

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Dunstable College

January 1994

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL**

The Further Education Funding Council has a statutory duty to ensure that there are satisfactory arrangements to assess the quality of provision in the further education sector. It discharges this duty in part through its inspectorate, which inspects and reports on each college in the FEFC-funded sector every four years. The inspectorate also assesses and reports on a national basis on specific curriculum areas and advises the Council's quality assessment committee.

GRADE DESCRIPTORS

The procedures for assessing quality are given in FEFC Circular 93/28. In the course of inspecting colleges, inspectors are expected to assess the strengths and weaknesses of each aspect of provision they inspect. Their assessments are set out clearly in their reports. Inspectors also summarise their judgements on the balance between strengths and weaknesses using a five-point scale. Each grade on the scale has the following descriptor:

- 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.*

*Cheylesmore House
Quinton Road
Coventry CV1 2WT
Telephone 0203 863000
Fax 0203 863100*

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 07/94

DUNSTABLE COLLEGE

EASTERN REGION

Inspected October-November 1993

Summary

Dunstable College, Bedfordshire is a major provider of post-16 vocational education in Bedfordshire. Under the guidance of open and responsive management and active governors, the college has increased its enrolments by more than 16 per cent in the last year. The college's own company, Dunstable College Enterprises Ltd, has also achieved considerable success in developing full-cost courses for industry and commerce. Students benefit from well-planned and effective teaching and full-time students are given strong guidance and support. Levels of achievement in external examinations are mixed: in 1992-93 most full-time vocational students obtained the qualifications for which they were aiming but the examination results of the relatively small cohort of GCE students were less than satisfactory. Student retention rates are high. Most areas of teaching and learning are adequately resourced but the library bookstock is insufficient and resources to support independent learning are not well co-ordinated. The college has a strong commitment to enhance the quality of provision. Quality assurance procedures are in place although they are not consistently implemented and are generally hampered by the lack of an effective management information system. Other areas of weakness are: the overlap of some managerial roles and responsibilities; the co-ordination of student support services; the college-wide delivery of core skills; accreditation for students with learning difficulties and disabilities; and the level of responsiveness to adult learners.

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

Aspects of cross-college provision	Grade
Responsiveness and range of provision	2
Governance and management	3
Recruitment, guidance and support	2
Quality assurance	3
Resources	3

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Business studies	3	Health and social studies	3
Secretarial studies	3	Child care	1
Management and professional studies	3	Courses for students with learning difficulties	3
Humanities and languages	3	Engineering and information technology	3
Science and mathematics	3	Art and design & printing	3

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INTRODUCTION

1 Dunstable College in Bedfordshire was inspected during October and November 1993. A team of 13 inspectors spent a week in the college from 22-26 November. A further 50 inspector days were used to inspect specialist aspects of college provision. Inspectors visited 160 classes, examined samples of students' work and held discussions with governors, staff and students. They also met 24 representatives of local employers and the community including a representative of the Bedfordshire Training and Enterprise Council (TEC).

2 The report is based on inspections carried out according to the framework and guidelines described in Council Circular 93/28. The framework describes a four year cycle. When this cycle becomes fully established, colleges will have the opportunity to respond to the findings of earlier inspection visits before their quadrennial inspection and the subsequent report. As this inspection occurred early in the cycle, the opportunity for such a response has not been available.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

3 Dunstable College was established in 1961. It is a general further education college occupying a single campus in the centre of Dunstable. Its buildings were constructed between 1959 and 1973. The college has established its own college company, Dunstable College Enterprises Limited, which is responsible for full-cost provision. The company operates from separate premises close to the main site. The college also makes use of some outreach centres for adult education work.

4 Dunstable College draws its students from a catchment area covering the Luton and Dunstable conurbation and the nearby rural areas of Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire. Extensive sixth form provision is available in the four 11-18 schools and the nearby Luton Sixth Form College. There is a growing level of co-operation with Luton Sixth Form College and with Barnfield College in Luton.

5 The college's total enrolments for the academic year 1992-93 were 10,552. Of these 1,314 were full-time and a further 616 were for full-time attendance on courses of between four and 30 weeks duration. Enrolments for the current academic year were still continuing at the time of the inspection. The college anticipates that it will meet its target of a growth in full-time enrolments of 8 per cent. There is a full-time equivalent staff of 134 lecturers and 116 support staff: 101 lecturers and 77 support staff have full-time posts (figure 1). The college's wide range of vocational and general education courses are managed through three departments: design and technology, community studies and business studies. Figures 2 and 3 show enrolments, and enrolments expressed as full-time equivalents, for the curriculum areas offered by the college.

6 Dunstable has a population of 34,000. The area is predominantly urban and home to some major manufacturing companies. Employment in local manufacturing industry is declining. The unemployment rate in the South Bedfordshire area is 11 per cent and there are significant numbers of long-term unemployed.

7 The college has identified three key values in its mission statement: promoting continuous improvement by the development of comprehensive quality assurance; giving priority to meeting the education and training needs of business, organisations and individuals in South Bedfordshire; and working collaboratively with schools and other colleges.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

8 The college is the main provider of vocational courses in the area. A number of these are offered in partnership with local secondary schools and some courses are franchised from the Universities of Luton and Hertfordshire. The college also offers a General Certificate of Secondary Education/General Certificate of Education (GCSE/GCE) programme and a wide range of adult and community education classes, both on site and in local community centres and schools.

9 The college is responsive to the education and training needs of the locality it serves. It has rapidly expanded the range and scale of the courses and programmes it offers by working collaboratively with local schools, local employers, the TEC, colleges, universities and other organisations. There is now extensive provision for students in the 16-19 age range and for adults, employed and unemployed.

10 The expansion in the vocational programmes has been particularly marked. General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) have been introduced as they have become available nationally. There has also been a significant recent growth in the management and professional courses on offer. There remains scope for extending the range of courses in engineering and design.

11 The college company, which includes the college training agency, has expanded rapidly over the last three years. It has developed extensive contacts with local organisations including local councils, the probation service and major local employers such as Vauxhall Motors and Texas Instruments. Its success in attracting a large number of commercial clients has enabled it to become the largest provider of TEC programmes in South Bedfordshire. The company now provides over 20 per cent of the college income.

12 A number of programmes are offered jointly with local high schools. There is a good level of co-operation between the college and the schools over the management of the programme and a number of school leavers enrol in the college as a consequence of the links.

13 The college offers a range of courses specifically for students with moderate and severe learning difficulties but the lack of suitable foundation-level courses hampers those students wishing to progress to the next stage of vocational training.

14 The scope and scale of provision for adult students are variable. There is an extensive range of training programmes for unemployed adults and a more limited range of access courses for adults returning to study.

15 The college has attracted a substantial number of students from the local Asian community. They represent a larger proportion of the college's total enrolments than is represented in the local population. Strong links have been established with youth and community workers and there is some interesting outreach provision.

16 The college has a marketing plan but its identification of local needs is not based on specific market research or regular analysis. The arrangements for promoting the college at schools' careers conventions are effective. Some promotional activity takes place at departmental level but the balance between this and the college's central activities is not fully co-ordinated.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

17 Membership of the governing body of the college represents wide industrial and commercial interests. Seven of the 15 governors have an industrial background. Governors use their experience and expertise to support the college. Meetings of the governing body are generally well attended and a number of governors take an active role in committees and working groups. Staff would welcome the opportunity to meet more frequently with governors but governors already find the support they provide time-consuming.

18 The active participation of the governors in monitoring the financial management of the institution has enabled significant weaknesses in the system for financial reporting to be identified. Steps are being taken to remedy the situation. The strategic plan, which was developed through the joint working of governors and college management, effectively identifies short and medium term objectives.

19 Staff have a positive view of the college management and the progress the college has made over the past two years. Management is accessible and responsive and there is a college policy of open communication which staff appreciate. The principal and his team have a strong commitment to quality and quality concepts underpin many of the college decisions.

20 The college's strategic plan provides a clear sense of direction for the development of the college. Staff are familiar with and understand the plan but from middle managers down they have not been sufficiently involved in development of the plan or the subsequent setting of targets

related to it. Not all departments have departmental plans in place to support the overall strategic plan.

21 Of the four assistant principals, one heads the college company; the other three each have cross-college roles as well as responsibility for one of the three departments. The current sharing of departmental management between the assistant principals and the respective directors of department has led to some confusion over responsibilities and has prevented assistant principals from giving sufficient attention to cross-college functions.

22 The channels of communication within departments are clear. Courses are well managed. Departmental managers work with staff in their departments to develop new programmes but there is no strategic view of curriculum development across the college as a whole. There are no systems to check the impact that new provision might have on the resources for existing provision and no explicit arrangements to ensure that departmental managers liaise and plan in conjunction with cross-college managers. Staff operating cross-college facilities such as the library and learning resource centre are not kept adequately informed about the changes in courses and students' learning requirements.

23 Summaries of the college's income and expenditure for 1992-93 are shown in figures 4 and 5. The college's unit of funding for 1992-93, set by the local education authority, is recorded in the FEFC report, Funding Allocations 1993-94, as £2,137 per weighted full-time equivalent student. The median for general further education colleges and tertiary colleges is £2,436. The college has recognised procedures for allocating resources internally. Unit costs of provision are not calculated.

24 The college uses a computerised management information system to record student enrolments and to provide external and internal information. The system has difficulty in meeting the current demands for information and analysis. As a result, staff are frequently asked to supply the same information several times over. The college has yet to define fully its current and future requirements for management information.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

25 There is a commitment to develop coherent support and guidance systems for students. In line with the strategic plan, the college has a detailed policy on student services which establishes clear priorities and targets. Progress is being made in meeting the targets but a comprehensive system for all students is not yet in place.

26 The college has established a central guidance point with responsibility for dealing with initial enquiries, student admissions, careers advice and adult guidance. The centre, which is well situated in a prominent college location, provides students with an efficient service in a welcoming environment.

27 The central admissions system for full-time students operates effectively. All full-time students are interviewed and receive detailed guidance on both their college and course choices. Guidance and support arrangements for part-time students are less well co-ordinated.

28 The induction procedures for full-time students are generally sound. A tutor handbook provides a comprehensive framework which can be supplemented to meet specific course requirements. In some areas, the framework is not fully implemented. Induction arrangements for part-time adult students, including those on employment training programmes, are less thorough and supportive than they are for the full-time students.

29 A tutorial system is in place for all full-time students. The use of early diagnostic assessment, records of achievement and the effective monitoring of attendance are all positive features of the system. Most full-time students benefit from tutor support and are knowledgeable about the range of support services available to them. However, there is no cross-college monitoring of the system to ensure a consistent quality of delivery.

30 The college has an effective counselling service and there are good links between this and other professional support services in the locality. The counsellor contributes to most induction programmes. The importance of counselling is recognised by the course teams and some staff have counselling experience. There are sound strategies for the referral of students and most students are aware of the procedures.

31 The college identifies full-time students' needs for basic skills training when they first enrol at the college. This initial screening allows tutors to support students in improving their literacy and numeracy but, at the time of the inspection, the arrangements for providing such support across the college were not fully developed.

32 The college has developed a learner agreement which addresses the requirements of the Charter for Further Education. As yet, there are few opportunities for students to become involved in influencing their courses through formal college structures.

33 The cross-college managers responsible for the various aspects of student support have recently started meeting as a management team. Their aim is to create a comprehensive system of student support through more effective co-ordination of the services currently offered.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

34 Most teaching sessions are well planned and effective in achieving their aims. The teachers' schemes of work are clear: they include an outline of the topics to be covered, the sequence of topics to be taught and, where appropriate, the relationship between the teaching programme and students' assignments.

35 The following table summarises the grades given to the teaching sessions inspected.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
A/AS Level		0	3	11	5	0	19
GNVQ		0	8	9	1	1	19
NVQ		5	6	8	7	0	26
BTEC		6	16	17	9	0	48
Other		12	13	13	10	0	48
Total		23	46	58	32	1	160

36 Students were actively engaged in learning and enthusiastic about their work. The students' coursework was of a high standard in the majority of courses inspected. The overall quality of teaching sessions was highest on the child care courses where teachers drew effectively upon students' experience and encouraged the development of their analytical thinking and social skills.

37 Many of the classes on the GCE A level programme lacked variety. There was an over-reliance on teachers' formal presentation of information. Few examples were observed of teachers drawing upon students' experience through groupwork or other means.

38 There were some imaginative assignments set for students on the advanced and intermediate GNVQ programmes in business. The use of a common initial assignment allowed for early identification of students' strengths and weaknesses. The teaching programmes and assignments for students on Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) courses, offered in partnership with local schools, were well planned and implemented.

39 National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) programmes are still predominantly taught over the traditional academic year. The set start dates for adult students are limited in number and few programmes operate on a modular basis. A positive feature of learning on the NVQ business administration programme is that students are able to work at their own pace by using well-prepared learning packs.

40 Where work experience forms part of full-time courses, for example, in child care and leisure studies, it is well co-ordinated. There is comprehensive documentation for students and employers, outlining how the process is managed, and a range of assignments which allows students to learn from their work placements.

41 The learning support available for students through open learning workshops is limited. The flexible-learning unit has an insufficient stock of materials to support students' independent learning. Directed study time on the full-time courses is not well managed: few full-time students

were making effective use of the time spent in the library or the flexible-learning unit.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

42 Students on vocational courses were strongly committed to their studies. Their projects and other assignments were well presented. They demonstrated high levels of confidence in assignments which involved presentation and group work.

43 There is no college-wide strategy for ensuring that all students have opportunities to develop essential skills such as communication, numeracy and information technology. The lack of access to study-skills support applies particularly to students on the full-time GCE A level programme.

44 Assignment programmes for individual BTEC courses give students the opportunity to develop essential skills as an integral part of their work. Students on the first year of BTEC national diploma courses had a clear understanding of what was required for each skill area. Second year students were able to apply this understanding to work-related assignments.

45 The college has no agreed procedure for assessing and accrediting students' prior learning nor is there much experience of assessing prior learning within the course teams. Arrangements for assessing and accrediting the achievements of students with learning difficulties and disabilities are also underdeveloped. Students did not know how they were to be assessed and what qualifications they would obtain at the end of their courses.

46 The college has a high retention rate on its full-time courses. In 1992-93 almost 90 per cent of full-time students completed their courses. A high proportion of full-time vocational students, 85 per cent in 1992-93, also obtained the qualification they were aiming for.

47 Pass rates on the full-time GCE A level programmes, which form a small part of the college's total provision, are poor. In 1992-93, A level students achieved a 47 per cent pass rate, grades A-E compared with the national average of 79.8 per cent. The average points score of students age 16-18 entered for two or more A levels (where A=10, E=2) was 5.3. This is low when compared with the scores from other institutions in the further education sector. The performances of GCSE students was significantly better than those of A level students. GCSE evening students generally achieved better results than their day-time counterparts.

48 Destination statistics are well documented and show that a high proportion of students move on to further or higher level courses or to employment. For example, over 80 per cent of students on the college's access course were able to progress to higher education. Figure 6 provides further details of students' destinations.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

49 The college has a commitment to a total quality strategy. Senior management are intent on improving the quality of provision and most staff are aware of the college's quality assurance policy. There has been extensive staff development on quality issues for staff and governors.

50 Comprehensive procedures have been developed to monitor and evaluate the quality of courses and programmes. There is a programme management handbook for tutors to complete which reflects the requirements of the external validating bodies for course review and evaluation.

51 In practice, the procedures for monitoring and evaluation are applied with varying degrees of consistency across the institution. It was evident that some courses had been more thoroughly reviewed than others.

52 Quality initiatives have been identified and taken forward by quality improvement teams which report to the quality council, a sub-committee of the academic board. The stress on teamwork is a positive feature of the quality assurance system. It has proved an effective way of bringing about improvements such as the introduction of an academic appeals procedure.

53 The college has only recently established an academic standards committee which will take responsibility for the validation, re-validation and periodic review of courses. The committee has not had the time to make an impact upon the development of standards across the institution. There is some confusion amongst staff about its role and responsibilities in relation to those of the quality council.

54 The college is seeking to extend quality assurance policies and procedures to other aspects of college provision such as student services and learner support. An action plan has been assembled but comprehensive procedures have yet to be developed.

55 The college does not have formal procedures for evaluating the quality of the assessment process for NVQs and there is no college-wide assessment policy covering, for example, the distribution of assessment regulations to students.

56 The procedures for quality monitoring and enhancement do not deal with the delivery and evaluation of cross-curricular areas such as information technology and mathematics. Some programmes, such as employment training, are not evaluated according to the standard review procedures of the college.

57 The college supports the professional development of all of its staff. This support is illustrated by its intention to gain the Investors in People award. All staff, including part-time staff, take part in the staff development programme. An innovative feature is the use of an external consultant to co-ordinate the programme. As yet, the procedures for identifying needs

and prioritising them are underdeveloped; for example, directors of departments are not involved in approving applications for staff development.

58 An induction programme has recently been developed for all new staff and this has been well received. An appraisal system is being developed and has been piloted in the college. The focus of the appraisal system is to identify staff needs and subsequently to support staff in their professional development.

59 Assessor and verifier training has been given a clear priority. Specified targets have been met. Fifteen staff from the three departments of the college have been accredited as assessors for NVQs. Forty-five other staff are on the programme which is phased to match the introduction of specific NVQs.

RESOURCES

60 Teachers and support staff have the qualifications and experience needed to deliver the current course provision. The college is responding to the need for a personnel function: appropriate policies and systems are either in place or in process of development.

61 The college benefits from having its activities concentrated on a single campus which is near the town centre and close to important facilities such as the main public library and leisure centre.

62 The environment in which most students study is attractive and purposeful. Furniture, fittings and equipment in the teaching-rooms allow for and encourage the adoption of varied methods of teaching and learning. Rooms are clean and well maintained. There is a programme for improving the existing permanent accommodation.

63 The temporary accommodation, used extensively by some students, varies in quality. A few student groups are in a poor learning environment for a large part of their timetable. Some teaching staff are based in offices that are poorly decorated and furnished.

64 Public areas are generally welcoming in appearance and well-maintained. Communal areas where students can relax are too small and have restricted opening hours. As a consequence, they are little used. In particular, these areas have little to offer the increasing number of adults in the college. Provision for students with problems of mobility is poor: access for wheelchair users is limited to the ground floors in the main buildings.

65 The use of accommodation is effectively monitored centrally and the employment of specialist accommodation management software is being investigated. Comprehensive surveys of room occupation have been carried out and these have enabled the college to manage its accommodation efficiently. The occupation rate of classrooms during daytime hours is high.

66 There is an adequate level of appropriate equipment to support learning in most specialist subject areas. Good resources include a secretarial studies area with a well-equipped practice office. Leisure studies courses benefit from the extensive hire of rooms and facilities in the large leisure centre adjacent to the main college site.

67 In some curriculum areas, for example engineering, older equipment needs to be replaced. Science has benefited from equipment purchases funded from income derived directly from the delivery of franchised courses at the college. In design studies, current and projected developments will need considerable investment.

68 The library and learning resources unit brings together all aspects of library, open and flexible learning, and workshops to support the development of essential skills. There is a policy for improving these resources but it is constrained by the absence of effective links between curriculum development and resource planning.

69 The bookstock in the library is insufficient to support the current courses and student access to resources is restricted by the lack of a computerised retrieval system. The college is aware that it should take action in these areas.

70 The information technology (IT) resources are sufficient to meet the needs of timetabled classes. However, there is a shortage of IT facilities available for students' use outside their timetabled classes. The use of some of the existing IT rooms is dominated by particular course groups. The college has a development plan to enhance and rationalise these resources. An 80-workstation IT workshop, currently under construction, should alleviate the current problems.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

71 Dunstable college has expanded rapidly over the last three years. It has a strong commitment to improving quality and is making considerable progress towards achieving the key values expressed in its mission statement. The main strengths of the provision inspected are:

- the open and responsive management and active governors
- the rapid expansion of vocational provision in response to business and community needs
- the commitment to enhancing the quality of provision
- some well-planned and effective classroom teaching
- the guidance and support provided to full-time students
- the high retention rates on the full-time courses
- sufficient resources to support the current provision.
- the success of the college company in developing full-cost courses.

72 The college will have to address each of the following areas if it is to continue to raise the standards achieved by its students:

- the demarcation of managerial roles and responsibilities

-
- management information systems
 - the college strategy for managing curriculum change
 - the implementation of the quality assurance procedures
 - a college-wide approach for core skills development
 - responses to the particular needs of adult learners
 - the accreditation for students on discrete learning support programmes
 - the co-ordination of student support services
 - the co-ordination of resources to support independent learning
 - the library bookstock.

FIGURES

1 Staff profile (as at November 1993)

2 Enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1992-93)

3 Enrolments expressed as full-time equivalents by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1992-93)

4 Income (1992-93)

5 Expenditure (1992-93)

6 Destinations of full-time students (1992-93)

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

Figure 1

Dunstable College: staff profile as at November 1993

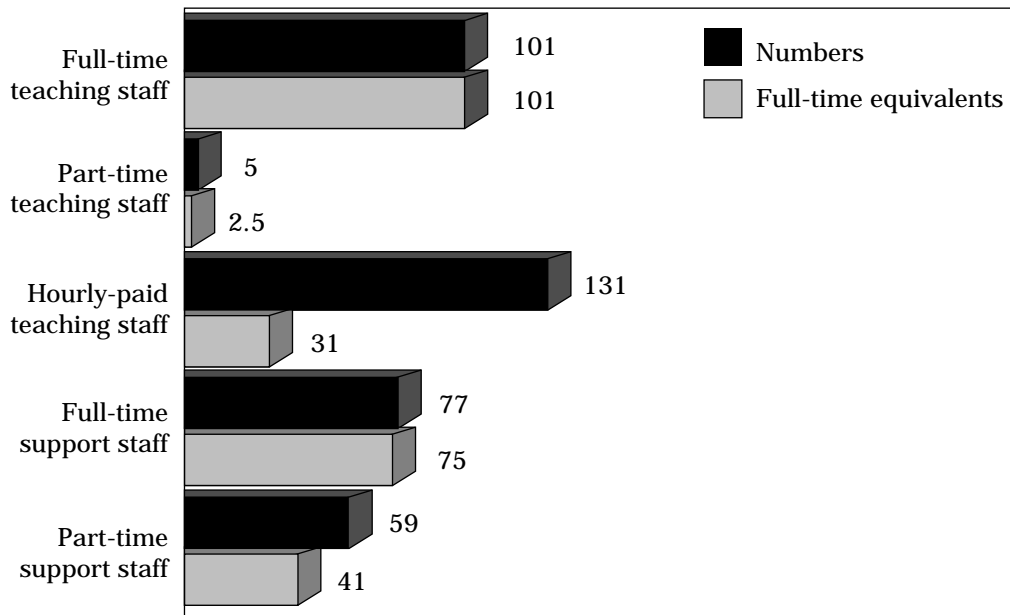
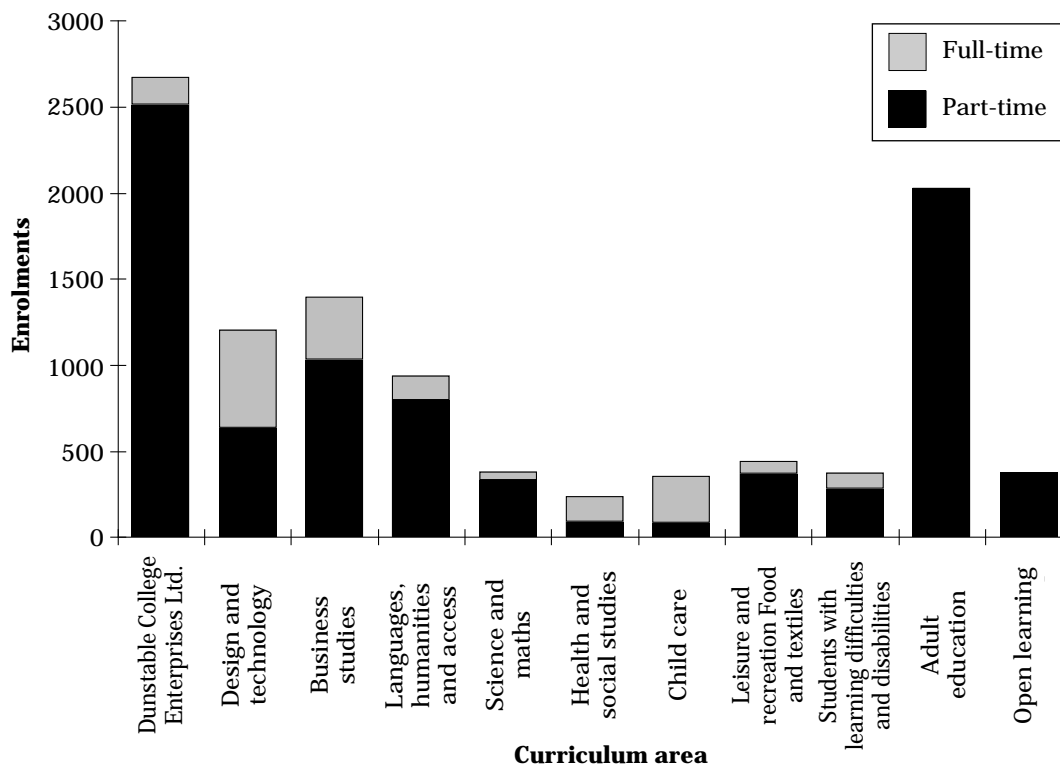


Figure 2

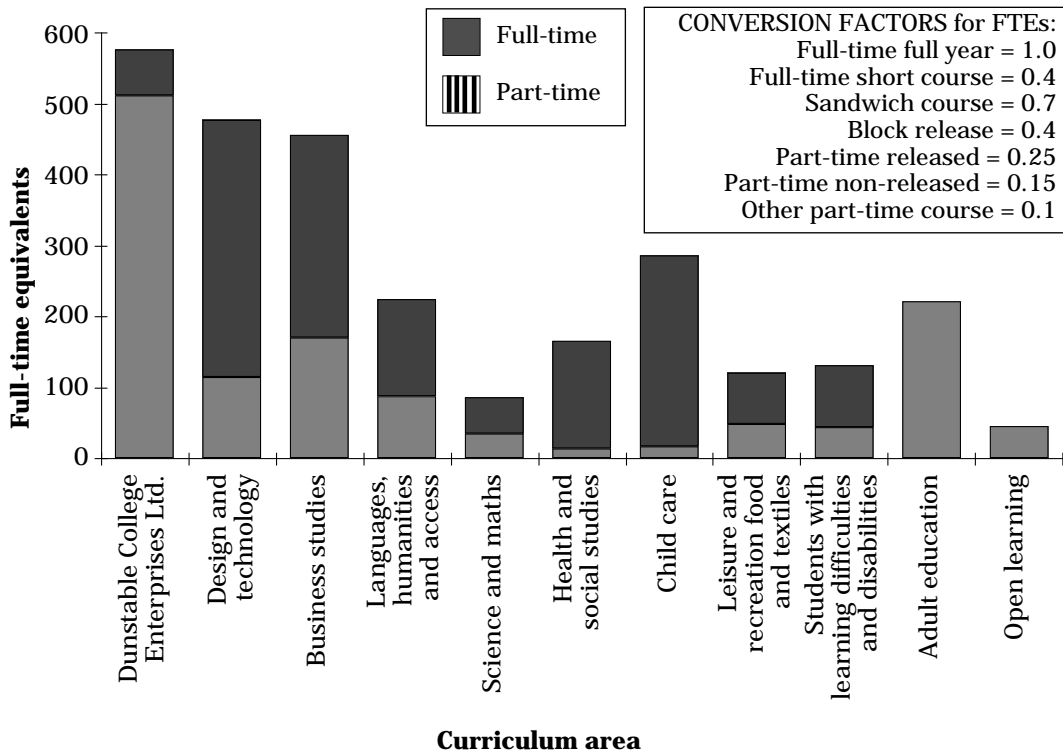
Dunstable College: enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1992-93)



Note: higher education enrolments (413) are not included

Figure 3

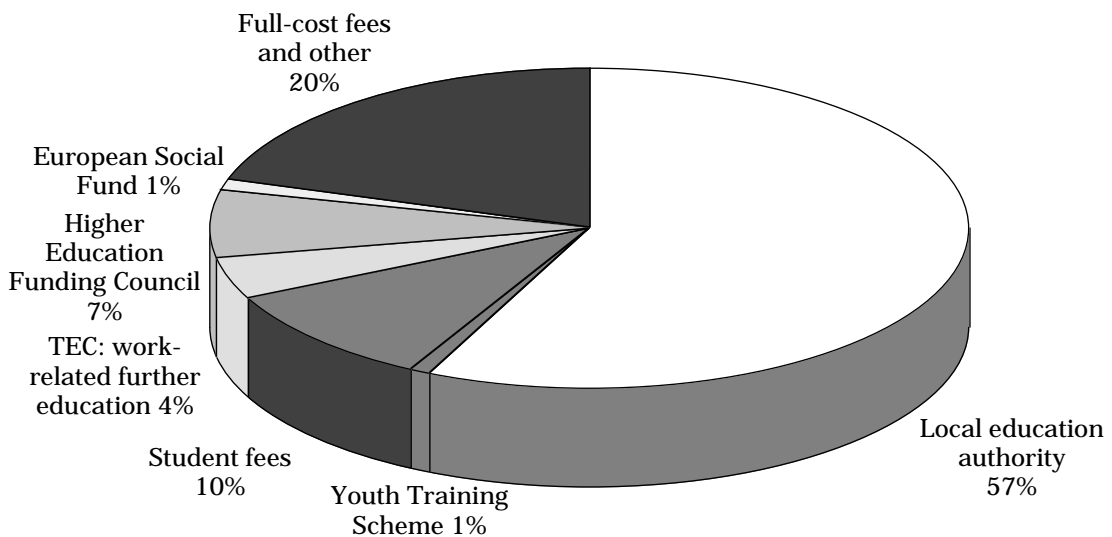
Dunstable College: enrolments expressed as full-time equivalents by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1992-93)



Note: higher education enrolments (129.8 full-time equivalents) are not included

Figure 4

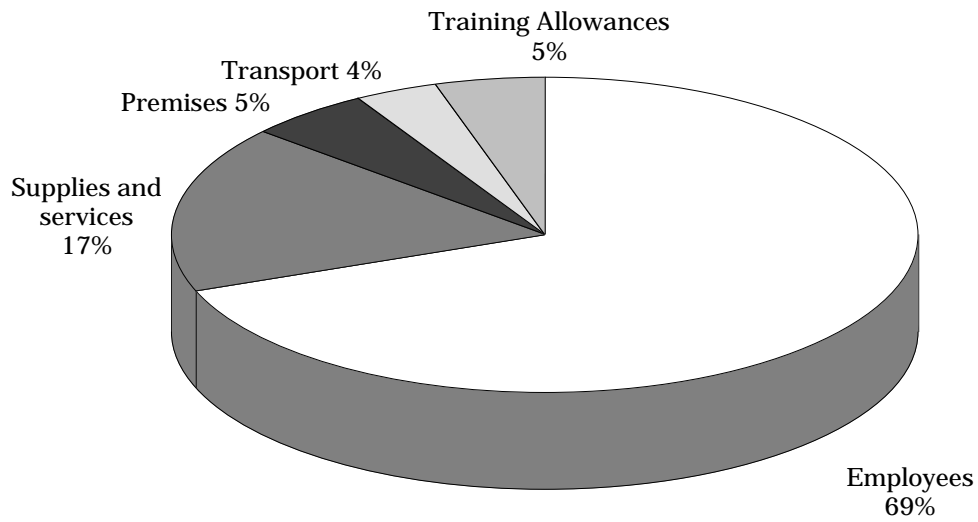
Dunstable College: income (1992-93)



Total income: £5.76m

Figure 5

Dunstable College: expenditure (1992-93)



Total expenditure: £5.7m

Figure 6

Dunstable College: destinations of full-time students (1992-93)



Note: this draft includes 133 students who withdrew before the end of their course

Published by the
Further Education Funding Council
January 1994