

# **Commercial in Confidence**



## **matrix Assessment Report**

**For**

**BICTON COLLEGE**

**By Mervyn E Niblett**

**On behalf of ENTO LTD**

**Assessment Date: 19/05/2009 – 22/05/2009**

# **CONTENTS**

<b>1. Executive Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3. Methodology</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>4. Strengths</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>5. Areas for Continuous Improvement</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>6. Added Value</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>7. Detailed Findings against the matrix Standard</b>	<b>10</b>

## 1. Executive Summary

Having carried out the Assessment in accordance with the guidelines provided, Bicton College (the College) has demonstrated that it meets the **matrix quality standard for information advice and guidance services**. Accreditation to the **matrix** Standard is granted for the external services provided by the College.

This Assessment Report covers the services provided by the College and includes a brief description of the organisation, the Assessment methodology and an overview of how the College demonstrated that it met the **matrix** Standard.

## 2. Introduction

Having been taken out of the County Councils control in 1992, the organisation became Bicton College of Agriculture and as a result took full responsibility, through a Board of Governors for its future - including self funding. In the years that followed - in addition to changing its name, there has been significant development both in the infrastructure and diversification of the service it provides.

The College specialises in land based Further Education (FE) provision and whilst located in east Devon, it attracts students from across the south-west peninsular and beyond. The College has over 2,000 students, of which 680 are full time and 230 in residential accommodation.

The College also delivers; foundation degrees - in conjunction with the University of Plymouth and Work Based Learning (WBL) - under contract to the local Learning Skills Council (LSC), as well as Train to Gain provision in partnership with Exeter College and have a local contract with the Probation Service.

In addition to an extensive range of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ's), the College also provides Skills for Life courses, as well as offering bespoke, commercial training for employer organisations.

The College has recently gone through a significant restructure, which has resulted in the organisation becoming more commercial and student led; and whilst for a period headed by an interim Principal, a permanent replacement was appointed in April of this year.

The majority of students are referred through word of mouth, partner/network organisations - such as feeder schools, or as a consequence of their internal marketing activities. There has been an increase in the demand for its services year on year and as a result the College now employ over 250 staff, 125 of which are full-time.

The organisation describes their core business as widening participation - in order to increase access to learning. The College also encourage those who access their service to aim higher through maximising their practical abilities, whilst supporting those who are able, to attain recognised qualifications.

The 500 acre site is extensive and includes; a fully functional farm, veterinary and animal care facilities, plant, floristry and a large arboretum, as well as stables, engineering facilities, kennels and a five acre lake. The building premises consist of; residential accommodation, a range of recreational facilities for students, lecture halls and classrooms. However, the centrepiece of the College is the stately Georgian manor house completed in 1780 which houses both administration and student facilities.

The College motivation in coming forward for **matrix** Accreditation was to; establish the effectiveness of the restructure, evaluate current practices and procedures and further embed its Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) function, as well as to achieve a nationally recognised award and develop further business opportunities.

The management style was found to be predominantly hands-off, although supportive when required. The staffs approach is informal when dealing with both students and employers, who appreciate this and consider the service to be a personal one.

The Assessor gained an impression of a delivery team which is supportive in its approach, has a genuine interest in students and strives to improve the service it provides.

This open culture was reinforced by students the Assessor met who were clearly relaxed, vocal with their praise, considered that they were treated with respect and enjoyed the friendly atmosphere within the College.

The scope of the Assessment was wide ranging and as a result, the whole organisations IAG service provision was assessed against the **matrix** Standard. Whilst evidence was gathered from across all four functional departments, the Assessor paid particular attention to those which included learner/student services and learner responsiveness.

The agreed objectives for the Assessment were to:

1. Establish whether the College meet all the elements of the **matrix** Standard.
2. Identify improvement areas and opportunities for development.
3. Confirm how embedded - or not, policies and procedures are.
4. Provide informative feedback on all the above.

Prior to the Assessment, the College identified an additional objective (3) for the visit. In order to add value to the process the Assessor asked further - more probing questions, with regard to objective 3. The findings of which have been incorporated within the main body of this report.

### 3. Methodology

In order to achieve an accurate Assessment of the service provided by the College, the Assessor's on-site days followed the agreed schedule produced with the organisation. However, in order to support the application there was a need for the schedule to be flexible, with a number of amendments being made both prior to and whilst the Assessment was taking place.

The method of gathering appropriate evidence was; verbal, factual and face to face where possible through interview. The role of the Assessor was to gather naturally occurring evidence as the process developed.

Due to the nature of the service provided by the College, it was not possible to carry out individual one to one interviews with its partners or employers - due to their county wide locations and as a result evidence gathering was carried out over the telephone. However, students were met at the College, either in groups or individually during study breaks.

The Assessor used a range of methods to gather evidence of the external services provided by the College against the **matrix** Standard:

Face to face interviews with 20 members of delivery staff.

One to one interviews with two students.

Informal face to face group interviews with a total of 18 students.

Observation of two student tutorials.

Telephone interviews with two employers and one partner organisation.

Observational tour of premises, facilities and resources.

Review of computer based and hard copy documentation; strategic plan, a range of policy statements, handbooks, survey data, action plans and promotional material.

Immediate feedback was provided on completion of the Assessment visit. Further, more detailed feedback on the Assessment findings is contained within this report.

### 4. Strengths

During the Assessment six strengths were identified which are outlined below. The numbers and letters in brackets refer to the relevant elements and criteria in the **matrix** Standard.

- The Bicton College Charter is a significant organisational strength. It is a clear example of what students and others can expect and reinforces the range of IAG available in the majority of its statements. It is clearly written, easy to understand and in many areas exceeds the requirements of the **matrix** Standard with numerous references specific to IAG and its delivery (1a).

- Equality and diversity with regard to access, availability and opportunity to receive IAG is addressed exceptionally well, not only through promotional activities but also through actions. Examples of this include students who are visually impaired and have hearing problems, as well as those with Down's syndrome and other learning disabilities. As a result the College has a reputation of inclusion whatever individual's capabilities. This pragmatic approach is not only good IAG practice but also a College strength (1b, 2b).
- It became apparent early on in the Assessment process that staff were clearly aware of their individual limitations and boundaries with regard to providing information, advice and/or guidance and if unsure always referred on. Tutors in particular agreed that whilst they provide students with a considerable amount of information and on occasion advice, they did not provide guidance. Where there was a need, those who provided this service followed the formal process through the referral form, although on occasions where speed was the overriding factor - referrals were more informal and verbal (4b, 6c).
- It was reassuring to find that IAG within the College is widespread and did not limit itself to the more traditional functional areas. Management is to be congratulated in putting the whole College forward for Assessment. Further questioning as to the benefits of this approach from both management and students were; more inclusive IAG delivery, better quality of service, improved referral processes and a clearer understanding of individuals limitations and boundaries (5b).
- It was found that in recent times there had been a culture shift within the College. It was further acknowledged by those met that since the reorganisation people were much clearer as to what is expected of them. More focused direction from senior management was appreciated by staff, as was the significant level of autonomy given; both to and from the Heads of Departments. This supportive, empowered approach is welcomed; allowing those who manage people and functional areas to use their initiative and specialist knowledge to meet the needs of existing and potential students.

The majority of people within the College considered that under its current leadership there is the ability to take the College where it wants and needs to be. A number of positive comments were forthcoming from staff and partners alike, these included;

*"I enjoy working here; the best part of the job is the freedom and flexibility within your area of work", "meeting the daily challenges which occur are often the most rewarding", "although a partner organisation - the College is very supportive and they always respond positively to my requests", "the College approach is to put students at the centre of the service offered".*

In support of the leadership and direction which exists, it was found that senior management is not adverse to taking risks outside of their comfort zone - if the outcome will improve the service provided (5b, 6c).

- In addition to being a good example of open management, the ‘Principal’s Question Time’ is not only well received by students, but is a practical example of proactively seeking the views of those who use its service at the highest level. This approach employs both formal and informal means and issues raised are actioned and responses to all questions are posted on the students’ intranet. Although this is a relatively new activity, it clearly supports continuous improvement as required by the **matrix** Standard (7c, 7d).

## 5. Areas for Continuous Improvement

During the Assessment the Assessor also identified eight areas where further development may improve the quality of service provided to those who use it. The numbers and letters in brackets refer to the relevant elements and criteria in the **matrix** Standard in element order, rather than that of importance.

The Assessors approach to this section of the report is as an external pair of eyes reporting their findings as a result of a short, factual, enquiring visit. The reader is however, encouraged to refer to the appropriate element and criteria of the **matrix** Standard, in order to fully appreciate the following feedback.

- Whilst already known, there is scope to further widen the net with regard to making potential students aware of the service and products the College is able to provide. It was found that when this more proactive approach was recently undertaken with potential feeder schools, the response was extremely positive. By definition, attracting those who are harder to reach requires more effort; however the benefits have been shown to be worthwhile. Evidence found suggests that employer engagement also applies here and there is potential for the College to increase the size of its network (1b, 1c).
- A recurring theme with regard to the wider role of IAG was the large number of students who considered their tutor the first and main point of contact; even though they were aware of other more appropriate routes. As a result there is potential for further development of those in this role with regard to IAG (1c).
- The wording of the College ‘Mission Statement’ differs in a number of examples sighted; website, strategic objectives - key themes document and the large mural situated on the half-landing of the Learning Resource Centre (LRC). Whilst it could be argued that organisations could have more than one mission, there is a need for information to be current, unambiguous and consistent (2a).
- Whilst many students were reasonably aware of the complaints process and agreed that they had been informed of the procedure, the majority preferred other routes to short-cut the formality. It may be that the formality involved is only a perception by students; even so the procedure may benefit from a review to further simplify the current approach. Further questioning as to how they currently resolved potential grievances brought the following replies:
- *“I always go to my tutor”, “the student council works for me”, “usually I just grump to myself - although student services are helpful and reassuring” and “the new thing with the Principal is perhaps a more direct route”* (2b, 7a).

- There are many and varied notice boards in and around the College, each with a nominated person responsible for its management which is to be commended. In order to add value, there may be a benefit from commonality between information boards - rather than the title. Some suggestions put forward by students were; the person responsible and contact number, as well as sections; whole college, department, individual and new this week. Students stated that it would be easier to find specific information and help people to make links between departments and other areas of work. It was further suggested that a steering group of 'Board Members' may wish to develop this further (3b, 3c).
- An action point suggested by a student and endorsed by others in the group again concerned notice boards. Most of those met were reasonably aware of the information boards that were relevant to themselves; they were equally unclear if there were others that could provide them with useful information and advice. It was further suggested that a visual map type postcard could be developed to indicate where each board was situated and what information it displayed. The Assessor considers this a valid suggestion as when asked to list where or who they received the majority of their information from; notice boards rated highly. This proposal links well with the previous paragraph (3d).
- There are numerous groups and small teams within the College which impact upon the quality of IAG provision; student services, tutors and marketing, as well as several working parties. There is a potential benefit from having a nominated champion within each group to act as lead on the IAG function. Their role could be a supportive one to advise and reinforce where and how their group impacts upon each or all aspects of information, advice and guidance (5b).
- The College may wish to encourage and support interested members of staff - as part of their personal development, to consider a recognised advice and guidance qualification, although not a requirement of the **matrix** Standard. There is potential for individuals to become informed specialists in this key functional role and could benefit both students and the College by becoming IAG advisers. This development could reinforce the importance of College wide IAG and also further enhance the Colleges approach to continuous improvement (6b, 8d).

## 6. Added Value

In addition to the eight areas where further development may improve the quality of service provided by the College; the Assessor became aware, through informal responses or observation, of a number of points which may add value. These are regarded as informative feedback, rather than specific improvements to be addressed and were discussed at the closing meeting and subsequently asked to be included by the College.

- There were many examples found of tutors providing excellent additional support to students. These included; unlimited time - often with one-to-one meetings after classes, researching information on their behalf, loaning reference material and presenting a range of learning opportunities, as well as openly sharing their knowledge, experience and expertise. Students consistently referred to the interest tutors and lecturers showed in them, the level of personal service they received and that the support and encouragement received gave them confidence. Numerous praiseworthy comments were volunteered, a sample of which have been included here:

*“I very much appreciate the ‘keep it simple’ approach employed by (name provided)”, “this course and tutor is perfect for me she gets right to the point and doesn’t waffle like some do”, “there was a problem with my enrolment form - however, my tutor sorted things out for me”, “I feel comfortable with (name provided) and wish that I had half of his knowledge, but I’m working on it”, “my tutor is the first point of contact I have if I’m unsure or have a query - he is truly my ‘one start and one stop shop’ ” (3d, 6b).*

- Whilst the principles of ‘The National IAG Policy Framework’ are implicit within a range of documentation and practices, there is an opportunity to make both staff and students more aware of them. In becoming more visible and raising the ten principles closer to the top of the College agenda; there is potential to provide a further, practical example of management’s commitment to honour their contract with those who both deliver and receive the service. Copies may be found on; [www.matrixstandard.com](http://www.matrixstandard.com) (reference MA07) (5a, 5b).
- Senior management regard IAG as an integral function of the service that they provide and contributes significantly to meeting the aims and objectives of the College. There may be a benefit, when next reviewing the strategic plan, from revisiting those objectives which have a direct correlation with the IAG function. The **matrix** Standard asks for aims and objectives - which impact upon IAG services to be clearly defined and measurable. There is potential to improve the clarity of understanding of IAG within the plan. Whilst this may not necessarily require fully SMART objectives; a more focused, goal setting approach, may enhance the ability to more accurately measure performance; how well predicted outcomes have been met or not. This enhancement may further support management information, monitoring processes, decision making and future planning (5a, 8a).
- Further networking with IAG practitioner groups - nextstep for example, may enhance staffs Continuing Professional Development (CPD), adding to the College’s body of knowledge of the IAG function (5g, 6b).
- The feedback loop, with regard to partner organisations and employers, was also explored during the Assessment and found to be an area which may benefit from further revision. Whilst supportive of the College, when questioned further as to what other services the College offered that may be of benefit to them, most were unaware. Even so, they were vocal in their praise for the support they received from the College. Particular reference was made by employers to the support provided by visiting assessors (7c).

- The development and implementation of student ambassadors is acknowledged as a positive move by those met and is a further example of the College's incremental approach to integration. This practice as well as others, provides an opportunity to openly seek the views of students on a range of issues. It was however, unclear how these views were captured and fed in to the appropriate action plan (7d).
- The additional Assessment objective requested by the College concerned how embedded or not, policies and procedures are since they were last reviewed. Questioning by the Assessor identified that people considered things were now much clearer, communications had significantly improved and they understood their roles better, as well as what both the College and students expected of them. Since the restructure which included a revision of policies and procedures, the IAG function had become a more focused activity and as a result those met stated that they were better able to support and assist students in their learning. It is therefore suggested that this objective has been achieved. However, in reading this report it needs to be remembered that the **matrix** Assessment is a snapshot of current practice and that fully embedded processes may require further examination (8b).

## 7. Detailed Findings against the matrix Standard

The following information is a summary of the findings against each element and should be read in conjunction with the previous sections.

### 1.

#### **People are made aware of the service and how to engage with it**

On their journey towards **matrix** Accreditation, the College revisited their practices and processes in order to examine the level of service they deliver to those who use it. As a result of an analytical review, a self assessment report was produced and a number of practices amended. However, management may wish to allocate additional resources in order to make more clear the services available to potential students, employers and others.

Users of the service are clearly defined as; anyone wishing to learn new skills, increase their knowledge and obtain qualifications through learning and other widening participation activities. This was explored at length by the Assessor during the visit and found to be established within the culture of the service.

The College promotes its service through a range of practical methods. The most significant of these is their comprehensive prospectus brochure - of which there are three; Further and Higher Education, as well as part-time/short courses. These are widely distributed throughout Devon and beyond and are customised for the type of courses available.

Acknowledging that the marketing and promotion of the services the College provides is an area that can always be improved; the sharing of ideas, widening the circle and maximising all available people resources may produce new promotional opportunities.

Much of the information and the range of courses offered are also available on the College website; together with support routes, informative news and downloadable documents, including enrolment forms. During the Assessment it was found that those who had access to the Internet used it very much as an initial information tool.

Students interviewed stated that on the whole it was easy to engage with the College and their representatives, which as a result, had a positive impact upon their reputation within the local community. Comments included;

*“The people I have met are really helpful in making you aware of what is available and go out of their way to put you in touch with someone who can, if they are unable”, “they have time for you and always get back to you if you have a problem” and “all the tutors I have had contact with are so easy to get on with and very supportive”.*

## 2.

### **People’s use of the service is defined and understood**

The College continues to support and offer those who use its service with a clear and unbiased explanation of what is available. During a simulation of a routine initial interview, it was identified that the following were covered; confidentiality, a full description of what the potential student could expect from the session, alternatives explored and agreement made on the most appropriate route.

Although many of the students met had difficulty in remembering what they had been told during their induction to the course; when questioned further, most considered that they had been informed of the range of services on offer and provided with supplementary information on other subject areas. However, most did remember being informed that they could get in touch with someone at anytime if they had a concern.

There were examples found of staff encouraging students to self evaluate not only themselves, but also their progress throughout the course. This worked well with some and produced meaningful and positive outcomes, resulting in many taking ownership of their learning - the benefits of which increased their confidence.

The Assessor found that the Skills for Life programme was particularly effective and that the information and advice given encourages the student to consider early on what they may be able to achieve. This practical approach prepares people in advance, challenging them to aim higher than they may have considered before.

Whilst no opportunities presented themselves during the Assessment to observe how referrals worked in practice, the Assessor questioned both staff and students to provide examples of how this was done. It was noted that on the whole the formal referral process is followed, with people stating that it is easy to use and effective.

### 3.

#### **People are provided with access to information and support in using it**

It is noted that the accuracy of information is closely monitored by those departments who are responsible for producing it and on the whole this is done well. Whilst there may be an argument for this to be managed centrally, it is important that locally produced information remains accurate; telephone numbers remain current and that individual names and photographs have not been superseded.

Although much information is sourced from a range of external agencies; it is equally important that this to be regularly monitored - in order to ensure that it remains relevant and fit for purpose and quality assured.

Some of the information provided is accessible through the Internet and where appropriate people are directed to suitable sites. If personal home access is unavailable to learners it was found that tutorial and lecturing staff occasionally carried out research on their behalf. However, students considered that the College was particularly effective at making contacts on their behalf, introducing them to others with similar concerns through a buddy system to share learning experiences.

In order to authenticate the information available, a range of relevant material and documentation was sighted during the visit and feedback, where appropriate, has been provided within this report.

Students confirmed that they were pleased with the IAG given by those who provided them with it. Some students did volunteer that they would have liked more clarification at enrolment, although agreed that they did not know 'what' at the time. It was however noted that the interview and enrolment process had been considerably improved recently. The majority of staff agreed that this was the most significant improvement in the past few years.

Those met were complementary of how they were encouraged and supported, stating that;

*"Tutors are extremely patient, helpful and respectful", "I am free to do things my own way, although if I am struggling, there is always someone to help me" and "student services are very knowledgeable and responsive".*

### 4.

#### **People are supported in exploring options and making choices**

During the Assessment opportunities were also taken to establish the impartiality and objectivity of the service delivered by the College. As a result, it was noted that all were treated equally, with information or advice required given to the individual and their need at the time. However, with regard to tutoring, much curriculum information was provided in a group environment.

Those met were of the opinion that the service they received was very much a personal one and that having people available with specialist knowledge and expertise gave them the opportunity to question, in a relaxed atmosphere, the most appropriate action to take. Initially many stated that they felt unsure of their ability to achieve their agreed plans, however fears were always addressed; although staff agreed that they were aware of the need to progress at the pace of the individual.

During a simulated initial interview it was noted that; a range of options were provided and discussed, alternatives explored, understanding checked and opportunities made available for questions to be asked. It became clear that whilst potential students are informed and supported in their decision making - they make the final choice, including when they would like their next meeting - if one is required. Some of those who had accessed the service made the following comments;

*“I felt more confident about the future after having a meeting with (name provided)”* and *“I was unsure what I should do once my course finished but after discussing this with (name provided) things were much clearer”*.

Whilst all teaching staff are qualified and registered with the Institute of Learning; it was found that they were also particularly effective in encouraging and supporting students who sought their advice. As a result, they were able to guide students in exploring options and making appropriate choices.

Management’s aim is to put the learner at the centre of their provision and as they move closer to this aspiration, they may need to further up-skill their workforce in advice and guidance - in order to further consolidate its ability to deliver the wide range of services it provides.

## 5.

### **Service delivery is planned and maintained**

Within the organisation’s strategic objectives there are a number of ‘key themes’ and whilst they appear more to be general aims, they remain appropriate for the service provided. However, there is potential to improve this planning document by making some statements more measurable and defined with regard to aspects of IAG.

Management is aware of the need to maintain a broad spectrum when developing future strategies - highlighting their wish to become more proactive. This approach has the potential to become a strength in raising the quality of provision through sharing good practice with others in partnership projects. Management were also acutely aware that without financial security, they would not be able to support the service they wished to develop.

Direction on how best to meet the needs of the IAG service is clearly becoming a more open and integrated responsibility. Whilst management make operational decisions; the approach to delivery of the service it provides is a shared and consultative one involving not only salaried staff, but part-time tutors and the students themselves - where appropriate. Key to the effectiveness of this approach is the openly shared information flow and two-way interaction which staff volunteered had significantly improved since the restructure.

It was further evidenced that management considers the IAG function to be a key building block in its approach to quality provision and improvement - as well as on-going development and growth. It was also noted that advice and guidance impacts upon a number of developments in various operational areas, the most significant of which is to ensure that each and every student is enrolled on the most appropriate course for them as individuals and their ability to achieve.

Whilst preparing for accreditation, numerous policies and procedures were reviewed, together with relevant legislation and codes of practice. It was considered by management that this had been a particular benefit as it provided them the opportunity to align these more closely to IAG and its principles. However, there are pockets within the College which may benefit from being made more aware of them.

There is potential for the College to revisit the limited number of partnerships and network organisations which it currently has. In view of future plans, there may be a need for the College to consider additional partnerships as it develops new products and services.

## **6.**

### **Staff competence and support they are given are sufficient to deliver the service**

There were some, although limited opportunities for the Assessor to evidence the effectiveness of the internal induction process offered to those staff new to the service - due to the fact that staff turnover is low. However, those the Assessor did meet confirmed that their introduction was appropriate and effective.

It was subsequently found that induction to those who are part-time also included aspects of IAG, in addition to more general information. Further adding that if unsure, there was always someone to ask; acknowledging that they were supported well and that communication processes were good - considering that most were not full-time.

Without exception, all staff met were aware of their own responsibilities to maintain their competence, knowledge and upgrade their skills. The organisation's supportive learning and developmental culture is not limited to external learners and applies equally to internal staff. It was also established that current policies, processes and practices for people development are robustly applied.

Regular internal monitoring takes place of staff's competence against the College's future requirements and include; team and department meetings, formal as well as casual discussions, contract monitoring and more formally at the annual appraisal, as well as six monthly reviews - to ensure that agreed targets are being addressed. Staff meetings are employed to good effect as a development opportunity to share good practice. Tutors are also developed through; curriculum groups, core training, individual observations and CPD support - in order to meet their individual registration requirements.

Management are aware and recognise staff limitations and therefore identify future learning needs, as well as involving them in finding appropriate solutions. Evidence of this was found in practice by staff sharing experiences, knowledge and expertise through; a range of questionnaire surveys, casual and formal coaching, shadowing, mentoring, observations and post programme evaluation. Together these processes inform future developmental activities and encourage staff to take responsibility for their own learning.

The existing supportive approach from both management and colleagues is unobtrusive but effective and provides ample opportunity for people at all levels to openly gain feedback on their performance. This was explored at length during the visit and clearly found to be the norm.

## 7.

### **Feedback on the quality of the service is obtained**

Although feedback processes clearly exist; the majority of learners stated that they liked to keep things informal and that if there was a need, they would raise an issue at the time. In following this trail, the Assessor identified that this was the case and as a result concerns were primarily dealt with as they arose:

*“I remember reading the handbook bit that mentions the complaints procedure - but would need to look it up if needed”, “I know that if I have a problem I would see (name provided)” and “when we had our induction I think that I was told of the complaints process, although I don’t know of anyone who has used it”.*

Much effort is put into enhancing and monitoring evaluation processes and further questioning identified factual evidence to support this. The Assessor found that all revisions of practices and ideas for improvements, as well as the views of staff and key external partners, were collated centrally and acted upon where appropriate.

Significant resources are put into the three, yearly learner surveys which is a powerful monitoring tool. Response rates are good for this type of information gathering and therefore its findings are valid. Management Information Systems analyse survey outcomes and inform appropriate action plans. Collectively these activities are beneficial to both management and students alike. Even so, the format of action plans is inconsistent in many areas and may benefit from a revision. However, current processes support the **matrix** Standards approach to continuous improvement.

Those who work at the College also have the opportunity for their views to be sought through a range of processes which include; email, sharing experience and expertise in steering groups, contract monitoring, development days and regular staff meetings, as well as formal and informal briefings - all of which have an open agenda, linked to service quality and delivery.

The views of employers and partner organisations - although limited, are also proactively sought and it was found that increasingly more regular meetings are taking place where information, data and good practice is shared. It was also acknowledged that the organisation’s behaviour supports their practice and application. In probing further, the following phrases were used to confirm this:

*“Extremely professional”, “people at the College believe in what they do”, “peoples experience is openly shared”, “enthusiastic about what they do” and “have good progression routes for students”.*

Whilst complementary, this inclusive approach is an example of improved and joined-up co-operation and as a result has an impact on future developments. Management also considered the **matrix** Assessment a major opportunity for objective feedback to be sought from those who access their services.

## 8.

### **Continuous quality improvement is ensured through monitoring, evaluation and action**

The College monitors the effectiveness of the service it provides to others through a variety of methods with measures which are appropriate for current requirements. However, there is scope to revisit current monitoring and evaluation practices in order to ensure that they remain appropriate and robust for future needs. Perhaps the key question to be asked here is; ‘what do you currently not monitor, validate or evaluate’?

Many of those met considered the continuing demands for the services they provide to be a practical example of the quality of provision and whilst accurate, staff need to be watchful and not become complacent.

The current approach to evaluation is clearly inclusive. Management volunteered that they gather feedback information from everyone, whenever they can. Although during further questioning, accepted that evaluation against more wide ranging and defined objectives could be of benefit.

A variety of internal activities are employed in order to monitor and validate the effectiveness of College delivery, against the strategic plan and self assessment process. Examples of these are, regular senior management team meetings with agendas which include; strategic priorities, quality, curriculum, administration, operational development, contract monitoring and learner progression, in addition to financial forecasts.

Practical examples of actioned outcomes taken as a result of internal evaluation processes are; widening participation of the 14 to 16 programme, the Bicton on tour promotion bus, availability of out-of-hours counselling, moving initial assessment into the interview process and the development of a Virtual Learning Environment. These improvements are recent developments and as a result increased the quality of information and advice available.

Senior management were focused as to how the service they currently provide to students and others should develop. The strategic overview identifies not only the Colleges operational needs; but also the needs of those who deliver and support the service, as well as the wider community and the economic environment in which they operate. It is expected that all of these activities will have a direct impact upon the future of IAG and increase the demand for its use.

In recent times the College has become increasingly forward looking and is more effectively using feedback to evaluate its current level of service. In order to reposition itself within the sector, the College may need to challenge existing ways of doing things if it wishes to achieve its Mission Statement.