

**FURTHER EDUCATION
COMMISSIONER ASSESSMENT
SUMMARY**

Bicton College

MAY 2014

Assessment

Background

1. Established in 1947 Bicton College is a specialist land based college situated in East Devon, with a remit to serve the whole of Devon and the wider South West region. Similar provision exists in neighbouring local authority areas delivered by Kingston Maurward College (Dorset), Bridgwater College (Somerset) and Cornwall College (Cornwall). The college has residential facilities for some of its students.
2. Bicton offers full and part-time courses at foundation/entry level and levels 1 to 3, with progression opportunities through to foundation degrees, in partnership with the University of Plymouth. Student numbers (16-18) at Bicton College have increased overall since the 2010 to 2011 academic year, with some fluctuation over a three year period. Total 16-18 student numbers in 2012 to 2013 were 641, considerably smaller than other local colleges. Continuing demographic decline means that the college may find it difficult to grow and enhance its 16-18 market share on which it is substantially dependent.
3. Following the notification by the Skills Funding Agency that Bicton College had been assessed as inadequate for financial health, 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* (April 2013).
4. The FE Commissioner conducted his assessment between 17 March and 28 March 2014. He assessed: the capacity and capability of the College's leadership and governance to secure a sustained financial recovery within an acceptable timetable; 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*); and how and when progress should be monitored and reviewed taking into account the Agency's regular monitoring arrangements.

The Role, Composition and Activities of the Board

5. The Corporation operates a version of the 'Carver' model of governance where governance takes place at the Board level rather than committee level. In practical terms this has meant the Corporation has had limited financial oversight.
6. The Corporation has made a number of new governor appointments, including a new commercially minded Chair. These new appointments have led to the Corporation taking a much more stringent approach to monitoring the College's activities and challenging the

Principal and Senior Management Team. In particular, the refreshed Corporation has reviewed a number of the College's recent projects where a number of weaknesses were identified in how the College set up and ran them. Following a review into the financial issues at the College the refreshed Corporation is considering reinstating the Finance & Resources Committee.

The Clerk to the Corporation

7. Clerking arrangements are good, although further improvements could be made to ensure that sufficient attention is being given to ensure the Corporation has the information, data and training they need to operate effectively.

The Senior Management Team

8. The Principal and two Directors (Director of Students and Enterprise and an Interim Director of Finance and Corporate Services) are experienced and knowledgeable. Collectively they are delivering good quality provision and taking steps to improve the financial position of the College. However, the size of the SMT has reduced recently to the extent that the College is very dependent on the skills of specific individuals and does not have the capacity to deal with unexpected issues as they arise. This represents a significant risk going forward.

The Quality of Provision

9. Bicton College was inspected in October 2012 and judged to be "good" in all aspects of its provision. This compares with a judgment of "satisfactory (requires improvement)" previously. The inspectors commented: "The quality of teaching, learning and assessment, outcomes for learners and the effectiveness of leadership and management are all good. Learners make good progress in lessons and develop valuable vocational and personal skills that prepare them well for their future careers; their progression into further study or employment is good. The college provides a harmonious and purposeful environment for learning, making very good use of the college farm and estate".
10. There were a number of issues that prevented the college being considered to be outstanding, notably retention in some subjects, a lack of consistency of quality in some lessons and the absence of systematic plans for improvement in teaching, learning and assessment.
11. Since then the college has made progress in all of these areas and the views of stakeholders are highly complimentary with regard to the quality of the provision currently on offer. Good systems are in place to maintain these improvements

The Financial Position

12. The current challenges at the College are driven by its financial position. The College has been in financial recovery since 2008. It has taken a number of steps to address the

financial issues, including restructuring to reduce costs, seeking a partnership with another college (which did not materialise), and increasing – to a small extent - income through delivery. However, in 2012/13 the College reported a significant, unexpected deficit which has damaged the College’s reputation and credibility with stakeholders.

13. To address this, the refreshed Corporation commissioned two reports; one into the financial position of the college and another in to the short to medium term viability of the College as an independent institution.
14. The first report identified a number of weaknesses in reporting and budget monitoring, which the Corporation has accepted and has begun to implement changes to address these weaknesses. The new Interim Finance Director has made good progress in stabilising the financial position of the College and ensuring the budget for 13/14 is delivered.
15. The second report concluded that the College cannot survive as an independent institution without damaging its long term development, and it should seek a strong partner without delay. The FE Commissioner supports this conclusion.

Views of Stakeholders

16. In the course of the intervention, the Skills Funding Agency arranged for a number of interviews with local stakeholders, ranging from the Chief Executive of the Local Authority, employers who used the college’s provision and the National Farmers Union
17. The priority for all those interviewed was the maintenance of land based provision in Bicton as the only land based college in what is one of the country’s most important farming areas. The quality of what was on offer was clearly appreciated as indeed was the hard work and dedication of the Bicton College staff.
18. The question of potential partnerships was also explored, and although independence was seen by some as the preferred way forward for the college, all could see the benefits of Bicton College being part of a larger “whole”. There was a sense of realism with regard to land based training and its funding in the present economic climate and a general feeling that Bicton College could do much more commercially to capitalize on its excellent location and facilities. It would however need further investment that was currently beyond its means.

Conclusions

19. The introduction of new Board members and a new Chair has resulted in Bicton College beginning to face up to the financial challenges that have largely been ignored over the past few years. There is now a realistic appreciation of what needs to be done to secure land based training in the area and that this is likely to involve a merger or federation with another institution.

20. The new Interim Director of Finance is beginning to have a major impact on resolving the immediate problems of financial control and through the actions that have been taken, it is possible that the College will achieve a small in year surplus or at worst a modest deficit. However this does not solve the longer term issues of the college's high level of debt and the need for significant investment.
21. As one of the major farming areas of the country it is important that land based training is not only maintained but developed in the county. This can only be achieved by a different structural arrangement and an appraisal of the options available should be urgently undertaken.

Recommendations from Further Education Commissioner

1. A Structure and Prospects Appraisal, led by the FE Commissioner, should be carried out within the next three months to identify appropriate partnership/merger arrangements that will allow for the continuation and development of land based provision in the area. In considering potential partners, the quality of the college's offer and the needs of local stakeholders and learners will be paramount in determining the most appropriate way forward.
2. As part of the Structure and Prospects Appraisal the College should develop a detailed commercial plan to determine the best ways the College – as part of any new partnership – should capitalise on its extensive facilities and estate. The plan should aim to increase its commercial income significantly by drawing on best practice from other land based colleges and apply a professional project management approach and cost benefit analysis to any new venture.
3. The Board should establish a separate Finance and Resources committee to scrutinize the college's financial performance on a monthly basis until such times as the present situation is resolved. The Committee should ensure that it has members who are financially qualified, either drawn from their existing membership or co-opted as appropriate.

You may re-use this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. Visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available from www.gov.uk/bis

If you require this publication in an alternative format, email enquiries@bis.gsi.gov.uk, or call 020 7215 5000.