

**Further Education Commissioner
assessment summary**

Mid Cheshire College

April 2016

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Assessment

Background

The FE Commissioner's report is intended to advise the Minister and the chief executive of the funding agencies on the following, as appropriate:

- The capacity and capability of the college's leadership and governance to secure a sustained financial recovery within an acceptable timescale;
- The capacity and capability of the college's leadership and governance to secure a sustained recovery for the quality of provision within an acceptable timescale;
- 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*;
- How and when progress should be monitored and reviewed taking into account the regular monitoring arrangements of the funding agencies.

Introduction

Mid-Cheshire College is a small general further education college with its main campus at Hartford and a subsidiary site at Winsford, some five miles away.

The college is in difficulty in many respects. More than half its students are 16-18 and there is both a demographic downturn which will affect this age-group for the next five years and significant competition from two Grade 1 sixth-form colleges close by and 13 schools with sixth forms.

The number of students who left the college and achieved their desired qualification has fallen from 4,608 in 2012-13 to 2,715 in 2014-15. Learner success rates have also fallen from 86.2 per cent to 79.5 per cent over the same period, more than five points below the national average. Managers have attempted to cope with this decline by making cuts wherever possible and by some five successive reorganisations. Among the results is extreme staff turnover, with 108 people having left or being due to leave between April 2015 and the end of August this year, 2016, from a total headcount of around 430. However, the number of full-time equivalent staff has declined only very slightly, from 432 in 2012-13 to 427 in 2014-15, so that staffing cost as a proportion of revenue now stands at 78 per cent

Whilst it has had ups and downs over the years, the college was awarded Grade 1, 'Outstanding' by Ofsted in 2008, under the leadership of a former principal. Many people in the college believe that this judgement, led to complacency. Ofsted inspected the college again from the 19-22 January 2016; judging it to be Grade 4; 'Inadequate' in every respect, except for its significant apprenticeship provision which was graded 'Good'. As a result of the inspection the college was issued with a Notice of Concern on 2 March 2016.

Despite its troubles, the college is regarded as being at least satisfactory in terms of its financial health. The college has benefitted from some significant property disposals since 2008, some of the income from which has been used for new buildings and the remainder to boost cash reserves. The deficit posted in 2014/15 and the projected deficit for this year and next, however, will reduce these significantly.

The college accepts that it is on the verge of an irreversible decline unless decisive action is taken, and that it has no realistic prospect of continuing independently. It has made a number of approaches to neighbouring organisations prior to the area review process, of which it is now a part, but without success.

Curriculum

With the exception of apprenticeships, which were judged to be 'Good', Ofsted reported that all aspects of the curriculum were 'Inadequate'. They gave a comprehensive indictment of the quality of teaching, teachers' low expectations, learners' poor progress, weak student success rates and the very poor quality of curriculum management among senior leaders. They did however find that the apprenticeship programmes were well managed and learners with high needs were well supported and made good progress. The college also has some good higher education (HE) courses, notably in art, design and the performing arts, which were recently assessed favourably by the QAA.

Over the last three years the success rates of students on full-time programmes have declined rapidly to a position well below that of comparable colleges. In particular, the numbers who fail to complete their programme has increased to an unacceptable level. This deterioration in student success rates pervades almost all curriculum areas. A lack of systematic and rigorous monitoring of performance has failed to ensure students are kept on track and action to address underperforming areas has been slow. It is unfortunate that the good practice in the apprenticeship area has not been replicated elsewhere in the college.

Overall managers have also been hampered by a lack of accurate and timely progression and achievement data. The system borders on obsolescence and is unfit for purpose. A scan of a number of college reports suggests that some information is flawed. Notwithstanding possible inaccuracies, it appears the Board has sometimes accepted the data at face value.

Over the years the numbers of full-time and part-time students have declined significantly. Despite this attrition, the college has not sufficiently re-appraised the curriculum offer or introduced new provision to cater for the changing needs of the locality. The link between planning and finance is frail, undermining confidence in financial forecasting. A review of the college curriculum is needed to streamline the current offer and to re-assess viability in terms of both financial contribution and quality.

Some courses have performed poorly for a number of years without the issues associated with this performance being addressed.

Heads of Learning have been in post less than a year. They have not received a management training programme. Of immediate concern is the need for them to feel confident and skilled enough to address unsatisfactory teaching performance and in general they feel unsupported.

The college has taken some steps to improve teaching and learning and has appointed a manager responsible for this key area as part of the college Quality Improvement Unit. The college teaching observation process has been sharpened, so that teachers are no longer aware when an observation might take place. Too little has been done to raise aspirations or to celebrate areas which achieve highly and to share good practice. Students did, however, applaud the additional support that those in need of help receive and the dedication of these ALS teachers.

Governance and management

The Corporation Board has up to 20 members; much larger than is now the norm for the sector, many of whom are long serving. It normally meets five times a year but is currently meeting every month. Ofsted reported that Senior Leaders do not provide governors with the information needed to use their skills effectively' and that 'Many reports to governors provide an overly-positive view of the college, particularly in relation to learners' performance, progress and success rates'.

Our observation is that much of the information recorded as having been considered by the Board has been anecdotal rather than statistical, and that statistics have not been presented in the form of data which would assist the Board to accurately monitor trends. Whilst a number of members of the Board are described as challenging, particularly those among recent appointees, the Board itself has not evidently either questioned the strategic direction of the college or acted decisively to change it until very recently.

Every member of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) was an internal appointee, some having worked their way up through a series of positions in the college over many years. It is widely accepted that a lack of awareness of the changes taking place in the FE sector has been a material factor in the college's decline. The poor performance of the college over the past three years has been reflected in increasingly critical appraisal reports on the Principal and a salary freeze, but it has not been followed up with action. Minutes show that the Board was dissatisfied with aspects of the performance of the senior management team but took no action.

The SLT as a whole appears to be dysfunctional. The SLT members are clearly able in their respective spheres and highly committed to the success of the college, but they need strong leadership to make their joint efforts more effective than those they contribute individually.

The word heard repeatedly during our visit, from staff at all levels and from Board members, was "frustration". The Principal is liked but he is universally criticised as failing to provide the strong leadership; clarity of purpose; excellent communication; and inspiration which saving the college from further deterioration demands.

In effect, the Board has taken over management responsibility for recovery from the poor inspection result. Members realise that this is inappropriate in normal circumstances but, with some justification they believe that it is now inevitable. Active interventions now include not only management of the PIAP but a requirement for such administrative detail as weekly reports from the Principal to the Chair on the number of staff appraisals carried out, in an effort to move forward with performance management.

The college has retained several consultants and interim managers in recent months that have made or are making a significant impact. The Interim Head of the Learning Experience Centre, for example, is responsible for additional learning support, student recruitment, attendance monitoring and initial assessment, has made inroads into the shortcomings of all these areas, but reports, rightly, that a distinction has to be made between some immediate fixes and more substantial change from September 2016. Similarly, the Interim Data and Funding Manager is doing much-needed work to produce management information which has been unreliable, inaccurate or inaccessible until now. Tenders are now being sought for new software which will integrate data which are currently available only as separate reports, but, again, there will be only limited improvement until well into the 2016-17 academic year.

Conclusions

We cannot be confident that the college has sufficient capability in governance and management to resolve its problems. Those problems now comprise; a falling demographic among the college's 16-18 year old main target student body; significant and rising competition for those same young people; declining success rates; a worsening financial position; and an 'inadequate' judgement by Ofsted almost across the board, damaging the college's reputation. A well-qualified Board has not received the data it needs to exercise strong strategic guidance and has failed to take decisive action at points where the evidence before it strongly suggested that it should. It has intervened belatedly to take over some of the duties of management, but the dysfunction of the Senior Leadership Team, an impracticable curriculum management structure, widespread inexperience among managers and many poor or outdated systems of control, make it difficult to conceive of timely success. There is a vacuum in leadership; no clarity of objective, and an absence of inspirational communication sufficient to motivate and co-ordinate the efforts of staff. The college has been inward-looking, failing to take sufficient account of the changes affecting the sector.

The college has some good accommodation, a large and pleasant site at Hartford, and good facilities. Nevertheless, it clearly has too much accommodation for its present needs and is holding on to the Winsford campus for social reasons rather than any that can be justified by benefit to the college. This appears to be an indulgence in current circumstances, which dissipates staff and management effort, contributes to costs and precludes interaction between some strong and some weaker curriculum areas. The staff are not only committed to the college but are passionate about its wellbeing and that of their students. Their morale has been damaged by vacillation and by opportunistic cuts which denuded some vital functions of expertise, whilst failing to reduce staffing costs as a proportion of income to a sustainable level. In some respects the college has suffered from the appearance of austerity without benefitting from a genuine alignment of revenue and cost. The position now is that there are inefficiencies in the use of staffing and space which will put the college's financial health beyond redemption unless they are addressed. There are undoubtedly good courses, including higher education and apprenticeship, which are capable of leading the college out of trouble if their influence can be systematically applied.

The continuing area review process presents an immediate opportunity for a much-needed fresh start; a prospect of future success with which to help restore self-belief. However, it is hard to see the college's attempts to join other local institutions as anything other than random and often unrealistic. The college is now in a weak position. It is being sustained temporarily by its legacy of well-managed financial resources, and it should now seek a merger with a strong partner while there is time to do so. That conclusion is understood and accepted in the college, but it needs to be acted upon with vigour and focus, as part of restoring a clear strategic direction. In the short term, the college will need to invest in a more rational and robust leadership and management structure, to set realistic goals, trim costs where necessary, and rebuild quality and reputation.

Recommendations

We recommend the following:

- a) That the college should be placed in Administered Status;
- b) That the Board should review its own effectiveness with a view to refreshing its membership and enhancing its chairmanship;
- c) That the Board should take decisive action to raise the effectiveness of the senior leadership team and should review the management structure at all levels to improve communication and accountability;
- d) That the Board should continue to develop the Post-Inspection Action Plan, ensuring that it is divided into manageable sections and that all staff have a stake in its success;
- e) That the college should urgently review the efficiency of staff deployment addressing indicators such as average class size, contact hours and the proportion of income devoted to staffing;
- f) That the relevance, accessibility and accuracy of management information should continue to be improved as a matter of urgency to enhance the manageability of the curriculum;
- g) That the consistency and robustness of performance management procedures, involving all managers and staff, should be substantially improved;
- h) That both internal and external communications should be improved;
- i) That within the context of the area review the college should urgently pursue a realistic merger with another institution or institutions with the capability to accelerate quality improvement;
- j) That the college should prioritise the improvement of all aspects of teaching and learning, including English and maths, equality and diversity, and safeguarding, enhancing the consistency and quality of all full learning programmes;
- k) That the college should review its accommodation needs, seeking to raise substantially the efficiency of space utilisation;
- l) That a comprehensive programme of continuous professional development should be introduced, prioritising the development needs of newly-appointed managers;
- m) That the FE Commissioner and the Agencies should monitor the college's progress, conducting a Stocktake visit in the autumn term.

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