

**FURTHER EDUCATION
COMMISSIONER ASSESSMENT
SUMMARY**

Darlington College

APRIL 2015

Assessment

Background

Darlington College is a medium sized college with the main campus being situated in Darlington offering a broad curriculum from pre-entry to Higher Education. It relocated to this newly built campus in August 2006. Its second campus at Catterick was primarily created to serve the Ministry of Defence Super Garrison which is the largest in Europe. However, the provision offered at this campus is now mainly provision for those young people who are not in education, employment or training, and functional skills provision for the Army now takes place within the Garrison itself.

Following the Skill's Funding Agency's notification that Darlington College had been graded as inadequate by Ofsted at its most recent inspection the Minister for Skills 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*'.

The FE Commissioner's report is intended to advise the Minister and the Chief Executive of the Funding Agencies on

- a) The capacity and capability of Darlington College's; leadership and governance to deliver quality improvement within an agreed timeframe.
- b) Any action that should be taken by the Minister and/or the Chief Executive of the funding agencies to ensure the delivery of quality improvement and financial stability (considering the suite of interventions set out in '*Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills*') and
- c) How progress should be monitored and reviewed, taking into account the Agency's regular monitoring arrangements and Ofsted's monitoring visits.

Assessment and Methodology

The FE Commissioner, supported by two FE Advisers carried out an assessment during the period April 20th to April 24th. They received in advance extensive briefing information from the SFA and the EFA. A wide range of College documentation was reviewed and they interviewed Board members, managers, staff, students, representatives of the trade unions and key stakeholders. They also toured the college.

The Role, Composition and Operation of the Board

The Board of Darlington College has not been effective for some time. Despite being one of the larger Boards in the sector (21 members) there has been an absence of the range of skills needed to provide the leadership and oversight of a college of this size. Attendance at meetings has generally been poor, training rudimentary and appraisal of Board members non-existent. Curriculum links with the college to enable board members to understand the business of the college are only just being developed and currently lack focus.

On the positive side, however, following the latest Ofsted report, Board members are determined to take decisive action to address these issues. A new interim Chair has been appointed and an away day to review all aspects of the Board's operations is scheduled for mid-June. Clerking arrangements, which are basic, will also need to be improved significantly.

The Senior Leadership Team

Although the Senior Leadership team contains a number of talented individuals, it is too small and as a whole lacks further education experience. Only two members of the Executive have recently worked in a college. As a result the pace needed to address the issues that the college faces has been too slow and key actions – for example to put in place a robust process to address poor performance in the classroom – have not been given sufficient priority. At middle management level the team is similarly inexperienced and new to role. To ensure that their potential is achieved, a targeted programme of management development will be essential.

Quality Improvement

Darlington College was inspected by Ofsted on 9 – 13 February 2015 and was deemed to be inadequate for overall effectiveness, outcomes for learners, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and the effectiveness of leadership and management.

The self-assessment report for 2013/14 is generally forthright and self - critical although there has been a tendency, in the past, to deliver the facts but soften the message. The college assessed itself as Grade 3 for overall effectiveness, outcomes for students, quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and effectiveness of leadership and management. However, at the same time, it self-assessed 5 of its 14 Subject Sector Areas as Grade 3 (requires improvement) and 4 Subject Sector Areas as Grade 4 (inadequate). Senior leaders, including governors, are now demonstrating a much more focused and realistic approach to and understanding of the college's true position.

The Quality Improvement Plan is a competent and user friendly document which clearly identifies the issues raised in self-assessment, clear actions and responsibilities and appropriate milestones. It complements the Post Inspection Action Plan and a measure of progress will be evidenced when the two documents can be brought together with a single focus.

The Post Inspection Action Plan itself is a detailed response to the Ofsted Inspection Report and focuses on the requirements for improvement contained in the Ofsted findings. However, whilst the plan is comprehensive and full of improvement initiatives, there is a danger that staff will experience 'initiative overload'. Identifying and communicating the key priorities needs more attention.

There is a genuine desire among all those staff interviewed to progress improvement but they express some frustration at the pace of change, the need for some simple measurable actions and an ongoing collegial recognition and update of progress achieved.

The college has developed a useful data dashboard with Key performance Indicators and benchmarks and this will help immeasurably in informing governors and staff on the actions required to deliver the plan. Some basic “housekeeping” practices, however, are missing. The college monitors attendance and punctuality, for example, but there is no evidence of ‘front of house’ challenge of learners who are late.

Teaching, learning and assessment have been a key focus of the recovery plan with an increase in resources and focused staff development. The senior leadership team reports that a large majority of staff welcome or, at least accept the new processes. A small but diminishing proportion of staff is, however, reluctant to accept change.

The decline in success rates for 16 – 18 students over a period of years to significantly below the national average shows evidence of having been arrested and predicted success rates for 2014/15 are at or above the college target of 82% with the exception of SSAs 5, 6 and 15. These areas were self-assessed Grade 4 in 13/14 and should be a particular focus for improvement.

The procedure for teaching and learning observations has been strengthened and formally linked to Capability Procedures and, whereas, in the past, sub-contracting partners were responsible for establishing their own observation processes, the college now additionally undertakes its own observations for standardisation purposes. Where the outcome is “Requires Improvement” a re-observation will “normally be undertaken within 8 weeks of the original observation” In the case of an “Inadequate” outcome a re-observation “will normally be undertaken within 12 weeks of the original observation.” Although focused CPD follows an outcome which requires improvement or is inadequate, it means, for the latter that staff who have been graded “inadequate” can still be teaching students for more than 1/3 of an academic year. This is unacceptable.

The students interviewed were, by and large, satisfied with their course programmes, but generally negative about the information, advice and guidance they received before joining the college and during the induction process. Students were also concerned that poor behaviour in the classroom is insufficiently challenged, and suggested that this lack of challenge extended to behaviour in social areas.

The college has recognised the need to make English and mathematics first priority in curriculum planning so that students and tutors will have a clear timetable from day 1 next year. In addition the college has put new management arrangements in place and recruited new English and maths tutors. The college has similarly invested in finding work experience placements and participation has increased considerably.

The Present Financial Position – Overview

The College has had a recent history of fluctuating financial performance. In 2010/11 and 2011/12 surpluses were achieved but the College recorded deficits in 2012/13 and 2013/14. A further deficit is forecast in 2014/15. The College's financial health was assessed as satisfactory after the submission of its financial statements. This was due in the main to healthy cash balances and the relatively low levels of debt. Overall however the college has significant financial issues that it needs to address.

The College has seen a significant reduction in total income each year from 2011/12 when it lost a significant MOD contract. Its total projected income for 2014/15 is two thirds of what it was in 2011/12. The combination of reductions in income levels and staff restructuring have resulted in a reduction in the key ratio of staff costs to income. However, pay costs still account for too high a proportion of the college's budget.

The Executive team has produced a comprehensive schedule of potential savings, with each member of the Executive having an individual target. A staff consultation has started around proposals for significant changes in terms and conditions, and a whole College voluntary severance scheme has been launched. The Executive have identified significant potential savings from the closure of the Catterick site.

Whilst the College has started the process of achieving a balanced and deliverable budget for 2015/16 and beyond, there is not yet a comprehensive recovery plan with clear targets and timescales. In particular, the initial forecasts for 2015/16 and 2016/17 have not been updated with current information to establish an evidenced based savings target. As yet, there are no clear financial targets for a surplus nor for other indicators such as pay as a percentage of income.

The College has a detailed and inclusive approach to curriculum planning, although in recent years, its plans have been overly optimistic. Executive scrutiny of the 2015/16 planning process is greater than in previous years, and will need to result in plan which is deliverable and efficient. Central to achieving an efficient curriculum will be improvements in both average class size, and teaching staff utilization. The College also needs to develop the capacity to analyse and report actual contribution by curriculum area, to enable efficiency improvements to be correctly targeted.

College leaders and managers have reported that business systems are too paper based leading to excess bureaucracy in business processes, poor or slow management information and a lack of ownership of systems and data. Whilst the problem is widely acknowledged, there is no comprehensive plan in place to address the issue in a systematic and timely fashion.

Views of Stakeholders

Stakeholder partners were largely supportive of the college. There was a unanimous view that, for a number of years, there had been a huge turnover of senior and middle managers and, as a result, quality assurance had 'slipped'. It was felt that the college's focus had been on its financial position and the loss of the British Army contract had only

served to reinforce that focus. Partners felt that there had been major improvements in 2014/15 with greater interaction with the college.

These views, however, were not universal and there were a number of criticisms of the administration of apprenticeships.

Conclusions

The College has a considerable amount of work to do to restore its reputation as an “outstanding” college and improve its level of efficiency to sector norms. However, since the Ofsted report there has been a renewed energy to address the issues that the college faces and significant operational changes are in the process of being made.

The inexperience in further education of the majority of the senior team and its effect on the pace and timing of the necessary changes has been recognized. With an appropriate addition to the senior management team and mentoring support for those who have come from outside the sector, the college should be in a position to make rapid improvements in quality and financial performance without the need for further intervention.

However, the FE Commissioner’s team will closely monitor progress over the next three months and carry out a full stock take assessment at the end of September when the main enrolment position for 2015/16 is known.

Recommendations from Further Education Commissioner

- 1) The Board should conduct a full review of its current performance and implement the changes necessary to its skills base and day to day operations to ensure it can adequately support and challenge the senior management team.
- 2) At senior team level, an additional director appointment should be made to widen the range of expertise amongst members and ensure that quality improvement is given a higher priority.
- 3) The College should take steps to ensure the availability of appropriate leadership of the finance and registry functions before the current Director of Finance and Funding leaves in June. The new post of Director of Finance should be designated a senior post holder.
- 4) The college should strengthen and formalise the “student voice” and the constitution and operation of its Student Council. It should also ensure that student attendance and punctuality are more rigorously reinforced and that there are consistent tracking measures in place to monitor student performance.
- 5) The college should address the performance management of staff and in particular the lesson observation policy with a tighter focus on the timing of the re-observations of Grade 3 and 4 lesson observation outcomes.
- 6) The new finance system should be fully implemented to ensure that management accounts are produced in a timely manner. This should be subject to an early independent review by the internal audit service.
- 7) The financial forecasts for 2015/16 and 2016/17 should be updated with the current information and assumptions regarding funding and performance, to inform the targets for the recovery plan. The forecasts should assume no growth in 16-18 learner numbers beyond those achieved in 2014/15.
- 8) The existing documents relating to cost reduction activity should be consolidated into a single recovery plan, with clear objectives and performance measures relating to, for example, the size and shape of the College, the level of surplus to be achieved and the spend on pay as a percentage of income.
- 9) The college should ensure that it has a communications strategy which informs internal and external stakeholders about progress against the Post Inspection Action Plan.

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.