



HMIE

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland
Luchd-sgrùdadh an Rìgh airson Foghlam ann an Alba

External review of Modern Apprenticeship delivery by North East Scotland College (NESCoI)

A report by HM Inspectors

16 June 2026

CEO/Principal	Neil Cowie
External review date	20 April 2026
Provider type	College of Further and Higher Education
Lead HMI	Sarah Halliwell
Apprentice numbers	881

1. Background

External inspections of Modern Apprenticeship (MA) providers are planned collaboratively between the provider and HM Inspectors. Skills Development Scotland (SDS) provides information regarding provider performance including key data to support this process.

During the inspection, a team of HM Inspectors evaluated the quality of training provision and the experiences of apprentices and key stakeholders, including employers. During the visit, the team met with staff, apprentices, employers and other stakeholders and explored the quality of training delivery; how well the needs of apprentices are being met; and approaches to improve the quality of provision.

This report summarises the findings from the inspection, highlighting areas of positive practice and areas for development. The provider receives grades for three elements: leadership and management; quality of delivery, and progress and outcomes. The report also contains any main points for action identified by HM Inspectors.

The report will be shared with the provider, Scottish Government and SDS. For colleges, the report will also be shared with the Scottish Funding Council and the college Board of Management. A final summary report will be published on HMIE's website.

2. The provider and its context

North East Scotland College (NESCol) is a large multi-campus institution serving employers and learners across Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire. The college operates from four main sites; two in Aberdeen, one in Fraserburgh and one in Peterhead (The Scottish Maritime Academy).

NESCol delivers a wide range of programmes across Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) levels 1-8 with progression pathways to degree-level study. The college works with employers across a variety of sectors to deliver apprenticeship programmes and bespoke training to support regional, economic development and national skills priorities.

Within the college's contract with Skills Development Scotland (SDS), approximately 60% of apprentices are currently undertaking MA programmes in the Engineering sector, with around 19%

in Construction and 15% in Automotive. Smaller numbers of apprentices are undertaking programmes in Business and Administration (3%), Hairdressing (1.5%), Freight Services (1.3%), while Healthcare, Social Services and Management account for under 1% of overall apprenticeship delivery.

Outcome of external review

The grades for each of the three elements are:

Leadership and Management	Good
Delivery of Training	Good
Progress and Outcomes	Satisfactory

3. Summary of review findings

A summary of the findings of HM Inspectors are set out below.

Element 1: Leadership and management – Good

QI 9.1 Influential vision, values and aims

Areas of positive progress

- Senior managers have a clear and ambitious vision to grow the college's MA provision to meet it's *Our Region* core objectives. The development of the Energy Transition Zone (ETZ) is supporting the region in its transition to renewable energy and helps ensure apprentices are building the knowledge and skills required to succeed in the renewable sector.
- The college's 2025-30 strategic plan underpins the ambition of driving regional growth by aligning programmes with regional demand. It identifies strengthening partnerships with employers, local authorities and community organisations as key to ensuring alignment with skills reform, economic growth, regional and national priorities.
- Senior leaders work effectively with employers and regional partners to identify skills gaps and growth sectors. They develop apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programmes based on labour market intelligence to target growth in response to regional skills shortages. This ensures provision remains relevant to current and emerging workforce demands, enhances progression opportunities and supports sustained employment.
- The Board of Management receives regular updates on apprenticeship programmes, including recruitment trends, growth areas and partnership opportunities. This supports informed discussion and decision-making about the direction and scale of apprenticeship provision in relation to regional skills shortages and employer and economic need.

- Strong partnership arrangements support investment in college resources to align curriculum design with industry needs. This ensures that the delivery of apprenticeship programmes is up-to-date and relevant to industry needs.
- NESCol leaders demonstrate strong commitment to learner wellbeing and inclusion. College support services and initiatives such as *Men in Mind* support apprentices with their health and wellbeing and helps build their resilience.

Areas for development

- The college has recently introduced five overarching strategic objectives and a number of supporting strategies. These at an early stage of implementation. Apprenticeship staff are not yet sufficiently aware of or embedding these strategies across apprenticeship delivery.

QI 9.4 Leadership for innovation and change

Areas of positive progress

- The MA Coordinator Team has designed and implemented effective arrangements for the monitoring of apprentice performance, including centralised tracking tools. This innovative approach is helping to increase oversight, support timely and targeted intervention, and impact positively on the overall quality of provision.
- NESCol provides employers with regular opportunities to participate in events to promote employment within their industry sector, such as careers fairs. A high number of employers attend these events to promote job opportunities and progression pathways in MA programmes.
- Managers work collaboratively with key employers across a wide range of sectors. This ensures MA programmes reflect sector developments, including changes in apprenticeship frameworks, emerging labour market trends and skills priorities.

Areas for development

- Within a few subject areas, the number of apprentices recruited has increased significantly. However, the recruitment and training of work-based assessors has not kept pace with the increase in volume. This has led to delays in assessment opportunities, incomplete evidence and has contributed to a decline in apprenticeship outcomes.

QI 9.5 Securing improvement of quality and impact of training

Areas of positive progress

- Senior leaders monitor apprentice progress through systematic analysis of college Management Information System (MIS) data and SDS activity reports on a framework-by-framework basis. This effective use of data enables the identification of

patterns and trends, including reasons for withdrawal.

- Most NESCol managers encourage assessors and lecturers to engage in relevant joint professional development. This helps ensure assessment and teaching practice remains current and broadly aligned with sector expectations and industry standards.
- Almost all assessors participate effectively in standardisation meetings to plan and review verification activities, share effective practice, and identify actions for improvement. Staff are encouraged to engage in awarding body events and to participate in qualification and design meetings. They find this helpful and this ensures close compliance with awarding body standards.
- The approaches taken by college leaders and staff to the delivery of MA programmes support the development of a skilled workforce. Almost all employers confirm high levels of satisfaction with the skills development of their apprentices.

Areas for development

- Self-evaluation and action planning arrangements are not consistently and systematically applied across apprenticeship provision. As a result, improvement actions lack clear prioritisation and their impact is not routinely monitored or evaluated. This is limiting their effectiveness in driving sustained improvement.
- Employer engagement in self-evaluation and strategic planning is limited. A significant number of employers do not participate in college-devised initiatives.
- Most staff are not aware of SDS performance data or how programmes perform against SDS benchmarks and framework requirements. This limits the use of national data to support improvement.
- Despite some apprenticeship programmes having low rates of successful outcomes, no apprenticeship programmes have been identified for targeted intervention through the college's *Spotlight Review* process. This is a missed opportunity to identify specific strengths or emerging risks that are unique to the apprentice experience to support improvement.

Element 2 Delivery of training – Good

QI 5.1 Design and delivery of training

Areas of positive progress

- Overall, the quality of off-the-job learning and teaching is good. Where delivery is of particularly high standard, staff ensure teaching sessions in workshops and classrooms are planned well and are supported by appropriate industry standard resources. This helps apprentices understand the relevance of their learning and supports the development of knowledge and skills.

- Most teaching staff and assessors use well-considered questioning techniques and praise to encourage apprentices to reflect on their on and off-the-job training experiences. This approach helps apprentices develop relevant vocational knowledge, technical skills, and engage productively in their MA programme. Apprentices articulate clearly how their college experiences help them in their job roles.
- Almost all employers comment that the MA programme meets their workforce needs and provides added value to their business through skills development. For example, industry partners and college staff are working collaboratively to design and deliver a level 5 Civil Engineering and Construction qualification to meet industry needs and regional demand.
- Almost all assessors work productively with employers and apprentices to identify training needs and select specific frameworks and units that align to business requirements. This ensures training remains relevant and directly linked to the workplace.
- Most college managers acknowledge the challenge of maintaining pedagogical and subject knowledge and skills of staff. They ensure that all staff have the opportunity to engage in development activities including field trips and industry-specific events.
- Across most subject areas, assessors work closely with teaching staff to share information, including emerging technologies and industry-related developments. This approach to professional development ensures teaching staff are kept informed and up to date with industry practice.
- Apprentice quarterly review documentation is routinely shared with employers. This ensures transparency and continuity of oversight. Employers are regularly informed of apprentices' attendance and timekeeping and are promptly notified of any concerns relating to progress or performance.

Areas for development

- The majority of apprentices are not sufficiently aware of the range of support services available or how to access them when attending off-the-job training in college. This limits opportunities for apprentices to access health and wellbeing support or additional help to complete assessment tasks.
- The engagement of employers in quarterly reviews is inconsistent across departments. Employers would value access to this information to help them better align off-the-job learning and assessment needs to individual apprentices' work duties.
- Most apprentices are not made aware of how their feedback is used to drive improvement.

QI 5.4 Effectiveness of training

Areas of positive progress

- Almost all apprentices benefit from effective assessment planning and structured quarterly progress reviews. This ensures they take an active role in leading their own learning and helps apprentices build confidence in managing their progression.
- Across all subject areas, apprentices have access to high quality resources and equipment. Apprentices experience industry-relevant standards and are supported to achieve, including where employers cannot provide the full range of equipment required for the completion of tasks associated with the award during on-the-job training.
- Almost all apprentices confirm that the quality and consistency of feedback provided by assessors is helpful. This supports their understanding of how to improve, helps deepen their knowledge, and builds confidence to take greater ownership of their learning.
- The majority of apprentices are encouraged to participate in a range of activities to widen their knowledge and skills, including competitions and additional awards. This helps broaden their experience, builds motivation and confidence and supports occupational skills development.
- Almost all apprentices confirm that their apprenticeship is appropriate to their employment and can clearly articulate how their college activities relate to their job role. This alignment supports the development of relevant vocational skills and helps apprentices understand the value of their apprenticeship in the workplace.
- Online portfolios actively encourage apprentices to take ownership of their own learning and progress at a pace that suits their circumstances and abilities and provides timeous insight for employers into their apprentices' progress.

Areas for development

- In a few subject areas, not all lecturers have current industry knowledge and skills. This limits their ability to provide up to date learning experiences which align with industry standards.
- In a few subject areas, approaches to programme design restrict opportunities for apprentices to accelerate their progress and complete their programme ahead of schedule if appropriate.
- Almost all learners engage well during classroom activities, however the pace of learning in a few lessons is too slow. This limits progression opportunities for a few apprentices.
- Access to online portfolios has not yet been made available to all apprentices. This limits the ability of those apprentices to reflect on the progress they have made and take ownership of their own learning.

- On a few occasions, off-the-job training activities are not directly relevant to workplace practices. This limits opportunities for apprentices to develop relevant vocational knowledge and technical skills.

QI 8.1 Reflection on provision to improve training

Areas of positive progress

- Almost all apprentices receive a structured induction and appropriate onboarding arrangements. This helps them settle into their studies and supports an effective start to their learning.
- College staff work effectively with employers seeking to recruit apprentices. They facilitate opportunities for employers to engage with full-time learners to promote job vacancies. This strengthens employer engagement, enhances progression opportunities, and ensures apprenticeship programmes meet local and regional workforce development needs.

Areas for development

- A few employers who have limited experience of MA programmes do not have sufficient understanding of the requirements of apprenticeship delivery. They would welcome additional support to help them better understand apprenticeship delivery requirements.
- Skills scanning is not used routinely at onboarding to assess apprentices' starting points or confirm programme suitability. As a result, early identification of skills gaps and individual learning needs is limited.

Element 3 Progress and Outcomes – Satisfactory

QI 1.1 Achieving and maintaining high levels of service delivery

Areas of positive progress

- Positive relationships are evident between apprentices and college staff. Almost all apprentices report feeling well supported throughout their programme and describe staff as approachable and responsive. They value the quality of feedback and guidance provided, which helps them stay focused, understand the progress they are making and remain on track to achieve.
- Almost all apprentices and employers confirm that the pace and duration of their apprenticeship programmes are appropriate. This enables apprentices to balance work and learning effectively and supports sustained engagement and steady progress throughout their training.

Areas for development

- Meta-skills delivery is at an early stage and is not yet well understood by apprentices, employers or staff. Most apprentices are unclear about how their meta-skills are being developed, which limits their ability to recognise progress or apply these skills effectively.

QI 2.1 Apprentice progress and achievement of individual outcomes

Areas of positive progress

- Overall rates of apprentice achievement were above SDS targets of 70% for apprentices aged 16–19 and 75% for those aged 20 and over in 2023–24 for a small number of frameworks. These included programmes in automotive and business and administration.
- In 2023–24, rates of apprentice achievement in automotive, business and administration, freight logistics, hairdressing and barbering, and management were above SDS targets for apprentices aged 20 and over.
- In 2024–25, the freight logistics framework continued to perform strongly, achieving success rates above SDS targets for both age groups. Social services and healthcare also achieved above-target outcomes for apprentices aged 20 and over.
- Recruitment of apprentices with a declared disability is above SDS national comparator data.
- Apprentice progression to employment upon completion of their programme is high.

Areas for development

- The overall apprenticeship achievement rate for 16- to 19-year-olds was 65.8% in 2024 and 62.2% in 2025. This is below both the SDS target of 70% and the national achievement rates for this age group of 71.2% in 2024 and 75.9% in 2025.
- The overall rate of achievement for apprentices aged over 20 years was 69.7% and 56.9% in 2024 and 2025 respectively. This is below both the SDS 75% target and the national achievement rate for this age group of 79.1% in 2024 and 82.2% in 2025.
- Over time, in civil engineering and engineering, rates of apprentice achievement have been low for all age groups.
- Automotive and business and administration programmes showed a decline in performance between 2023–24 and 2024–25, with achievement rates falling below SDS targets for all learners in the most recent year.
- Recruitment of female, minority ethnic and care-experienced apprentices is below SDS national comparator data.

- Leaders do not currently track apprenticeship destinations or progression following completion of their programme. This limits their ability to identify trends among early leavers and non-completers.

4. Main points for action

The following main points for action are identified:

- College managers and staff should ensure that self-evaluation and action-planning arrangements are applied consistently and rigorously across apprenticeship provision.
- College managers should support staff to improve apprenticeship achievement rates for programmes where they are low.
- The college should ensure the development, promotion and tracking of meta-skills is embedded across all apprenticeship programmes.

5. Examples of highly effective practice

- The bespoke Wind Technician MA delivered in partnership with MHI Vestas to meet growing offshore wind demand. It provides clear progression pathways into sustainable careers in the offshore wind sector.

6. What happens next?

HM Inspectors are confident that the college has the capacity to continue to improve and will make no further visits as a result of this inspection. The SDS Skills Investment Advisor will monitor the college's progress in addressing the issues identified within this report.

Sarah Halliwell
HM Inspector

Appendix 1 Grades used in reporting

A common grading scale is used in making judgements for provider reviews:

- Grade 1 EXCELLENT – Outstanding and sector leading
- Grade 2 VERY GOOD – Major strengths
- Grade 3 GOOD – Important strengths with some areas for improvement
- Grade 4 SATISFACTORY – Strengths just outweigh weaknesses
- Grade 5 WEAK – Important weaknesses
- Grade 6 UNSATISFACTORY – Major weaknesses

Summary

- An evaluation of **excellent** applies to training which is of a very high quality. An evaluation of *excellent* represents an outstanding standard of training which exemplifies very best practice and is worth disseminating beyond the current provision. It implies that very high-levels of performance are sustainable and will be maintained.
- An evaluation of **very good** applies to training characterised by major strengths. There are very few areas for improvement and any that do exist do not significantly diminish apprentices' experiences. While an evaluation of *very good* represents a high standard of training, it is a standard that should be achievable by all. It implies that it is fully appropriate to continue to provide training without significant adjustment. However, there is an expectation that the provider will take opportunities to improve and strive to raise performance to excellent.
- An evaluation of **good** applies to training characterised by important strengths which, taken together, clearly outweigh any areas for improvement. An evaluation of *good* represents a standard of training in which the strengths have a significant positive impact. However, the quality of apprentices' experiences is diminished in some way by aspects in which improvement is required. It implies that the provider should seek to improve further the areas of important strength but take action to address the areas for improvement.
- An evaluation of **satisfactory** applies to training characterised by strengths which just outweigh weaknesses. An evaluation of *satisfactory* indicates that apprentices have access to a basic level of training. It represents a standard where the strengths have a positive impact on apprentices' experiences. However, while the weaknesses will not be important enough to have a substantially adverse impact, they do constrain the overall quality of apprentices' experiences. It implies that the provider should take action to address areas of weakness while building on its strengths.
- An evaluation of **weak** applies to training which has some strengths, but where there are important weaknesses. In general, an evaluation of *weak* may be arrived at in a number of circumstances. While there may be some strengths, the important weaknesses will, either individually or collectively, be sufficient to diminish apprentices' experiences in substantial ways. It implies the need for prompt, structured and planned action on the part of the provider.



- An evaluation of **unsatisfactory** applies when there are major weaknesses in training, requiring immediate remedial action. The training experience for apprentices is at risk in significant respects. In almost all cases, staff responsible for training evaluated as unsatisfactory will require support from senior managers in planning and carrying out the necessary actions to effect improvement. This may involve working alongside other staff or agencies in or beyond the immediate support given by the provider.

Appendix 2 Evaluative Terms

The following standard HMIE terms of quantity are used in this report:

All	100%
Almost all	91%-99%
Most	75%-90%
Majority	50%-74%
Minority/less than half	15%-49%
A few	less than 15%

Other quantitative terms used in this report are to be understood as in common English usage.