

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Blackburn College

March 1996

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL**

The Further Education Funding Council 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 every four years. The inspectorate also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum and gives advice to FEFC's quality assessment committee.

College inspections are carried out in accordance with the framework and guidelines described in Council Circular 93/28. They involve full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have knowledge and experience in the work they inspect. Inspection teams normally include at least one member who does not work in education and a member of staff from the college being inspected.

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CONTENTS

	Paragraph
Summary	
Introduction	1
The college and its aims	2
Responsiveness and range of provision	7
Governance and management	18
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	28
Teaching and the promotion of learning	40
Students' achievements	53
Quality assurance	66
Resources	76
Conclusions and issues	89
Figures	

GRADE DESCRIPTORS

The procedures for assessing quality are set out in the Council Circular 93/28. During their inspection, inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of each aspect of provision they inspect. Their assessments are set out in the reports. They also use a five-point grading scale to summarise the balance between strengths and weaknesses.

The descriptors for the grades are:

- *grade 1 – provision which has many strengths and very few weaknesses*
- *grade 2 – provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses*
- *grade 3 – provision with a balance of strengths and weaknesses*
- *grade 4 – provision in which the weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths*
- *grade 5 – provision which has many weaknesses and very few strengths.*

By June 1995, some 208 college inspections had been completed. The grade profiles for aspects of cross-college provision and programme areas for the 208 colleges are shown in the following table.

College grade profiles 1993-95

Activity	Inspection grades				
	1	2	3	4	5
Programme area	9%	60%	28%	3%	<1%
Cross-college provision	13%	51%	31%	5%	<1%
Overall	11%	56%	29%	4%	<1%

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 38/96

BLACKBURN COLLEGE
NORTH WEST REGION
Inspected March-December 1995

Summary

Blackburn College is a large and well-managed town centre tertiary college. It works with numerous partners and plays a well-defined role in local economic regeneration. Links with schools, businesses and local communities are strong. The college is taking care to ensure that the needs of the growing Asian heritage community are analysed and met. A broad and constantly developing range of high-quality educational and training opportunities attracts large numbers of students. Higher education forms a substantial part of provision but is not being allowed to dominate. Students study with enthusiasm and interest and are generally successful in achieving their learning goals. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are always taught in mainstream classes and have exemplary arrangements for their support. The quality of much of the teaching is excellent. Most staff have good academic and teaching qualifications. Many have interesting and relevant industrial experience that enriches their teaching. The college's buildings are carefully maintained. Those on the main town centre campus blend attractively into their surroundings. Well-used outreach centres serve community needs. Students' learning is supported by easily-accessible computers and high-quality software.

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

Aspects of cross-college provision	Grade
Responsiveness and range of provision	1
Governance and management	1
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	1
Quality assurance	2
Resources: staffing	1
equipment/learning resources	2
accommodation	2

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Mathematics, science and computing	2	Health care and beauty	1
Construction	2	Art and design	1
Engineering	2	English, modern languages, teacher training	1
Business	2	Other humanities	2
Catering and leisure	1	Adult basic education	1
		Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities	1

INTRODUCTION

1 Blackburn College was inspected in three stages. The college's enrolment and induction procedures were inspected in July and September 1995. Specialist inspections took place in March, May and October 1995, followed by a cross-college inspection in December 1995. Twenty-seven inspectors took part in the inspection using a total of 125 days. They visited 302 classes and examined students' work. They met current and former students, college teaching staff and managers, parents, employers, and representatives of partner schools, universities, the local communities, the borough of Blackburn, City Challenge and the careers service. Discussions also took place with the chairman of the corporation and with a representative of the East Lancashire Training and Enterprise Council (ELTEC). One inspector attended the annual corporation seminar and a full meeting of the corporation. Inspectors examined a wide range of college documents, including the mission statement and charter, planning documents, committee minutes, position statements and the self-assessment report.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 Blackburn College is a large town-centre tertiary college. It was founded in 1888 as a technical college specialising in textiles and basic engineering. It became a tertiary college in 1984 following the reorganisation of post-16 education in parts of Lancashire.

3 The main campus blends into the surrounding shopping and residential areas. Its buildings range from the listed Victoria Centre that housed the original college to a modern single-storey technology block constructed in 1989. Ninety-five per cent of college activities take place on the main site. The remaining 5 per cent take place in seven outreach centres, six of which are shared with other community users.

4 Blackburn and Darwen have a population of 133,099, with the Asian heritage community making up almost 16 per cent of the total. Just over a third of the working population is employed in the manufacturing sector and a further third in the service industries. The area has the lowest living standards in Lancashire. Unemployment is high. In the 4,000 households headed by single parents it reaches 61 per cent overall, and 92 per cent amongst women. New jobs over the next five years in the distribution, hotel and catering and service industries should bring a small decline in unemployment, but manufacturing will continue to shrink. In 1995, there were 1,865 16-year-old school leavers, of whom just over 20 per cent now attend the college. General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) results in Blackburn's local authority schools are below national and county averages. The percentage of Blackburn school leavers remaining in post-compulsory education is, however, fairly high at 66 per cent, compared with 64 per cent for Lancashire as a whole and 62 per cent for the North West region. Only 6 per cent of school leavers went directly into employment, generally to low-paid and low-skilled jobs which required little or no training.

5 The college is a key provider of education and training in the community. It works in close partnership with the borough of Blackburn, with City Challenge and single regeneration budget initiatives, and with the Lancashire Local Education Authority (LEA). Its mission is 'to serve the educational, cultural, social and economic needs of the local community, and to provide further and higher educational opportunities to a national and international clientele'. A commitment to widening access for disadvantaged groups is central to its philosophy. In 1994, 14 per cent of Blackburn school leavers were identified as having special needs, as against fewer than 10 per cent in Lancashire as a whole. At present, 500 students are being given the language and basic skills support they need to play an active part in mainstream classes.

6 At the time of inspection there were 3,928 full-time and 14,505 part-time students. Asian heritage students make up 25 per cent of full-time students. Student numbers by age, by level of study, and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2, and 3, respectively. The college competes for students with a sixth form college half a mile from the main site, and four large further education colleges within a 10-mile radius. There are also private schools with sixth forms and large training providers, including one that specialises in training for Asian heritage girls and women. The college has a full-time equivalent staff of 305 teachers and 327 support staff. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

7 The college has a broad portfolio of courses which covers all vocational areas except agriculture. The portfolio is reviewed regularly. In most programme areas students have the opportunity to progress from foundation level to advanced or higher level courses. Eighteen per cent of the college's students now go on to higher education. The college is also responsible for non-vocational adult education in Blackburn, for which it receives payment from the LEA. This widens its curriculum base and provides opportunities for adults returning to study to progress to more advanced courses.

8 Students can choose how they study. Drop-in facilities, workshops, open learning and distance learning provide opportunities for adults to study at their own pace. Some courses, for example in business and catering, are being modularised in order to increase flexibility. The college is the only one in the country to have its own cable television channel. It broadcasts for four hours a day to growing numbers of learners.

9 The college offers 33 subjects at General Certificate of Education advanced level (GCE A level) and 14 GCSE subjects. GCSE courses for students resitting their examinations were substantially reduced recently in favour of General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) programmes. GNVQs are offered in all the available subjects except catering and the college acts as a pilot centre in a number of occupational

areas. Clear guidelines drawn up by a steering committee determine the provision of GNVQs. They are introduced only when curriculum managers are convinced that the new qualification is more appropriate to students' needs than those it replaces. There must also be evidence of adequate staffing and staff training. National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) courses are fully developed in construction, catering, hair and beauty, business, information technology and other technology areas. There is substantial open college provision.

10 The college has an established local and national role as a higher education provider, with courses in business and management, teaching, art and design, health studies and engineering. It recently became an associate college of Lancaster University and is seeking to broaden its provision by developing joint degree courses. There are franchise arrangements with five other universities, including the University of Glamorgan, which channels funds from the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales.

11 There are extensive and imaginative links with a large number of schools in the immediate vicinity and also further afield. To some extent, these build on the legacy of the technical and vocational education initiative but they go beyond the boundaries of the original consortium. The vice-principal (curriculum) chairs the education business partnership that succeeded the technical and vocational education initiative when funding ceased. A lot of effort goes into marketing the college and its courses to schools. Publicity materials are well designed and informative. 'Move On', a colourful and attractive newsletter, is widely distributed to pupils and their parents in Blackburn and the surrounding districts. It makes particularly effective use of student case studies. A roadshow, involving a large number of staff, informs 15-year-old pupils about college courses.

12 To encourage adults to take up courses the college produces 'Adult Times', a newsletter containing information on courses and contributions from students who have successfully returned to learning.

13 The college plays a carefully considered and active role as a partner in the economic regeneration of Blackburn and its surrounding districts. The college's senior managers contribute to regeneration strategy through membership of the City Challenge board and other local and regional committees. Other staff have numerous formal and informal links with regeneration projects.

14 Recently, the college's dealings with ELTEC have been formally defined in a statement of arrangements. The relationship is productive though increasingly competitive. There has been collaboration on numerous curricular projects, and ELTEC sees the college as being responsive to both employers' and schools' needs. Its youth training programme accounts for 10 per cent of ELTEC's provision, and training for work performance is good. A training manager has recently been appointed to co-ordinate managing agency contracts.

15 Enterprise activities are undertaken through Pennine Associates Ltd, the college company. One of its arms is the business development bureau. In line with the college's strategic objective to strengthen external communications and partnerships with industry, the business development bureau has recently extended its role to include acting as the single point of contact for all employers' queries. Until recently, each faculty was responsible for generating and maintaining a large number of contacts with employers and this led to some duplication of effort. Relationships with employers also include work experience for 16-19 year old students on full-time courses. Placements are centrally handled using a computerised system. Employers find the arrangements efficient and well co-ordinated. Foreign links reflecting the college's curriculum strengths are managed by an external projects unit that has contracts with Poland, Oman and Malaysia. The unit acts as the lead agency for European Social Fund and European Regional Development Fund grants. It also arranges staff and student exchanges throughout Europe.

16 The college has long-established links with the Asian heritage community and is well regarded by its members. Community representatives speak appreciatively of the accessibility and helpfulness of staff both within the main college and at outreach centres. The college seeks to analyse and respond to the needs of the Asian community. Formal links are maintained through the section 11 committee and through a termly consultative meeting which has a broad membership. Students and their parents also meet college staff on a regular basis. The Audley and Bangor Street outreach centres provide a limited range of lower level courses that attract those who do not have the confidence or the wish to attend classes on the main site. Well-attended courses are run for women of all ages.

17 The college's equal opportunities policy is implemented effectively; there are many examples of good practice. A recent review of policy has strengthened its application to the Asian heritage community. The equal opportunities committee is a standing committee of the academic board. It meets regularly and its minutes are widely circulated. The college is taking steps to increase participation in its activities by under-represented groups. Outreach centres play an important role, as does the college's work with schools, in attracting female students to courses where males usually predominate.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

18 The 20 members of the corporation board show a strong commitment to the college. They helped to frame its mission statement and are clear on what its values should be. The board is large, in order to ensure a breadth of expertise and to reflect the diversity of the local community. It is chaired by the plant director of one of Blackburn's largest employers. Members bring expertise in accountancy, personnel management, engineering and the public services. They include the bishop of Blackburn

and the local member of parliament. ELTEC, Blackburn City Challenge and the Ethnic Minorities Development Association, all important partners in the college's activities, are also represented. A staff and a student governor, both elected, complete the board.

19 Board members give a generous amount of time to the college. Attendance at the termly meetings has averaged 77 per cent over the last 12 months. The board's main subcommittee is the finance and general purposes committee, which meets monthly. Board members are active in planning. Together with senior college members they consider strategic priorities for the coming year at a well-attended annual residential seminar. The board has a clear view of its role and fully supports senior college staff in their management function. Members take part in social and educational events as well as corporation meetings.

20 Board members are well trained. New board members go through an induction programme. They receive an information pack explaining their duties and liabilities. They visit the college to meet staff and tour the premises. A more experienced board member acts as a mentor for the first few months of office. All members receive regular reports from the principal on developments in the college, together with copies of the staff newsletter and information on national and local developments in further and higher education. During the past year they have also started to receive reports from the academic board and regular briefings from individual college managers. The board is keen to explore additional ways in which members can keep in touch with college developments. They have appointed outside consultants to help review their performance. A code of conduct has recently been adopted and a register of members' interests is maintained.

21 Blackburn College is exceptionally well managed. A clear vision of the way in which the college should develop to achieve its mission is successfully communicated to all staff. The senior management team's 14 members, four of them in post for less than a year, work together productively. The team comprises: the principal; the vice-principals for curriculum and resources; the chief administrative officer; five deans of faculty; four assistant principals for external projects, curriculum, student services and information technology; and the financial controller. The team meets weekly. In addition, the Q group, consisting of the principal, the two vice-principals, the chief administrative officer and financial controller, meets to take executive decisions and to follow up matters arising from the senior management meetings. There is a cross-college committee chaired by the vice-principal (curriculum) which oversees the planning of courses and makes recommendations to the senior management team. The vice-principal (resources) co-ordinates the strategic planning process and chairs a further cross-college committee of faculty resource managers.

22 Managers and staff at all levels understand the strategic planning process and take an active part in it. There is a well-defined planning

calendar with related documentation. The governors and senior managers meet in November to identify the key issues which face the college and to agree the strategic priorities for the coming year. Senior managers then lead the process of translating the objectives into detailed plans for faculties and functional areas. Faculty and divisional operating plans relate closely to the college's strategic plan. Any proposals for new developments must be accompanied by evidence of need and a calculation of resource implications. New courses must be approved by the curriculum committee and the academic board validating committees. When the plan has been agreed a summary of it goes to all staff.

23 There are effective channels of communication between staff at all levels. Faculties have a calendar of meetings which helps staff to manage the numerous claims on their time arising from membership of multiple course and subject teams. Minutes of team meetings are concise and are produced to a common format. They are circulated to the staff identified in the summarised action points. Senior managers and the principalship also receive copies. They often follow up issues with team leaders. College newsletters, regular faculty and division staff briefings, and a well-used electronic mail system also help the flow of information.

24 The college curriculum is managed through the five faculties, each headed by a dean. Each dean has two deputies. In three of the faculties one of the academic deputies has been replaced by a resource manager who heads an administrative support team. Teaching staff welcome the relief this brings from administrative duties. Staff are aware of the responsibilities of managers and know where to turn for advice, although the recent reorganisation of learning support services has led to some tensions and confusion. Divisions within the faculties meet regularly and this provides the opportunity for senior management decisions to be shared with staff.

25 Managers at all levels of the college earn the co-operation and respect of staff. They strongly support the college mission and work well together to achieve it. Styles of management vary but, in all cases, effective leadership is combined with delegation of responsibilities to individuals and groups. Team work is well established in the faculties and new staff in particular welcome both the formal and informal support they receive. In some divisions part-time staff regularly meet divisional or course managers; this good practice should be spread more widely. Individual managers are encouraged to take up opportunities to develop their management skills. A more coherent approach to the training of middle managers is needed, to enable them to adjust to their rapidly developing roles. Managers' job descriptions are not regularly updated.

26 The college has reorganised its management information services. This is partly in response to the funding methodology from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), but also in order to give managers more robust information to support decision making. There has been a

major investment in new equipment and software, and new support staff have been appointed. The registry and college examinations functions have been incorporated into information services, and quality indicators have been applied to measure the response of the service to customers. Surveys of staff carried out in the spring and summer showed a significant increase in the confidence which staff place in the service. Staff throughout the college increasingly use the system to monitor students' attendance and to support the administration of courses. A programme of staff development has run. Few staff are unaware of the potential of the service although some remain reluctant to use it. The range of services has been extended to include the deployment of staff, the monitoring of retention rates and room utilisation.

27 The college's average level of funding for 1995-96 is £16.31 per unit of activity. The median for general further education and tertiary colleges is £17.84. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1995 are shown in figures 5 and 6. The FEFC provided £13.3 million or 65.2 per cent of a total income of £20.4 million. Over £2 million of income derives from grants from European and domestic public sources. This funds a wide range of initiatives aimed at improving and extending the college's portfolio of courses. The college exceeded its unit targets by 2 per cent in 1994-95. It anticipates that targets for the current year will be met or exceeded, partly as a result of an increase in franchised work with local companies and public bodies.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

28 Staff teams within the student services unit meet regularly and maintain close and effective contact with faculty staff. Their responsibilities encompass marketing, guidance, tutorial provision and learning support. A recent reorganisation has brought together all student services into a large and welcoming area next to the main entrance of the college. Its accessibility helps to attract enquiries from the general public.

29 The student services unit provides advice and guidance for students of all ages. There is an experienced and effectively co-ordinated team of schools liaison officers, carefully selected from the college teaching staff. Each officer works with an assigned caseload of schools, getting to know heads, teachers and pupils individually and helping to smooth the path between school and college. This year the liaison officers are introducing an equal opportunities teaching programme for 14-year-old pupils. Fifteen-year-old pupils take part in short courses and work shadowing. From the age of 14 onwards, many students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities gain confidence through part-time attendance of the college's well-established link courses, otherwise known as school partnership programmes. In the past, mainstream schools also sent pupils, but take-up is now declining because of a similar programme directly funded by the local TEC. The college also provides some link activities for which there is no fee. These include after-school lessons that attract

substantial numbers of school pupils aiming to gain A or A* in GCSE mathematics, and computer, language and business clubs. Some pupils have college students as mentors.

30 For adults there is a comprehensive advice and guidance service which has strong links with external agencies. Members of the students services team are responsible for liaising with community groups. Bilingual support is provided for home visits and for parents attending open evenings.

31 Recruitment and selection procedures are thorough. Full-time students are interviewed twice, first on recruitment and then at enrolment. Senior tutors co-ordinate the interview arrangements, which involve faculty staff. All staff who interview have had specialist training. They take care to give appropriate and impartial advice. Students are generally placed on programmes of study that match their achievements and aims.

32 Induction programmes are well organised. Students are well informed about their courses and are given helpful course booklets. All students receive a welcome pack which includes a copy of the student charter. They are aware of the services that the college provides and of their rights and responsibilities. Extra induction sessions are organised for those who join the college after September. Relatively few students change course. Nonetheless, there are established procedures that ease transfer between programmes. Full-time students are interviewed after three weeks and again after six weeks to review progress and confirm choice. Students wishing to move to another course are referred to senior tutors for guidance on making the transfer.

33 One of the college's great strengths is the way it accommodates students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities on many different mainstream courses. Their needs are identified in the term before enrolment after a three-day assessment involving mainstream tutors. Key support tutors then link with mainstream staff, students and support workers to ensure that individual needs are met. This collaboration has been exceptionally successful. Parents confirm that their sons and daughters are being treated with sensitivity and understanding and are receiving help that enables them to make progress.

34 There are flexible arrangements for providing language, dyslexia and basic skills support. Support can be organised for a small group or for individuals. Language and basic skills support within classes is well organised although mainstream tutors need further staff development. The college offers open access to information technology and has developed a software package that students can use independently to develop their information technology skills. The package also enables tutors to monitor students' progress. The use of the facility is still limited and would be increased if more tutors were aware of the information technology support that is available.

35 The college has a co-ordinator for the accreditation of students' prior learning. Accreditation of prior learning procedures are well thought out, but they are not yet applied in all curriculum areas. Where students' previous achievements cannot be accredited they can still be recognised. Fast-track arrangements can be made and some students have benefited from credit accumulation and transfer procedures.

36 Tutorial arrangements for full-time students are well developed. Senior tutors in each faculty work with subject tutors to plan and review schemes of work. A pack of resource materials gives further help to tutors and sets standards for their work. At the moment tutorial support for part-time students is patchy. The progress of all students is reviewed regularly and individual action plans are agreed between tutors and students. Records of achievement are used at interview and full-time students are encouraged to update them regularly, using software designed by the college. Parents or guardians receive reports on the progress of 16 to 19 year old students. The frequency and usefulness of the reports vary from division to division. Some parents complain that they have received none at all.

37 Student services staff give advice on welfare matters. There is clear guidance on access and hardship funds and on student loans. The student welfare officer has close links with the local benefit office. The college offers creche places to students requiring childcare facilities. Personal counselling is available although there is little accommodation suitable for confidential interviews.

38 The college has a formal relationship with the East Lancashire Careers Service Ltd through a service level agreement. Careers officers work closely with senior tutors and other college staff to plan tutorial programmes that will help students to progress. Foundation level students receive close attention. Students wishing to progress to higher education receive individual guidance on making applications. There is a pilot project to introduce psychometric testing for GCE A level students who are uncertain about what to do after their course is over. The college also provides a helpline to provide information and guidance on higher education opportunities after students receive their GCE A level results.

39 Although students are represented on the corporation board, the way in which the students' union is organised does not allow it to provide an effective channel for communicating student views to college managers and the corporation board. There is no formal liaison between the students' union and the student services unit.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

40 The abilities of individuals are acknowledged by teachers. Carefully-planned and unobtrusive support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities runs like a thread through all provision. There are some particularly effective examples of this in catering and construction.

The quality of teaching is assured by good leadership and the college policy of ensuring that all staff train within three years of taking up their post, following good-quality courses organised by the college. Teachers are enthusiastic and successfully communicate their enthusiasm to students. Students experience a variety of learning methods and the work is well paced. Group work is used skilfully to help students develop their interpersonal skills. There is modern equipment to support learning although some teachers are reluctant to take advantage of the college's excellent information technology resources. Work experience makes a valuable contribution to many full-time courses.

41 Inspectors observed 302 teaching sessions. The majority of teaching was judged to be of a high standard. Thirty-four per cent of sessions had many strengths and very few weaknesses. In a further 43 per cent of sessions strengths clearly outweighed weaknesses. This is significantly better than the average inspection grades quoted in the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report for 1994-95*. The weaknesses outweighed the strengths in just under 3 per cent of sessions. The following table summarises the inspection grades awarded.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE AS/A level		18	26	10	0	0	54
GCSE		5	9	4	1	0	19
GNVQ		15	26	9	2	0	52
NVQ		18	19	8	1	0	46
Access to higher education		1	3	1	0	0	5
Other foundation		26	35	17	4	0	82
Higher education		1	3	4	0	0	8
Non-schedule 2		0	2	0	0	0	2
Other		20	7	6	1	0	34
Total		104	130	59	9	0	302

42 Detailed schemes of work had been developed for all mathematics courses and for some courses in science and computing. Lesson plans reflected the schemes and were generally shared with students. Teachers showed thorough knowledge of their subject. In science, they laid stress on the development of numeracy. The standard of teaching was generally good across the programme area. In mathematics and computing there were some outstanding sessions, enlivened by a well-differentiated range of practical, group and problem-solving activities. For example, in a GCE A level evening class, students were starting to learn calculus. The teacher first worked with the whole group on the underlying theory. Students then worked individually or in pairs on an exercise. During the session

they were successfully introduced to new mathematical notation and terminology. They practised its use. Their algebraic skills were reinforced and their understanding deepened.

43 Construction students experienced a friendly and supportive atmosphere. Staff were enthusiastic and knowledgeable. They drew on their industrial experience to good effect. Teaching methods ranged from formal lectures to practical sessions in well-equipped workshops and project areas. Classes were generally lively and teachers sustained students' interest. There were a few dull lessons, including one in which students took dictation for 45 minutes. Support for students with learning difficulties was excellent. In a foundation level carpentry and joinery session two students with learning difficulties had been encouraged to develop the knowledge and confidence to give an oral presentation to the rest of the group. It would be helpful if teachers could share such examples of good practice across the construction divisions. This does not happen at the moment.

44 Engineering staff had an easy relationship with their students and gave them a good deal of individual attention and feedback. On the foundation level programme, support staff worked with teachers, jointly planning lessons and taking part in group work and role-playing activity. Classroom and workshop activities alike were planned to engage the interest and commitment of students. Question and answer techniques were well used in most sessions. Teachers drew not only on their own work experiences but also on those of their students to illustrate points of theory. On Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) courses assessment procedures were poor. Standards of marking varied significantly. There were no formal systems for double marking and for the internal verification of standards for assessment.

45 Teachers of business, management and professional courses used a well-judged mix of activities in class. On most courses, case studies were used to illustrate theory, followed by exercises to test its application. Where possible, teachers drew on students' own experience. A student on a part-time private secretary's certificate course, studying the structure of business, was employed by a brewery company that had recently been taken over. She used her experiences of the process and its consequences to help the rest of the group to understand the aims and effects of company growth through acquisition. The many adult students on part-time courses received tutorial help when they needed it, and gained confidence and reassurance from group work. There was a high standard of presentation in handouts, course handbooks and guides to study skills. Best practice was not always disseminated. Within the same programme there were examples of teachers using different approaches to the same topics with markedly differing degrees of success. Although students developed information technology skills within their courses, the core skills of communication and numeracy received insufficient attention.

46 Teaching on catering courses was generally excellent. Staff set exacting professional standards, drawing on their extensive experience outside the college to ensure that students were made aware of the demands of their chosen trade. Kitchens and practical areas were equipped to industrial standards and were fully used. Planning for catering and leisure courses and tourism courses met programme requirements and took into account the differing needs and abilities of the student. All students received individual tutorial support. Unobtrusive and effective support was on hand for students with learning difficulties in both theory and practical sessions. Students learned many valuable lessons through exciting and varied work experience that took them into large commercial kitchens at major events in the United Kingdom and abroad. Better use could be made of industrial links to improve leisure and tourism courses. Leisure and tourism assignments were well designed and students were given guidance on how to assemble their portfolios which helped them to understand GNVQ requirements. Not all catering students were acquiring the information technology skills that they would need at work. They should be encouraged to do so.

47 Teachers on hair and beauty courses and health and care courses were knowledgeable about their work and drew on their own professional experience to maintain high standards. Visits and outside speakers gave an up-to-date view of working life. Health and care students were set interesting tasks. In one National Nursery Examinations Board class, students used well-chosen guidelines and a chart to investigate equal opportunities issues in children's books. Students on vocational courses were encouraged to broaden their qualifications by taking appropriate GCSE subjects. They were generally challenged to think and plan creatively but at level 3 some of their assignments were too constraining. Students received detailed feedback on their progress, and recording and tracking documents were well used.

48 In art and design, teaching programmes were well documented and met course objectives. Lesson plans described an appropriate balance between theory, expert demonstration and individual creative practice. Teachers were knowledgeable practitioners and textile students in particular were set demanding professional standards. Practising artists visited regularly and offered constructive criticism of students' projects. Students understood their assessment regimes and knew what they needed to do to improve their skills. Assessment procedures incorporated self-assessment by students. There was a rigorous internal verification system, which included double marking procedures. Stronger links between the design disciplines and with the performing arts would enable students to develop a wider range of skills. Modular GCE A level courses in performing arts allowed students to establish fruitful connections between music, dance, theatre studies and performing arts although these links were not always fully exploited. Students received constructive written and verbal comments on their work, but they needed more encouragement to assess their work for themselves.

49 English and humanities teachers were expert in their subjects and some had academic reputations beyond the college. English teaching was generally of a very high standard. The schemes of work used by all the English teachers for GCE A level and GCSE were exemplary; they covered subject content, methods of working, resources and assessment procedures. The schemes for history, religious studies and classical civilisation did little more than specify content. In the best lessons there was scholarship, rigour and an understanding that students would work alone and undertake their own research when required. Academic tutorials in sociology and psychology were helpful for students; they provided immediate support for individuals at the end of lessons and enabled students to recapitulate on what had been covered in the course to date as well as course reviews. In the less effective sessions, mainly GCSE classes in English for 16 to 19 year olds, teachers failed to ensure that all students were fully involved in classroom activities. Planned activities were pursued even when students did not respond. As a result, the pace of work slowed and students' interest waned.

50 The wide range of classes in modern foreign languages included well-attended and well-taught classes in Asian languages. Languages teachers had realistic expectations of their students. Most lessons were successfully tailored to meet the needs of students with differing abilities. In a few classes, however, weaker students were working on tasks that were too difficult. Teachers had good command of the foreign language and used it whenever possible, even to correct homework and explain grammatical points. Some students did not have sufficient opportunity to practise speaking in class because the whole group was taught together for too much of the time.

51 Staff teaching adult basic education were skilled in course development and in the use of systems for assessing students' abilities and needs. They have been trained to encourage individual achievement and to review students' progress. Schemes of work and lesson plans were, in most cases, excellent. One particularly effective English class for speakers of other languages related to the use of everyday language in social situations. The students worked in pairs to practise questions and answers. They then demonstrated what they had learned in front of the whole class. The teacher controlled the activities well and the lively presentation ensured that all students took part, picking up important vocabulary and learning how to conduct social transactions. Adult basic education students had plenty of opportunities to gain appropriate qualifications. However, a few still lacked confidence and this affected their oral and group work.

52 The average attendance at the classes inspected was 83 per cent. Almost all curriculum areas had attendances above 80 per cent, including classes for students attending part-time during the day or evening. Courses in teacher education, science, mathematics, art and design and some humanities were particularly well attended. Attendance rates for lessons in GNVQ advanced business studies, intermediate level catering,

foundation level hairdressing, GCSE English, English for speakers of other languages and the access to higher education course in information technology were not as good. The college sets targets for attendance and retention but they are not monitored sufficiently rigorously to determine the reasons for the differences between subjects and courses.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

53 Most students had purposeful attitudes and were well motivated. They were gaining the specialist knowledge and skills they needed. Their work was of an appropriate standard for their ability and the level of course they were following. They responded to teaching with interest and enthusiasm and were keen to contribute to class activities and discussion. They spoke well of the college, the quality of their courses and the support of their tutors.

54 Files and notebooks were well kept. They showed clearly that students were making progress. A minority of students, mainly 16 to 19 year olds, produced work which was poorly presented and of a low standard. For example, some GCSE English students were poorly motivated and their work was superficial. In engineering at NVQ level 1, practical work was sound but students' written portfolios were weak. In GNVQ intermediate manufacturing (printing) some written assignments were poor. The notebooks of some students following the private secretary's certificate contained outdated information and errors.

55 Students have done well in practical work. Art students have achieved professional standards and competed in exhibitions throughout the country. Hair and beauty students have achieved high levels of skill and professional practice. Catering students have gained international awards in competitions. Business studies students have increased their knowledge through business applications. Management and professional students were able to relate their studies appropriately to their jobs. Construction students worked co-operatively in a safe working environment. Electrical engineering students worked responsibly on agreed tasks and were competent and confident with machinery and tools.

56 The college has extensive facilities for information technology and gives all full-time students opportunities to develop these skills. Engineering, construction and GNVQ business courses require students to use information technology. Art and media students use computers extensively as design tools. Students on health and social care courses sometimes wordprocess assignments and use information technology for creating vocationally-relevant charts and diagrams. Other areas, including some business studies courses, mathematics and English, make insufficient use of information technology. Most students who are studying part time also make little use of information technology.

57 The college has won a national training award for its work with students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. These students have responded well to the challenges which are set for them and are justifiably

proud of their outstanding achievements. The college provides a wide range of supported vocational training opportunities leading to nationally recognised qualifications. Students have gained full or partial qualifications in a wide range of NVQ or GNVQ courses as well as in English, mathematics and information technology. They have also gained qualifications in hairdressing, business and administration, health and social care, motor vehicle engineering, bakery, catering and construction. They work competently in practical sessions and take a full part in work experience. They are developing confidence and self-esteem and some who previously needed individual support are able to work independently. Those following courses in English for speakers of other languages and other basic skills have good records of examination success. Many students progress to more advanced courses or to employment.

58 Most of the college's students who stayed the course achieved the qualifications for which they were aiming, but many left early. The college is working hard to improve its retention rates and there have been examples of significant improvement. Figures for 1995 showed:

- high retention rates of between 90 and 98 per cent for construction, engineering, transport, management and professional studies, and art and design
- high completion rates of 84 per cent for GNVQ science
- unsatisfactory retention rates of 50 to 60 per cent in other GNVQ courses
- average GCE A level and GCSE retention figures of 77 and 73 per cent, respectively
- low retention rates of 52 per cent in performing arts subjects at GCE A level
- a smaller proportion of part-time, than of full-time students, completing their courses, with rates of below 50 per cent for open college psychology and sociology.

59 GCE A level examination results were good. Students in the 16 to 18 age range who were entered for GCE advanced supplementary (AS) or GCE A level examinations in 1994-95 scored an average of 4.8 points per entry (where A=10, E=2). This was an improvement on the previous year's 4.5 points and placed the college among the top third of colleges in the sector on this performance measure, based on the data in the 1995 performance tables published by the Department for Education and Employment. In that year, there were 833 entries from all age groups in 33 GCE A level subjects. The average pass rate was 88 per cent which was well above the national average of 69 per cent for students of all ages in general further education and tertiary colleges. The percentage of passes

for all subjects at grades A to C (51 per cent) was high. Performances in individual subjects varied:

- all students passed GCE A level art and design, music, media studies, dance, biology, design technology, environmental science, and Spanish
- there were pass rates of over 90 per cent in chemistry, English language, English language and literature, performing arts, physical education, physics, classical civilisation and mathematics
- pass rates were below the national average in religious studies, government and politics, economics and theatre studies.

60 GCSE results for full-time students were good. The 1995 figures show:

- 253 entries in 14 subjects
- an overall pass rate at grades A* to C of 61 per cent
- pass rates of 100 per cent in one-third of entries
- pass rates above the national average in over two-thirds of entries
- results in geography, history and mathematics which were below national averages
- poor psychology results.

The pass-rates at grades A* to C for part-time GCSE students were equally as good as those for full-time students. In 1995, there were 799 entries in 21 syllabuses. The overall pass rate at grades A* to C was 61 per cent, with most subjects achieving at or around national averages.

61 Results for 16 to 18 year olds on vocational courses were good but significantly lower this year than last. Eighty-three per cent of such students in their final year of study gained their intended qualifications according to the Department for Education and Employment's 1995 performance tables. The college was in the middle third of colleges in the sector, based on this performance measure. This contrasted with the college's achievement of 92 per cent in 1994. Disappointing results in some advanced level GNVQ courses contributed to this change. In general, GNVQ results, in terms of successful completion within the standard timescale, were above national averages.

62 Students whose examination pass rates did not contribute to the college's place in government league tables generally had good results:

- art and design students gained a range of specialist qualifications with few failures
- there were good results in hair and beauty, health and social care, leisure and tourism, science, computer-aided design, motor vehicle and construction courses
- results for management and professional qualifications were in line with, and sometimes better than, national averages

-
- secretarial course results ranged from satisfactory to very good, with adults performing particularly well
 - open college results on advanced courses ranged from good to excellent
 - teacher training results were good.

63 Students' levels of achievement were lowest in:

- audio-typing, advanced shorthand, BTEC first and GNVQ intermediate information technology
- assessor and verifier awards, where portfolio completion was very slow
- intermediate level open college courses.

64 The college follows the progress of full-time students after they have completed their courses. Figures for 1995 were not available at the time of the inspection, but in 1994, 80 per cent of full-time students provided information. Figures showed that:

- three-quarters of full-time students continued their studies, many within the college
- one-third of these entered higher education, including three-quarters of GCE A level students, almost all art and design students, and most advanced level GNVQ or BTEC national students following health studies, science, sports science, computing, building and electrical engineering courses. Most students of hotel and catering, hair and beauty, nursery nursing, secretarial and signwriting found employment.

65 Students achieved many other successes, for example in a range of individual and team sports, outdoor pursuits and the Duke of Edinburgh award. They won competitions and appeared in the local press. There were opportunities for personal and cultural development in a range of activities, such as theatre workshops, college musicals and the college choir. The college's many presentations held both in college and at outreach centres, its annual awards evening and its use of the record of achievement demonstrate its commitment to students' achievement.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

66 The quality assurance system is the responsibility of the academic board. Two main committees, the academic standards committee and the service standards committee link with boards of study in each of the five faculties and quality improvement groups in each of the service areas. Activities are regularly reviewed, and action is taken to improve the quality of the service provided to students. Policy and accompanying procedures are clear and effective in most parts of the structure. Services provided by external contractors are monitored carefully and are required to meet the same standards as those provided by the college. Performance data are

collected but they are not generally used as a basis for setting targets except by the senior management team. Not all teaching divisions have the same quality of review.

67 All course teams must produce an annual report. Between one-quarter and one-third of courses are selected each year for review by the academic standards committee. The fact that academic review is course based means that it works less well for part-time and short courses, and for the science and humanities faculty where the unit is the subject rather than the course.

68 The first stage of the system relies heavily on students' perceptions. Questionnaires are issued to an agreed timetable, and the results scrutinised by an assistant principal. Course tutors are required to respond in writing to issues raised by him. Matters affecting service areas are referred to the service standards committee and brought to the attention of the appropriate service area. The college is reviewing whether the system gives enough useful information. There are some very slow response times, and students do not always hear the outcomes of the surveys.

69 Records of visits by external moderators and verifiers are dealt with through a well-defined system which ensures that key messages are noted by the principal and the necessary action taken. Course teams are expected to build these reports in to routine evaluation and review activities. In most divisions, internal verification is well documented, with systems regularly evaluated and developed.

70 The senior management team and the corporation board are required to review their own performance. The board recently commissioned a survey to gauge staff opinion of its work. A simplified version of the college's quality assurance scheme is applied to franchised activity, and clear commitments to quality are to be included in the formal agreement with franchisees. Mechanisms for obtaining employers' views on the quality and appropriateness of the college's courses are currently under review, following internal reorganisation in the college.

71 The college's self-assessment report is based on a very thorough audit of all aspects of its work. It is self-critical and evaluative. All key areas of the college are included. It represents a considerable investment of time and energy, and provides a useful model for a future college-wide evaluation.

72 The information in the college charter is well presented. All full-time students receive a copy of the charter during induction. The complaints procedure is clearly documented and explained to them. One of the deans chairs a small charter review group that is amending the document for 1996. Students are involved in commenting on both the content and design. The college has put together a complete and helpful file of all the documents referred to in the charter. The charter's impact is uneven across the faculties. Some of its language could be simplified.

73 The appraisal scheme is based on nationally-agreed guidelines. It focuses on the assessment of staff-development needs for the member of staff concerned. The scheme will be in place for all full-time staff by the end of January 1996. Some of the action plans drawn up as a result of appraisal do not provide a sufficiently clear basis for determining whether objectives have been met. The appraisal model for the senior management team is pay related and is different from that for other members of staff.

74 Overall, staff development is well managed and structures are effective. However, links between plans for the college on the one hand and the assessment of staff needs and their development on the other should be strengthened. A substantial proportion of the staff-development budget is delegated to faculties to meet the needs of faculty teams. Staff are required to pass on the outcomes of external events, so as to make the best use of resources. Cover is provided for support staff as well as for teaching staff when they attend such events, and staff are never refused training requests because cover cannot be found. Three or four days a year are devoted to events involving the whole college. An induction programme for new staff runs each month. All new staff have a mentor for a year and recently-appointed staff have found this helpful.

75 The annual assessment of staff-development needs for all staff contributes to the development of the college. The preparation for assessment against the Investors in People standard is encouraging the maintenance of high standards in this area of the college's work. At present too few staff are involved in the staff-development and appraisal programmes.

RESOURCES

Staffing

76 Overall, the numbers of teachers and support staff are well matched to the courses which the college offers. The use and deployment of staff are monitored effectively and staffing budgets are controlled rigorously. Morale is high and staff are enthusiastic about their work.

77 There are 237 full-time teachers, 94 per cent of whom have signed the new contracts, and 68 full-time equivalent part-time teachers. Full-time teachers deliver 72 per cent of the hours taught. Staff are well qualified. At present, 79 per cent of full-time teachers have a teaching qualification and 77 per cent are educated to degree or higher national diploma standard. The importance of good teaching skills is emphasised. All staff have to give presentations at interview as an initial means of testing their teaching and communication skills.

78 Many of the staff working on vocational courses have relevant industrial experience, much of it recent. In a few instances, and particularly in business studies and construction, this is limited. Substantial numbers of staff are working towards the Training and

Development Lead Body awards. After the initial impetus, many staff are now taking a long time to complete their portfolios. Only 46 per cent of those working towards D32, 33 and 34 awards have so far finished. Only 30 staff have so far gained D34, and only two have achieved D36. Urgent action is required to ensure that the college retains its accredited centre status.

79 There are almost equal numbers of men and women on the teaching staff but of the 66 managers only 22 are women. Three members of staff on the management spine are women of Asian heritage. There are no exact figures available on the ethnic backgrounds of teachers, despite attempts to collect information. The proportion of staff of Asian heritage is known to be less than the proportion that exists in the local community. Efforts are being made to improve their representation through carefully-targeted advertising. All staff who interview are trained in fair selection procedures.

80 Learning support, administrative and technical support are provided by a total of 301 full-time staff and 84 part-time workers. The quality of support that they provide is high. They play an effective role in workshops and learning centres. Non-teaching staff receive the same encouragement as teaching staff to further their qualifications.

Equipment/learning resources

81 General equipment and learning resources meet curriculum needs in most parts of the college. The majority of classrooms are well equipped with screens or whiteboards and overhead projectors. Specialist equipment is sufficient to support existing courses and there are particularly good new resources in hairdressing and modern languages. The college was one of the country's first to acquire a Comenius centre, containing a wide range of materials and equipment to support foreign language learning.

82 The college has no capital replacement policy. Some of the more expensive equipment, particularly in general and motor vehicle engineering, is growing old and is becoming less able to support industry relevant courses.

83 The overall standard of information technology provision is exceptional. There are 695 computers for student use, giving a workstation to student ratio of 1:10.4. Many of these computers are linked to the college network which greatly increases their effectiveness. The level of use by students is constantly monitored to ensure the best possible match between supply and demand. Recent problems that made the network temporarily unusable meant that learning was affected for some of the less experienced students for several weeks. The problems appear to have been overcome.

84 The college's information technology equipment and other technology equipment are managed by committed and enterprising members of staff.

The equipment in the technology centre is up to date. There are excellent computer-aided design and computer-aided manufacturing facilities as well as well-equipped electronic workshops. Some aspects of provision are found in few other places. The college broadcasts for four hours a day on its own cable channel, using both bought programmes and those that have been made by its own staff. A so-called 'cyber classroom' has recently been installed to encourage experimentation with new forms of communication. Teachers can broadcast to other parts of the college or to other parts of the town using video and television equipment.

85 There are currently 55,000 books in the library, which is low for the number of students on roll. The book catalogue is fully computerised. Students do, however, have access to information stored on compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) databases and to various materials in resource centres throughout the college. There are good stocks of periodicals. The current allocation of £90,000 is equivalent to £11.70 per full-time student. Seventy per cent of this budget is delegated to the faculties who are responsible for ordering text books. This system works to the satisfaction of most staff. Some faculties supplement their library budget by drawing from their consumables budget. The library itself is small for the number of students on roll; there are only 215 study places. It is well used and the environment is conducive to learning. The library is divided into three distinct areas with differing degrees of silence imposed. The quietest area is underused and could well be made smaller. Within the resources available the well-qualified library staff provide an excellent service which is much appreciated by students and staff.

Accommodation

86 The college has an effective accommodation strategy which is closely linked to the strategic plan. It is now being updated to cater for the next phase of projected growth in student numbers. Teaching accommodation is allocated to faculties and careful management ensures its effective utilisation. Most of the accommodation is kept in good repair by an efficient estates management team. They have an annual budget of £480,000. The estates staff, most of whom are college employees, work to a detailed set of performance indicators. One example of the effectiveness of these indicators is the complete elimination of graffiti. Security is looked after by a private firm. Security officers have successfully reduced vandalism and theft. Their work is appreciated by staff and students alike.

87 The college vision of an evolving campus, closely integrated with the town centre and providing high-quality accommodation for its students, has largely been achieved. The main campus is spacious and looks cheerful and inviting. Communal spaces such as the refectories are excellent and other student common areas are adequate. A staggered lunch hour helps to avoid overcrowding. Most classrooms and corridors are well decorated, and have attractive wall displays. Workshops and laboratories are generally of a good standard although some science rooms still need to be

brought up to modern standards. Some of the computer areas become too warm when in full use for long periods. Indoor sports facilities are good; they include a sports hall, a fitness suite, and an aerobics and dance studio. There are no playing fields but students have ample access to nearby pitches where a full range of team games is played.

88 The college has seven outreach centres, only three of which it owns. The quality of some of these centres is not as good as the buildings on the main campus. The Harrison building has poor accommodation and suffers from major structural problems. College House, Holker House at Darwen and the Harrison building are not easily accessible for wheelchair users.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

89 The college has many strengths. The major ones are:

- the breadth of its provision
- its responsiveness to its large and varied clientele
- the support it offers to students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- exceptionally good management by a vigorous team
- excellent, proactive relationships with local schools
- a firm role in economic regeneration
- well-trained and effective teachers
- a high level of student achievement
- a clear and effective quality policy backed by well-developed procedures
- constant encouragement to all staff to improve their knowledge and qualifications
- exciting developments in open and flexible learning
- welcoming and well-maintained buildings
- modern and plentiful information technology and workshop facilities.

90 To make further progress the college should:

- market its services to industry more effectively
- consider how the implementation of college policies and the monitoring of progress towards them is best achieved
- further develop accreditation of prior learning
- report systematically to parents of students under 19
- strengthen links between strategic planning and the planning of staff development
- continue to improve accommodation in outreach centres.

FIGURES

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- 1 Percentage student numbers by age (as at November 1995)

 - 2 Percentage student numbers by level of study (as at November 1995)

 - 3 Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at November 1995)

 - 4 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1994-95)

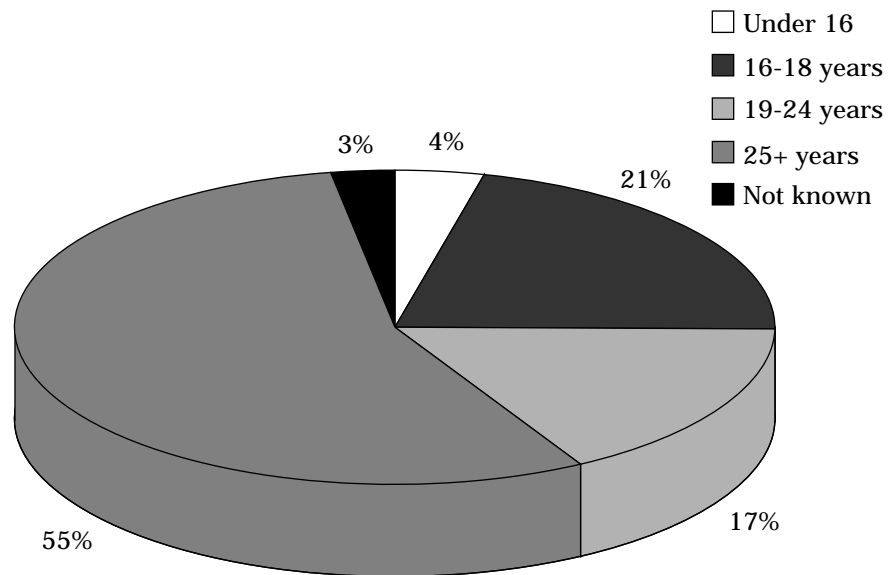
 - 5 Income (for 12 months to July 1995)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 12 months to July 1995)

Note: the information contained in the figures was provided by the college to the inspection team.

Figure 1

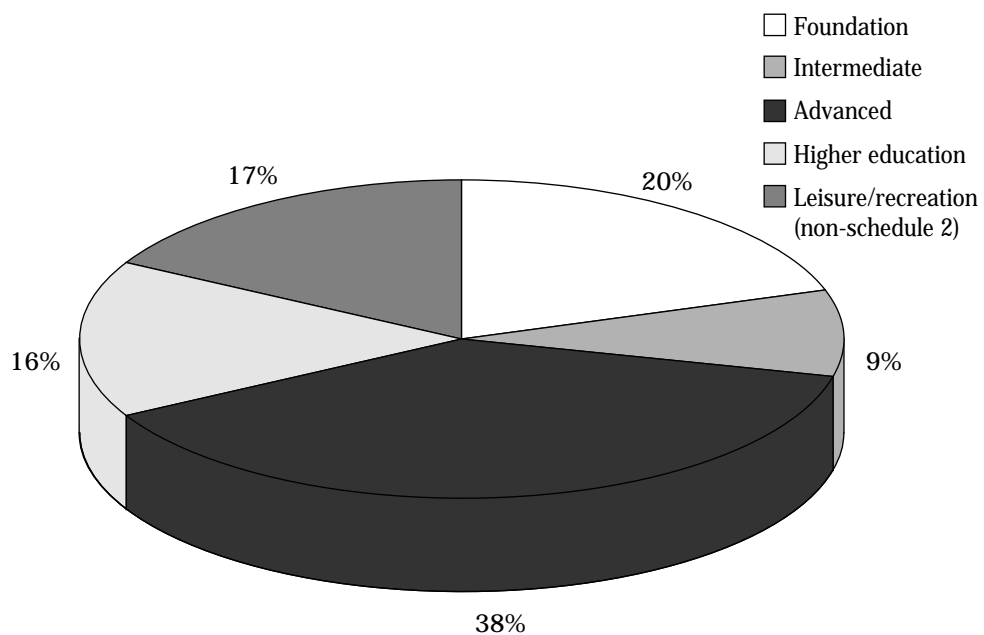
Blackburn College: student numbers by age (as at November 1995)



Student numbers: 18,433

Figure 2

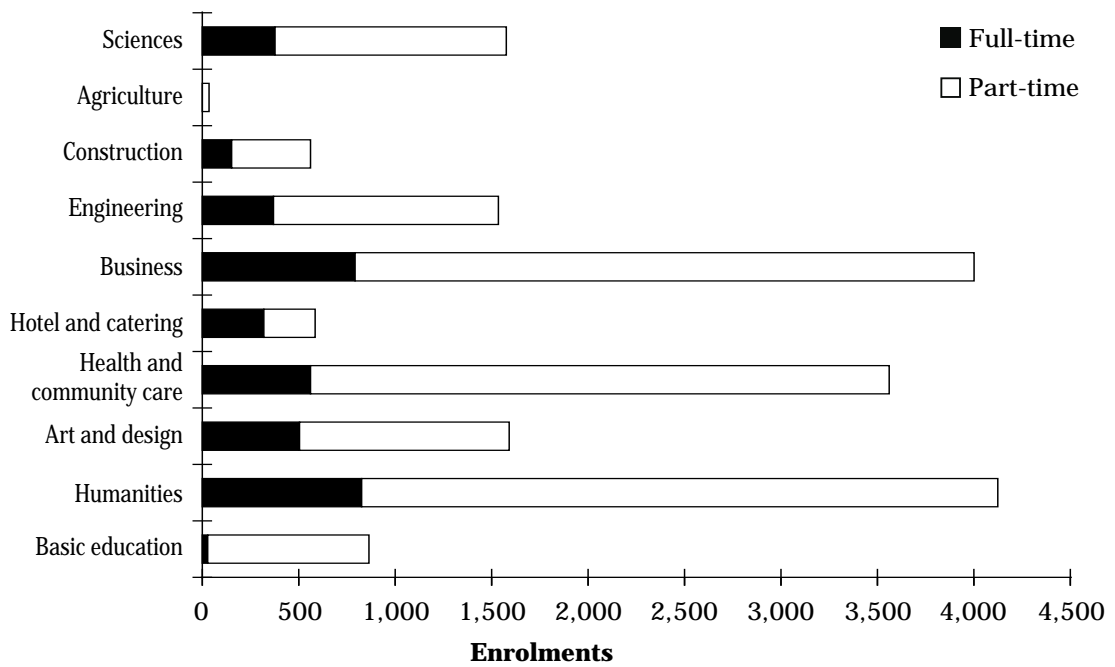
Blackburn College: student numbers by level of study (as at November 1995)



Student numbers: 18,433

Figure 3

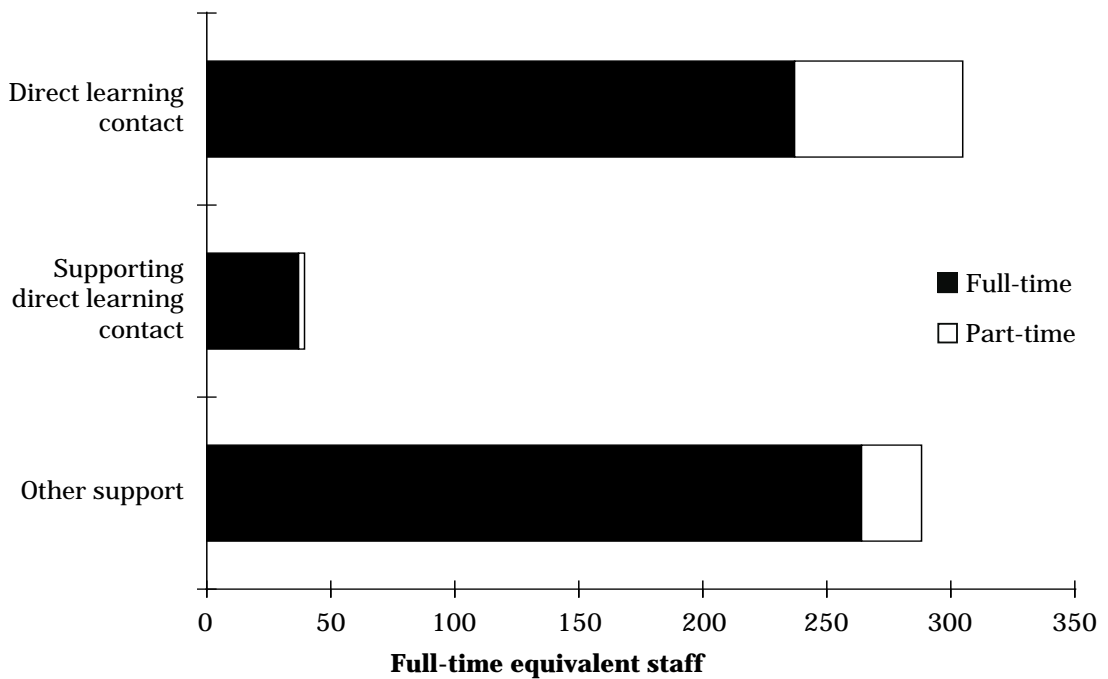
Blackburn College: student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at November 1995)



Student numbers: 18,433

Figure 4

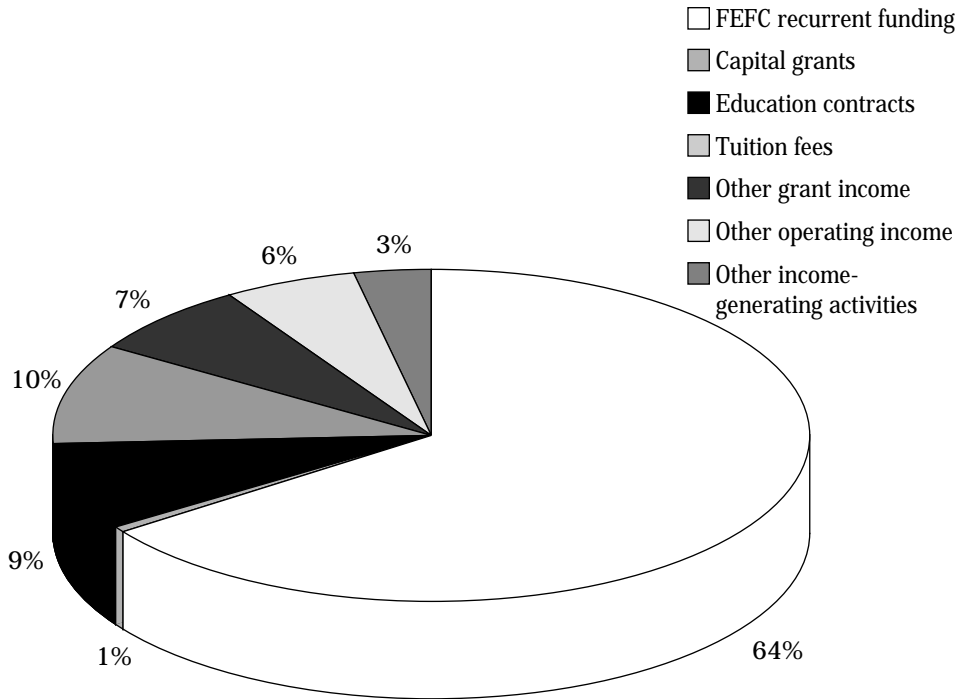
Blackburn College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1994-95)



Full-time equivalent staff: 632

Figure 5

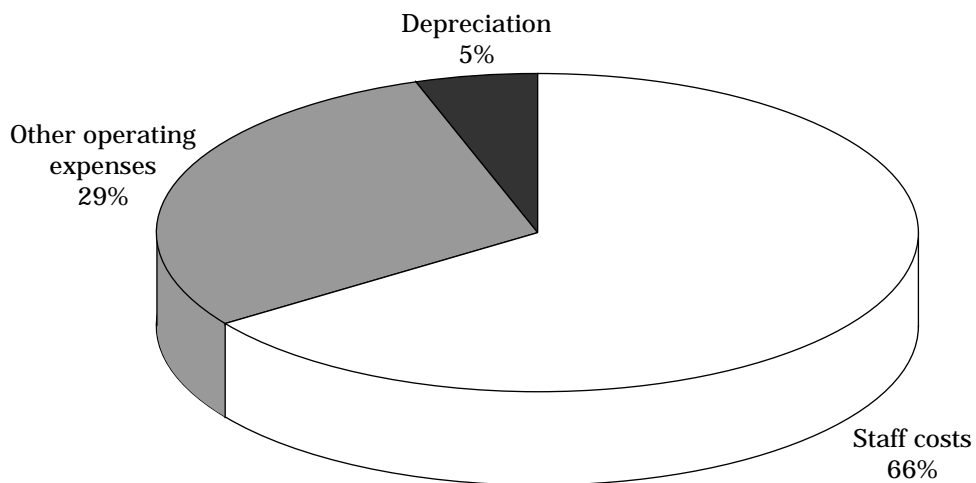
Blackburn College: income (for 12 months to July 1995)



Income: £20,445,000

Figure 6

Blackburn College: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1995)



Expenditure: £20,319,000

Note: this chart excludes £56,000 interest payable.

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