

**FURTHER EDUCATION
COMMISSIONER ASSESSMENT
SUMMARY**

LeSoCo College

MAY 2014

Assessment

Background

1. Following the inadequate inspection result in November 2013, the Minister for Skills and Enterprise decided that the FE Commissioner should assess the position of the college in line with the government's intervention policy set out in *Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills*.
2. The FE Commissioner conducted his assessment between 27 January and 7 February 2014. He considered the capacity and capability of the College's leadership and governance to deliver quality improvement within an agreed timetable; any actions that should be taken by the Minister and/or Chief Executives of the funding agencies to ensure delivery of quality improvement; and how and when progress should be monitored and reviewed taking into account the Skills Funding Agency's regular monitoring arrangements and Ofsted's monitoring visits.

The Role, Composition and Activities of the Board

3. The College has a recently formed Board with members who are broadly well skilled and willing to challenge, although there is a concern with the rigour of that challenge and its follow through. The Board recognises its future needs and will use imminent vacancies to strengthen current business expertise.
4. Whilst there is no quantum on Borough representation, the Board has ensured that significant stakeholders are included in the new Board to represent the communities which the College now serves. However, key decision makers from both Lewisham and Southwark Borough Councils are not involved in strategic discussions and this appears to be a serious weakness.
5. The College has an independent Clerk to the Corporation who reports to the Chair. She is qualified, has an appropriate job description and minutes are both comprehensive and clear.

The Senior Management Team

6. The Senior Management Team (Principals' Group) meets every two weeks. It consists of the Principal and three Vice Principals. Change is expected as a new VP Corporate Services is currently being recruited and the existing post holder will move to lead the Estates Strategy. There is good evidence that this team has managed several aspects of the merger effectively and has driven increases in success rates consistently over the past three years. However, this has been from a very low base.
7. A wider Senior Leadership Team also meets every two weeks. This group includes four Assistant Principals who lead the curriculum. These post holders are new in post from September 2013. Both the Principal's Group and the SLT use 'live' dashboards to evaluate current data but the minutes lack actions for specific areas or clear responsibilities around Teaching, Learning and Assessment.
8. The College has changed its management structure several times over recent years, especially at the previous Southwark College. A further change was made at LeSoCo in September 2013. All Apprenticeships were transferred to the curriculum areas in November 2103. There remains confusion and uncertainty, however, around

boundaries of accountability. Roles and responsibilities are not yet consolidated and staff and managers are still feeling the effects of these sequential and regular changes.

9. Insufficient action has been taken to build in staff and managers consultation and communication in a manner which engages them in the College's plans for the future. The current approach is risking serious discontent which could impact negatively on teaching, learning and assessment

The Quality of Provision

10. LeSoCo was inspected by Ofsted in November 2013 and was graded inadequate for overall effectiveness, Quality of Teaching Learning and Assessment; and Requires Improvement for Outcome for Learners and Effectiveness of Leadership and Management.
11. Insufficient action has been taken to date to address the known weaknesses in timely Apprenticeship outcomes; weaknesses in Functional Skills delivery and outcomes; inconsistency in the operation of key elements of the College's Quality Improvement Plan, and improvements in the use of data and success rates for Level 3 learners. This leaves serious doubts about the capability of the leadership team, to effect real improvements for learners in the required timescales
12. The current Post Inspection Action Plan (PIAP) lacks urgency and clarity against the key priority areas for improvement cited in the Ofsted report. There is little evidence that planned actions can work and it is lacking in detail of methods, realistic timescales or staff responsible for implementation.
13. Many aspects of the Quality and Curriculum Strategy were new in September 2013 and are now subject to further revision. Staff and managers offered examples around the September 2013 changes which they feel have already impacted negatively on learner outcomes (e.g. changes to the recruitment process have removed many teachers' roles in information, advice and guidance (IAG), potentially leading to learners being placed on the wrong course). There are similar concerns with regard to changes to the tutorial system.

The Financial Position

14. The College is incurring operating deficits that are significantly higher than the norm. Staff costs as a proportion of income are well above the average for a college of this size and there are no tangible structured plans that have been developed to address this issue. A more accurate and realistic financial forecast, with detailed and costed plans to achieve the efficiency gains for a balanced budget is needed.
15. The College is producing a very informative contributions analysis which shows the financial contribution made by each curriculum area. This analysis suggests that on average the contribution is 49% of Income. However, despite this, the College is incurring operating deficits which suggests that its overheads are significantly higher than usual. Again this suggests that the College's cost base, in this case non-staff items and business support function costs, are too high.
16. At merger, a decision was made to harmonise business support systems including Finance, MIS, HR and Payroll. The only system that gave problems was the finance system. The senior Finance Team is now confident that it has completely overcome any remaining issues. The College should be applauded for dealing with the systems harmonisation requirements as early as it did.

17. However, the College has not yet dealt with curriculum staff contracts of which they have two different versions, one requiring 828 direct contact hours, which was the standard at Southwark College and one requiring 864, which was the Lewisham standard
18. The three year forecast that was provided to the SFA in July 2013, which showed “satisfactory” across all three years, is now outdated and no longer appropriate. It needs to be redeveloped based upon a realistic view of income and cost expectations in 2013/14 and beyond

Views of Stakeholders

19. In the course of the assessment interviews were held with a number of stakeholders as suggested by the SFA - namely senior officials of Job Centre Plus (JCP) and the leaders and executive officers of Lewisham and Southwark Boroughs.
20. Responses from these individuals were very different. In the case of JCP, there was considerable satisfaction with both LeSoCo's approach and delivery. Indeed the work of the college was being held up as best practice.
21. For both local authorities, however, the feelings were very different. Both Lewisham and Southwark officers and leaders expressed their concern and disquiet at what had happened at the college.
22. Progress, they felt, had been far too slow and there had been insufficient consultation with regard to the needs of the area with either of the boroughs. The current estates strategy was not supported in that there appeared to be little consideration of the needs of the residents of Southwark at entry level and levels 1 and 2 in the push for business and entrepreneurial activities at level 3 and above. In their view, the vocational training needs of the area, particularly with regard to construction and engineering, were not being met either and the quality of the apprenticeship provision was such that in the case of Southwark they had moved their apprentices elsewhere. As result there was a lack of confidence in the current senior leadership team.

Key Issues

23. The existing College leadership have not retained a sufficient focus on teaching, learning and assessment and have failed to accelerate the process of quality improvement with sufficient urgency.
24. Attention also needs to be paid to reducing the unusually high levels of discontent evidenced by significant numbers of staff and middle managers. A change of style will be needed if the College wishes to achieve its full potential and avoid the risk of staff dissatisfaction impacting on learner success
25. A refocus on ensuring that Teaching, Learning and Assessment is a key priority for LeSoCo particularly in the midst of significant capital redevelopment and a seriously reducing funding envelope. Further differentiation in the Post Inspection Action Plan (PIAP) is essential to ensure that it can deliver the required improvements whilst allowing the strong areas of the curriculum to feel valued and to flourish. The PIAP needs to identify immediate and clear priorities for the areas needing most improvements. A rapid review of Apprenticeships is also necessary to ensure that data is accurate and that the PIAP for this year will be effective. Regular ongoing reviews will be essential.

Recommendations

1. The Board of the College is recently formed. Broadly speaking they are well skilled and willing to challenge. However, the board should continue to refresh, ensuring representation from local business/employers. The Board should also have representatives at leader or executive director level from both Lewisham and Southwark Borough Councils. The Board should also develop and implement a succession plan for the post of Chair.
2. The Board should review the capacity of the current senior management team. As a minimum and as a matter of urgency, the Board should strengthen capacity in the areas of quality improvement and resource management. The Board should also develop and implement a succession plan for the post of Principal.
3. The existing Post Inspection Action Plan should be revisited and enhanced by the inclusion of specific timelines and milestones. More emphasis should be given to the need to improve functional skills and a functional skills audit of vocational staff should be carried out, followed up by supportive CPD where necessary.
4. A revised curriculum plan is needed to demonstrate how the needs of students at all levels will be met as each stage of the estate's strategy is implemented. More attention should also be given to the total learner experience of those currently enrolled at the college.
5. A detailed analysis of staff numbers and utilisation on both the teaching and support side of the college's operations should be conducted as a matter of urgency to bring the college's expenditure in this area to within sector norms. The harmonisation of pay and conditions should be a priority, together with agreements on common policies and procedures.
6. The college's somewhat precarious financial position should be addressed by developing a more accurate and realistic financial forecast, together with detailed and costed plans to bring the college into break even within two years. This should be completed within the next three months.
7. A communications strategy should be developed and implemented that allows for meaningful consultation on key issues with both internal and external stakeholders.
8. The FE Commissioner should regularly review the actions the College takes to respond to the recommendations set out above, and their impact of quality improvement and financial recovery.

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