

The ceilidh principle – you must take part

A former headteacher brings a novel approach to her new job as depute principal of Newbattle Abbey College

By Raymond Ross

IT SEEMS, on the face of it, an intriguing career move: from secondary headteacher to depute principal of Scotland's only adult residential college.

But given Marian Docherty's diverse career to date, including spells as a senior lecturer in FE, a national development officer and an HMI, her recent appointment to Newbattle Abbey College begins to look more natural.

As head of St David's High in Dalkeith until August this year, Mrs Docherty already had strong links with the college, including helping to set up an ESOL Family Learning Partnership for Polish pupils and parents at St David's. And with HMI in the 1990s, she worked alongside the current principal of the college, Ann Southwood.

"When I was with the inspectorate in the 1990s, my remit included adult education and guidance and I was very aware of Newbattle and its values and traditions. This was also a time when I was beginning to gain a real sense of how the different sectors of Scottish education were linked," she says.

"I understand how systems work. My career has been diverse and this has given me an overview of different sectors, including primary, secondary, FE, voluntary and community. My experience has taught me that people need to work in partnerships and they need to understand and respect each other.

"You can achieve anything if you have a common agenda."

Pursuing partnerships is high on the new depute principal's agenda. Although only in post since the end of last month, Mrs Docherty is planning a "Pan Celtic Programme" to include potential partners as diverse as the Scottish Arts Council/Creative Scotland, Historic Scotland, the Heritage Trust, the Scottish Storytelling Centre, the Scottish Mining Museum, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, university departments, local authorities, community education groups and schools.

"The programme builds on Newbattle's tradition of promoting literature, creative writing, history and Scottish culture within our heritage site. It will incorporate our storytelling course and festival in a wider cultural programme, linked to Celtic traditions across Europe – including those of Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Brittany, Cornwall, Galicia and the Isle of Man," she says.

Starting with a St Andrew's Night ceilidh in November, drawing guests from potential and existing partners, she hopes to establish a Celtic Festival next May. This would act as a springboard for courses relating to history, literature, the Gaelic and Scots languages, music, dance and storytelling (offering progression to FE/HE options). It could also embrace broadcasting skills; Curriculum for Excellence programmes tailored to schools; continuing professional development; and family learning courses.

The college already has a "con-

cordat" with the Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) to promote woodland management and education (Newbattle has 125 acres of protected woodland), which she hopes will dovetail with the Pan Celtic Programme.

"Through the forestry partnership, we hope to establish outdoor classrooms, encourage school visits to our woodlands with ranger support, involve pupils with special needs, develop programmes for disaffected young people and offer vocational options in conservation, forestry, land management and horticulture, all of which will help promote cultural heritage" she says.

It's a busy agenda, but one advantage of her new post, says Mrs Docherty, is that it gives more time for strategic planning. She is not as sorely pressed with matters of operational planning and day-to-day management as she was when a secondary head.

Helping to oversee the full-time one-year residential course in Arts and Humanities, now with 60 students, remains central to her remit, as does the development of a new part-time two-year course the college is piloting with 10 students.

"We are a national, not a local college, and our mission is to extend access to education as a national facility open to everyone. It is about pursuing and celebrating inclusion and that includes local and international links.

"It's a very exciting time in Scotland and anything that promotes Scottish educational



opportunities can only be good.”

Her strategic thinking is based on what she calls, slightly tongue-in-cheek, “the ceilidh principle”. As headteacher at St Thomas of Aquin’s High in Edinburgh and St David’s High in Dalkeith, Mrs Docherty (a traditional fiddler) formed ceilidh bands involving pupils and staff.

The Newbattle Abbey College Community Ceilidh Band will premiere at the forthcoming St Andrew’s Night Ceilidh.

“The principle of the college is the principle of the ceilidh. You come to take part. You have to take part. I’m very insistent and persistent about this. You bring your skills and we all work together to produce and to celebrate the genuine

life-changing opportunities which Newbattle represents and provides,” she says.

Marian Docherty replaces Norah Fitzcharles who retired as deputy principal, though she has not severed links entirely. She has returned to begin teaching another new course at Newbattle: beekeeping.

A hive of activity, indeed.

CV

1976 Graduated from Edinburgh University with Honours in English and Italian
1976-77 PGCE at Craiglockhart College of Education, Edinburgh
1977-81 English teacher, St Augustine’s High, Edinburgh
1981-84 Children and family time
1984 English teacher, Holyrood High, Edinburgh
1984-88 Senior lecturer in English and communications, Lauder (Carnegie) College, Fife
1989-90 National development officer for Scottish Flexible Learning Projects
1991-97 HMI
1997-2003 Headteacher, St Thomas of Aquin’s High, Edinburgh
2003-09 Headteacher, St David’s High, Dalkeith
2009- Depute principal, Newbattle Abbey College



Marian Docherty, new depute principal at Newbattle Abbey College, is a traditional fiddler who formed ceilidh bands with pupils and staff. Photograph: Chris James

