# **Aquinas College**

## REPORT FROM THE INSPECTORATE 2000-01

THE FURTHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL

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The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education according to a four-year cycle. It also inspects other further education provision funded by the FEFC. In fulfilling its work programme, the inspectorate assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum, disseminates good practice and advises the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

College inspections are carried out in accordance with the framework and guidelines described in Council Circulars 97/12, 97/13 and 97/22. Inspections seek to validate the data and judgements provided by colleges in self-assessment reports. They involve full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have knowledge of, and experience in, the work they inspect. A member of the Council's audit service works with inspectors in assessing aspects of governance and management. All colleges are invited to nominate a senior member of their staff to participate in the inspection as a team member.

Cheylesmore House Quinton Road Coventry CV1 2WT Telephone 024 7686 3000 Fax 024 7686 3100 Website www.fefc.ac.uk

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### **Grade Descriptors**

Inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of each aspect of provision they inspect. Their assessments are set out in the report. They use a five-point scale to summarise the balance between strengths and weaknesses.

The descriptors for the grades are:

- grade 1 outstanding provision which has many strengths and few weaknesses
- grade 2 good provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses
- grade 3 satisfactory provision with strengths but also some weaknesses
- grade 4 less than satisfactory provision in which the weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths
- grade 5 poor provision which has few strengths and many weaknesses.

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision and curriculum areas, for colleges inspected during 1999-2000, are shown in the following table.

			Grade		
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum					
areas	6	44	44	7	0
Cross-college					
provision	9	45	38	8	0

Source: Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1999-2000: Chief inspector's annual report

Sample size: 112 college inspections Note: percentages subject to rounding

### Student Achievements

Where data on student achievements appear in tables, levels of achievement are shown in three ways:

- as number of starters, which is the number of enrolments on qualifications where the student was expecting to complete the qualification that college year. For example, a student on a two-year programme who began their programme in October 1996, would appear in the results for 1997-98 because this is the year in which they expected to complete their qualification
- as a retention rate, which is the percentage of qualifications which students have completed as expected or where they are continuing their studies beyond the expected end date of the qualification. For programmes of study of two years or more, retention is calculated across the whole programme, that is, from the start to the end of the qualification
- as an achievement rate, which is the number of qualifications students have fully achieved as a percentage of completed qualifications with a known outcome. Partial achievements are not included.

## Summary

## Aquinas College North West Region

#### **Inspected September 2000**

Aquinas College is a designated Catholic sixth form college in Stockport, Greater Manchester. Self-assessment is well established in the college and the report produced for the inspection was detailed and thorough. It was prepared using the college's existing quality assurance arrangements and was validated by a grading panel which included external representatives. It drew on the findings of a well-structured programme of lesson observations. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the selfassessment of the curriculum areas and agreed with all four of the curriculum area grades. They found that significant weaknesses had been understated or omitted in the assessment of cross-college aspects of provision and agreed with only one of the cross-college grades.

The college offers courses in seven of the 10 programme areas funded by the FEFC. Of the college's students, 85% take courses in the three programme areas inspected. The college provides mainly advanced level programmes for 16 to 19 year olds. There is some provision at intermediate level and some for students with moderate learning difficulties. The college also offers a good range of evening classes for adults. Courses are well managed. Of the lessons observed, 82% were judged to be outstanding or good, which is well above the national average

and an increase of 14% since the last inspection in 1997. Achievement rates are good on most GCE A level courses, but poor on some level 2 programmes. Support for students is good. A notable feature is the extensive provision of additional learning support for both full-time and part-time students. The accommodation is insufficient for the size of the student population. A new sports centre and classroom block is nearing completion. There are few social areas for students. Quality assurance procedures are an integral part of the college's activities; there is good analysis of students' achievements and good use of benchmarking data, but some procedures are not implemented consistently by all departments. There is a strong commitment to staff development. Governors have a broad range of expertise and good links with staff and students. There is strong support for the college's mission and values and a commitment to its Catholic identity among governors, managers and staff. Managers monitor the quality of teaching and learning and encourage staff to express their views through participation in a range of committees and working groups. The college should: widen its range of provision at level 2; improve retention rates on some courses; increase the amount of social space for students; take a more systematic approach to actionplanning; ensure that all college policies and procedures are implemented; and improve some aspects of governance.

The grades awarded as a result of the inspection are given below.

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Biology, chemistry and physics	2	Support for students	2
Art, design and performing arts	2	General resources	3
English and communication studies	2	Quality assurance	2
Law, psychology and sociology	2	Governance	3
		Management	2

### The College and its Mission

1 Aquinas College was established as a Catholic sixth form college in 1980 following a reorganisation of Catholic secondary education in Stockport. It is located on a compact site 1 mile to the south of Stockport town centre. The college attracts students from a wide area but particularly from its four Catholic partner schools in Stockport and Buxton. It competes for students with two other sixth form colleges and a large college of further and higher education within Stockport as well as other colleges within the Manchester area.

2 Stockport has a population of 285,000 and a lower rate of unemployment than the national average. Nevertheless, the borough contains areas of deprivation as well as areas of affluence. The proportion of young people remaining in education after the age of 16 is high at 72%. Ethnic minorities form 2.4% of Stockport's population and 5.8% of Aquinas College's students. At the time of the previous inspection in 1997 there were close to 1,150 full-time students enrolled. This number had increased to 1,450 by September 2000. In recent years, the college has been increasingly oversubscribed and has significantly exceeded its enrolment targets. The college accepts students, irrespective of ability, provided that places on suitable courses are available. Catholic students, those from the partner high schools and other Catholic schools, as well as brothers and sisters of present or former students are guaranteed places. The remaining places being allocated on a 'first come, first served' basis. The college welcomes all those who wish to share in its Christian ethos. About half the students are Catholic; the remainder are from other Christian denominations and from other faiths, or have no religious affiliation.

3 The college currently offers 40 general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) subjects, two advanced vocational certificate of education (AVCE) subjects, nine general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) subjects and two general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) intermediate courses. The college also offers an extended education programme for those with moderate learning difficulties. There are in excess of 1,000 adult enrolments each year, on courses ranging from basic skills through to higher education, with the majority on information technology (IT) and leisure courses.

4 The college mission is expressed in its statement of purpose, vision and values which is based on the 'Gospel spirit of freedom, justice and love'. This statement places a major emphasis on the quality of personal relationships. The management structure of the college reflects this emphasis. The management group is the senior management forum. It comprises the principal, the vice-principal, five assistant principals, the personnel manager and seven senior tutors. The curriculum is managed through 17 heads of department. The structure is not one in which lines of authority are dominant. All members of staff are part of their departmental teams and in addition they are linked to at least one member of the management group.

5 The college 'aims to affirm and value each member of the community, recognising the dignity and unique nature of each individual'. It strives to help its students 'in the search for truth, in making informed decisions, in accepting responsibility for their own actions, and in co-operating with others'.

## The Inspection

6 The college was inspected during the week beginning 25 September 2000. The inspection team had previously evaluated the college's selfassessment report and reviewed information about the college held by other directorates of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). Inspectors used data on students' achievements derived from the individualised student record

## Context

(ISR) for 1998 and 1999. The college provided data for the year 2000 which were checked before the inspection against primary sources such as class registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies. These data were found to be largely accurate. The inspection was carried out by 10 inspectors and an auditor working for a total of 41 days in the college. Inspectors observed 56 lessons, and examined students' work and college documentation. Meetings were held with governors, managers, other college staff, students, and other interested

## Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

parties including representatives from local schools, the diocese and the local education authority (LEA).

7 The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1999-2000. Of the 56 lessons inspected, 82% were judged to be good or outstanding and 2% were less than satisfactory. This compares favourably with the national averages of 62% and 6%, respectively, for all colleges inspected during 1999-2000.

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	13	19	7	1	0	40
GCSE	0	4	1	0	0	5
Other*	5	5	1	0	0	11
Total (No)	18	28	9	1	0	56
Total (%)	32	50	16	2	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges						
1999-2000 (%)	17	45	31	6	0	100

Source for national average: Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1999-2000: Chief inspector's annual report \*includes access courses, NVQs and tutorials

*Note: percentages subject to rounding* 

8 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1999-2000.

Classes were considerably larger than the national average.

#### Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
Aquinas College	14.9	87
National average, all inspected colleges 1999-2000	10.3	76

Source for national average: Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1999-2000: Chief inspector's annual report

## **Biology, Chemistry and Physics**

### Grade 2

9 Inspectors observed 11 lessons in GCE A level and GCE advanced supplementary (AS) biology, chemistry and physics and in GCSE science. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements in the self-assessment report.

### Key strengths

- good teaching
- above average achievement rates at GCE A level
- effective working relationship between teachers in different science subjects
- key skills clearly mapped within schemes of work and lesson plans
- regular assessment and monitoring of students' work

#### Weaknesses

- insufficient level 2 provision
- poor GCSE results
- poorly designed laboratories

10 The science department is the largest in the college in terms of student numbers. This year GCSE science was the only level 2 science course running. No vocational science courses are offered. The three heads of subject share the responsibilities for the department as a whole. Their roles and responsibilities have been clearly identified and written into job descriptions. They work effectively together. Careful consideration has been given to the choice of syllabuses at level 3 in order to capture and maintain students' interest. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that schemes of work are thorough. In biology all students receive outline schemes of work together with a resource pack of information for each module.

11 Inspectors observed much good teaching. Lessons are well planned and have a clear sense of purpose. In one lesson, students took on the identity of a scientist who had been instrumental in the discovery of an aspect of the structure of the atom. They researched the scientist's contribution and then presented the information to the group in a role-play exercise. Teachers in each of the subject areas have attended courses about curriculum 2000. They enjoy good working relationships with the students and expect them to work hard and to achieve high standards. Attendance in the lessons observed was high at 92%. Practical work is carried out safely. There are thorough risk analyses of experiments where necessary. Students are involved in a range of activities which facilitate the assessment and accreditation of key skills. In some second-year GCE A level lessons, students made fewer contributions than would normally be expected. They were reluctant to express their own ideas. This weakness was identified in the selfassessment report.

12 The standard of much of the students' work is high. This was not fully recognised in the self-assessment report. Physics students have particularly well-developed IT skills. Project work in chemistry is of a high standard and students have well-developed research skills. Coursework, projects and homework are set and marked at an appropriate level and are returned promptly. Worksheets contain references to library resources as well as encouraging the use of IT.

13 Achievement rates at GCE A level in all three science subjects are consistently above national averages, both for pass grades and for higher grades. Student assessment, monitoring and reporting procedures are effective and students are well prepared for external examinations. The rate of progression to higher education is high. Retention rates on GCE A level physics and chemistry were below average for sixth form colleges in 2000. Achievement rates in GCSE are poor. Of the 19 students who started the GCSE science course in 1999, only one achieved a grade C or above.

## **Curriculum Areas**

14 There are two well-equipped specialist laboratories for each science subject and all are used most of the time. Some laboratories provide the only access routes to other areas of the department. This was not noted as a potential hazard in the self-assessment report, and its disruption to teaching, particularly in theory lessons, was not recognised. A strength identified in the report was the very good level of support provided by a team of well-qualified and experienced technicians. The sciences are well resourced with learning materials. For example, in physics, differentiated graded question sheets have been produced on some topics. There are sufficient relevant textbooks for student use in the laboratories and in the learning resource centre.

#### A summary of retention and achievement rates in biology, chemistry and physics, 1998 to 2000

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and	Co	ompletion yea	ar
		outcome	1998	1999	2000
GCSE biology	2	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	22 68 27	23 70 38	15 80 25
GCSE science	2	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	18 72 42	23 83 53	19 74 6
GCE A level biology	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	125 79 91	140 78 91	146 84 91
GCE A level chemistry	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	81 75 100	76 80 100	94 68 95
GCE A level physics	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	70 80 93	58 83 96	53 75 95

Source: ISR (1998 and 1999), college (2000)

### Art, Design and Performing Arts

### Grade 2

15 The inspection covered GCE A level courses in art, design technology, theatre studies and performing arts. Inspectors observed 12 lessons. They agreed with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report, but found additional weaknesses in art and design.

#### Key strengths

- good teaching
- notable progression to art-related higher education
- high rates of retention and achievement
- high standard of students' work

#### Weaknesses

- insufficient use of IT in art and design
- students' underdeveloped skills and ideas in GCE A level art
- overcrowded accommodation in art and design

16 Inspectors agreed that there is an appropriate range of advanced level courses in art and design and performing arts. The recently introduced GCE AS in dance has recruited well. Recruitment to all courses has improved this year. There is a good rate of progression to higher education. In 1999, 54% of art students progressed to art-related higher education courses including courses in product design and architecture. Courses are well organised. The teaching of performing arts and music in a designated building has assisted close and collaborative teamwork and joint performances.

17 Most of the lessons observed were good or outstanding. Teachers plan learning activities which take into account individual students' needs, a strength recognised in the selfassessment report. Inspectors agreed that teachers prepare lessons and assignments well. They use appropriate teaching methods which capture and retain students' interest and help them learn. During a practical exercise in a GCE A level performance lesson, students were placed in groups to explore action words like travelling, turning, jumping and gesturing. Each group was given a task that took account of group members' abilities. In an art lesson, constructive guidance and support was given to individual students who were developing ideas from an outdoor drawing exercise. Each was encouraged to develop a unique style and to experiment with new techniques and unfamiliar materials. In most lessons, students participate effectively in discussions. In a few lessons, teachers failed to engage students in discussion and evaluation when it would have been appropriate to do so. Assignment briefs are comprehensive. Assessment is thorough and teachers provide regular and supportive feedback that enables students to improve their work. However, in some practical art and design lessons, the tasks set were not sufficiently challenging.

Pass rates on most courses are above the 18 national average, a strength noted in the selfassessment report. The proportion of high grades is at or above the national average in all GCE A level subjects. Retention rates are improving on all courses. Students' practical and written work is of a good standard. Students on performing arts courses successfully contribute to college productions, initiate practical projects and participate in workshops and theatre visits. Art students have produced an effective and colourful mural for a local primary school. Students' work in drawing and painting from observation is well developed. Their ceramics work demonstrates appropriate three-dimensional skills; for example students have made bright, skilfully decorated tiles in the art deco style. Students' work in sculpture,

## **Curriculum Areas**

mixed media and life drawing shows lower levels of skill development. Although sketchbooks demonstrate a range of responses, they show insufficient awareness of, and creative use of, contemporary art influences. Insufficient attention is paid to sketchbook research and the development of students' own ideas.

19 The self-assessment report states that the accommodation in the art studios is overstretched and inspectors agreed. Some improvements have been made which have created extra working space which can be used in a variety of ways, but the accommodation is still inadequate. Art students rarely use easels and are restricted to small works in two and three-dimensional studies. There is no dedicated space to display work for assessment

#### A summary of retention and achievement rates in art, design and performing arts, 1998 to 2000

and for exhibitions. Much creative and colourful art work is displayed on walls in public areas around the college. This work is unprotected and as a result the quality of presentation has suffered. The accommodation for performing arts and drama has been improved significantly. There is a large performance hall, a music house with music technology facilities, practical rehearsal spaces and a well-equipped theory base. Students use IT resources in their performance work. There is insufficient industrial-standard hardware and software for art and design students. Teachers are professional and supportive. Some are practitioners in their subjects and make effective use of their up-to-date specialist knowledge and skills in their teaching.

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and	Co	ompletion yea	ar
		outcome	1998	1999	2000
GCE A level art studies (fine arts)	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	57 70 100	52 81 98	58 83 100
GCE A level design technology	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	54 72 97	44 73 100	40 85 100
GCE A level theatre and dramatic arts/performing arts	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	30 77 87	37 81 100	44 91 95

Source: ISR (1998 and 1999), college (2000)

# English and Communication Studies

### Grade 2

20 The inspection included GCE A level courses in English language, English language and literature, English literature and communication studies, and GCSE English. Inspectors observed 12 lessons. They agreed with many of the judgements in the selfassessment report, but identified some additional strengths and weaknesses.

#### **Key strengths**

- well-organised, confident, and purposeful teaching
- carefully chosen and prepared materials to support learning
- helpful and detailed written comments by teachers on students' work
- effective support and encouragement for individual students
- consistently good achievement rates in some GCE A levels
- articulate and confident oral and written responses by students

#### Weaknesses

- declining retention rate in GCE A level communication studies
- low achievement rates in 2000 in GCSE English and GCE A level English literature
- insufficient use of achievement and retention information by course teams
- inadequate strategy for developing key skills

21 All courses are well organised. Teachers collaborate effectively in course teams. Schemes of work are detailed, but some give insufficient guidance on teaching methods. Teachers analyse information on retention and achievement, including value-added data, carefully. Despite this analysis, they have not identified all the issues requiring attention. This weakness is not recognised in the selfassessment report. Inspectors agreed that the strategies for delivering key skills are underdeveloped. Although opportunities to develop skills have been identified, they are not part of an overall plan.

22 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that teaching is thorough and well planned. Teachers make clear the standards they expect from students. In all the lessons observed by inspectors, students were given opportunities to participate in group work, discussions, or other activities. In a GCE A level English literature lesson, the teacher provided copies of a poem by Carol Ann Duffy, from which some key words had been omitted. When asked to suggest their own words, students produced thoughtful responses and gained awareness of what the poet was expressing. In several lessons, teachers used topical illustrations. For example, a teacher used an example of the press coverage of a British athlete's Olympic success two days earlier to illustrate relevant language features. Students' written work often contains strong, well-informed personal responses, although in some cases the work is marred by technical inaccuracies. In one GCSE English lesson, students read out their first piece of writing on the course, vividly describing a memorable personal experience. Many students contribute thoughtfully and articulately in class and they invariably work well in groups. The full value of students' contributions is not sufficiently recognised in the self-assessment report.

23 Inspectors agreed with the college's selfassessment that teachers support individual students well and encourage them to work to their full potential. English teachers offer additional help to students having difficulties with their work. Communication studies students have regular individual interviews with teachers to check progress. Assessment

## **Curriculum Areas**

procedures for coursework and project work are implemented efficiently. Teachers mark students' work carefully, commenting on the overall standard achieved and on points of detail. Most teachers provide students with clear guidance material for each topic. A particularly thorough handbook for the communications studies project has helped students to achieve high standards.

24 In some courses, achievement rates have been good in each year from 1998 to 2000. In communication studies, every student entered for the examination in that period obtained a pass, and a high proportion gained A and B grades. In GCE A level English language and literature, the pass rate has been consistently above the national average for sixth form colleges. Achievement rates in GCSE English and GCE A level English literature fell to below average in 2000. This weakness was recognised

### A summary of retention and achievement rates in English and communication studies, 1998 to 2000

and an action plan has been devised to improve future results. Retention has been generally above average, except in communication studies where it has declined over three years to 71% in 2000. Attendance rates during the inspection were well above the national average.

25 There is a dedicated suite of rooms for English and communication studies. The learning resource centre has a wide selection of relevant books. The extensive fiction section is a particularly valuable resource for English students. Staff in the learning resource centre consult regularly with teachers to ensure that resources meet students' needs. Each classroom has a recently installed computer. Some are not yet operational, and subject teams do not have a clear policy for their regular use. Two of the English rooms are too small to allow a full range of teaching methods to be used with some of the larger classes.

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and	Co	ompletion yea	ar
		outcome	1998	1999	2000
GCSE English	2	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	103 76 56	104 77 58	92 78 28
GCE A level communication studies	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	85 82 100	94 73 100	98 71 100
GCE A level English language	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	90 77 78	55 69 97	71 83 79
GCE A level English literature	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	98 81 92	100 77 99	72 83 81
GCE A level English language and literature	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	27 85 91	35 86 100	49 85 92

Source: ISR (1998 and 1999), college (2000)

### Law, Psychology and Sociology

### Grade 2

26 Inspectors observed 13 lessons covering GCE A/AS level, GCSE and access to higher education programmes. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the selfassessment report and noted that some of the weaknesses identified during self-assessment have already been addressed. They identified some additional strengths and weaknesses.

#### **Key strengths**

- effective teaching and learning methods
- regular monitoring and assessment of work
- well-planned courses incorporating contemporary topics
- good additional support for students
- outstanding achievement rates in GCE A level psychology and sociology
- excellent learning materials

#### Weaknesses

- low achievement rates on one-year courses
- low and declining retention rates on some courses
- declining enrolments on level 2 programmes

27 The courses are well organised and attract increasingly high numbers of students at GCE A level. Psychology has more students than any other single subject in the college. The implementation of curriculum 2000 has been soundly planned and appropriate resources have been developed. There are small and declining numbers of students on level 2 courses. The self-assessment report does not comment on this decline. GCSE law was replaced by a national vocational qualification (NVQ) level 2 course in vocational legal studies in 1998 and GCSE sociology has been withdrawn. Law and sociology modules are part of the evening access course for adults, which also has low enrolments.

28 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that teaching and learning are well organised. The majority of lessons observed were good or outstanding and all but one had clear aims. There is diversity in teaching methods to meet the learning needs of individuals. Group work is not always well managed or effective. Good use is made of teaching aids. In a GCSE psychology lesson, video extracts from a case study were skilfully used to illustrate the effects of isolation. Topical information from the Internet about conjoined twins was used in a law lesson as preparation for a lively class discussion on the complexities of law-making. In sociology, students made effective use of a topic booklet when working in small groups on the value of the individual in society. Although the infrequent use of IT at subject level was identified as a weakness in the self-assessment report, departments have begun to improve the situation. Students in sociology make use of a worksheet on how to research from newspapers on the Internet. The worksheet also helps to develop their IT key skills. Psychology students use IT for statistical analysis exercises.

Teachers make regular use of enrichment 29 activities to enhance students' learning. Law students undertake work placements with solicitors and the courts. There is an extensive programme of visits to courts of law in England and to Brussels and Strasbourg. Students take part in national competitions and mock trials. Social science students attend revision conferences and benefit from presentations by guest speakers. Complex questions relating to human values are examined. For example, discrimination, justice and morality are explored in law; practical psychology lessons deal with ethical considerations; and sexism, ethnicity and disability are explored in sociology. Inspectors agreed that these features constitute a strength.

## **Curriculum Areas**

There is regular setting, monitoring and assessment of students' work. Feedback is detailed and constructive. Students are encouraged to take responsibility for monitoring their progress against minimum grade targets.

30 GCE A level achievement rates in psychology and sociology are outstanding. Pass rates and achievement of higher grades are significantly above national averages. Valueadded scores for students in all subjects are positive. The college's self-assessment notes these features, but low achievement rates on many one-year courses are not acknowledged. Only four of the 13 students who started GCE AS sociology in 1999 were successful. Most courses have retention rates at or below national averages and some are declining. Departments are addressing this problem and improvements have been made, for example, on GCE A level psychology courses.

31 Support for students is strong, as identified in the self-assessment report. Additional lessons are provided for students experiencing difficulties with their courses. All staff are well qualified and work together effectively in departmental teams. New staff are given comprehensive guidance and induction. Meetings are well attended and include parttime staff. Rooms are well furnished but some are barely adequate in size for the groups using them. Wall displays, which include students' work, are attractive and relevant.

## **Curriculum Areas**

### A summary of retention and achievement rates in law, psychology and sociology, 1998 to 2000

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and	Co	ompletion yea	ar
		outcome	1998	1999	2000
Institute of Legal Executives NVQ	2	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	* *	30 60 67	13 62 62
GCSE psychology	2	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	16 88 46	31 65 †	22 73 12
GCSE sociology	2	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	7 78 100	8 67 75	6 75 33
GCE AS psychology	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	15 93 †	11 100 100	10 70 100
GCE AS sociology	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	6 67 100	7 86 100	13 77 44
GCE A level law	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	83 75 87	116 74 83	135 77 78
GCE A level psychology	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	142 74 100	144 71 100	171 84 100
GCE A level sociology	3	Number of starters Retention (%) Achievement (%)	53 79 90	70 61 93	56 70 97

Source: ISR (1998 and 1999), college (2000) \*course not available †unreliable data

## **Support for Students**

### Grade 2

32 Inspectors confirmed most of the judgements in the self-assessment report. However, they identified a significant additional weakness.

### Key strengths

- effective links with feeder schools
- good pre-enrolment information and advice
- efficient enrolment and induction procedures
- effective additional learning support
- effective student information service

#### Weaknesses

- inadequate careers education and guidance
- failure to recruit in line with the college's mission and equal opportunities policy

33 The college is heavily oversubscribed each year and attracts students from more than 40 schools. Of these students, 96% follow advanced level courses. There is little provision for students wishing to follow intermediate or foundation level courses. This recruitment pattern is not consistent with the college's mission or with its equal opportunities policy that seeks to remove barriers to access. This is a weakness not identified in the self-assessment report. The college plans to improve its provision for these students.

34 Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that its links with its feeder schools are strong. Staff, often accompanied by former pupils of the schools, pay regular visits to promote college courses. Open evenings are well attended. Prospective students receive clear advice and guidance. The prospectus provides comprehensive information in a clear format. 35 Governors approve the list of students who are to be interviewed according to the college's published admissions policy. Interviews are often held in the pupils' own schools. In July, the college provides 'taster' days when students sample lessons. Inspectors agreed that the college's enrolment procedure is efficient. All students are allocated to tutor groups. Tutors teach most, if not all, members of their groups. Relationships between students and their group tutors are good. A comprehensive induction programme introduces students to the college charter, equal opportunities policy, complaints procedure and the popular enrichment programme. Students receive a college diary that contains useful information and advice. Assemblies early in the term reinforce the college's commitment to its students and the high standards expected of them. Students are introduced to the student information service which provides daily help and information. This service is highly praised by students and inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that it constitutes a strength. While the college does not have a nominated counsellor, senior staff and chaplains provide first-line help. Students have access to external professional counselling.

36 Tutor groups meet briefly every day. Attendance is closely monitored. Students whose absence is unexplained are contacted promptly. There is a programme of weekly tutorials. The programme for first-year students is well designed and is valued by them. The second-year programme has recently been modified in response to students' requests. Group tutors are responsible for conducting the termly review of students' progress, during which they make reference to subject reports. Target minimum grades for students on advanced courses are used judiciously. Students giving cause for concern are offered appropriate guidance and support. The college provides information evenings for parents and opportunities to meet group and subject tutors.

37 Arrangements for identifying the additional learning support needs of students are well established and have been strengthened by the introduction of assessments of students' key skills. Close links with schools facilitate the passing of information to assist the college in meeting students' needs. Students identified by their schools as likely to need additional help are interviewed, an initial assessment is made, and individual action plans are agreed. Group tutors are kept informed of their students' attendance and progress. Throughout the year, students may refer themselves or be referred by their tutors for additional support. Teachers give freely of their time to help students. Students on GNVQ intermediate courses benefit from additional learning support provided by a full-time tutor specifically allocated to them. The college makes special provision for about 10 students with moderate learning difficulties who are supported by two tutors. In total, over 200 full-time students receive additional learning support. Support for part-time adult students includes advice and guidance about available courses, study grants, and childcare provision. They are all offered learning support.

38 The college acknowledges in its selfassessment report that its careers education and guidance programme has been disrupted by the reduction in support provided by the local careers service. Senior tutors and learning resource centre staff provide some guidance. The careers library is well stocked but its focus is predominantly on higher education. The college recognises the need to improve its service to students seeking employment. All students have the opportunity to undertake work experience during their first year.

39 The college's two chaplains play an important role in promoting the ideals of the college and fostering good relationships between staff and students. They assist in arranging assemblies, retreats and charitable work and liaise closely with the department of religion and philosophy. Mass is celebrated twice weekly. Students of other denominations or faiths are made welcome and are encouraged to participate in all chaplaincy activities. The chaplains review their work and agree actions to improve their service. Their accommodation is unsuitable for some of the activities they undertake. The student council is elected annually. It organises social and other events. Its president is the student governor.

### **General Resources**

### Grade 3

40 Self-assessment of general resources was one of the weaker aspects of the college's overall self-assessment. Some of the judgements did not relate to resources. Some weaknesses had been understated and others had not been identified.

### Key strengths

- well-researched accommodation strategy
- efficient use of teaching accommodation
- good provision of services and facilities by the learning resource centre

#### Weaknesses

- few recreational and social facilities for students
- no access to some areas for students with mobility problems
- lack of signposting in college and poorly located reception
- poorly maintained public areas

41 Since the last inspection, the college has brought additional teaching accommodation into use. However, continued growth in recruitment means that it still has insufficient accommodation to meet students' needs. The college recognises this weakness. It appointed a company to provide advice. An architect spent two months based in the college in order to

understand the issues and produced a wellresearched strategy for improving accommodation. The classroom and office block planned at the time of the last inspection was completed in August 1998 and a sports centre including further classroom accommodation is nearing completion. College managers anticipate that overcrowding will be alleviated by the opening of this building later in the year. The college makes effective use of adjacent rented accommodation for performing arts and adult education classes. It has recently refurbished a house for music teaching. Timetabling is carried out centrally and there is efficient use of teaching accommodation.

42 Most classrooms are well resourced. The newer rooms are in good decorative order. There is a marked contrast between those areas where staff have made efforts to improve the environment with displays of students' work or other materials and those areas where little effort has been made. Corridors, stairways and communal areas are overcrowded. Congestion and noise, particularly at lesson changeovers and break time, are disruptive to other classes. There is a lack of signs to the college and directional signposting in the college is poor. The college reception area is often congested. It is poorly signposted and located.

43 A lift provides access to all parts of the new building but parts of the older buildings are inaccessible to people in wheelchairs. The college makes efforts to ensure that wheelchair users are not disadvantaged by, for example, relocating classes to the ground floor. However, some specialist facilities such as laboratories remain inaccessible. The college recognises this as a weakness. Narrow and congested corridors, changes in levels and awkward access from the car park make movement around the college difficult for those with impaired mobility.

44 The learning resource centre seats 193 learners, and houses the careers library and learning support staff. There are three qualified librarians and two assistants, who maintain a

close working relationship with teachers. Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that, despite pressure on space, the centre provides a high-quality service to students and staff. It is open until 19.30 hours and outside of term time. There are good mechanisms for identifying and responding to the changing needs of the curriculum. The consumables budget increased substantially between 1999 and 2000 to support the introduction of curriculum 2000 and the development of students' key skills. Use of the learning resources centre is monitored. There are over 1,000 visitors on some days. At certain times students socialise in the centre, which is not conducive to study. Action has been taken in an attempt to reduce noise levels, consistently identified as a problem in student surveys.

45 The college is currently implementing a detailed information and learning technology plan. The college's judgement that this strategy constitutes a strength is premature. The stock of up-to-date computers has recently increased. Some are allocated exclusively for adult courses. The college intranet was launched in September 2000. Staff in some curriculum areas are beginning to develop the intranet as a learning resource but others have not recognised the potential of IT to enhance learning. Arrangements to monitor the use of IT facilities are rudimentary. Technician support is good.

46 Student surveys regularly identify dissatisfaction with the lack of social areas. There is no common room or shop. There is very little seating outside classrooms for students, who often congregate in reception areas and corridors. The college is aware of this but has not given it sufficient attention in the accommodation strategy. This is at odds with the college's mission statement. The front entrance has recently been painted. The dining room has been refurbished and redecorated and is used by students for socialising. There is a large sports field and a gym. Staff workrooms are adequate. Many communal areas are

untidy. Corridors are littered and are used to store chairs and office equipment.

### **Quality Assurance**

### Grade 2

47 Inspectors agreed with some of the judgements in the self-assessment report but found significant weaknesses the college had not identified.

### Key strengths

- a well-understood quality assurance policy
- good analysis of students' achievements and use of benchmarking data
- well-established self-assessment process
- effective arrangements to appraise and develop staff
- structured lesson observation programme, leading to improvements in teaching and learning

### Weaknesses

- lack of recording and review of actions identified at course team meetings
- underdeveloped quality standards for service areas
- inconsistent approach to implementation of policies and procedures

48 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that staff have a good understanding of the quality assurance system. A 'quality group', which includes a governor who is a trained quality auditor, is closely involved in monitoring and improving the provision. For example, relatively poor performance in two curriculum areas was improved following action by the heads of department. Managers receive regular reports on attendance and take action if this falls below 90%. There has been an improvement in the understanding of management data by heads of department, which was identified as a weakness in the selfassessment report.

49 Course teams hold regular meetings, but the minutes of some are insufficiently detailed. Action points are not always identified and responsibilities and timescales are not always specified. Progress in implementing the actions is not reviewed at subsequent meetings, which makes it difficult to identify whether improvements have been achieved. This weakness was not acknowledged by the college. The self-assessment reports for each department comprise the annual course reviews and evaluations. These are consistent in format and are generally well written. Targets for attendance, retention and achievement are set for the following year, taking into account performance over the last three years, national benchmarking data for sixth form colleges and value-added data. However, few measurable targets are set for improvements in student satisfaction as revealed in feedback questionnaires.

50 A strength identified by the college, and agreed by inspectors, is the thorough validation of the self-assessment report. The quality group assesses each constituent report in detail using a comprehensive checklist. External consultants have been used to validate both the process and the report. Quality standards have not yet been developed for all the service areas. However, staff in the learning resource centre have devised their own comprehensive quality manual.

51 The college has a well-established system for the observation of lessons. The college identified this as a strength and inspectors agreed. All full-time staff are observed twice a year; once by their line manager and once by a colleague of their choice. The principal also observes teachers. Newly qualified teachers are observed six times in their first year. The outcomes contribute to their assessment at the end of the first year. Part-time staff are

observed at least once a year. All teachers have been trained in lesson observation. There has not yet been any external moderation of observations. The proportion of lessons graded good or outstanding by inspectors increased from 68% in the last inspection to 82% in this inspection. This is above the sector average, but below the proportion of high grades awarded in the internal observation programme.

52 Feedback on the college charter has been analysed carefully by the principal each year for the last five years. It shows, for example that 90% of students' work is marked and returned within the college deadlines. There is a separate charter for adult students. There is a documented complaints procedure but most complaints are dealt with informally by teachers and support staff and records are not kept. Only a third of students surveyed by the college knew about the complaints procedure. It is not well publicised although it is brought to students' attention at initial tutorials. Although there is a clear college quality assurance policy, the details of its implementation are left to individual departments. For example they devise their own student feedback forms at the end of the first year. Some departments also use focus groups to obtain feedback. Departments have adapted college policies or devised their own policies on equal opportunities, internal verification, attendance, enrolment, retention, record-keeping and health and safety. This inconsistent approach to the implementation of policies and procedures is not acknowledged in the self-assessment report.

53 Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that arrangements to induct, appraise and develop staff are good. New members of staff are allocated mentors. There is careful induction and support for newly qualified teachers. The appraisal of teachers uses information gathered from lesson observations. The staff development plan is linked to the college's strategic objectives. Individuals' plans reflect college priorities as well as departmental and individual needs. The budget for staff development is 2.7% of the whole-college budget. The college has been recognised as an Investor in People since 1993.

### Governance

### Grade 3

54 Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements in the college's self-assessment of governance, but they considered that some strengths were overstated and they identified additional weaknesses.

### Key strengths

- strong involvement in determining the educational character and broad direction of the college
- good links with staff and students
- good use of governors' wide range of experience
- appropriate arrangements for appraisal of senior staff

#### Weaknesses

- aspects of conducting governing body business
- insufficient attention to setting targets for retention and achievement
- insufficient governor training
- underdeveloped self-assessment of governance

55 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is adequate. The governing body substantially conducts its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It also substantially fulfils its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC.

56 The governing body has 19 members comprising the college principal, 11 appointed by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Shrewsbury, one nominated by Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council, one parent, two co-opted members, two staff governors and one student governor. At the time of inspection there was a vacancy for the parent governor. The college benefits from the range of skills and experience of its governors, which include experience in financial, legal, buildings, business, education and community matters. The four committees: finance and building; general purposes and employment; remuneration; and audit, each have clear terms of reference which have been reviewed recently. The audit committee has appropriate terms of reference and operates largely in accordance with Council Circular 98/15, Audit Code of Practice. The finance and building committee receives copies of the management accounts each month and reviews them at its termly meetings.

Inspectors agreed with the college's self-57 assessment that governors have a sound understanding of the college and strongly support its ethos. There is good attendance at meetings and college events such as certificate presentations, concerts and exhibitions. Governors are represented on some college committees and one governor liaises with college staff on inclusive learning. Staff have an opportunity to meet governors informally before meetings. There are appropriate arrangements for the appraisal of senior staff. The principal is appraised by the principal of another Catholic sixth form college and an LEA adviser, and a written report, which includes performance targets, is presented to the chair of governors.

58 The governing body conducts its business openly. Declarations of interest are completed annually by all governors. Agenda, minutes and papers are open to public scrutiny. However, some of the work of governors is not sufficiently formalised. There is no planned cycle of business to ensure that the governing body and its committees deal with routine tasks at the appropriate time. Standing orders approved in 1996 have not been reviewed. Some weaknesses in governance arrangements, identified in an internal audit report in August 1999, had not been addressed a year later. The recently appointed clerk is appropriately experienced and is independent of the college but does not clerk all committees. A member of the college finance staff clerks the finance and buildings committee and the general purposes and employment committee. The governing body has yet to consider whether these clerking arrangements are sufficiently independent. Arrangements for the appraisal of the clerk have not been determined by the governing body.

The governors are involved in determining 59 the educational character and the broad direction of the college through discussions at their regular meetings. A group of governors is reviewing the college mission statement. Governors have little formal involvement in the production of the college's strategic plan and there are no formal arrangements whereby they can monitor progress towards all the college's strategic objectives. Governors do not monitor the extent to which the college meets its charter commitments. They do not receive reports on health and safety issues and have not reviewed the health and safety policy and procedures since 1998.

60 A weakness not identified in the selfassessment report is that the governing body is not sufficiently involved in setting targets for retention and achievement. A governor sits on the college quality committee where targets are discussed and reports are presented to the governors' general purposes and employment committee. However, there is insufficient formal engagement of the governing body in the process of setting overall college targets for retention and achievement. The targets submitted to the FEFC in 1999 and 2000 were not formally approved by the governing body.

61 In its self-assessment report, the college recognised the need to improve induction arrangements for new governors. There is no structured programme, but an induction pack has been introduced recently. There has been no analysis of individual governor training needs to establish an appropriate training programme. There have been some training events, for example on inclusive learning and inspection but overall, governors have received insufficient training. Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that the evaluation by governors of their own performance was underdeveloped. The governance selfassessment report was written by one governor and then discussed by the governing body. Governors have completed a questionnaire on the conduct of business but the governing body has not defined criteria, performance indicators or targets relating to its performance.

### Management

### Grade 2

62 Inspectors agreed with some of the strengths in the self-assessment report but found that others had been overstated. They identified additional weaknesses.

### Key strengths

- staff awareness and support for the college's mission and values
- good financial management
- effective monitoring of teaching and learning by managers
- effective and efficient deployment of staff
- productive links with external partners
- well-managed adult provision

#### Weaknesses

- insufficient attention to poor retention rates
- poor health and safety practices

• inconsistent implementation of college policies

63 Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that staff understand and support the college mission. Most strategic objectives are focused on the curriculum, on the quality of teaching and learning and on the achievement of high standards. As recognised in the self-assessment report, managers monitor teaching and learning through lesson observations and meetings with relevant staff. The principal meets all staff individually once a year. These meetings, known as 'fireside chats', include review meetings with each head of department in the autumn term. If course pass rates and students' value-added scores have fallen below target, heads are required to draw up an action plan. There is little mention of retention in the strategic plan and some managers give insufficient attention to the poor or declining retention rates.

The FEFC's audit service concludes that, 64 within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is good. The college has generated operating cost surpluses in the last three years and has income and expenditure reserves. Recent forecasts for the next three years indicate continuing surpluses. Detailed management accounts are produced each month and reviewed in meetings of the senior management team. However, the accounts do not include adequate updates on the financial position of the college building project. The financial regulations, which have been reviewed recently, are reasonably comprehensive. The finance manager is appropriately qualified and experienced. The college issues timely monthly management reports to budget holders, which include committed as well as actual expenditure. The internal and external auditors did not identify any significant weaknesses in the most recently available annual reports.

65 College managers seek to foster a sense of collective responsibility by giving staff

opportunities to shape their own work and to contribute to college-wide initiatives. A range of committees and working groups, most with open membership, meets regularly. Inspectors did not agree with the college's assessment that lines of accountability are effective. A wide range of staff has responsibility for cross-college policies. Not all of them carry out their responsibilities. There is inconsistent implementation of college policies at course level. Though most college policies have procedures for their implementation, many lack monitoring arrangements.

Staff are effectively and efficiently 66 deployed, a strength recognised in the selfassessment report. All academic staff teach, including, on occasion, the principal. Most of them are tutors and many have additional responsibilities. The long average length of employment and low absence rates suggest that staff morale is high. Management of the curriculum is effective. Planning for the introduction of curriculum 2000 has been wellthought-out. Departmental teams are small and work well together. They have many opportunities for face-to-face communication with staff from their own and other departments and rarely use other methods such as electronic mail, though this is available.

67 The continuing education department offers courses to adults, most of which recruit well. The provision for adults is well managed. The large number of part-time teachers are well co-ordinated and well supported. Comprehensive planning documents ensure that teachers are fully aware of departmental procedures. The department's marketing plan draws on a careful analysis of appropriate information. Minutes of team meetings are clear and identify actions to be taken and followed up at subsequent meetings. The minutes are sent to those part-time teachers who cannot attend. The continuing education department is not as well served as others by the college management information system.

However, it makes good arrangements to ensure that it has accurate data.

68 Inspectors agreed that the college has productive links with a range of external partners. Close and well-managed links exist with the four partner schools, Stockport LEA and the other three Stockport colleges. The college has good links with Stockport and High Peak Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) and runs courses funded by the European Social Fund. The principal is an active member of several associations, including the association of Catholic sixth form colleges and the diocesan secondary heads' association. He serves on the national council of the sixth form colleges' employers' forum.

69 The college's health and safety policy is in the staff handbook, but managers and staff pay insufficient attention to implementing it. Some departments do not carry out risk assessments of the activities undertaken by students. Where risk assessments have been carried out, some significant hazards have been labelled as minor. The last fire drill was held six months before the inspection. A site manager has just been appointed, but as yet there are no routine whole-site risk assessments. Some features of the buildings constitute potential hazards, for example low, wide-opening windows in upper storeys and poor ventilation in the new building. Hazards that are the result of poor heath and safety practices, such as sacks of waste paper in corridors, filing cabinets stored in narrow corridors and fire doors left open, were in evidence throughout the inspection week.

### Conclusions

70 The college produced its third selfassessment report for this inspection. The report was clearly written and provided a useful basis for planning and carrying out the inspection. It was well supported by evidence which was readily available to inspectors. An action plan attached to each section addressed

the weaknesses identified. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the selfassessment of the curriculum areas but found additional strengths and weaknesses. They agreed with all four curriculum area grades. They found that significant weaknesses had been understated or omitted in the selfassessment of cross-college aspects of provision, and agreed with only one of the cross-college grades.

71 Strengths and weaknesses identified during the inspection are listed under each section of this report. The main strengths and weaknesses are identified in the summary.

## **College Statistics**

#### Student numbers by age (July 2000)

Age	%
Under 16	0
16-18 years	75
19-24 years	2
25+ years	23
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

### Student numbers by level of study (July 2000)

Level of study	%
Level 1 (foundation) and entry level	1
Level 2 (intermediate)	17
Level 3 (advanced)	73
Level 4/5 (higher)	0
Level not specified	0
Non-schedule 2	9
Total	100

Source: college data

## Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (July 2000)

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	431	303	40
Engineering	6	0	0
Business	128	42	9
Hotel and catering	5	0	0
Art and design	86	0	5
Humanities	711	110	45
Basic education	9	16	1
Total	1,376	471	100

Source: college data

#### Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1998-99 ISR data, the college recruited 9% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' Index of Local Conditions.

## Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (July 2000)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning				
contact	58	13	0	71
Supporting direct				
learning contact	5	2	0	7
Other support	43	7	0	50
Total	106	22	0	128

Source: college data, rounded to nearest full-time equivalent

## **College Statistics**

## **Three-year Trends**

#### **Financial data**

	1998	1999	2000
Income	£3,124,000	£3,510,000	£4,172,000
Average level of funding (ALF)	£16.47	£16.38	£16.69
Payroll as a proportion of income	74%	69%	68%
Achievement of funding target	106%	109%	99%
Diversity of income	8%	8%	11%
Operating surplus	£59,000	£84,000	£100,000

Sources: Income – Council Circular 00/10 (1998), college (1999 and 2000) ALF – Funding Allocations 1997-98 (1998), Funding Allocations 1998-99 (1999), college (2000) Payroll – Council Circular 00/10 (1998), college (1999 and 2000) Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1997-98 (1998), college (1999 and 2000) Diversity of income – Council Circular 00/10 (1998), college (1999 and 2000) Operating surplus – Council Circular 00/10 (1998), college (1999 and 2000)

#### Students' achievements data

Level	Retention	Studer	Students aged 16 to 18			Students aged 19 or over		
	and pass	1998	1999	2000	1998	1999	2000	
1	Number of starters	69	85	38	200	252	216	
	Retention (%)	78	96	76	98	99	86	
	Achievement (%)	100	100	100	100	98	82	
2	Number of starters	1,106	501	567	74	56	99	
	Retention (%)	82	74	82	95	100	84	
	Achievement (%)	100	97	96	100	95	100	
3	Number of starters	2,339	2,321	2,512	33	28	52	
	Retention (%)	80	77	82	67	89	81	
	Achievement (%)	89	90	86	71	89	56	
4 or 5	Number of starters	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	
	Retention (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	
	Achievement (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	
Short	Number of starters	455	622	879	55	233	290	
courses	Retention (%)	98	99	99	98	97	90	
	Achievement (%)	49	1	50	31	13	19	
Unknown/	Number of starters	13	12	1,063	3	340	4	
unclassified	Retention (%)	85	100	91	100	94	50	
	Achievement (%)	n/a	50	100	n/a	100	100	

Source: college n/a not applicable

### **FEFC Inspection Report 01/01**

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Further copies can be obtained by contacting the communications team at:

The Further Education Funding Council Cheylesmore House Quinton Road Coventry CV1 2WT

> Telephone 024 7686 3265 Fax 024 7686 3025 E-mail fefcpubs@fefc.ac.uk

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