising is conducted in respect of those within the protected characteristics groups including the Care Experienced.
- Will raise staff awareness of the vision, values and purpose of the SA to enable staff to fully understand and support the activities of the SA to encourage learner participation and ensure an inclusive approach is implemented.

The Students' Association, through its Calendar of Events, actively promotes events which mark days of celebration i.e. for those in protected characteristics including Black History Month, LGBT History month , International Men's and International Women's Day and works in partnership external organisation to hold fairs promoting Equality and Diversity and Health and Wellbeing.

Measuring the effectiveness and impact of this service

The effectiveness and impact of each element of the whole-college support model is measured in a variety of different ways including:

- External audits and robust internal verification and audit processes
- A wide range of student surveys and focus groups
- Reports and updates at committee meetings
- Self-evaluation reports
- Equality Outcome action updates
- Review by Senior Management and staff responsible for the implementation.

High-level oversight of progress on relevant objectives is maintained by the:

a. Curriculum Quality and Student Support Committee
b. Equalities Committee

Mid-way Update

Through use of the HGIOC (How Good Is Your College) framework and the annual self-evaluation and enhancement planning process, staff from curriculum and professional support teams are encouraged to engage in meaningful evaluation of their impact on access and inclusion objectives, feeding into the College-level Evaluation Report and Enhancement Report.

Since the publication of the Access & Inclusion Plan NESCol's committee structure, including key action groups, has been revised. As such, the aforementioned high-level oversight is now maintained by the Curriculum & Quality Committee, the Equalities Committee and the Curriculum Quality and Student Support Committee (CQASS).

Securing a parity of outcome

As session 2021 – 2022 draws to a close, the Curriculum Area Reviews will provide for an analysis of KPI's and data with a focus on reflective practice and challenge questions with a view to sustaining parity of outcomes for learners – a key driver of the Access and Inclusion Plan. With the advances made to date with SIP and the Student Support Referral system, robust support teams Power BI data will also be available to inform the measurement of effectiveness and impact had.

The College's work on supporting care experienced learners has been effective in bringing improvements in success rates for full time students over the last 3 years. Success has risen from 39% in AY2016-17 to 64.5% in AY2018-19. Numbers of care experienced learners have also risen from 76 to 152 over the same period.

The Student Advice and Support Team works effectively with College curriculum teams, local schools, universities and Skills Development Scotland to support smooth transitions and positive destinations for students who have additional support needs including those who are care experienced. Corporate Parenting training is in place for College staff, including all new staff as part of their induction programme. In particular, the following support is made available to those who have disclosed they are care experienced: Pre-entry advice; Guaranteed Interviews; Transition and Learning Support; Priority Funding Processing; Enhanced Funding; Academic Support; Peer Support and Employability/Progression advice.

The attainment gap for students with disabilities has closed from 10% in 2015-16 to 5% in AY2018-19. This has been brought about by improved focus on these learners resulting in earlier identification and tracking of those with a disability, allowing for more timely and appropriate support to be put in place. This has included contacting all applicants who declare a disability/additional support need at the point of application to discuss potential support available to them at College and offering a learning support needs assessment where appropriate.

''What I enjoyed most about my time at NESCOL was being able to interact and learn alongside a diverse group of classmates who accepted me for who I am and not the disability or illness I have.'' Social Sciences Student

Success for full time students from SIMD 10 and SIMD 20 postcodes are 63% and 64% respectively which is almost in line with the overall attainment for full time learners (67%). Although numbers of enrolments from these postcodes remain relatively low at approximately 100 and 600 for SIMD10 and SIMD 20, respectively, there are relatively few postcodes falling into these classifications in the region.

College policy and activities to promote a culture of inclusion are working well to ensure all learners feel safe and welcome in the College environment. Student feedback suggests that they feel safe and secure on College premises (96% positive response) and that the College is doing enough to highlight and promote equalities issues (92%). 85% of full time and 91% of part time students respectively responded positively to the satisfaction survey question "I believe all students at the College are treated equally and fairly by staff".

Relatively small numbers of students were recorded as having a gender identity different from birth (83) in academic session 2018-19 but these individuals had a higher level of achievement than those declaring a gender identity same as birth. The relatively small numbers of students declaring a **different gender** identity makes it more challenging to evaluate success. 17.5% of students preferred not to disclose their gender identity. The College will continue to encourage disclosure for this student group.

26% of students preferred not to disclose their **sexual orientation**, suggesting this is a sensitive area. Of the relatively low numbers declaring their orientation, success rates for full time gay men (69%); gay women (66%); bisexual (66%) and other orientation (69%) are very close to the heterosexual population (68%). This suggests the College is providing equality of opportunity and will continue its work to raise the confidence of students in disclosing their orientation.

In academic year 2018-19 95% of full time students were "white". Success rates across the other ethnicity groups suggest that ethnicity is not a barrier to success.

Most students disclose their religion although the numbers outwith the various Christian or no **religion** categories are low. Attainment rates for those of religion is generally higher than those of no religion, but small numbers in the groups makes it challenging to identify.
The College is already committed to, and involved in, work which seeks to address gender imbalance and inequality. All College staff have a responsibility to support College approaches towards greater gender balance within its curriculum offer. Curriculum staff have, through learning and teaching, opportunities to promote and support gender equality. All staff, support and curriculum, have responsibilities to positively, in terms of academic, vocational and career choice and progression, support and encourage prospective or current learners to challenge arcane views and practices which perpetuate gender segregation in specific course areas and career choices.

The College's Students' Association and the Marketing & Communications Team are effective in raising awareness of equality themes. They promote a range of materials including a suite of digital awareness presentations, distributed via the College's cross-campus information screen system and also on the student and staff portals on topics such as Anti-bullying, Race Awareness, Breathing Space Day, LGBT Awareness,

Disability Awareness, World Sight Day, International Day, Rosh Hashanah, Deafblind Awareness Week. Students are also involved in events such as Grampian Pride and International Women's Day.

Students experience and effectively contribute to learning and teaching methods and materials which are accessible and which promote and celebrate diversity. Academic Tutors are charged with undertaking activities to promote understanding of diversity. To mitigate against the potential of prejudicial views and conflict, colleagues establish ground rules in advance with students. Staff act as role models, thus demonstrating to students how to handle views and actions that conflict with their own views, ideas and experiences.

Supporting training and development

All College staff are offered relevant development opportunities around inclusiveness and where these necessarily underpin particular roles this development will be mandatory. All new staff receive a comprehensive induction programme which introduces them to the College's Vision and Values and explains their duties under the Equality Act (2010) and other relevant legislation. Corporate parenting, mental health awareness and safeguarding are covered in the induction programme.

All new teaching staff undertake training to help them become skilled in designing and implementing learning experiences which are active, engaging and inclusive and support is provided for new lecturers to become TQFE qualified within recommended time frames.
Ongoing training is provided to develop learning and teaching skills including the use of a range of digital technologies within the learning environment. Training is provided for staff who are required to assess learners which includes inclusive assessment and the implementation of alternative assessment arrangements.

Student Advice and Support Team staff are supported to achieve qualifications relating to inclusive practice such as the PDA in Inclusiveness. Training events are provided which raise awareness of equality issues, such as mental health, dyslexia, Asperger's syndrome, LGBTI, religion, culture etc.

The College ensures that all managers are trained in conducting Equality Impact Assessments.

The College fully engages in staff participation at the Colleges Development Network (CDN) events and relevant members of College staff are members on a range of working groups and forum relating to inclusive practice.

Mid-way Update

As part of the 'Welcome Back' initiatives planned for August 2021, cross-College staff were invited to attend Mental Health and Safeguarding Refresher sessions, to reiterate process and to clarify the mode of response to supporting students presenting with mental health or safeguarding concerns amidst a hybrid working model. These sessions were well attended and allowed for professional dialogue and the insightful sharing of practice between colleagues.

Presently, as Block 1 closes, informal discussion sessions have been arranged on the topic of self harm for staff to attend to develop their understanding of self-harming behaviours.

Supporting health, wellbeing and student welfare

A steering group consisting of support, teaching and student body representatives has been created in order to develop and drive forward a range of initiatives that link to the College's Mental Health Strategy.

The Academic Tutoring role and the Student Advice and Support Team play a crucial role in helping to deliver a positive student experience which allows for improvement in the support and retention of students who experience mental ill health, and ensures that all students are enabled to achieve their full potential as successful learners, ready to transition to future learning, life and work.

The Academic Tutor role (over 300 in place) provides the opportunity for effective relationships and trust to be built between staff and students, and signposting to online resources available through the student portal. The College developed a bespoke Mental Health Toolkit available to students through the College's student portal and Blackboard. The resource provides students with an easy to navigate tool through various mental health and wellbeing topics, including self-management, support at College and various other local and national support organisations.

All College staff receive mental health awareness training, and the Student Advice and Support Team and other key members of staff have undertaken mental health first aid and ASIST training in order to attend to MHFA and safeguarding situations.

The College works closely with the Student Association and People Services/ Occupational Health to plan a range of events and activities to raise awareness of, and tackle stigma about, mental health issues and promote health and wellbeing of both the student and staff population.

Furthermore, NESCOL continues to exchange and evaluate good practice in collaboration with other colleges, local schools and universities to ensure smooth transition and positive destinations for students, including those experiencing mental ill health issues.

Mid-way Update

NESCol's Wellbeing Strategy 2021 – 2023 outlines our commitment to making a positive difference to the lives of all students and staff so they are able to experience positive mental, physical and social health and achieve their full potential as successful and confident individuals. To achieve this NESCol is committed to investment in preventative measures such as building resilience, promotion of self-management strategies and providing an environment that promotes a healthy lifestyle and is free of stigma and discrimination. The wrap-around support services will continue to cover from prevention to the treatment end of the scale when it comes to supporting student and staff wellbeing.

Following the launch of NESCol's Wellbeing Strategy, the Framework for Student Wellbeing demonstrates how the whole-college support model is applied to support students from pre-entry to pre-exit with their physical, mental and social wellbeing.

In session 21-22 the Student Advice & Support Team were pleased to have welcomed two Student Wellbeing Advisers to the regional team. Post holders will be instrumental in developing mental health and wellbeing provision across College.

Work is also well underway to revitalise and fully embed the Respect Initiative at NESCol. For session 21-22 staff and students will be invited to broaden their knowledge and understanding of issues pertaining to the LGBTQ+ community and to learn about the relationship between respect and sustainability matters. Staff and students will also find out more about #callitracism, the landmark colleges and university sector declaration to stand united against racism.

Working in partnership

The College has developed strong, collaborative relationships with partners through its on-going activities within Community Planning Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire Community Planning and the Regional Economic Strategy Group. This enables managers in the College to be responsive to the needs of the region when planning provision across the areas served by the College.

The College provides a wide range of high-quality education and training opportunities to meet the needs of individuals, communities and employers across the region in a flexible, engaging and accessible way. This includes working to integrate the Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) initiative and actively addressing skills shortages.

The School Liaison team works collaboratively with all 22 Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire schools across the region in planning activity to implement improvements agreed. The primary focus is to prepare young people for the world of future work – supporting career path planning. This is demonstrated through Foundation Apprenticeships.

The College has established good working relationships with the local third sector organisations, NHS, Police and local authorities and their Health and Social Care partnerships which has been demonstrated through co-delivered workshops on mental health, multi-agency meetings in order to support vulnerable students.

A strong relationship with the NHS sees us collaborate on a number of areas including Modern Apprenticeships and staff training. NHS staff work closely with College staff and support our full-time provision which is good for our students and helps to ensure that our training is up to date and relevant to a modern healthcare industry environment. The "Get into Healthcare" is a 6-week employability course which was conceived through partnership working with the College and NHS Grampian. The aim is to ensure there is an exit route for students who complete their Level 5 course but do not wish to continue with their studies.

The College engages well with local and national universities and schools across the region and has 27 HNC articulation routes and 142 HND articulation routes with Scottish Universities. The College and Robert Gordon University have a unique partnership (degree link 2+2) which can allow students to enter into year three of a degree from HND level. As the first College in Scotland to be an associate of a university, NESCol has worked closely with RGU to offer students seamless progression from one course to another.

The Business and Community Development Team will typically have up to 500 Modern Apprentices at any point in time, across a wide range of industry areas, in addition to many more industry sponsored students. The Team also has significant sponsorship arrangements with Shell UK Ltd who sponsor a technician training programme, a major Girls into Energy programme (1,000 participants) and a secondary schools skills competition.

The Business and Community Development Team has recently developed a whole new portfolio for the business sector through the Flexible Workforce Development Fund. Through this opportunity, training has been delivered to 100 of the largest employers in the region.

Additional considerations for AY 2020–23

As the College has never offered a counselling service, it is difficult to accurately forecast potential demand. Not every student who reports a mental health and/or wellbeing issue will require or benefit from counselling. After a careful consideration of a range of options the decision has been taken that the College will work with an experienced local area counselling provider potentially in combination with and online provider. The College will monitor the impact of the new service which will be subject to formal review and evaluation at regular intervals. Additional consideration will need to be given in respect of the provision of the effective triage system which will be required and provided by the College's Student Advice and Support and Safeguarding Teams in order to utilise the additional services effectively.

The College has purchased and is in the process of implementing a new IT system in order to improve and develop the case management of safeguarding and other confidential and sensitive disclosures (e.g. convictions, Mental Health First Aid emergencies, counselling referrals) submitted by both students and staff. Due to the nature of disclosures the system and its features strongly supports the Scottish Government Equally Safe Strategy which requires major and sustained change from educational institutions across Scotland to eradicate gender-based violence.

In 2019 the College launched the RESPECT Initiative which has been well received by students and staff and reinforces long held College values, tolerance, respect and inclusion. Going forward the College will continue to embed the initiative into classroom-based conversations or resources to explore and challenge learners' views, perceptions, stereotypes and experiences.

Mid-way Update

Both the partnership with ACIS Student Counselling and the introduction of Report + Support to manage safeguarding disclosures have become well embedded since the publication of the Plan. Going forward, minor work will be undertaken in these areas to further refine the operational side of the counselling offer and to consider the configuration and user experience of the Report + Support platform.

Looking ahead for the remainder of the Plan's duration, a key focus, and an additional consideration that could not have been anticipated, is the part NESCol has to play in our regional recovery following the Covid-19 pandemic. How we meet the needs of the communities we serve and continue to support our applicants in to College and support our students to sustain their place at College, will remain an overarching focus.