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AUDIT & RISK COMMITTEE

08 February 2024

Internal Audit Assignment – Student Retention

1.0 PURPOSE OF PAPER

For decision

1.1 The purpose of this paper is to provide the Committee with findings of the internal audit for Student Retention.

2.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2.1 The Committee approved the Internal Audit plan for 2023/24 on 11 May 2023. The plan included a review of Student Retention.

2.2 The review of Student Retention has been undertaken during November 2023.

2.3 The audit has identified two recommendations and has an overall conclusion as “Strong”. The management response to the recommendations are included in the full report contained in Appendix A.

3.0 RECOMMENDATION

3.1 I recommend that the Audit and Risk Committee note the report contained in Appendix A.

4.0 BACKGROUND

4.1 The Financial Memorandum with the SFC requires the College to have an effective internal audit function and that the duties of that function conform to the professional standards of the Chartered Institute of Internal Auditors. For incorporated colleges and Regional Boards, the operation and conduct of internal audit must comply with Public Sector Internal Audit Standards and, where relevant, the Scottish Public Finance Manual. Internal Audit is to provide the Regional Board, the Principal and senior management with assurances on the adequacy of the internal control system.

4.2 The Internal Audit Service is contracted to Wylie Bisset who provide an annual plan of the areas to be audited. The plan for 2023/24 was approved by the Committee on 11 May 2023. The plan included a review of Student Retention.

5.0 STUDENT RETENTION AUDIT

5.1 The audit of review of student retention levels was undertaken between 23 November and 29 November 2023.

5.2 There were two recommendations identified, four areas of good practice identified, and the overall conclusion is “strong”. The full report is contained in Appendix A.

and enrolments and can confirm these are efficient and effective.”

“Following our review, we can provide the College with a strong level of assurance surrounding the controls in place to manage student retention. We assessed processes in place at the College where problem areas and low retention have been highlighted. We have raised several good practice points, 2 low grade recommendations for improvement and 1 observation for consideration. See Section 3: Recommendations and Section 4: Observations for further information.”

6.0 IMPLICATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

6.1 Financial Implications

The are no direct financial implications from the contents of this report.

6.2 Learner Implications

There are no direct implications from the contents of this report. The identified areas of good practice highlight the work undertaken to ensure students are given levels of support which to complete their studies.

6.3 Staff Implications

There are no direct staff implications from the contents of this report.

6.4 Equality and Diversity Implications/Equality Impact Assessment

There are no direct equality and diversity implications from the contents of this report.

6.5 Sustainability/Environmental Implications

There are no direct sustainability or environmental implications from the contents of this report.

7.0 RISK COMMENTARY

7.1 To ensure the credit targets within the Outcome Agreement with Scottish Funding Council are met and the College remains a high preforming College requires students to have successful outcomes of their studies. The support given to students ensure the successful retention and positive outcomes for students. The overall conclusion of "Strong" demonstrates the College is performing well in this area.

8.0 CONCLUSION

8.1 The audit of Student Retention has been completed and resulted in an overall conclusion of "Strong".

Kirsty Robb, Vice Principal Finance & Corporate Resources

Previous Committee Approvals: N/A

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Wylie + Bisset
Accountants, Business & Tax Advisers

Borders College
Internal Audit 2023-24

Student Retention
December 2023

Overall Conclusion
Strong

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The matters raised in this report came to our attention during the course of our audit and are not necessarily a comprehensive statement of all weaknesses that exist or all improvements that might be made.

This report has been prepared solely for Borders College's individual use and should not be quoted in whole or in part without prior written consent. No responsibility to any third party is accepted as the report has not been prepared, and is not intended, for any third party.

We emphasise that the responsibility for a sound system of internal control rests with management and work performed by internal audit should not be relied upon to identify all system weaknesses that may exist. Neither should internal audit be relied upon to identify all circumstances of fraud or irregularity should there be any although our audit procedures are designed so that any material irregularity has a reasonable probability of discovery. Every sound system of control may not be proof against collusive fraud. Internal audit procedures are designed to focus on areas that are considered to be of greatest risk and significance.

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

Purpose of review

The purpose of this assignment was to review the levels of student retention at the College. We assessed the processes in place at the College to highlight problem areas and where retention is low. We also assessed the processes undertaken by the College to address areas of poor student retention.

This review forms part of our 2023/24 Internal Audit Annual Plan.

Scope of review

Our objectives for this review were to ensure:

- Responsibilities for student retention are clearly defined throughout the College.
- The College has good quality data for quality monitoring student retention which is reported on a timely basis.
- The College actively monitors its student retention in a clear and defined manner.
- The College has plans in place to address areas of poor retention in a timely manner.
- Where poor levels of retention are highlighted, the College's procedures have been adhered to and are fit for purpose.

Our approach to this assignment took the form of discussion with relevant staff, review of documentation and where appropriate sample testing.

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Limitation of scope

There was no limitation of scope.

Background Section

Guide to Curriculum Meetings

The purpose of the Guide is to provide direction on the activities required to monitor student progress, record actions, and evaluate performance for students throughout an academic session. The main activities are:

- Preparation for academic session meetings;
- Tracking and monitoring meetings;
- Self-evaluation meetings;
- Team operational meetings; and
- Progression Board meetings.

Approach to Quality Improvement

The Strategy articulates the College's strategic objectives, performance measures, values, and behaviours. In supporting the document, Borders College recognises that it is essential that quality assurance and enhancement sits at the heart of what they do. More formally, it is a condition of grant funding that each College in Scotland takes responsibility for quality assurance and improvement within its own institution.

The document covers the following areas:

- Education Scotland's Quality Framework.
    - Self-evaluation meetings (August, February and June);
    - Track and Monitoring Meetings;
    - Preparation for Academic Session Meetings;

- Training and Development;
- Validation and Approval of Delivery;
- Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) and Credit Rating;
- Internal Verification;
- Quality Audits;
- Internal Verification Audit;
- Learning and Teaching Observations; and
- The Observation Process.

Student Guidance Procedure

The Student Guidance Procedure details all key information regarding the student retention process. The Procedure was last reviewed in 2021. Please see **Section 3: Recommendations** for further information. The Procedure contains information on the following sections:

- Allocation of Course Tutor and Achievement Coach;
- Main duties and support provided by staff;
- Transitions;
- On course;
- Further progression; and
- Withdrawals.

Monitoring

We held a call with the Assistant Principals & Learning Support (APLS) Team who advised that every full-time student has a student support officer and every officer monitors attendance on a daily or weekly basis. If a student has poor engagement for 2 weeks, they will contact the student and provide feedback to the curriculum team. Any support needed is then put in place.

The APLS Team meet twice per month, whereby the Director of MIS and E-Learning goes through the performance Dashboard as a live document. A report is not produced, the data is viewed live.

The Learning and Teaching Committee meet on a quarterly basis, and we can confirm within these meetings that there is reporting on the College's student retention KPIs.

The College's Curriculum and Quality Committee meet on a quarterly basis, and receive reports which contain key and concise information surrounding students' retention and are shown in the forms of graphs to ensure everyone understands them clearly.

Roles and Responsibilities

Student Support Officers liaise with the Student Support Services Team prior to students starting their course to ensure resources (if required) are in place to support student success.

Lecturers, Student Support Officers and the Student Support Team should continue to liaise throughout the academic session on any student issues.

In evaluating students presenting with poor attendance (which could impact on their Early Withdrawal) it is essential that **Course Tutors/ Student Support Officers** know why each student's attendance is a concern or in the unlikely event why they have left their course. If a student has left their course, the **Student Support Officer** completes a 'follow up phone call' to determine if there is an opportunity for the student to return to their study or to determine why they left the course. This is necessary for Skills Development Scotland (SDS) partners so that 'No-body is left behind' and they can establish contact with the student. Once this information has been gathered, the **Student Support Officer** passes the information to the **Student Experience Team**.

Many issues can affect student's attendance rates, for example, where students have found full-time employment before completing their programme or they may be experiencing difficult personal circumstances. It is important to track student destinations if they decide to leave the College prior to the end of the course and Course Tutor**s** are advised to conduct an exit interview with the student and liaise with DEBI (**Department of Enterprise & Business Innovation) team** to establish if there are opportunities for MA (Modern Apprentices).

The **Students' Association** is also a key part of the student retention process, and they will:

- Act as advocate for individual students and as the collective voice of students about the quality of services provided.
- Work in partnership with the College to ensure the range of support services meet the needs of all students.
- Work in partnership with Student Support Services to ensure students have access to a wide range of external support agencies.
- Provide an access point for the c-card sexual health service.
- Provide support for the College's Faculty Council system, including training and ongoing support for Class Representatives and Faculty Council Chairs.
- Provide a safe space for LGBT+ students.
- Provide mental health first aid if necessary and direct students to the appropriate support service(s).
- Promote a sense of belonging for all students by establishing appropriate support groups and raising awareness for relevant student issues.
- Ensure students always have access to support and advice by committing to an open-door policy.

Young Person's Guarantee Research Project

In the Summer of 2023 and supported by Young Person's Guarantee (YPG) funding, Borders College undertook a research project seeking to understand why students were withdrawing, or contemplating withdrawing, from their college course.

The report summarises the key themes emerging from this research and offers a series of recommendations designed to improve retention of students going forward.

Summary of Research

Participants:

- Students aged 16-24 years old who had withdrawn or considered withdrawing from their college course.
- Student-facing staff (Curriculum and Support)

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Data:

- Withdrawal information for Academic Year 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23
- Enrolment data from 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23

Summary of Recommendations

1. Build on establishment partnership with Skills Development Scotland to provide enhanced support around careers advice and progression.
2. Review admissions and induction approaches to ensure students have a clear understanding of progression opportunities and transferable skills.
3. Explore opportunities to embed inclusive learning and teaching approaches across the curriculum.
4. Establish a Report and Support mechanism to improve accessibility of hate crime and harassment reporting.
5. Review current student feedback processes and our ability to pro-actively respond to feedback and share outcomes.
6. Establish a programme of regular and accessible study skills sessions across the academic year.
7. Review the accessibility of student support functions and implement changes (welfare, learning support and funding).
8. Deliver Unconscious Bias training, including the development of processes and protocols to mitigate the impact of bias within services.
9. Introduce key contacts for each student, responsible for liaising with college teams and supporting the coordination of wrap around support.

For further information see **Section 4: Observations** for further information.

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Work Undertaken

In line with the objectives, we completed the following work:

Objective 1: Responsibilities for student retention are clearly defined throughout the College.

- We reviewed the College's Guide to Curriculum Meetings and the Student Guidance Procedure to ensure that responsibilities for key members of staff are clearly defined.
- We held discussions with the key members involved in student retention to ensure there are clear lines of responsibility and understanding of their roles.

Objective 2: The College has good quality data for quality monitoring student retention which is reported on a timely basis.

- We reviewed the 4 September, 21 September, 3 October, and 4 November 2023 APLS Meeting Minutes to ensure that student retention is monitored on an ongoing basis.
- We reviewed the May, September and November 2023 Learning and Teaching Committee Meeting Minutes to ensure that the data presented to Committee Members is sufficiently detailed and informs decision making.
- We held discussions with the APLS Team to understand how they monitor student retention on a day-to-day basis.

Objective 3: The College actively monitors its student retention in a clear and defined manner.

- We held discussions with the APLS Team to ensure that the ProSolution MIS and ProMonitor Systems used for quality monitoring of student retention is clear for all members of staff.
- We reviewed a variety of reports that can be run from the systems to ensure these are clear and concise.

Objective 4: The College has plans in place to address areas of poor retention in a timely manner.

- We reviewed a sample of 5 students presenting poor attendance to understand the College's next steps and to ensure everything was dealt with in a timely manner.

- We held discussions with the APLS Team to understand how the College work with both positive and negative lessons learned regarding student retention.
- We reviewed the Young Person's Guarantee Research Report which was conducted in Summer 2023 and held discussions with the APLS Team to understand the College's next steps in addressing the recommendations raised.

Objective 5: Where poor levels of retention are highlighted, the College's procedures have been adhered to and are fit for purpose.

- We reviewed the College's Self Evaluation Enhancement Plan 2023/24, the Approach to Quality Improvement, and the Student Guidance Procedure to ensure these documents are up to date.

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Conclusion

Overall conclusion

Overall Conclusion: Strong
Following our review, we can provide the College with a strong level of assurance surrounding the controls in place to manage student retention. We assessed processes in place at the College where problem areas and low retention have been highlighted. We have raised several good practice points, 2 low grade recommendations for improvement and 1 observation for consideration. See **Section 3: Recommendations** and **Section 4: Observations** for further information.

Summary of recommendations

Grading of recommendations				
	High	Medium	Low	Total
Student Retention	0	0	2	2

As can be seen from the above table there were no recommendations made which we have given a grading of high.

Areas of good practice

The following is a list of areas where the College is operating effectively and following good practice.	
1.	The College's Student Guidance Procedure, Approach to Quality Improvement and Self Evaluation and Enhancement Plan 2023/24 clearly outlines the clear lines of responsibility in regards to the student retention quality process.
2.	Student retention is monitored through the APLS Team meetings. The APLS will meet twice a month and is made up of the Vice Principal – Student Experience, Assistant Principals, Director of MIS and eLearning and the Director of Student Support Services. The College's Learning and Teaching Committee meet on a quarterly basis and discuss quality student retention data in key detail, and we can confirm that there is appropriate questioning of data in the meeting minutes. The College's Curriculum and Quality Committee also meet on a quarterly basis and discuss key KPIs surrounding student retention such as withdrawal rates, learner success, and enrolment figures. These KPI reports are presented in a clear and concise manner.
3.	We held discussions with the Director of MIS and eLearning and over screenshare we were shown the ProMonitor system. We can confirm that this system can run reports on specific areas such as poor attendance reports which can be broken down into departments and courses. The system also gives lecturers access to student specific data and any flags they may have against them. This ensures they are kept fully aware of specific issues.
4.	The College have completed analysis on specific groups of FT and PT students against the sector averages and as such the Progress and Achievement Sessions have been implemented to give students a chance to catch up and get extra support throughout the year.

2 BENCHMARKING

We include for your reference comparative benchmarking data of the number and ranking of recommendations made for audits of a similar nature in the most recently finished internal audit year.

Student Retention

Benchmarking				
	High	Medium	Low	Total
Average number of recommendations in similar audits	0	2	2	4
Number of recommendations at Borders College	0	0	2	2

From the table above it can be seen that the College has a lower number of recommendations compared to those colleges it has been benchmarked against.

3 DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

Student Guidance Procedure			
Ref.	Finding and Risk	Grade	Recommendation
1.	The College's Student Guidance Procedure details the key information surrounding student retention guidance. During our review, we found that the Student Guidance Procedure was last updated in May 2021 and from our discussions with the Assistant Principals & Learning Support Team we understand various job titles have changed since the last review. There is a risk that when College staff or students read the Procedure, they may be unaware of who to contact which could result in an avoidable withdrawal.	**Low**	We recommend that the Student Guidance Procedure is updated in accordance with the new job titles of the Student Support Officers and the Head of Sectors.

3 DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

Management response	Responsibility and implementation date
• Student Guidance Procedure to be updated to reflect organisational changes	*Responsible Officer:* A Brydon, Director of Student Support Services *Implementation Date: Sept 2024*

3 DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

Linking interventions to improved performance			
Ref.	Finding and Risk	Grade	Recommendation
2.	Identifying the cause and effect for any intervention may aid the improvement of retention rates. During our review we found that an effective analysis of cause and effects to identify whether interventions have resulted in improved performance with regard to retention, has not been undertaken. If unable to identify the types of interventions that are successful and those that do not result in improved performance, it is possible that ineffective interventions are being promoted. This may create an inefficient use of resources and can impact on retention numbers.	**Low**	We recommend that cause and effect analysis is undertaken on any of the interventions utilised to address student retention. The results of these (lessons learned) should be shared in an appropriate forum.

3 DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

Management response	Responsibility and implementation date
• A workshop is arranged for 26 Feb 2024 to review current reporting processes and identify opportunities to improve and/or develop new reports that help us better understand the impact of interventions. • Outcomes of interventions reported through existing committee structures and recorded within departmental self-evaluation processes.	*Responsible Officer: A Brydon, Director of Student Support Services* *Implementation Date: Dec 2024*

4 OBSERVATIONS

The following is a list of observations from our review	
1.	In the Summer of 2023 and supported by YPG Funding, the College undertook a research project seeking to understand why students were withdrawing, or contemplating withdrawing, from their college course. At the time of our review the College are awaiting the results of the YPG research project for local Colleges to compare results. Upon the completion of this the College will create an action plan surrounding the recommendations raised from the research.

5 AUDIT ARRANGEMENTS

The table below details the actual dates for our fieldwork and the reporting on the audit area under review. The timescales set out below will enable us to present our final report at the next Audit Committee meeting.

Audit stage	Date
Fieldwork start	23 November 2023
Closing meeting	29 November 2023
Draft report issued	12 December 2023
Receipt of management responses	15 January 2024
Final report issued	16 January 2024
Audit Committee	8 February 2024
Number of audit days	3

6 KEY PERSONNEL

We detail below our staff who undertook the review together with the College staff we spoke to during our review.

Wylie & Bisset LLP			
Partner	Graham Gillespie	Partner	graham.gillespie@wyliebisset.com
Senior Manager	Sue Brook	Senior Internal Audit Manager	susan.brook@wyliebisset.com
Auditor	Carla Tamagnini	Internal Auditor	carla.tamagnini@wyliebisset.com

Borders College			
Key Contacts:	Joanne George	Director of MIS and eLearning	jgeor@borderscollege.ac.uk
	Joanne Elliot	MIS Team Leader	jelli@borderscollege.ac.uk
Wylie & Bisset appreciates the time provided by all the individuals involved in this review and would like to thank them for their assistance and co-operation.			

APPENDICES

A GRADING STRUCTURE

For each area of review, we assign a level of assurance in accordance with the following classification:

Assurance	Classification
Strong	Controls satisfactory, no major weaknesses found, no or only minor recommendations identified.
Substantial	Controls largely satisfactory although some weaknesses identified, recommendations for improvement made.
Weak	Controls unsatisfactory and major systems weaknesses identified that require to be addressed immediately.
No	No or very limited controls in place leaving the system open to significant error or abuse, recommendations made require to be implemented immediately.

A GRADING STRUCTURE

For each recommendation, we assign a grading either as High, Medium or Low priority depending on the degree of risk assessed as outlined below:

Grading	Classification
High	Major weakness that we consider needs to be brought to the attention of the Audit Committee and addressed by Senior Management of the College as a matter of urgency.
Medium	Significant issue or weakness which should be addressed by the College as soon as possible.
Low	Minor issue or weakness reported where management may wish to consider our recommendation.

B ASSIGNMENT PLAN

Purpose of review

The purpose of this assignment is to review the levels of student retention at the College. We will assess the processes in place at the College to highlight problem areas and where retention is low. We will also assess by the College to address areas of poor student retention.

This review forms part of our 2023/24 Internal Audit Annual Plan.

Scope of review

Our objectives for this review are to ensure:

- Responsibilities for student retention are clearly defined throughout the College.
- The College has good quality data for quality monitoring student retention which is reported on a timely basis.
- The College actively monitors its student retention in a clear and defined manner.
- The College has plans in place to address areas of poor retention in a timely manner.
- Where poor levels of retention are highlighted, the College's procedures have been adhered to and are fit for purpose.

Our approach to this assignment took the form of discussion with relevant staff, review of documentation and where appropriate sample testing.

Limitation of scope

There is no limitation of scope.

Audit approach

Our approach to the review will be:

- Discussion with the relevant College Staff to establish the procedures employed by the College for monitoring student retention.
- An assessment of the quality processes used to monitor student retention in place at the Trust and their effectiveness. This will include an assessment of performance metrics utilised, targets that are set and processes for monitoring progress and reporting outcomes.

Potential key risks

The potential key risks associated with the area under review are:

- Responsibilities for student retention are not clearly defined throughout the College.
- The College has quality data for quality monitoring student retention which is not reported on a timely basis.
- The College actively do not monitor its student retention in a clear and defined manner.
- The College does not have plans in place to address areas of poor retention in a timely manner.
- Where poor levels of retention are highlighted, the College's procedures have not been adhered to and are fit for purpose.