



Department
for Education

FE Commissioner Intervention Summary: Birmingham Metropolitan College

October 2019

Update on progress since FEC intervention assessment

Since the FEC intervention assessment, governors and senior leaders have worked successfully to stabilise the college's financial position to the point where they have been able to withstand the effects of COVID-19 without external support.

The chair, principal and senior team now work well together, give clear direction and have raised confidence levels and college and student ambition. Governors and senior leaders have continued to make good progress on delivering the recovery plan and FEC recommendations. The organisational structure is fully functional and facilitating continued improvement in teaching, learning and assessment (TLA). Operational management provides strong local leadership and clear direction with a focus on classroom practice. The delivery structure, which is based around individual centres, continues to develop and drive improvement in quality, with the college consistently putting TLA and learners at the core.

The strategic plan has been thoroughly revised and informs the curriculum planning process. Senior leaders and governors have continued to implement the estate strategy by simplifying the estate, selling land/buildings, and reducing running costs. They continue to monitor the college's finances closely and effectively, mitigating losses that are related to the COVID-19 pandemic where possible. The 2020/21 budget has been set on a business as usual basis, but leaders and governors appreciate that the budget will need to be reviewed and amended in late October 2020 to reflect known recruitment numbers and costs.

To date, the college's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been good, including effectively maintaining engagement with learners throughout the lockdown period. Planning for the return of learners in September 2020 is thorough and considered.

The college will be recruiting for a new, permanent principal/CEO in the autumn of 2020.

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FE Commissioner Intervention Assessment Summary Report:

Birmingham Metropolitan College

Name and address of college	Birmingham Metropolitan College
Assessment undertaken by	Meredydd David - Deputy FE Commissioner Martin Sim - Deputy FE Commissioner Anna Fitch - FE Adviser
Chair of the college	Sir Dexter Hutt
Principal / Chief Executive of the college	Cliff Hall
Clerk to the Corporation	Hilary Barber
Date of assessment	29 to 30 October 2019

Background to FE Commissioner Intervention Assessment

Birmingham Metropolitan College (BMET) received a Notice of Concern in July 2015 due to Inadequate financial health. The college's financial health grade remains Inadequate and it is in formal intervention. The initial trigger for intervention was the declining financial position at the college. Subsequently, issues emerged around governance, leadership and the quality of provision.

FEC team recommended steps were taken to address the weaknesses identified at board and senior leadership team (SLT) level. Recommendations were also made to develop a quality improvement process that would deliver a positive impact on student performance; restructure curriculum management across all sites; consolidate A level provision to a single site and develop a centre of excellence; and review the benefits of delivering such a broad range of provision, often inefficiently, across multiple venues.

The pace at which the college was implementing an effective quality strategy was far too slow and actions were not enough to secure quantifiable and measurable improvements. An overall decline in recruitment and the delay to the college's strategy to dispose of city centre sites worsened the financial position of the college.

The sale of the CEAC building in spring 2018 at above previous estimates was a major boost that should have finally put the finances in a much stronger place. However, quality was not improving, and student numbers were still in decline. It emerged that the risks around the 2017/18 budget the FEC team had identified in October 2017 were becoming a major problem.

An FEC-led structure and prospects appraisal (SPA) was carried out to secure a permanent structural solution and a sustainable future for the college.

The SPA recommendation was to reduce the footprint of the college so that proper attention could be placed on improving the quality of provision for learners in Birmingham. To achieve this, it was recommended that BMET should cease to offer provision outside Birmingham. All provision offered in the Black Country should be disaggregated from BMET and transferred to other colleges with a proven track record of high-quality delivery.

Full implementation of the SPA recommendations was achieved by August 2019, leaving the new leadership team to focus on a more deliverable financial improvement strategy and on swiftly improving quality and outcomes for students.

The FEC's report is intended to advise the minister and the chief executive of the ESFA on:

1. The capacity and capability of the college's leadership and governance to secure a sustained financial recovery within an acceptable timetable;
2. Any actions that should be taken by BMET to deliver a sustainable financial recovery within an acceptable timetable; and
3. How and when progress should be monitored and reviewed taking into account the ESFA's regular monitoring arrangements.

Overview of the College

BMET is a large general FE college with approximately 16,000 learners and 3 main campuses based in Birmingham; James Watt College, Matthew Boulton College and Sutton Coldfield College. Most learners on full-time programmes are aged 16 to 19. The college supports students from some of the most deprived communities in the UK.

The broad curriculum offer includes full-time courses: A Levels and vocational qualifications, access to higher education, part-time adult professional development, entry level and recreational courses as well as full and part-time degree level study. The college has good working relationships with employers in a range of sectors.

The college requested exceptional financial support in 2015/16 to meet its immediate cash flow problems. The college proposed repayment of the loan by December 2017 from asset disposals and operating surpluses.

In March 2016, the Birmingham & Solihull Area Review recommended that the college continue as a standalone institution to focus on its recovery.

Delays in disposals of assets and year on year weak operating performance meant the college was unable to repay the DfE loan in full. Although part repayments have been made from several disposals, the loan term has had to be extended on 2 occasions and additional emergency support was needed in mid-January 2019.

An interim principal/CEO and chief finance officer (CFO) started in October 2018, with a new permanent chair appointed in January 2019. The new leadership team has worked with the FEC team on the SPA, which recommended the de-merger of all provision in the Black Country and subsequent closure of the Stourbridge site. The recommendation was implemented by August 2019 and relevant provision, learners and staff were transferred to Dudley and Halesowen colleges.

Leadership and Governance

Role, composition and operation of the board

The college has made significant changes to its leadership and management at board and executive levels over the last 12 months. The board appointed a new chair in January 2019 who is an experienced leader in education. The chair is experienced in leading cultural change but recognises that a large FE college is much more complex than he had previously realised. He has reached out for support from a national leader of governance (NLG).

The chair has agreed with the SLT to adopt a more interventionist role, rather than a traditional chair role, due to the significant financial and quality challenges the college faces. This approach has been well received and welcomed by the principal/CEO. The chair and principal/CEO work well together. The chair is known by staff and respected. Governors are now more visible across the college and engage well through link governors and other arrangements.

The corporation has been bolstered by the appointment of new governors in January 2019 who have strong backgrounds in further and higher education and legal services. There is a good mix of skills, knowledge and experience on the board and board members have a healthy range of time served.

Interim arrangements are currently in place to provide clerking support to the corporation following the departure of the previous long-standing company secretary at the end of August 2019. A new company secretary with a background in the private and public sector has been appointed and is due to start at the end of November 2019. The college considered a more traditional clerking model but has decided to retain the existing broader model because they believe it represents better value in the context of key asset disposal transactions and other complex issues the college must manage going forward.

The board and each of its main sub-committees meet 4 times a year; the chair is conscious of the need for sub-committees to work effectively and provide detailed scrutiny and assurance to the main board. One to one meetings between board members and the chair have helped the chair to assess the skills and ability of board members.

The college strategic recovery plan is monitored by the recovery and improvement monitoring group whose membership is mainly the SLT. This group meets monthly and is chaired by the chair of the board. This provides a clear line of sight for the chair and board and is an example of good practice.

Governors whom the FEC team met said that previously, governors and management did not “accurately know the college”, and there were insufficient people who understood FE. They felt that they had been let down before due to the poor quality of information they had received.

Governors, SLT and the clerk felt that reports were now accurate and well presented. Minutes evidenced good challenge and long-standing governors met endorsed these views and especially the improvement in challenge and engagement with the college.

Leadership and senior management team

An interim principal/CEO and CFO were appointed from October 2018. The new principal/CEO has significant experience of leadership in the FE sector and is personally leading on the college’s quality improvement and teaching and learning strategy.

The CFO has previous experience of the FE sector and specialist skills in college turn-around strategies. In March 2019, the college corporation approved the appointment of these 2 senior positions to substantive posts to provide stability in the leadership leading up to the next Ofsted inspection.

The chair has very recently entered discussions with the principal/CEO regarding extending his contract for a further period and a decision on this needs to be made urgently in order to progress appropriate succession plans in a timely manner if needed.

Governors felt there is now a strong SLT who work well together. They said that SLT are focussed on teaching, learning and assessment, have a shared understanding about what they want to achieve and work together with a high level of trust.

The principal/CEO has made a significant positive impact during his period at the college and is well respected by staff met by the FEC team. He is viewed as open and honest and communicates effectively across the whole college with a clear vision and strategy.

The principal/CEO believes the recommendation to disaggregate the Stourbridge Campus was correct as it has enabled the college to focus on its 3 main Birmingham sites. The disaggregation was managed effectively and in a timely manner. Concerns raised by members of the community in Stourbridge were responded to in a timely manner. The sale of this site is at the point of governor approval and an acceptable offer has been received.

The SLT was restructured in January 2019 with assistant principals to lead each of the 3 main campuses. Their responsibilities are similar to a campus principal. This has developed accountability and ownership at campus level of the quality of teaching and learning and students experience and outcomes. It is too early to see evidence of the impact, although staff were positive about these changes.

Governors and SLT have agreed 6 key performance indicators (KPIs) that drive strategy and discussions. This has provided the wider college management team and all staff with clarity and focus. This is supported by timely, accurate and well-presented data accessible to managers and staff.

The management team are clear about their focus on improving teaching learning and assessment and the essential focus on learners and enabling them to achieve. This was viewed as a step change under the current leadership; strategies and policies implemented to support this now need to be embedded.

Curriculum and Quality Improvement

Curriculum and provision overview

Courses provided at BMET range from entry level to higher education and include adult learning programmes and apprenticeships. The college has good working relationships with employers - in part through sponsored academy provision in a range of sector areas. It works very closely with the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) and following devolution of the adult education budget, receives funding to support WMCA learning and skills priorities.

The majority of college delivery is undertaken at 3 major centres, each with its own specialisms. For example, all A Level provision is delivered at Sutton and construction/engineering is centred at James Watt. Around 60% of full-time learners follow 16 to 18 study programmes. There are plans to allow individual campuses to develop their own identity or brand influenced by the curriculum offer, students and local needs. However, each centre will follow a common BMET approach where appropriate; for example, the recently implemented teaching, learning and assessment policy.

Curriculum planning and development

The process of curriculum delivery has been significantly improved over the past year to ensure the curriculum offer meets the needs of learners, the skills requirement of the local area economy and the wider aspirations of the combined authority. This proactive approach to the curriculum offer has been championed by the assistant principals leading each centre.

A business development plan covering the next 18 months has been produced for each delivery unit. These plans undergo several stages of internal scrutiny before board approval. Link governors are provided with the opportunities to contribute to the early stages of the plan and use their local knowledge to influence content. Link governors remarked that delivery centres were starting to acquire a much greater public profile, with positive new stories around student success and progression.

Data management at the college has evolved to provide a solid foundation on which to build these development plans and monitor operational implementation. Staff at the college have developed an in-house business intelligence dashboard (BID), which brings together much of the data held within the college into one online site. The dashboard has been built using standard reporting language. All data in the college is stored in a data warehouse, which is centrally controlled, and allows live data to be reflected in the dashboard.

The BID includes live attendance data, funding and enrolment reports, staff utilisation, compliance reports and exception reports. Users can 'cut' the data in many ways, which allows them to identify areas for improvement and drill down to individual learner level where necessary. In some cases, reports show league tables which encourages healthy competition between departments. Staff whom the FEC team met said that they use the dashboards all the time and regard them to be 'the one source of truth'.

Quality improvement and self-assessment

The new principal has facilitated a transformational change to teaching, learning and assessment. Staff whom the FEC team met remarked on the positive change in the college; they feel revitalised by the emphasis placed on improving the quality of teaching and learning and providing life changing opportunities for their students. Staff point out that the current agenda is new and will take time to become established in the organisation's culture, but it has their full support.

Since 2015, the college has had 3 full Ofsted inspections and has been consistently graded RI. Following the last inspection in October 2018, the college has developed an incisive and focussed action plan that links challenging targets to clearly defined actions. Progress against these targets is regularly reviewed by local teams and further monitored by SLT and the board. Remedial action can therefore be implemented quickly to ensure compliance with a challenging, fast-paced improvement plan.

An Ofsted monitoring visit in October 2019 confirmed the college is making reasonable progress in addressing the main areas for improvement.

Student outcomes continue to make progress in a number of areas. The majority of full-time learners at the college are 16 to 18 and outcomes increased by 2.8%. 19+ outcomes remain near to the level at the previous inspection (Good) and reflect a curriculum that is challenging at all levels, particularly at level 3. Apprenticeships are continuing to improve; 16 to 18 remain slightly below the national rate but have improved by 5.5% on last year.

Senior leaders have implemented strategies to improve core teaching. Targeted professional development for staff and greater opportunities for students to receive additional support are positive. Improved quality assurance in the form of learning walks, data monitoring and scheduled progress checks are expected to underpin improvement and test potential impact. It is too soon to judge whether these actions will result in students making substantial and sustained progress from their starting points.

However, the volume of change indicated in the documents reviewed, coupled with a relatively short implementation phase, provide significant risk to the consistency of application. Senior leaders should be mindful of this.

Trends in student recruitment and retention

The current student recruitment position at the college is encouraging. Historically, the college has failed to recruit learner numbers in the main due to negative demographics. It is too soon to predict recruitment except on 16 to 18 where initial indicators are good, with the current prediction above the ESFA allocation. Other funding streams are on course to hit target. Retention levels at the college are good; 16 to 18 level 1 retention has increased by 4.4%.

Managers and staff are optimistic that the percentage of students that leave prior to the funding census date will reduce from 2018/19; however, the target in place is optimistic. Managers monitor their curriculum areas weekly, with the student experience monitored through themed learning walks.

Student views

Students whom the FEC team met were from a range of courses and years. They were positive about the college and confirmed that their experience was in line with expectations. The majority of learners had chosen the college on the recommendation of former students or family members or because it was their local college. Students emphasised that the college has a good reputation; it cares and supports students in a proactive way. Many students referred to the availability of additional learning support; many articulated their appreciation of staff who go “the extra mile” to prepare them for their external tests. Comments regarding teaching

and learning were positive. Students present had a wide variety of end destinations, including working in the construction trades, course progression or university. The students' unanimous view was that they were all on the right course and confident they would achieve their desired outcomes and destinations.

Staff views

Staff whom the FEC team met expressed their appreciation for the positive changes since the appointment of the new chair and principal/CEO and welcomed the strict focus on teaching and learning. Many considered that they now felt part of a new college; strategy was clear and communication effective. Consultation was considered genuine and an opportunity to contribute. Staff now believed that the college had a positive future.

The developing supportive culture was assisting staff to develop as better practitioners; learning walks, observations, staff development days were facilitating better classroom practice. New management patrols ensured management visibility and helped further improve a safe learning environment.

Staff welcomed the autonomy of the individual centres and the opportunity to develop an individual centre brand.

Effectiveness of the college to manage and improve quality

The board and SLT have set a clear strategic direction to implement improvement through changing organisational culture. Ensuring that managers at all levels, but especially at senior and centre level, have the right skills is fundamental to success.

The board and SLT have set a high expectations agenda based on the aspiration to create high calibre teaching and learning, putting the student firmly at the centre of the college. The post-inspection action plan contains the key requirements for success. Staff whom the FEC team met were supportive and willing to participate. The next few months provides time for new systems to develop and mature; it allows for operational reflection. The volume of change has been significant in a relatively short time frame; further unnecessary change may hinder rather than help.

Finance and Audit

Recent financial history and forecasts for coming years

The improvements in the financial performance of the college in 2018/19 are forecast to continue, demonstrated by a significant improvement in EBITDA and the overall operating performance.

Based on the financial plan submitted to the ESFA in July 2019, financial health will recover to Requires Improvement (RI) in 2019/20 and will increase to Good in 2021/22.

When the draft 2018/19 outturn was compared against FEC benchmarks, the college fell outside the target range on 5 of the 6 benchmarks: operating surplus; cash days in hand; current ratio; staff costs; and financial health.

Financial performance 2018/19

The college's draft financial statements for 2018/19 confirm an operating deficit. This is a significant deficit which results in an Inadequate financial health score, but it is an improvement over the 2017/18 result, and is better than budget.

Total comprehensive income is in deficit. Just under 30% of this is due to pension adjustments, and 55% reflects impairments of the Stourbridge properties and losses on the sale of fixed assets. These impairments are accounting entries and have no impact on cash.

Financial forecast 2019/20 to 2020/21

The 2019/20 and 2020/21 budgets forecast a small operating deficit. To achieve this, staff cost savings have been assumed, of which 65% of annualised savings had already been made before the end of July 2019. Additional controls have been added to significantly reduce the expenditure on agency staff, which is expected to produce additional savings and ensure that permanent staff cost savings are not eroded by additional agency costs.

The college will be producing a revised financial plan for 2020/21 and 2021/22 as agreed with the ESFA to take account of known funded enrolment figures. Although the data has not yet been finalised after the first 42-day period, the college is expecting to exceed the ESFA allocation on 16 to 18 enrolments in 2019/20. The current financial plan assumes no growth.

Cashflow / liquidity (including overdraft details and usage if appropriate)

The closing available cash balance at 31 July 2019 was more than double that of the previous year end. In January 2019, the ESFA advanced a loan to provide working capital support, which was used to return creditors to normal payment terms and facilitate the reduction in pay costs.

In 2019/20, the college forecasts a further increase in its cash balances by 31 July 2020 without any additional support from the ESFA. At March 2020, cash is forecast to be low; however, the college is confident that it will be able to manage this position through creditor stretch if necessary.

The college's cash flow forecast assumes that various property sales and associated loan repayments will be achieved. No large loan repayments are due prior to the associated asset sale; therefore, senior leaders have minimised the risk to the college.

Financial liabilities / loans

At all year ends from 31 July 2016 onwards, both banks covenants have been breached and formal waivers were not in place at those dates. Therefore, all loans are classified as being due within 12 months of the balance sheet date which has had a negative impact on the current ratio.

In September 2019, the college repaid part of one bank loan, with 66% of the proceeds from the transfer of provision at Stourbridge. They retained the remainder of this to provide increased working capital.

Further loan repayments are planned to be made during 2019/20 from receipts from property sales. Repayments against the ESFA loan are currently being negotiated with the intention of full repayment by 2025/26.

Relationships with the banks have improved during the last 12 months, to the extent that representatives from both banks attend the monthly ESFA case conferences and engage in constructive dialogue with senior leaders. Subject to 3 conditions being met by the college during the first quarter of 2019/20, the banks will renegotiate and reset the loan covenants. Senior leaders are confident that they have met the required conditions.

Financial (budgetary) control, management and record keeping

When the new CFO started at the college, he found that the internal auditors had given no assurance on financial controls and budget setting, and the financial regulations were out of date. The management accounts were not helpful to governors or external agencies.

The management accounts have now been reformatted and include:

- Executive summary which details performance against the KPIs and other useful financial performance indicators.
- Summary income and expenditure account.
- Detailed income analysis.
- Detailed pay cost analysis.
- Detailed non-pay cost analysis.
- Balance sheet, with analysis of debtors, creditors and loan covenants.
- Cash flow forecast.
- Capital expenditure analysis against budget.

The management accounts usefully include the prior year's results for comparison purposes. However, this would be more meaningful in 2019/20 if the results for Stourbridge for 2018/19 were excluded.

The finance function has been restructured to include a capable financial controller and 2 finance managers (operations, and financial reporting). An upgraded finance system came into use in August 2019 and all budget holders now have monthly business planning meetings with their finance business partner. A cross-college income monitoring meeting is now held each month to ensure that income forecasts are robust, and to devise strategies for dealing with income underperformance.

The chair of the finance committee stated that she now feels that financial information is consistent, and that the CFO anticipates questions and explains variances. Members of the finance team attend the finance committee when appropriate, which is appreciated by governors.

Estates and Capital Plans

Use and maximisation of college estates and assets

Senior leaders and governors have worked hard to reduce excess space, eliminate unnecessary expenditure on buildings and sell buildings which are no longer needed.

An independent estates review (April 2019) provided several recommendations to rationalise the college's estate which the college are working through.

The independent consultants have been commissioned by the college to write an estates strategy which will be presented to governors in early 2020. The college has also engaged a local firm to scope and cost up a planned maintenance programme. In previous years, maintenance has been undertaken on a reactive basis.

The college has engaged with a large employer that has pledged capital investment to develop and use one floor of the James Watt campus as their national training centre. This will reduce the underutilisation at the campus by approximately 10 percentage points.

Property management and investment

In January 2020, the college expects to receive a payment from Dudley College for the sale of the arts and design centre in Stourbridge, which is currently in an escrow account and will be paid to the college on completion.

The main Hagley Road Stourbridge site negotiations and approvals are ongoing. The college has incurred costs relating to the sale and a Lloyds bank loan is secured against the property, which will need to be repaid when the property is sold.

A further site in Dudley, known as Longlands, has been marketed for sale since 2015. After 2 failed sales, a national house building company has now committed to buy the site but there are various environmental issues which are delaying completion and receipt of funds. The college's cash flow forecast currently assumes receipt in April 2020, which will be used to reduce the ESFA's loan balance.

Conclusions

The FEC team endorse the strategic approach adopted by the board and the SLT in driving their improvement plan and support the intention to continue this work at pace. The RIMG is innovative and effective.

The chair of governors is confident and capable and has led a period of rapid and significant cultural change in partnership with the principal. Governors are well engaged with the college through their presence at meetings, functions and quality assurance events. The chair is known by staff and well respected and valued for his open and engaging approach.

The chair's first meeting with an NLG is due imminently. A skills assessment of the board has been completed and 2 governors were recently recruited, with one more vacancy to fill to bring the number of independents to 14.

Staff have a greater level of confidence in the future and are complimentary about the principal and his clear, open and honest approach. The principal has increased the focus on teaching, learning and assessment and agreed the KPIs and supporting strategies with the board.

The importance of rapidly improving the quality of teaching and learning and in ensuring consistency of student experience and outcomes is clear. This is being facilitated by a reorganisation of delivery systems with the creation of individual college brands led by an assistant principal. This has supported the cultural change of increasing accountability and responsibility within the organisation and the clarity of direction and leadership.

There have been improvements in teaching, learning and assessment evidenced by the student outcomes in 2018/19 which show improvement on previous years.

The college continues to implement appropriate strategies to facilitate continued improvement in teaching, learning and assessment and has the full support of all managers and staff whom the FEC team met.

SLT has completely reengineered the financial control mechanisms which has assisted in enabling the college to meet their revised budget. The SLT has successfully implemented major staff cost savings through restructures and voluntary redundancy schemes.

The SLT have recognised the need to rationalise their estate and are effectively delivering the recommendations from the estates review. This has delivered savings and cash receipts.

External stakeholders, including the banks and major national employers that engage with BMET, are showing increasing confidence in the college.

Recommendations

1. As a matter of urgency, the board needs to clarify arrangements for the long-term senior leadership of the college and to put in place a timely succession strategy for the principal/CEO post. A deputy FEC will support the board in the final stages of the recruitment process.
2. The board and principal need to ensure the SLT balance of skills is appropriate for the college to continue to progress.
3. A professional development and succession plan should be agreed for board members based on the outcome of a needs analysis discussion, and taking advice from the NLG, in order to deliver strong governance.
4. The board need to ensure that the structural changes recently implemented are embedded and their effectiveness evidenced by improved outcomes and experience for learners.
5. The board should agree with SLT their target budget operating performance expectations for 2020/21 and 2021/22 based on updated recruitment data for 2019/20 to accelerate financial recovery.
6. The SLT should ensure consistent operational practice across each of the independent campuses to guarantee high quality teaching, learning and student experience.

The FEC team will return in May 2020 to undertake a stocktake of progress made. The college will remain in supervised status due to its financial health category.

Annex A - Information reviewed

College Self-Assessment Report and QIP

Ofsted monitoring visit report

College PIAP

Finance and Quality and Academic Standards Board minutes

Full Board minutes

Student Achievement Data

Student attendance and retention data

Staff utilisation and class sizes data

Financial recovery plan

Recovery progress report

Financial Statements

Management Accounts

IBR Final report

In year funding information

Estates review

ESFA update

Management Structure

Governor profiles and skills assessment

Annex B - Interviewees

Chair of Corporation

Principal & chief Executive

Interim Company Secretary

Chief Financial Officer

Quality Lead

Director of IT and Data

Head of Data

Assistant Principals

Deputy Principal

Heads of Faculty

Lead Governor Finance

Lead Governor Quality

Group of Governors

Head of HR and Staff Development

Director of Estates and Facilities

Unions

12 Students and 12 Staff



Department
for Education

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