

**FURTHER EDUCATION
COMMISSIONER ASSESSMENT
SUMMARY**

Stockport College

DECEMBER 2013

Assessment

1. Following the inadequate inspection result in November 2013 and the Skills Funding Agency's inadequate assessment 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.
2. The FE Commissioner conducted his assessment between 25 November and 6 December 2013. The assessment considered: the capacity and capability of the College's leadership and governance to deliver quality improvement within an acceptable time span (including views on the robustness of the Post Inspection Action Plan); any actions that should be taken by the Minister or the Chief Executives of the funding agencies to ensure delivery of quality improvement and financial recovery; and how and when progress should be monitored and reviewed taking into account the Agency's regular monitoring arrangements and Ofsted's monitoring visits following the College's inspection in September 2013.

The Role, Composition and Activities of the Board

3. The Governing Body operates a Committee structure in which detailed information is monitored through committees rather than the whole Board. Although the whole board receives some KPI's the place for enquiry is within the Committee and therefore Board members tend not to have the full picture of how the College is operating.
4. The Governing Body has not demonstrated any rigorous challenge and has insufficient skills and experience in non financial matters to be effective in its duty of monitoring the quality of provision. It has approved the changes to the senior management team without considering the value of external appointments. New governors are not yet effective, particularly with regards to Quality and Standards. The Board minutes do not record any significant issues of concern or action from the Committees and are as bland and minimalist as to be of virtually no value. Clerking arrangements are unsatisfactory.

The Senior Management Team

5. The senior management team has been subject to continuous churn since 2009 creating serious discontinuity and a lack of focus on Quality (Teaching, Learning and assessment). The new senior management team from August 2013 are all internal promotions with some staff that are not sufficiently well qualified and/ or experienced for their role. The senior management team has shown a lack of focus on the quality of provision for learners, with standards remaining poor.
6. Both the Governing Body and the senior management team are too keen to blame previous regimes and exaggerated judgments from external consultants for the

present situation rather than to evaluate their own performance. This leaves questions around their future ability to self-analyse.

The Quality of Provision

7. Stockport College was inspected by Ofsted in November 2013 and was graded as inadequate for Overall Effectiveness; Outcomes for Learners; Teaching, Learning and Assessment; and Effectiveness of Leadership and Management. Staff and governors alike describe their reactions to the report on a range from 'shock and surprise' to one of blaming previous regimes and some senior individuals. All recount the College's financial and property challenges as reasons why 'eyes were taken off the ball'. Many see these reasons as valid distractions/excuses. The Chair of the Quality, Curriculum and Standards Committee, the Assistant Principal Quality and members of the Quality unit are much more open to recognising that the College should have acted earlier.
8. The College has produced a Post Inspection Action Plan (PIAP). The PIAP does not focus on rapid improvement and does not make clear the urgent priorities and responsibilities for the necessary improvements to be made. There is lack of precision on target setting and newly included milestones to measure progress. In its current form the PIAP will not produce the required improvement in the necessary timeframe.
9. Several senior managers have had responsibility for aspects of quality improvement over recent years. This has confused accountabilities and allowed a culture of blame to be prevalent. Accountabilities are still not clear enough. The previous VP for Quality was diverted for 2 days a week to property matters whilst the VP Curriculum was directed to bid for two new Free Schools. Neither the governors nor the senior team have focused their attention on improving the quality of provision for learners. Standards remain poor and are showing no signs of improvement.

The Financial Position

10. The College has made material operating losses during three of the last four years. The College has historically suffered from poor financial management, with a lack of understanding of finance in the senior management team, insufficiently trained budget holders, poor reporting practices and a lack of rigour to forecasting cash flow and the management of risk. The College has taken a number of steps to address these issues but there are still a number of critical concerns resulting in the College's financial recovery and sustainability being at risk.
11. It is generally accepted that some key property decisions were flawed and that there were serious errors in financial management in earlier years. In the past the College's pay costs as a percentage of income have been significantly above sector norms. The College's ratio was 78% in 2009/10 and 74% in 2010/11.
12. Furthermore, the College is facing a deficit in 2013/14 which, if realised, would be the fifth deficit in the last six years. As at the time of the FE Commissioner's intervention visit, no specific plans were in place to address this issue.

Stakeholder Views

13. A number of stakeholders selected by the Skills Funding Agency were interviewed by the FE Commissioner to gauge their reaction to the inadequate inspection report and to gain their perspective of the performance of the College.
14. At the individual employer level, there was a high level of satisfaction with what the College was doing and the description of the Apprenticeship scheme from one major employer for example, was a model of best practice both in its design and implementation.
15. The view from the Borough Council and the Greater Manchester LEP, however, was very different. In their opinion there had to be major changes, to which they were very willing to contribute, as the College was clearly in difficulty and to quote “things cannot go on as they are”. In the case of the LEP, a wider Greater Manchester solution to meeting the skills needs of the area was being sought and it was felt that a degree of rationalisation would save public money and allow a better service to be provided. The Borough Council were clearly focused on local provision being maintained, although they questioned the necessity of Stockport College continuing to offer A Levels when its main contribution to the borough would remain in the areas of vocational and higher education.

Conclusions

16. There is sufficient evidence to conclude that the current Leadership and Governance cannot significantly improve either the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and student outcomes or the College’s financial position within an acceptable time frame.
17. There are no signs of quality improving nor of the College moving towards a solution to its long term financial difficulties. A fresh injection of expertise is needed at both Board and senior leadership level and a review as to whether the present establishment can continue to exist as an independent institution and provide a high quality of education and training for its learners or whether a more radical solution is necessary. An independent Structure and Prospects Appraisal should be undertaken at the earliest opportunity to determine the way forward.

Recommendations from Further Education Commissioner

1. The College should be placed into Administered College status. Significant changes need to be made to the governing body and Senior Leadership Team.
2. The governing body should be refreshed with new appointments in the areas of quality improvement. The governing body is not sufficiently focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning, and student outcomes. There is no clear action to address the problems and insufficient oversight and scrutiny of the Post Inspection Action Plan. The governing body has not provided sufficient challenge and scrutiny of the Senior Leadership Team.
3. A member of the Skills Funding Agency and the Education Funding Agency should join the Board to provide professional oversight.
4. An FE Commissioner led Structure and Prospects Appraisal should take place between January and March 2014. There are questions over the long term sustainability of the College, and whether it can continue to operate as it is currently structured.
5. The existing Senior Leadership Team should be supported by the addition of an Interim experienced Principal/ex Principal and Director of Quality while this review is underway to address the significant issues being faced by the current student cohort. The Senior Leadership Team has been subject to continuous churn since 2009 creating discontinuity. There is a lack of focus on quality. Several senior managers have responsibility for aspects of quality improvement over recent years, with no clear lines of accountability. The Post Inspection Action Plan needs further work to ensure there are clear, measurable actions and effective mechanisms for monitoring progress.
6. Urgent discussions should be undertaken to resolve the issue of St Thomas's.

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