

# The Blackpool Sixth Form College

**REPORT FROM  
THE INSPECTORATE  
1997-98**

THE  
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COUNCIL

***THE FURTHER EDUCATION  
FUNDING COUNCIL***

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### College statistics

## 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.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision, curriculum areas and lesson observations, for colleges inspected during 1996-97, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum areas	9	59	30	2	–
Cross-college provision	18	51	27	4	–
Lesson observations	19	42	31	7	1

Source: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1996-97: Chief inspector's annual report.* Grades were awarded using the guidelines in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*.  
Sample size: 122 college inspections

## Retention and Pass Rates

Where data on students' achievements appear in tables, levels of achievement are shown in two ways:

- as a retention rate, which is the proportion of students who completed a course in relation to the number enrolled on 1 November in the first year of the course
- as a pass rate, which is the proportion of students which passed examinations in relation to the number entered. Pass rates for GCE A level are quoted for grades A to E unless otherwise specified. Pass rates for GCSE courses are quoted for grade C or above unless otherwise specified. Pass rates for vocational and professional awards are for successful completion of the full award.

# Summary

## The Blackpool Sixth Form College

### *North West Region*

#### **Inspected March 1998**

Teams of staff of The Blackpool Sixth Form College worked to produce the college's self-assessment report. The college grouped together subjects, and appointed a leader of each group. Inspectors found the report identified many of the college's strengths and some weaknesses of curriculum areas. It was less successful in evaluating the weaknesses of the college's cross-college provision in a number of areas.

The Blackpool Sixth Form College has 1,131 full-time students, aged 16 to 18 years and 111 part-time adult students. The college offers courses in eight of the FEFC's 10 programme areas. The inspection focused on GCE A level and GCSE provision. Standards of teaching are mostly good, though the range of learning experiences offered to students is narrow. In most GCE A level subjects, the levels of students' achievements are above the national average for sixth form colleges. Progression to higher education is good. The college acknowledges that retention rates on some courses give cause for concern. Teachers provide good additional subject support for students' learning through 'clinics'. There are few opportunities to disseminate good practice between

departments. Specialist teaching resources are good. The college has effective arrangements for reporting on students' progress and attendance to parents and guardians. There are extensive sporting and recreational programmes. The well-maintained accommodation provides a pleasant learning environment. The course review system has led to clear evidence of improvements in curriculum areas. Staff work hard to deliver the college's mission and strategic plan. Management information is well developed and used to good effect. To improve its provision the college should: address low retention rates on some courses; develop further its arrangements for personal support and learning support; improve the implementation of the personal tutor guidance policy; develop further its quality assurance arrangements; improve staff review, training and development; provide training for governors and encourage them to monitor the implementation of key policies; rectify identified shortcomings in departmental organisation and practice; review the delegation of management tasks; and improve and monitor its recording of management decisions and the implementation of its policies and procedures.

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

<b>Curriculum area</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Cross-college provision</b>	<b>Grade</b>
Science	2	Support for students	3
Creative arts	2	General resources	1
Modern humanities	2	Quality assurance	3
Modern languages	2	Governance	4
		Management	3

# Context

## The College and its Mission

1 The Blackpool Sixth Form College is situated on the eastern edge of Blackpool, just within the boundary of the new unitary authority. Students come to this college from a 20-mile radius within the geographical area known as 'the Fylde'. This area contains both urban areas and isolated rural communities.

2 Tourism and the service industries provide most employment. The general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) results of school-leavers in the area are below the national average. In 1996, 36.3 per cent of the Blackpool and the Fylde year 11 pupils gained five or more GCSE passes at grades C or above compared with 44.5 per cent nationally.

3 Other providers of post-16 education in the area are a large further education college, five secondary schools and six independent schools. The college remains heavily subscribed and promotes itself as 'the only specialist GCE A level college in the Fylde'. In its evening class provision the college emphasises its academic ethos and has been successful in attracting a substantial number of students.

4 Student numbers at the college have grown from 644 in September 1988 to 1,131 students aged 16 to 18 and 111 adult students in November 1997. Almost all students are studying general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) subjects but some 50 students are following GCSE courses. About 20 students are following a business technology course, usually with one or two GCE A level subjects. The advanced continuing education courses in the evenings for adults were started in 1993, with courses being severely cut back in 1997.

5 The college's senior management team comprises the principal and deputy principal. Other management roles are undertaken by the curriculum director, two student directors, the advanced continuing education manager and

nine other managers, each of whom is directly responsible to either the principal or deputy principal. There are 28 subject-based departments, each with a head.

6 The college's mission is 'the provision of a high quality but specialist education service'. Emphasis is laid on the quality of the college environment and on creating a relaxed, but purposeful atmosphere. Academic expectations for GCE A level students are high. Students are encouraged to take responsibility as 'young adults who have chosen to continue their education in a college student community providing a half-way house to higher education or good career training'. The college's mission statement also emphasises the extra-curricular opportunities it offers students. The college sets out to provide a high-quality service for parents and students which respects their individuality, and to maintain a sensitive concern for the interests of the staff as well as the students.

# Context

## The Inspection

7 The college was inspected during the week beginning 30 March 1998. The inspection team had previously evaluated the college's self-assessment report and information about the college held by other divisions of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). Data on students' achievements for the three student cohorts between 1993 and 1997 were validated by inspectors against primary sources such as class registers and pass lists issued by examination bodies. The inspection was carried out by 12 inspectors working for a total of 32 days and an auditor working for five days. Inspection team members observed 54 lessons and examined students' work and a range of college documents. They held meetings with governors, managers, college staff and students

and consulted the local training and enterprise council (TEC).

8 Of the lessons inspected, 72 per cent were judged to be good or outstanding and 6 per cent were less than satisfactory. This profile compares well with a national rate of 61 and 8 per cent, respectively, for colleges inspected in 1996-97, according to *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1996-97: Chief inspector's annual report*. The average level of attendance in the lessons inspected was 83 per cent compared with 77 per cent for the sector in 1996-97. The highest attendances observed were in modern foreign languages (88 per cent) and the lowest in creative arts (77 per cent). The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected.

### Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level	7	28	10	2	0	47
GCSE	1	3	2	1	0	7
Total	8	31	12	3	0	54

# Curriculum Areas

## Science

### Grade 2

**9 The inspection covered GCE A level biology, chemistry and physics and GCSE chemistry, human physiology and health, and science. Inspectors observed 14 lessons. The college's provision in environmental science and geology was not inspected. The self-assessment report used well the information from individual subject reviews and inspectors broadly agreed with the college's own self-assessment of the provision. Some weaknesses acknowledged in the self-assessment report had been rectified by the time of the inspection.**

#### Key strengths

- mostly well-planned courses
- helpful additional support for students' learning
- some good GCE A level science results
- very good progression to science-related courses in higher education
- effective course organisation and management
- well-resourced and serviced laboratories

#### Weaknesses

- insufficient opportunities for students to experience different methods of learning
- below average results in GCSE science and GCE A level physics
- lack of use of library and information technology (IT) resources by students
- failure of some lesson planning to identify effectively students' needs

10 Well-conducted practical work is integrated with theory in all science subjects. Schemes of work are clearly documented. Teaching is supported by well-presented workbooks or study

guides. In physics, the induction programme gives students a sound basis in skills such as graph plotting. Homework of an appropriate standard is set regularly and marked carefully. A programme of tests gives good preparation for module examinations. The detailed reports on performance in physics tests are especially helpful to students. Students' learning is enhanced through lunchtime 'clinics' in each subject. Some teachers make good use of a range of resources, such as an interactive CD-ROM which was used effectively to illustrate the physiology of the heart. In other cases, teaching relies on copied or dictated notes, and does not always take account of the skills which need to be developed, nor the needs of students of varying abilities. In some GCSE lessons teacher expectations are low. The self-assessment report did not identify these weaknesses.

11 Retention on the first year of GCE A level programmes is good. Over two years retention rates are more variable. GCE A level pass rates in chemistry are better than the national average for sixth form colleges, and students often achieve chemistry results that are better than those predicted on the basis of their entry qualifications. In chemistry and physics, students have achieved notable successes in national competitions. Pass rates in GCSE science double award at grades C or above in 1997 are well above the national average. However, in other GCSE science subjects, in GCE A level physics and biology subjects in some years, pass rates have been below national averages for sixth form colleges. The self-assessment report acknowledges that pass rates in some science subjects are unsatisfactory. Destination data produced by the college indicate that almost all GCE A level science students progress to courses in higher education. In most cases, these are in science-related areas.

12 Science courses are effectively managed. The process of annual course review is well established and annual targets are set and



# Curriculum Areas

monitored. Teachers are well informed on students' destinations and their progression to higher education. Departments are able to modify their teaching in the light of students' responses to regular surveys. Science teachers have considered both linear and modular syllabuses from several examination boards. There is little formal discussion across the three science departments about the overall management of science provision. Laboratories are well resourced and effectively serviced. Students are provided with appropriate modern text books and are able to use sophisticated equipment such as video microscopes, which allow a photograph of the specimen to be taken. In biology lessons, students make good use of a wide range of CD-ROMs, and teaching in chemistry uses computer software to improve spectroscopic methods of analysis. In general though, insufficient use is made of IT in experimental work. Worksheets and a wide range of materials useful for revision are available on the college network. The college library includes a range of appropriate science periodicals and software, and has a variety of textbooks and books of more general scientific

interest. Students do not make full use of this facility. Inspectors agreed that, as recognised in the self-assessment report, there are some shortcomings in resources for science but others have now been rectified.

## Examples of students' achievements in science, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GCE A level biology	Retention (%)	88	66	89
	Pass rate (%)	72	63	87
GCE A level social biology	Retention (%)	60	72	73
	Pass rate (%)	48	37	68
GCE A level chemistry	Retention (%)	80	68	80
	Pass rate (%)	88	92	94
GCE A level physics	Retention (%)	76	79	87
	Pass rate (%)	67	65	75
GCSE sciences	Retention (%)	75	75	75
	Pass rate (%)	29	15	43

Source: college data

# Curriculum Areas

## Creative Arts

### Grade 2

**13 The inspection covered GCE A level art, graphical communication, media studies, music, design and theatre studies, and GCSE drama. Sixteen lessons were observed by inspectors. Inspectors agreed with many of the findings of the college's self-assessment report. The self-assessment report was clear and well written but often too descriptive.**

#### Key strengths

- well-planned teaching of a generally high standard and, in some cases, outstanding
- a good standard of students' achievements in class and in most external examinations
- a wide range of complementary activities broadening students' learning and experience
- good progression to higher education and specialist colleges
- well-resourced courses

#### Weaknesses

- infrequent opportunities for students to take an active part in lessons
- poor retention on a few courses
- poor students' achievements in GCE A level design (technology) and theatre studies
- little sharing of good practice

14 Teaching is of a generally high standard and some is outstanding. Subjects such as textiles and theatre studies encourage students to explore their own ideas. In a lively art session about 1960s fashion, students examined videos and samples of 1960s clothing. This led to a stimulating discussion about the period's fashion, social attitudes, music and culture.

There are some missed opportunities for students to participate in the learning process in other subjects. Teaching is well planned, with coursework focused on the examination syllabuses. Feedback on written assignments is helpful. Enrolments on some GCE A level courses are low and this provision is vulnerable. The only courses at GCSE level are in drama and art.

15 The standard of students' achievements in class is good. Students work well in groups and enjoy their studies. There is a wide range of complementary activities to broaden students' learning and experience such as theatre productions, art exhibitions and music events in and out of college. Visits are also made to external events. Students generally achieve above the national average in external examinations; some achieve outstanding results. In GCE A level art, music, textiles, ceramics and sculpture 100 per cent pass rates are achieved consistently. Examination results in GCE A level design (technology) were poor and this course has now been discontinued. Retention varies from very good to poor. This weakness was acknowledged in the self-assessment report. Progression to higher education and specialist colleges is particularly good in this programme area, a strength recognised in the self-assessment report.

16 The courses are run by five different departments. Although there are team meetings, and staff frequently work together on college productions, the departments have not yet fully explored the benefits for students of other collaboration such as sharing good practice in teaching.

17 Courses are generally well resourced. Staff demonstrate expertise and are enthusiastic about their subjects. The accommodation, although sometimes crowded, is of a high standard; teaching spaces are modern and well designed. Appropriate specialist equipment is available to students and there is good access to

# Curriculum Areas

computers and library resources within departments. As the self-assessment report identifies, the media studies department should further develop its resources in audio and multimedia technologies.

## Examples of students' achievements in creative arts, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GCE A level music	Retention (%)	67	80	86
	Pass rate (%)	100	100	100
GCE A level theatre studies	Retention (%)	88	80	86
	Pass rate (%)	70	80	96
GCE A level art	Retention (%)	78	78	70
	Pass rate (%)	100	100	100
GCE A level media studies	Retention (%)	*	*	61
	Pass rate (%)	*	*	95
GCE A level design (technology)	Retention (%)	100	100	57
	Pass rate (%)	0	43	50
GCE A level graphic communication	Retention (%)	+	100	70
	Pass rate (%)	+	100	88

*Source: college data*

*\*course not running*

*+data not available*

# Curriculum Areas

## Modern Humanities

### Grade 2

**18 The inspection covered GCE A level and GCSE courses in economics, physical education, psychology and sociology. Inspectors observed 13 lessons and broadly agreed with the judgements in the college's self-assessment report.**

#### Key strengths

- many examples of good purposeful teaching
- good relationships with students and a high level of support
- well-managed courses
- various activities to enrich students' learning
- good results in GCE A level sociology and economics, and on GCSE courses

#### Weaknesses

- a narrow range of learning experiences for some students
- departments working in isolation
- poor retention on GCE A level courses and declining enrolments in psychology
- poor results in GCE A level psychology

19 The subjects inspected are run by four separate departments. Staff in each work closely as teams, and courses are well managed. There are rigorous course and unit plans, and the best of these emphasise good teaching and learning methods. There are careful records of students' progress and thorough monitoring of attendance. Departments work in isolation and this leads to some inconsistency in students' experience. There are few systematic opportunities for the sharing of good practice between departments, a weakness not identified in the self-assessment report.

20 Many activities enrich students' learning in humanities. Sociology students are involved in a four-year project with Lancashire Constabulary involving an investigation into the public's perception of the experience of crime and policing. Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that courses are well resourced. All departments have well-maintained specialist teaching rooms, and students have good access to computers in departmental resource areas. Students make good use of text and reference books and are provided with good-quality handouts.

21 As indicated in the self-assessment report, there is much purposeful teaching. Lessons were conducted at a good pace and maintained students' interest. In a GCSE sociology lesson, the teacher skilfully drew on students' own ideas and experience to develop their understanding of the concept of absolute and relative poverty. In a GCE A level physical education lesson, students' understanding of the topic of drug abuse was impressive and they engaged in a lively debate. Seating arrangements in some teaching rooms were inflexible and, in a number of lessons, there was little opportunity for students to play a sustained part in class activities.

22 Relationships between staff and students are good, and staff provide a high level of individual support. Students' coursework preparation is particularly well supported through individual meetings with staff and a good range of materials. There are appropriate opportunities for assessment which link closely to syllabus requirements. Work is carefully marked and teachers' comments are constructive, identifying strengths and areas needing improvement.

23 The self-assessment report recognises that examination performance varies between subjects. In GCE A level sociology, pass rates and the proportion of students achieving A to C grades have been significantly above the national average for the last three years. Pass

# Curriculum Areas

rates in economics have risen steadily from 84 to 100 per cent. In physical education, pass rates fell in 1997 but were good in the preceding two years. GCE A level performance in psychology is less than satisfactory; pass rates and the proportion achieving A to C grades have been well below the national averages for the last three years. In 1997, in all GCSE humanities subjects pass rates at grade C or above were above national averages. Retention on some GCE A level humanities courses is poor.

## Examples of students' achievements in modern humanities, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GCE A level psychology	Retention (%)	61	67	66
	Pass rate (%)	73	72	71
GCE A level sociology	Retention (%)	64	63	62
	Pass rate (%)	91	96	86
GCE A level economics	Retention (%)	95	85	65
	Pass rate (%)	84	91	100
GCE A level physical education	Retention (%)	79	92	79
	Pass rate (%)	96	88	80
GCSE one-year humanities	Retention (%)	74	80	78
	Pass rate (%)	49	54	72

*Source: college data*

# Curriculum Areas

## Modern Languages

### Grade 2

**24 The inspection included observation of 11 lessons in four languages: French, German and Spanish at GCE A level, and Spanish and Russian at GCSE level. The self-assessment report refers to most of the issues identified during the inspection. Strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning and students' achievements are clearly stated.**

#### Key strengths

- the good standard of most teaching
- sustained use of the language being learned in all teaching
- high pass rates in German and Spanish
- the high number of students progressing to modern language courses in higher education
- good management and teamwork at course level
- excellent facilities in the language resource centre

#### Weaknesses

- a few poorly-structured lessons
- poor pass rates in GCE A level French
- the weak oral skills of a few students

25 In 1997, the modern languages department was reorganised. This has resulted in clear lines of communication and in teamworking. Teachers meet regularly and agendas focus on teaching and learning. Teachers have recently started to observe each other's lessons and this is helping them to share good practice. Management at course level is good. Students' views are sought on departmental issues but students do not always feel that they are provided with sufficient feedback.

26 Most teaching is good and combines purposefulness with good humour. Lessons are

well prepared and mainly well structured. Most are conducted at a brisk pace and are sufficiently varied to sustain students' interest. Teachers successfully use different teaching methods to promote learning, a strength acknowledged in the self-assessment report. Textbooks are often supplemented by well-designed handouts, though some overhead projector slides contain too much information and are not easily legible. Grammar is taught in a lively and interesting manner and students are made well aware at an early stage of the need for accuracy in speech and writing. In one lesson, a carefully-constructed exercise allowed students in the first year of a GCE A level course to show their thorough knowledge of complex grammatical structures and their ability to manipulate them confidently. In a small number of lessons teachers failed to provide work which was sufficiently varied and did not maintain the pace and direction of the work effectively. In the occasional lesson, they did not provide work which was sufficiently challenging for the most able pupils. Teachers provide frequent opportunities for students to take part in oral work and conduct most lessons in the language being learned. As indicated in the self-assessment report, students are encouraged to improve their development of oral skills outside of lessons by viewing satellite television programmes and listening to audio tapes. A programme of well-planned and popular extra-curricular activities, including visits to the theatre and foreign exchanges, helps many students to improve their language skills.

27 Students' written work is of a high standard. A few students' oral skills are poor. In French and German regular clinics are held for students who need help with particular problems or individual contact with their teacher. Students value these clinics and also the generous amount of informal help they receive from their teachers. The majority of students approach their lessons with enjoyment. German and Spanish results at GCE A level are good and GCSE results in Russian and Spanish,

# Curriculum Areas

though taught to very small groups, have been consistently good. The college self-assessment report recognises the weakness of GCE A level French results, which have been well below national averages for the last three years. Many students go on to higher education to take courses in modern languages.

28 Teachers are appropriately qualified and effectively deployed. Accommodation is of a high standard. All modern language classrooms have satellite television and audio cassette stations. The recently-developed language resource centre has computers, satellite television and audio booths, as well as stocks of magazines and newspapers. There is a high-quality listening facility for use in examinations.

## Examples of students' achievements in modern languages, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GCSE languages	Retention (%)	89	74	93
	Pass rate (%)	83	66	83
GCE A level French	Retention (%)	76	81	91
	Pass rate (%)	68	67	67
GCE A level German	Retention (%)	79	79	82
	Pass rate (%)	90	91	94
GCE A level Spanish	Retention (%)	75	100	67
	Pass rate (%)	67	100	100

Source: college data

# Cross-college Provision

## Support for Students

### Grade 3

**29 Inspectors concluded that the college's self-assessment report on support for students accurately highlighted areas of progress since the last inspection and identified key areas for further development. However, the report overstated some strengths and gave insufficient weight to some weaknesses.**

#### Key strengths

- wide-ranging and successful links with schools
- effective arrangements for reporting on students' attendance and progress to parents and guardians
- the level of academic support provided by subject departments
- an extensive sporting and recreational programme
- well-organised systems to prepare students' applications to higher education courses

#### Weaknesses

- weak links between the different aspects of support for students
- shortcomings in the implementation of the personal tutor guidance policy
- inadequate arrangements for supporting students who need help with literacy and numeracy
- no direct access to a specialist counselling service

30 Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that pre-enrolment activities are effective in providing prospective students with impartial advice and guidance. Liaison programmes are well established with 14 high schools. Prospectuses, course leaflets and publicity materials are of high quality. Open

days and a pre-sixth form conference enable prospective students to find out about courses and college activities. Students who apply to the college have a first interview either in school or in the college. Insufficient records are kept of these meetings, a weakness not included in the self-assessment report. All students are interviewed at enrolment, and student directors check students' enrolment forms to ensure that their choice of subjects takes account of their skills and career aspirations.

31 Key features of the college's arrangements to support and develop its students are: weekly assemblies; a personal tutorial system; programmes of general studies; sporting and recreational activities; careers guidance; and provision for students who need additional help to cope with their academic subjects. The principal, deputy principal, student directors, the curriculum director and other staff are responsible for these activities, which are reviewed annually. There are no documented strategic and operational plans which record and bring together the aims and objectives of the separate elements of support for students and the actions necessary to achieve them. There are few formal links between the different components to ensure that students experience a coherent programme of guidance and support. These weaknesses were not identified in the self-assessment report.

32 Two student directors oversee the personal tutorial system and work with groups of personal tutors. Each student is assigned to a personal tutor who is also one of their teachers. Students confirmed that they have regular contact with their personal tutors, a strength highlighted in the self-assessment report. Personal tutors are allocated time to monitor and review students' progress. A calendar suggests topics to be covered in tutorial time but individual personal tutors can choose to follow their own timetable, providing key tasks are accomplished. There is not enough monitoring of the frequency and quality of personal tutorial



# Cross-college Provision

work, and insufficient recording of the action points for learning agreed with students. Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that the personal tutor guidance policy is implemented unevenly. Students do not have direct access to a specialist counselling service.

33 Keeping parents and guardians informed of students' progress is a high priority for the college and this is correctly identified as a strength in the self-assessment report. An electronic system enables the college to monitor students' attendance carefully, and parents are contacted on the third day of unexplained absence. A system of student referrals ensures that subject tutors, personal tutors and student directors are kept informed of students' progress. Parents and guardians are also informed. Changes to students' programmes of study are made only after careful consideration by student directors and discussion with parents or guardians. Consultation evenings are held twice each year for GCE A level students and once a year for students enrolled on the GCSE qualifying course. An annual report is provided to parents or guardians.

34 Academic support for students who need additional help to cope with their GCE A level and GCSE subjects is readily accessible. The college monitors carefully those students who may need special consideration when taking examinations and provides special classes for students with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia. As well as support from individual teachers who give up their own time to help students, 64 timetabled clinics are offered by most subject areas on different days of the week. Students speak highly of the benefits, but the numbers attending are low. Opportunities for students to develop key skills are provided in different ways. As part of the general studies programme, first-year students take courses in oral communication and IT. At the beginning of the autumn term, they take carefully-designed literacy and numeracy tests to identify areas where they might need additional help.

Arrangements to rectify weaknesses are underdeveloped. There are no formal systems to monitor the use of learning support materials nor their effectiveness in improving students' skills. Attendance at literacy clinics is poor.

35 Arrangements to guide and advise students who intend to apply to higher education are thorough and effective. Personal tutors and other staff work closely with individual students to finalise course choices and to ensure that applications and accompanying references are well presented and of high quality. Specialist careers officers from the local careers service are available to interview students on request but there is no formal programme of careers education to which all students are entitled.

36 As the self-assessment report indicates, students have access to sporting and recreational activities which provide opportunities for personal development. Over 700 students are involved in the programme. Competitive sport is a particular strength of the college. Thirty-three teams have regular fixtures and some gain bronze, silver or gold awards in the British colleges' sport competitions.

# Cross-college Provision

## General Resources

### Grade 1

**37 The college has excellent facilities for staff and students. Inspectors agreed fully with the strengths and weaknesses identified in the general resources section of the self-assessment report.**

#### Key strengths

- appealing and well-maintained accommodation set in landscaped grounds
- a pleasant working environment for students and staff
- attractive communal areas and recreational facilities for students
- a wide range of appropriate learning resources
- good access to up-to-date IT facilities

#### Weaknesses

- some areas inaccessible to people with restricted mobility

38 Since the last inspection, the college has improved the quality of its buildings and the grounds surrounding them. Changes include: a new foyer and reception area; a new, single-storey teaching block housing seven classrooms and two study areas; substantial repairs and improvements to the sports hall; refurbishment of a small detached building to create a fitness room and a classroom; two completely enclosed, landscaped quadrangles; extensive car parking facilities and an effective security system. Ramps are provided at some entrances to most buildings but the college acknowledges in its self-assessment report that access to some parts of the college would be difficult for people with restricted mobility. There are no lifts to rooms on the second floor where some specialist facilities such as the chemistry and physics

laboratories are located. A toilet for people with disabilities is located close to the concert hall and is accessible to wheelchair users.

39 Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that staff and students are provided with attractive, modern surroundings which are conducive to learning. Staff accommodation, classrooms, study areas and corridors are decorated and furnished to a consistently high standard. Each department has its own group of teaching rooms which helps to create a sense of subject identity. Photographs of students' activities such as college dramatic productions and other items of interest enliven the appearance of the college. Classrooms are well used by full-time students at certain times of the week but space is underused at other times, a weakness identified in the self-assessment report. Some specialist facilities are available to the wider community. External organisations use the concert hall for musical events and the sports hall is used by adults for leisure activities each evening.

40 Students respect the college environment. During the inspection there was no evidence of vandalism or graffiti. The open-plan design of the refectory and common room creates an excellent social area which is used heavily by students, particularly at break and at lunchtime. Students can sit outside in the courtyards which are attractively laid out with garden seats, flowers and shrubs. This helps to reduce congestion in the common room. Students have access to sporting activities in the sports hall at lunchtimes each day. Other timetabled recreational activities take place at venues away from the college site.

41 The self-assessment report judges that learning resources available to students in the library and in departments are of high quality and inspectors agreed with this. A wide range of resources including videotape recordings, audio cassettes and CD-ROMs, periodicals and over 15,000 books are housed in the library.

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Departments also have considerable collections of specialist books, slides and other learning materials but the library holds no central record of all the college's resources, a weakness not identified in the self-assessment report.

Analysis of library statistics and responses to students' questionnaires for the last three years show overall high levels of usage and satisfaction with the service the library offers.

42 Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that students have access to up-to-date IT facilities in classrooms and in specified areas of the college. About 115 computers are networked and available to students. Some of these computers are located in the library and study areas but others are less accessible, being located in classrooms which are used for teaching at certain times of the week. Access to the internet is available from networked computers for up to 25 simultaneous users.

## Quality Assurance

### *Grade 3*

**43 Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the college's self-assessment of quality assurance. The action plan addresses weaknesses in a thoughtful and realistic way.**

#### **Key strengths**

- many frank and accurate self-assessment judgements
- a strong, well-documented course review system, understood and supported by staff
- good use of information in curriculum reviewing
- clear evidence of improvements in curriculum areas
- demonstrable links between the quality assurance system and college planning

#### **Weaknesses**

- underdeveloped review practices in support services and cross-college areas
- insufficient auditing of review findings
- little use of formal lesson observation for self-assessment
- failure to use the staff review system to contribute to the achievement of strategic objectives and the monitoring of performance

44 The college has a quality assurance policy which is understood by staff and translated into practice with varying degrees of success but recognises that 'the development of a comprehensive, consistent and coherent system of quality assurance is only partially completed'. Inspectors generally agreed with the judgements in the self-assessment report. The main feature of the policy is a course review system which, as claimed in the self-assessment report, is 'thorough, valued by those taking part and results in action plans'. The course review documentation is clear and course teams make good use of a wide range of centrally-generated information when reviewing their work. They set targets informed by national and internal benchmarks and monitor their performance against them. Value-added information is used in making judgements on course performance and sometimes in predicting students' achievements. Written reports and action plans do not yet evaluate in depth, nor concentrate sufficiently on teaching and learning. There is nevertheless clear evidence of some improvements resulting from the course review system. Many of the reviews of support services and cross-college areas are descriptive and lack genuine evaluation. Inspectors found that students are not aware of their charter entitlements nor of the complaints procedure. The charter has not been revised since September 1995 and the college does not monitor its charter commitments in any systematic way. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment report.

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45 The college has been slow to introduce a staff review and development scheme. By the end of the 1997-98 academic year, half the college's teaching staff will have been reviewed. The scheme does not extend to support staff. The outcomes of the scheme emphasise personal development needs rather than college objectives. Except for new teachers, monitoring of the performance of individual teachers does not take place in any formal way. Lesson observations are not part of the quality assurance process and have not contributed uniformly to the self-assessment of programme areas. Not all teachers have been observed; records of the observations are sketchy and there has been no systematic monitoring of the outcomes. The budget for staff training and development has been disbursed to departments. Senior staff have identified college priorities for training, broadly tied into the strategic objectives, but there is now less overall planning of training activities within the college.

46 There are clear links between self-assessment procedures, quality assurance arrangements and college planning. Outcomes of the course and managerial reviews have been drawn together and used to inform the college's strategic plan. College staff drew on their course reviews and other documents to produce a synthesis of strengths, weaknesses and supporting evidence. The self-assessment report on management was written by the principal and deputy principal, and corporation members were responsible for the report on governance. The full report was considered by the self-assessment review panel which included senior managers, the curriculum director and a governor. Grades for the provision were ratified by this committee. However, arrangements for scrutinising evidence and verifying the judgements in the self-assessment process are underdeveloped, a weakness recognised by the college in its self-assessment report.

## Governance

### *Grade 4*

**47 The college's self-assessment report considerably overstates the strengths of governance. Very few weaknesses are acknowledged, and a substantial number of deficiencies are not identified.**

#### Key strengths

- close monitoring of examination pass rates
- good communication between staff and governors

#### Weaknesses

- failure of the governing body to play a full role in strategic planning
- ineffective clerking arrangements
- weaknesses in the operation of governing body's committees
- no arrangements for the formal appraisal of senior postholders
- failure to monitor the implementation of key policies
- inadequate arrangements for governors' training

48 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is weak. The governing body does not substantially conduct its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It does not substantially fulfil its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC.

49 The governing body, contrary to the instrument of government, has a variable rather than a fixed membership. In March 1998, there were 18 governors, comprising one TEC nominee, two parent governors, one staff member, three co-opted and 10 independent governors, as well as the principal. The

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expertise of the governors includes education, business, farming, and the public services. The parent governors and two of the independent governors were new appointments. The parent and staff governors, the TEC nominee and one of the independent governors are women. Although the governing body has performed a skills audit in order to identify potential gaps in its expertise, this has not been documented and vacancies have not been used to fill the gaps. As the self-assessment acknowledges, attendance at meetings is not formally reviewed at regular and agreed intervals. One governor has not attended any of the last four meetings. Governors receive little formal training to help them to understand their role. Induction arrangements for new governors are not well developed. Members of staff have made informative presentations on aspects of the college's work at governing body meetings, which have been well received.

50 The governing body does not conduct its business openly. Although the corporation notes as a strength in its self-assessment report the fact that it has a register of governors' interests and a code of conduct for governors, not all of the governors have yet completed the register and the code of conduct does not comply with best practice. Neither an annual report is prepared nor is an annual public meeting held. Corporation papers are not readily available for public perusal. The governing body does not have a code of practice on 'whistleblowing'.

51 Governors do not play a full role in the preparation of the strategic plan. In 1997, the draft strategic plan was posted to the governors, who reviewed it and sent their observations back to the college for consideration. The chairman of the governing body then signed the plan on the governing body's behalf. However, it was not debated and adopted by the governors at a formal governing body meeting. This is partly attributable to the governing body's summer term meeting in 1997 taking place in May, when the above document was not available for consideration.

52 The clerking of the governing body and its committees is poor, and good practice relating to governance and clerking issues is not followed. For example, no steps have been taken to determine the eligibility of governors, the corporation has no standing orders other than those in the instrument and articles of government, governing body agendas are not informative, and important decisions are not always recorded in the governing body's minutes. All of these issues were brought to the college's attention in a previous report issued by the FEFC audit service. A new clerk to the governing body was appointed in March 1998. For all but one of the governing body's previous meetings, however, the clerking was performed by a minuting secretary. The new clerk is a teacher in the college with no previous clerking experience and has yet to receive any formal training. A comprehensive job description has been drawn up for the clerk but it does not indicate how much time is allotted for clerking duties and it has not yet been approved by the governing body.

53 The governing body has four committees: administration and finance; audit; personnel; and remuneration. The committees have appropriate terms of reference. The administration and finance committee has, in accordance with its terms of reference, monitored the college's finances throughout the year. However, with the exception of the administration and finance committee, there are significant weaknesses in the way in which the committees operate.

54 Many of the college's governors have a long-standing relationship with the college. As acknowledged in the self-assessment report, they attend the college frequently on both formal and informal occasions and are well known to staff. They take a keen interest in the achievements of students. In particular, they discuss examination results in detail and support the principal in dealing with poor performance. Their attention to other aspects of the college's operation is less thorough. For

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example, the governing body has not adopted formally, reviewed nor monitored the equal opportunity policy which dates from before incorporation, and there are no formal arrangements for the appraisal of senior postholders.

## Management

### Grade 3

**55 Inspectors agreed with a number of strengths identified in the college's self-assessment report but also found weaknesses which were not identified in the report.**

#### Key strengths

- hard work of staff to deliver the college's mission
- involvement of staff at all levels in strategic planning
- good, readily accessible management information system
- effective marketing and communications
- good reputation in, and productive relations with, the local community

#### Weaknesses

- little delegation of management responsibilities
- failure to record some management processes and monitoring procedures
- too little emphasis placed on retention and achievement data in curriculum reviews
- some ineffective departmental organisation and practice

56 The prime objective of the college's mission is to provide two-year GCE A level courses for full-time students aged 16 to 19 years. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that its staff are strongly committed

to this mission. The curriculum is reviewed annually. Too little emphasis is placed on retention and achievement data when reaching decisions about the curriculum offer. The introduction of general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) courses has been considered but not agreed.

57 Staff recognise the principal's wish to be accessible and to take the lead in decision-making across a wide range of strategic, tactical and operational issues. There is little delegation and the small number of senior staff have many responsibilities. The workloads of other staff are carefully monitored and perceived by them as fair. The recording of management decision-making and action-planning is neither consistent nor sufficiently thorough. There are no detailed job descriptions and this has been the cause of some staff disquiet since incorporation. The implementation and monitoring of the college's equal opportunities statement is not recorded, a weakness recognised by the college in its self-assessment report.

58 College communications are generally effective. The staff handbook, the newsletter and meetings assist in this process. Inspectors confirmed the self-assessment report judgement that cross-college managers and heads of department contribute to the creation of the strategic plan and the associated annual operating statement. Inspectors also agreed that the college is committed to setting targets and monitoring progress towards their achievement. A range of performance indicators including recruitment, attendance, retention and added-value calculations are used. There are a large number of subject departments, a few of which are small. Some ineffective departmental organisation and working practices are under review by the senior management. The last inspection identified concerns about teaching and learning which the curriculum delivery panel was commissioned by the principal to address. College managers recognise that the

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work of the panel has had minimal effect. There is little sharing of good practice between departments, although collaborative planning by some departments helps to achieve balanced and realistic workloads for students.

59 Inspectors agreed with the college's view that the quality of management information systems is good. Returns to the FEFC are prompt and accurate. Teachers can access information easily through the staff computing network. The college is currently financially sound. However, the college has a high average level of funding; in 1997-98 it was £20.15 per unit compared with the median for sixth form colleges of £17.50 per unit. Convergence and the capping of units of activity has required the college to effect urgent reductions in recurrent expenditure and to seek opportunities to generate additional income. Staff teaching loads were increased by 5 per cent for 1997-98. Staff costs remain high at 77 per cent of recurrent expenditure.

60 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is adequate. The finance team is appropriately qualified and experienced. Management has monitored the college's overall financial position by formally reviewing the college's monthly financial reports. These have been prepared promptly and are of a good standard. The college is dependent upon the FEFC for 98 per cent of its income. The strategic plan does not contain specific financial targets. The 1996-97 external audit management letter does not raise any significant internal control issues. The work of the internal auditors was not always consistent with the required standards. The college has recently produced financial regulations but they are in need of further development.

61 Inspectors confirmed that the college enjoys a good reputation with parents and is a popular student choice. Unit targets are easily achieved. Marketing, publicity and promotion

are given high priority. The college has productive relationships with the local community and is planning to work collaboratively with the education department of the new unitary authority. Members of the local community are invited to events at the college. There are examples of commercial sponsorship and experience of work. A number of projects have been supported by the TEC, including an IT initiative to assist staff in monitoring students' progress and the provision of labour market intelligence to inform the college's needs analysis. The college collaborates with other colleges as a member of LawCOLL, a TEC/further education partnership in West Lancashire.

## Conclusions

62 Inspectors found that the self-assessment report and its supplement provided a useful basis for planning and carrying out the inspection. They judged that most of the curriculum grades and two of the cross-college grades awarded by the college were well founded. The curriculum sections of the self-assessment report accurately identified the major strengths and some weaknesses. Although they were not adequately informed by lesson observation, college data and course review findings, which include students' views, provided a reliable foundation for judgements. Inspectors found that some weaknesses in teaching and the promotion of learning were not identified by the college. They agreed with the conclusions of an appendix to the main self-assessment report that re-evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the modern languages provision, following implementation of the action plan suggested in the main self-assessment report. Action plans for individual sections show an intention to build on strengths as well as addressing weaknesses. In general, action plans do not indicate how progress is to be reported and monitored. There are no

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review dates and the people responsible for ensuring the action is carried out are not identified. Cross-college sections of the report are less accurate and reflect the less well-established review cycle for these areas. Two of these sections are insufficiently self-critical and one action plan lacks detail. Some strengths identified by the college are descriptive rather than evaluative and inspectors identified more weaknesses in provision than those detailed in the college's report. Inspectors considered that the college was overgenerous in its grading of three aspects of cross-college provision, particularly in relation to governance.

63 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 (November 1997)

Age	%
Under 16	0
16-18 years	92
19-24 years	2
25+ years	6
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

## Student numbers by level of study (November 1997)

Level of study	%
Foundation	7
Intermediate	6
Advanced	87
Higher education	0
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	0
Total	100

Source: college data

## Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (November 1997)

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	305	32	27
Agriculture	7	0	1
Engineering	12	0	1
Business	71	28	8
Hotel and catering	4	0	0
Health and community care	0	34	3
Art and design	87	0	7
Humanities	645	17	53
Total	1,131	111	100

Source: college data

## Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (July 1997)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	72	4	0	76
Supporting direct learning contact	7	1	0	8
Other support	20	4	0	24
Total	99	9	0	108

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

# College Statistics

## Three-year Trends

### Financial data

	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
Income	£3,346,000	£3,451,000	£3,361,000
Average level of funding (ALF)	£22.73	£21.43	£21.71
Payroll as a proportion of income	72%	73%	74%
Achievement of funding target	97%	103%	105%
Diversity of income	5%	5%	4%
Operating surplus	£104,000	£71,000	£67,000

*Sources: Income – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)*

*ALF – Performance Indicators 1995-96 (1994-95 and 1995-96), Funding Allocations 1996-97 (1996-97)*

*Payroll – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)*

*Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1995-96 (1994-95 and 1995-96), college (1996-97)*

*Diversity of income – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)*

*Operating surplus – Council Circulars 96/29 (1994-95), 97/35 (1995-96), college (1996-97)*

### Performance data for students aged 16 to 18

Qualifications		1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
GCE A level	Number of candidates	423	445	481
	Average point score per entry	4.6	4.7	4.9
	Position in tables	top third	top third	top third

*Source: DfEE*

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