

**FURTHER EDUCATION
COMMISSIONER ASSESSMENT
SUMMARY**

Amersham & Wycombe College

SEPTEMBER 2015

Assessment

Background

Amersham and Wycombe College is a medium sized general FE College based in south Buckinghamshire. Its catchment area is focused on the south Buckinghamshire area but also extends into Berkshire, South Oxfordshire, West Hertfordshire, and West and North London. It sits within the Buckinghamshire Thames Valley LEP area which is coterminous with Buckinghamshire County Council.

The total number of learners is approximately 1700 full time and 1800 part time with around 250 learners on apprenticeships courses. 75% of full time students are aged 16-18. The number of EFA funded students at Amersham and Wycombe College has dropped by approximately seven per cent - or 108 students - over the past five years, with its steepest drop in 2014/15. Early indications of 2015/16 recruitment are that the college will meet but not exceed its allocation of 1,478.

The college's offer is exclusively vocational. The most popular subject sector area is arts, media and publishing, and Art and Design is the most popular course for 16-18 students. The college has recently taken on direct recruitment for students at a motor vehicle facility, which was previously sub contracted provision.

The college was issued with a Financial Notice of Concern in March 2013 and the SFA has recently indicated that it has additional concerns over the college's financial control.

As a result it was decided 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*.

The FE Commissioner's report is intended to advise the Minister and the Chief Executives of the funding agencies on;

- a) The capacity and capability of the college's leadership and governance to secure a sustained financial recovery within an acceptable timetable
- b) The capacity and capability of the college's leadership and governance to secure a sustained recovery for the quality of provision, within an acceptable timetable
- c) Any actions that should be taken to deliver a sustained financial recovery within an agreed timetable (considering the range of interventions set out in *Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills*)
- d) How and when progress should be monitored and reviewed taking into account the Agency's regular monitoring arrangements

Assessment Methodology

Two FE Advisers carried out an assessment during the period 21st to 27th September 2015. They received in advance extensive briefing information provided by the Skills Funding Agency and the Education Funding Agency and reviewed a wide range of college documentation. They interviewed Corporation members, managers and staff, as well as representatives of the SFA and EFA.

The Role, Composition and Activities of the Corporation

Amersham and Wycombe College is governed by a Corporation consisting of members drawn from the community. Membership also includes staff and students who are nominated and elected by their respective bodies. The Corporation also includes other business governors. The current Corporation has two staff governors, one student governor and seven full members. There are two vacancies. Currently there is nobody with a direct Further Education quality background.

The Corporation has been trying to operate the Carver model but the college's internal audit reports have identified that this has not been operating to full Carver principles. As a result full Corporation meetings are running on for several hours to enable all topics to be discussed.

While the Carver model is unlikely to cause a problem when the college is in a stable state, when there are financial and quality difficulties it is essential that Corporation members have the time to examine and challenge the college management team regularly on the college's performance. During the intervention it was suggested that, given the college's present circumstances, the Corporation reverted to a model with sub committees for Finance and Curriculum and Quality. The Chair and Vice Chair agreed that this should happen.

Governors are requesting data that is still to be provided by the Executive and there is no dashboard or KPIs regularly presented to the Board. Governors are perceived by the Principal and Deputy Principal as carrying out some activities in their link roles which could be seen as overstepping into management.

The college is currently operating from the Recovery Plan and Quality Improvement Plan. There is no full strategic plan.

The internal audit report of June 2015 showed that none of the areas that had been covered in 2014/15 had been fully addressed.

Clerking arrangements are provided by a relatively new clerk who has received mentoring support from the clerks of other local colleges.

The Executive Team

The current Executive Team consists of the Principal, a Deputy Principal and a Vice Principal. All of these posts are interim and are filled by internal promotions. Below the Executive Team there is a structure consisting of nineteen managers. There is a new post focussing on English and mathematics, and a new post focussing on teaching, learning

and quality. There are six Programme Area Managers who through a recent restructuring have taken on more areas and staff but are still expected to teach for a 0.5 timetable. Whilst this might be sound financially the college needs to be focussing on improving quality and needs to ensure Managers can give the time and energy that this will take.

Finance

Amersham and Wycombe College has experienced declining Turnover and a worsening bottom line since 2007/08. This is mainly due to falling learner numbers but is also due to pressures on its main funding streams, weak leadership and management and poor financial management.

The College Board agreed a budget for 2014/15 with an Operating Deficit which as the year progressed increased in size. During the current year the college has overachieved against its SFA Adult Skills Budget and its 24+ Loans but has underachieved on its HE provision. Other Income including Tuition Fees is below budget.

Budget control has clearly not been adequate in the past. The Interim Financial Controller expressed an opinion that there had not been an appropriate level of understanding of budgetary matters. The Internal Auditors could give no assurance in their Annual Report and rated this "Red". There have been changes made in the way that the latest Recovery Plan and budget for 2015/16 have been developed. Both have been based upon a scientific analysis of curriculum activity to inform judgements on both income and staff requirements. However the plan still predicts operating deficits up to and including 2018/19 and does not present a picture of a stand-alone viable institution.

The Finance team is led by an Interim Deputy Principal who is a qualified accountant with an MBA with a number of years' experience in the FE sector. He is supported by two interim accountants, one of whom is the Interim Financial Controller. Below the level of the Deputy Principal there are four members of staff in the normal structure, but at the time of the intervention one of these posts was vacant. Due to historical operational issues there is a good understanding of financial issues at Senior Leadership level, but this still has to be developed through all levels of management.

Internal audit reports highlight concerns for Financial Planning and Financial Control.

Estates

There are two main campuses in Amersham and at Flackwell with an additional town centre leased premises in High Wycombe. The Estate provides good vocational resources, but is in need of refurbishment, both of the buildings and the IT infrastructure. The college has been working closely with Buckinghamshire Thames Valley LEP on a capital project to modernise the Amersham campus. This is due to be considered by the LEP Board in September 2015. Transforming the college's estate is a key priority identified in the LEP's Strategic Employment Plan. The Recovery Plan also includes money for reinvestment from 2017/18.

Quality Improvement

The college was inspected in November 2014 and was graded as Requires Improvement for Overall Effectiveness, Quality of Teaching and Learning and Assessment and Outcomes for Learners. Effectiveness of Leadership and Management was graded as Good.

The college developed a Post Inspection Action Plan but this has not had a major impact on the success rates for 2014/15. Some actions that are designed to address quality issues raised by Ofsted were not implemented until the departure of the Principal in March 2015.

The college has had a structure of performance reviews that appear as if they should have addressed quality issues and move the results forward. There was a schedule of termly reviews but they did not result in sustained improvements. They also did not highlight that the college was not delivering the Study Programme in line with the requirements. Staff were clear that in the past issues were raised but not followed through. The new Head of Improvement has appropriate plans in place for reviews which will be held monthly.

Areas that are deemed to be underperforming are also sent a Notice to Improve which brings closer scrutiny. There was a mixed impact on results during the past academic year. Areas that are of concern are 'inspected' by peers with external support.

The College has a set of MIS reports produced centrally. These are sent to the Executive for discussion. There is not, however, a clear dashboard which gives an overview of progress against a set of Key Performance Indicators that can be accessed by Managers or Governors. Similarly there is no guidance for the new Programme Area Managers on how to monitor performance and which standard reports to use. The College is relying on an individual's previous experience of managing performance.

From the beginning of this academic year the college has reviewed its teaching and learning strategy, including the observation policy and staff development programme to support improvements. The process has a clear focus on the learning, rather than the teacher's performance. An Executive decision has been to retain observation grading for another year and focus on formative assessment and differentiation. Learning walks will continue and Governors will be encouraged to participate. Peer support from local colleges will also take place.

Success Rates Classroom Based

Success rates have increased over the last three years but are still below the National Rate for 16-18 year olds. Indications from the results for 2015/16 is that overall results will not have improved significantly. The make-up of the success rates for 16-18 year olds indicates that retention is in line with national averages but achievement is not. The college has poor attendance and this raises the question as to whether or not students are being withdrawn promptly. If they are not that would inflate the retention rate.

Apprenticeship results for 2013/14 were strong on small numbers of enrolments (122 leavers in 2013/14). Overall results are stronger than timely completions which are 33% lower for those aged 16-18 and 34% lower for those aged 19-23.

Curriculum Planning

The process of curriculum planning is being reviewed. The new Programme Area Managers are aware of the targets they need to make for their areas and the implications of not having the good class sizes, or underutilising their staff.

Termly performance reviews of curriculum are carried out separately from the financial reviews during the year. As the new performance management system is under development it is recommended that the college reconsider this approach and look at aligning the processes.

From the beginning of this academic year the management of English and maths is now under a Head of Department. This has led to centralised timetabling and management of sessions. The department has an almost full complement of staff. There is a policy to employ an undergraduate for maths and English and to help them develop their teaching skills. This has proved effective over the past year. There will be English and maths champions created from within the student body, to give peer support.

Conclusions

The college now has a recovery plan for finance and quality in place. However these were not seen as robust and the targets set were not focused enough to bring improvement in a timely manner. Relationships between the Interim Executive team and the Governing Body are not strong, and could still be considered to be in a development phase. For this reason it is felt that the college should not be left to manage its own future, and should be put into administered status.

The longer term prospects for the college would best be served by some form of structural change that is likely to be derived from a merger or other form of relationship with another FE provider. The college has recognised this and has begun talks with other interested parties. The college should continue these discussions with potential partners, being mindful of the need to ensure the objectives of an area review are taken fully into account in progressing any proposals.

Recommendations from Further Education Commissioner

The college should be placed into administered status.

The college should continue discussions with potential partners, being mindful of the need to ensure the objectives of an area review are taken fully into account in progressing any proposals.

The college should engage external expert support to assist in the ongoing implementation of the recovery plan to ensure costs are minimised and the quality of provision for learners is quickly improved.

In addition the college would benefit from:

- Reinstating a finance and quality sub-committee to ensure an appropriate level of scrutiny is applied.
- Strengthening the targets in the financial recovery plan.
- Improving the layout of the QIP to ensure that milestones are clear and actions are not accredited as successful before their impact can be measured.
- Providing the Governors with a data dashboard and a set of clear KPIs.
- Reviewing the workload of the Programme Area Managers to ensure that they can be effective managers and good teachers.
- Carrying out financial performance monitoring alongside the monitoring of quality performance at reviews.
- Providing clear guidelines on the process to withdraw students.

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