

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Durham College of Agriculture and Horticulture

September 1997

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL**

The Further Education Funding Council has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education every four years. The inspectorate also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum and gives advice to the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

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

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GRADE DESCRIPTORS

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

By June 1996, some 329 college inspections had been completed. The grade profiles for aspects of cross-college provision and programme areas for the 329 colleges are shown in the following table.

College grade profiles 1993-96

Activity	Inspection grades				
	1	2	3	4	5
Programme area	9%	59%	29%	3%	<1%
Cross-college provision	14%	50%	31%	5%	<1%
Overall	12%	54%	30%	4%	<1%

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 117/97

DURHAM COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE AND HORTICULTURE NORTHERN REGION

Inspected February 1996-June 1997

Summary

Durham College of Agriculture and Horticulture is the sole provider of further education for land-based industries in County Durham. It offers courses in agriculture, horticulture, arboriculture, equine studies, the environment, floristry and small animal care. The college provides an expanding short-course, consultancy and contract service to industry, and operates an extensive programme of NVQs. Links with schools are strong; pre-entry and entry arrangements are well organised. Teaching in practical sessions is generally of a high standard and is supported by the diverse resources of the college's estate. The college has consistently exceeded its enrolment targets and reduced its level of funding. If it is to thrive, the college should: explore further diversification of its provision; complete changes to the management structure which will enable effective management; clarify responsibilities for academic leadership; improve the quality of financial and other information supplied to governors; improve internal communications and staff relationships; involve staff more in planning and in setting targets; improve the consistency of arrangements for tutorials and learning support; take steps to improve levels of achievement on some courses; develop an effective quality assurance framework; improve the teaching skills of some staff; speed the implementation of staff appraisal; ensure that staff development meets the needs of the college; and reduce the dependency on part-time teachers in some areas of operation.

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	4
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	3
Quality assurance	4
Resources: staffing	3
equipment/learning resources	2
accommodation	3
<hr/>	
Curriculum area	Grade
Agriculture, equine and environment	3
Horticulture and floristry	3
Arboriculture	3

INTRODUCTION

1 Durham College of Agriculture and Horticulture was inspected in a number of stages. Specialist inspections took place in February 1996 and April 1997, enrolment and induction arrangements were inspected in September 1996 and aspects of cross-college provision in June 1997. Six inspectors spent 38 days at the college. They observed 40 teaching sessions, examined students' work and studied documentation about the college and its courses. They held meetings with governors, college managers, teachers and support staff, students and parents. They met representatives from industry, the County Durham and Darlington Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) and others in the community who have a strong interest in the college. During the last two phases of the inspection, the principal was absent from the college through illness; the deputy principal (curriculum) acted as principal.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 The college was established in 1938 to provide a centre for agricultural education in County Durham. The college estate is situated within walking distance of Durham city centre. It lies within a loop of the River Wear and, apart from a short road frontage, is bounded by mature woodlands. The estate is designated by the local authority as an area of great landscape value and contains a number of grade II listed buildings. The college is known locally as Houghall College, a name derived from the title of the estate, and it uses this name in some of its literature. Transport links to Durham from the north and south are good, but travel from the east or west is more difficult. There is residential accommodation at the college for 100 students.

3 The nearest specialist college for land-based industries is 30 miles to the north, in Northumberland. County Durham has four general further education colleges. One of these is New College, Durham, which is also situated in Durham City. At the time of the cross-college inspection, a joint working group had been set up by the respective corporations of these two colleges to investigate the benefits of a merger between them. In 1996, 57 per cent of school-leavers in County Durham continued in full-time education and 20 per cent entered government training schemes. Less than half a per cent of the college's students are from minority ethnic groups, a proportion similar to that for the population of the county. In 1996, the unemployment rate in County Durham was 7.8 per cent.

4 In 1996-97, the college had 204 full-time and 538 part-time students funded by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC); an additional 68 full-time and 795 part-time students were funded through other sources. FEFC-funded student numbers by age, by level of study and by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3. The principal and deputy principal (curriculum) form the principalship; in addition there are the equivalent of 37 full-time teaching staff and

47 support staff. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

5 The college has two subsidiary companies: Houghall Enterprises offers short courses, consultancy and contract services, and deals with retail sales; Houghall Farm, which occupies 150 hectares on the estate, produces arable, beef, dairy, pig, potato and sheep products commercially.

6 The stated mission of the college is to 'enable all sectors of the community to progress their careers and interests within the land-based industry'. It seeks to provide education and training in all areas linked to the land and to meet the needs of industry and the local community.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

7 Courses in horticulture, arboriculture, equine studies, the environment, floristry and small animal care have been introduced to offset a decline in the number of students following the traditional courses in agriculture. The introduction of small animal care courses is recent. Some opportunities for further diversification have been missed. Courses are offered at foundation, intermediate and advanced level. Most full-time courses can also be studied part time and part-time students, many of them employees, can enrol on individual units of any of the national certificate or national diploma courses to update their knowledge and experience. Students are able to gain awards, for example certificates in competence to use chainsaws, which are additional to the main qualifications they are seeking, as a means of improving their employment prospects. A higher national diploma in environmental management and a higher national diploma in arboriculture are delivered jointly with the University of Sunderland and New College, Durham, respectively. The college also offers a foundation year in environmental studies which leads to a range of related degrees and higher national diplomas at the University of Sunderland.

8 A successful bid to the competitiveness fund, in partnership with other colleges in the region, has provided Internet links which have the potential to provide courses for students who cannot attend college regularly. No courses of this type are offered currently. The college is part of a European-funded initiative to produce distance learning materials related to courses on the environment.

9 Staff have successfully promoted a wide range of national vocational qualifications (NVQs) with employers. The college offers programmes from level 1 to level 3 in all main areas of its provision, and at level 4 in amenity horticulture. Full-time students can undertake NVQs as additional qualifications. A full-time NVQ co-ordinator ensures that the progress of about 230 candidates on youth training and modern apprenticeship placements is effectively monitored and that there are regular progress reports. College staff assess and accredit the prior learning and experience of employees, and train assessors, at their place of work. The college

works collaboratively with 26 local authorities to provide workplace training linked to NVQs in horticulture. Staff are involved nationally in the development of NVQ qualifications in grave digging and arboriculture. The college advertises full-time general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs) in land and environment. Recruitment is poor, as it is nationally. The only full-time NVQ programme is at foundation level.

10 The college's provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is small but responsive. It is highly regarded by the special schools and social services departments with which the college collaborates in developing courses. College staff provide off-site training at a local sheltered workshop. Link courses with special schools are designed to meet students' individual needs; achievements on some of these courses can contribute to NVQs. A co-operative voluntary sector company, which is based at the college, provides job opportunities for some students after completing their courses. It runs a landscape maintenance business which has contracts in the local community. The college has a disability statement describing its policy on the services it provides to those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. It has taken measures to improve access to college buildings and the estate for students with restricted mobility. Insufficient attention has been paid to the implementation of the college's equal opportunities policy and accompanying action plan which date from 1994. Staff show little awareness of the plan or of the college's policy on harassment. A newly-formed working group plans to refocus attention on equal opportunities.

11 The college is responsive to the needs of those who require retraining and to other local community needs. Funds from the County Durham and Darlington TEC and from European sources have enabled the college to provide 'taster' courses in land-based subjects for disaffected teenagers, and training in countryside skills for unemployed people from former mining areas. Recently, European funding has been secured to provide NVQ programmes at three leased centres in the community. In partnership with its local authority and a national charity, the college is setting up NVQ programmes in environment, forestry and horticulture to assist a local ex-mining community to improve their local area. A small range of non-vocational courses are run for people interested in land-based subjects. The estate is used by local groups and charities. The college contributes to floristry exhibitions in the cathedral and hosts equine events.

12 In some curriculum areas, the college provides a wide range of short courses or consultancy for employers. Employers spoke highly of the quality of this provision. Courses are sometimes operated at weekends and in the evenings to enable employees to attend. Houghall Enterprises contributes about 20 per cent of the college's income. Much of its activity is related to arboriculture. Short courses for planning officers provide training which enables them to undertake tree inspections. European and rural development funding supports the provision of advice for farmers on

how to diversify their woodlands. Contract work in horticulture and floristry is increasing. A recent agreement with a property company will involve the college in the provision of garden designs for their show houses. All new home owners will be given a plant list and offered a free place on a short course in garden design at the college. The college has been slow to provide formal channels through which industry could influence the curriculum. It has only recently formed industrial liaison groups to offer advice in some curriculum areas.

13 Links with local primary and secondary schools are well organised. The college uses its resources to provide varied and imaginative learning opportunities for pupils. Activities range, for example, from learning to identify the gender of sheep to learning how computer technology can be used to control the environment of glasshouses. Many of such activities are designed to contribute to the national curriculum. A full-time schools liaison officer teaches, by agreement, in the schools. Formal relationships have been established with European colleges and students have taken part in exchange visits. There is no planned European dimension to the curriculum.

14 A large and enthusiastic marketing team, which includes a governor and senior managers, meets every two to four weeks to review progress on enquiries and enrolments, and to take remedial action, if required. Marketing information is currently collated manually but it is gradually being placed on a computer database to improve the efficiency with which it can be used. Members of the marketing team are volunteers. The team provides a forum at which ideas are tested. It also organises support for a wide range of shows and exhibitions. A full-time marketing assistant provides effective administrative support for the team. Considerable efforts are made to maintain good relationships with careers officers and this has helped to make recruitment more effective. A free college newspaper, Houghall News, is distributed to areas where recruitment has been identified as falling, or where potential for recruitment has been identified. Budgetary constraints have limited advertising this year. The team recognises that the college's promotional material is in need of improvement. It is focusing its attention on investigating potential markets which would lead to further diversification of the curriculum.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

15 The corporation board has 15 members. They include a solicitor, an accountant, a member with long experience of personnel issues, several who have experience managing large estates, and a representative from the County Durham and Darlington TEC. The principal, a student, and a member of staff are also on the board. One member is a woman. Business members' interests cover the main curriculum areas of the college. Members of the board are enthusiastic supporters of the college. Meetings of the corporation and its committees are well attended and many board members attend public events at the college. Except for the student

representative, each member of the board is on one or more of the corporation's nine committees. Some of these committees, for example the farm and estate, horticulture and grounds, and buildings and resources committees, have additional members from the college staff; some committees draw additional members from industry. The corporation has a code of conduct and register of interests. Recent training sessions have covered funding matters, the Nolan report on *The Committee on Standards in Public Life*, and inspection.

16 The chair of the corporation has frequent contact with the principal and they have established a good working relationship. The corporation was involved in deciding the original mission statement of the college and it has reviewed the statement subsequently. Members have a good understanding of their role. The farm and estates committee, the horticulture and grounds committee and the buildings and resources committee, consider both operational and strategic matters, but their work relates primarily to the college's resources, not to the curriculum. Minutes from the college's health and safety group are routinely considered by the buildings and resources committee. The corporation recognises that it has not been sufficiently involved in setting and monitoring the strategic direction of the college. The reports it receives are not sufficiently concise or informative to assist it in making decisions. The board considers regular financial statements, but these have not included forecast information other than on an annual basis. It received its first set of summative indicators on the college's performance at its meeting in April 1997. It has not yet considered how to evaluate its own performance, though this is on its future agenda.

17 The college has been reorganising its staffing for two years and still does not have a stable management structure. The first phase of the reorganisation established a new senior management team comprising the principal, deputy principal (curriculum), student services manager, senior resource manager, personnel manager and enterprise manager. Departmental heads were replaced by resource managers and a number of posts with cross-college responsibilities were established. The second phase, in which the main body of staff will be reorganised, has yet to be implemented. Many staff have developed eclectic roles within the college. Where job descriptions are available, they are often out of date. Staff do not have a clear picture of the roles and responsibilities of some postholders. Lines of accountability are not clear. Performance targets and action plans are lacking and the workloads of staff are not effectively monitored. The deputy principal has line-management responsibility for five managers or co-ordinators, and for all teaching staff in regard to their course and teaching responsibilities. Staff who have assumed new responsibilities have been insufficiently prepared for their role.

18 Some staff are enthusiastic and there is some enterprising work from groups of staff. However low morale remains a problem. Some individual teachers and managers do not communicate with each other. Tensions

exist between teaching and non-teaching staff, and between some groups of teachers. Contracts and conditions of service vary. Staff have not been well informed about college developments or the financial position of the college. Minutes of senior management team and academic board meetings are not widely available. Recent attempts to improve communication, by introducing a weekly briefing session and an 'events' sheet circulated to all staff, have been appreciated.

19 The academic board is one of the committees of the corporation. A dispute over recent elections to the board highlights the tensions between teaching, non-teaching and management staff. It arose because the terms of reference and constitution of the board had not been reviewed since before incorporation. Staff are unsure how items reach the agenda of the academic board and members are uncertain of their role in disseminating the board's discussions. Much of the board's time has been spent on operational matters rather than on academic policy and the curriculum. The board has sometimes discussed academic changes, such as diversification of the curriculum, but recommendations have not been pursued. New members of the board are more enthusiastic about the possibilities of their role.

20 The current strategic plan includes few targets against which progress can be measured. Items in the operational plan are discussed by the groups responsible and some actions result. However, neither the senior management team nor the board of corporation formally reviews progress under the plan. The college's accommodation strategy document does not consider the value of the estate or describe a long-term strategy to meet the needs of the curriculum. There are few well-developed curriculum plans and teachers are unclear about the objectives or targets for their areas. A formal process for consulting staff and the board of corporation has been put into operation for drawing up the next strategic and operational plans.

21 Overall responsibility for curriculum and teaching belongs to the deputy principal (curriculum). The responsibility for academic leadership in each curriculum area is not so clear. The lack of job descriptions, clear line management and training for roles has led to inconsistencies between, and within, courses. There is little monitoring of course effectiveness and some course co-ordinators take no responsibility for monitoring targets or students' achievements. Annual reports are sent to the academic board but course leaders receive little feedback. Courses are generally administered satisfactorily, but course leaders sometimes have difficulty ensuring that team members comply with their requirements for documentation. Teaching teams include student representatives but technicians are not always invited. Technicians are ill-informed about academic matters. Good practice in the management of the NVQ programme has not been disseminated across the college.

22 Financial allocations to meet the day-to-day operations of the teaching teams are based on previous years' allocations and adjustments are made to take account of enrolments and other variables. The college is currently investigating the true cost of its courses so that costs may be better reflected in future allocations. At present, the criteria for financial allocations to cost centres are not clear to staff. Budget holders have not been trained in financial procedures, and not all are in possession of copies of the current financial regulations. Subject resource managers receive monthly statements of expenditure against budgets; some managers say they plan to overspend as a strategy to gain increased revenue. Often, managers fail to look at their resource needs in terms of a coherent plan. For example, there is no long-term planning for equipment or a costed replacement programme. Large items of equipment are replaced on a piecemeal basis.

23 The college has consistently achieved its funding targets and has successfully reduced its average level of funding from £35.26 per unit in 1993-94 to £26.27 per unit in 1996-97. The median for agriculture and horticulture colleges in 1996-97 is £22.86 per unit. The college plans for a further reduction to £20.94 in 1997-98. In 1995-96, Houghall Farm contributed £33,000 to the college's income. The college currently forecasts a deficit of £72,000 in 1996-97 on a budget of under £3,000,000. This includes a predicted loss from the farm. The deputy principal (curriculum), acting as temporary principal, and the accountant are working on strategies to return the budget to balance. The college's income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1996 are shown in figures 5 and 6.

24 The computerised management information system used for the college's main financial accounting provides regular and reliable data but has limited automatic reporting and forecasting capabilities. The computerised student record system provides a valued service to senior managers. Curriculum and resource managers cannot use the system directly, but data can be transferred readily from it to the college's academic network. Few managers use the facilities. Room timetabling is computerised. Library records and examination records remain paper based.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

25 Prospective students are provided with good-quality information about the college, its courses, and routes for progression. Liaison with schools, and especially with special schools, within a wide area is extensive and effective. The college makes a considerable effort to attend careers events held in secondary schools and elsewhere, and there are good arrangements for prospective students to visit the college as part of their school careers programme. Several open days are held each year which are in part aimed at prospective students. Arrangements for students' admissions are good. All applicants are contacted and offered an interview, though there is no procedure to ensure that this happens within the

timescale presented as a target by the admissions team. Enquiries are followed up diligently. The college makes arrangements to accredit students' prior learning as part of the admissions process.

26 Students are introduced to the college and their course through induction programmes which start on different days of the week for different groups. This allows students to receive closer personal attention. Elements of the students' programmes are linked to the courses which they are studying. For example, each introduction to the library is designed to take account of the learning needs associated with a particular course. Information for students is well presented. In a minority of the induction sessions which were inspected, however, teachers spent much of the time repeating orally information which had been provided in written form. The induction process includes a personal interview with each student. These interviews are conducted sympathetically. Outcomes are recorded on a standardised form and a formal learning agreement between the student and the college is completed.

27 All students are entitled to tutorial support on a regular basis. On some courses, students have a named personal tutor; on other courses the course tutor may, or may not, assume the role of personal tutor. The organisation, content and mode of delivery of the tutorial programme is left to course tutors and this leads to wide variations. On some courses, group tutorials are rare; on others they form a central and effective part of the students' experience. The college has endeavoured to provide some elements of a personal and social education programme through voluntary sessions. These sessions have not attracted large numbers.

28 All students are entitled to at least one individual tutorial each term. The frequency, content and format of these tutorials is decided by individual tutors. In some cases, tutorials are relevant and productive. Students are given helpful advice and valuable feedback on their progress. However, there were no records of individual tutorials in some students' files, including the files of many of those who eventually failed on the national certificate and higher national diploma in arboriculture in 1995 or 1996. In other cases, students had not received their first individual tutorial until late in the first term, or the beginning of the second term, which meant that any remedial action that was necessary was delayed. The college claims that setting targets for learning and drawing up action plans are fundamental elements of the individual tutorial. In some cases, however there is no record of these activities, or the records are poor. A standard agenda and a recording form have recently been introduced to try to remedy these deficiencies. Course tutors do not always have an accurate picture of students' current progress in each of the subjects they are taking; sometimes subject teachers have not marked a first assignment by the end of the first term. The college undertakes little monitoring of the quality or effectiveness of tutorials.

29 All new students take basic skills tests to enable the college to identify those who might benefit from additional support in literacy and numeracy. Students identified as needing such support are asked to include this information in a revised learning agreement. In 1996-97, 10 students have done so, which is about half the number identified. The college provides a learning support service, and some course tutors make their own arrangements with individual students. The support from tutors, which may cover all areas of the students' work as well as basic skills, is appreciated by the students. Students who are found to have particular learning needs at various stages of their courses receive additional support through the tutorial system or they are referred to the student services manager who then makes appropriate arrangements with the learning support service. The diverse ways in which support is provided are not linked by a common recording or reporting system. Managers are unable to check that all students identified as needing support receive appropriate assistance. On the college's courses for students with learning difficulties, the support provided takes full account of the individual needs of students. The college also provides an appropriate study skills course for students who are moving to higher education courses.

30 The college has established a confidential guidance service for students, called the 'listening ear'. It is provided by a group of tutors who have each completed an introductory course in counselling. However, the tutors lack a common understanding of some basic issues, and access to the service is not sufficiently confidential. There are good arrangements for students' referral to a trained counsellor or other external services. The role of the guidance service is not clearly understood or appreciated by all staff, and while some course tutors handle personal issues themselves, there is a reluctance on the part of others to see guidance as part of their duties or remit. There is no common recording or reporting system across the college and no rapid referral system for students with perceived problems unless such problems are of a behavioural nature.

31 Structured careers advice is offered to all students under a contractual arrangement with County Durham Careers Service. Students are informed about the service and their right to a personal interview. However, few take advantage of the opportunity. The careers service is especially effective with students who have special needs, and it provides a taught programme which is an integral element of the NVQ foundation course. Students have access to a well-stocked and up-to-date careers library which contains appropriate reading materials and computer-based resources. The library also provides a useful situations vacant service for students, helping them to identify suitable full-time and part-time jobs. Some course tutors give their students specialist advice on progression routes and careers, but not all students benefit in this way.

32 The college has sufficient residential accommodation to meet students' demands; the majority of students have single bedrooms with study facilities. There are five wardens on site, and at least one of the

wardens is on duty at any one time. The college has not yet fully implemented its responsibilities in relation to the *Protection of Children Act* but is in the process of adopting appropriate procedures. There are a number of issues relating to the management and operation of students' living and social accommodation which require further attention. Social and study facilities for day students are inadequate for the number of students. The student association is provided with an office and telephone. It plays an active role in the management of matters relating to students, including the hardship fund.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

33 Fifty per cent of the 40 teaching sessions observed had strengths which outweighed weaknesses. This is appreciably lower than the average for all lessons inspected in 1995-96 in further education colleges, as recorded in the *Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1995-96*. Weaknesses outweighed strengths in 15 per cent of lessons. The average rate of attendance in the lessons inspected was 83 per cent. The average number of students observed in each class was eight. The following table summarises the grades given to the teaching sessions inspected.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade 1	2	3	4	5	Totals
Non-GNVQ advanced	6	8	9	6	0	29
Other	1	5	5	0	0	11
Total	7	13	14	6	0	40

34 A wide range of learning activities was experienced by students in agriculture, equine and environment courses. The best teaching was observed in practical sessions. These were well planned and well prepared. They had a clear structure: introduction, demonstration, and supervised practice. For example, in a chainsaw practical for students on the national diploma course in land use and recreation, the teacher introduced the session by discussing with the students the key theoretical aspects relevant to the lesson. He followed this by clearly and expertly demonstrating the three saw cuts, emphasising the key movements required. The students were then given the opportunity to practise these activities. Finally each student's performance was discussed and areas for improvement were identified. In a minority of weaker practical sessions, teachers failed to organise the work effectively and some students remained inactive for appreciable periods of time. Most of the poorer grades awarded, however, were for classroom-based sessions. Here, teachers took too little account of students' diverse learning needs or failed to maintain the attention of all members of the class.

35 The majority of assignments in agriculture, equine and environmental studies were based on realistic practical environments familiar to the

students, for example, areas of the college farm. The best assignments provided students with good opportunities to apply their knowledge within a firm structure and guidance was given on what was required to obtain good grades. Some assignments were poorly structured and the accompanying documentation was weak. The quality of marking varied widely. Sometimes teachers provided full and constructive comments which helped students to improve their work; in other cases, comments were brief and unhelpful.

36 Arboriculture sessions were generally well taught. Students respected teachers' knowledge and expertise. Most theory sessions were well structured. Teachers encouraged students to speak and held their attention in well-organised question and answer sessions which involved all class members. Lessons were often lively, but teachers sometimes failed to ensure that the points emerging from class discussion were effectively summarised or recorded in students' notes. Practical sessions were carefully designed to emphasise teamwork, and close attention was paid to health and safety issues. Though individual sessions were of a high standard, the context in which teachers delivered them was less well structured. For example, schemes of work for each subject were often no more than a list of topic headings and dates; one topic was entered as covering eight weeks of work with no differentiation of the stages to be reached or the activities students should undertake. Schemes of work were often not cross-referenced to the syllabuses of the awarding body. Academic managers were unable to explain how they ensured that the syllabus was being fully covered.

37 Many of the separate assignments for arboriculture students were of high quality. For example, assignments in the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) higher national diploma in arboriculture contained detailed marking schemes which enabled students to structure their work and allocate their effort accordingly. These assignments were also rigorously assessed. One written assignment on tree pathology required students as a team to survey different tree species in areas of the estate and to write a report. Individual students had to select one of the diseases identified and evaluate reasons for its distribution and severity. The assignment culminated in an oral test in which students were asked to identify the symptoms and life cycle of the diseases affecting specimen trees and to propose remedies. On some courses students did not receive assignment schedules or an overall programme. Too many assignments were set late in the year.

38 The better teaching in horticulture and floristry was generally observed in practical sessions. Lessons were structured effectively and provided good opportunities for students to develop their practical competences. In one session, students following the national diploma in horticulture course were undergoing their first instruction on brickwork. The teacher introduced the session, covered the necessary basic theory and then took students through a series of demonstrations, each followed

by opportunities for students to develop their brickwork skills. Students were encouraged to assess their own work and the teacher paid sufficient attention to the weaker students whilst ensuring that the more able were kept busy. In several of the theory sessions, insufficient attention was paid to identifying and meeting the differing learning needs of students in the class. Although teachers asked students questions, they sometimes allowed the more able students to provide all the answers. As a consequence, other students' lack of understanding was not always identified or addressed.

39 Assignments in horticulture and floristry were generally based on realistic exercises and often provided good opportunities for students to acquire and apply knowledge. The effectiveness of some assignments was reduced because the assignment brief was not precise enough or because teachers' comments on the completed work were inadequate. National certificate and diploma in horticulture students each had a small plot of land in the college grounds for which they were responsible through the growing season. Maintaining and developing this plot helped them to develop their practical skills and provided good opportunities for them to put theory into practice by working on their own initiative.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

40 Students in agriculture, equine and environment classes were usually well motivated and responsive. Their knowledge was good and they were interested and involved in subjects which were clearly related to their chosen vocational area; for example, crop production. Students' written assignments were generally of a standard consistent with the level of the course they were taking. Students on the national diploma courses, however, had poor note-taking skills. Some students made insufficient use of information technology and had a poor understanding of its applications within their specialism.

41 A high proportion of the full-time students completed their courses. For example, all the students who started on the national diploma in land use and recreation in 1992 completed their studies in 1994; of those who started in 1993, 98 per cent completed in 1995. Pass rates for full-time students were also good; in 1995, 89 per cent of those who enrolled on a full-time course achieved their qualification. However, of the six students enrolled on the national certificate in agriculture in 1994-95, only three succeeded in obtaining the award. Success rates on part-time courses are generally lower than on full-time courses; overall, 71 per cent of those enrolled achieved their qualification. Some students gain qualifications in addition to qualifications related to their main studies. For example, in 1995-96, all students on the national certificate in the management of horses gained stage 1 of the British Horse Society's awards and over half achieved stage 2. A high proportion of the students who completed their courses in 1996 continued their studies or gained employment.

42 Arboriculture students were highly motivated and interested in their subject. They worked well in teams. One practical session, which took place in the derelict woods of a hotel, involved students working in small teams of two or three to renovate oak trees by using chainsaws to remove dead wood. The team reviewed the task thoroughly before the climber ascended the tree and made all the necessary safety checks on equipment. The students on the ground constantly reviewed the progress of the climber and anticipated any potential problems. Where necessary, they provided guidance or additional equipment. They also ensured the safety of the climber and members of the public. The tasks were properly supervised in accordance with guidelines. One student near the top of a 20 metre tree followed instructions from the teacher and succeeded in lowering a large branch to the ground using an advanced technique. On several occasions, arboriculture students have formed professional teams on completion of their course. The majority of the successful students take up related jobs in industry.

43 Arboriculture students participated well in class discussions, making pertinent observations and drawing sensible conclusions when problems were posed. Some of the value of the contributions made in class was lost because students often failed to make adequate notes. Assignments submitted for the higher national diploma in arboriculture were frequently of a high standard, and both these and national diploma assignments were often wordprocessed. A significant number of students in arboriculture failed to hand in assignment work by the set deadline. Higher national diploma students often delayed starting their project until too late in the year.

44 Over 80 per cent of arboriculture students complete their course. However, the two-year, part-time national certificate which ran for the first time in 1994-96 lost a third of its small enrolments before the end of the course and another third of the original cohort failed to achieve the award. Several courses have suffered falling success rates over the last three years. For example, on the higher national diploma, all the students who completed the course achieved the award in 1994, 87 per cent in 1995 and 81 per cent in 1996. On the full-time, one-year programmes, the corresponding overall figures were 83, 72 and 61 per cent, respectively. Details of students' achievements on the technician certificate in arboriculture were difficult to obtain for any year. Only one student passed in 1996 and results remain unknown for earlier years. On the part-time, one-year programme, 90 per cent of those completing the course passed in 1994, 59 per cent in 1995 and 65 per cent in 1996.

45 Horticulture and floristry students were well motivated, particularly in practical sessions. They demonstrated an appropriate level of knowledge and understanding, though a number of horticulture students showed some uncertainty about work which had been completed earlier in their course. Students were generally careful and conscientious in

carrying out their practical tasks, though their skills varied widely as a result of their differing experiences before joining college. Completed assignments for the national diploma and national certificate in horticulture were of a good standard but some first diploma assignments were well below the expected standard. Some students were failing to make satisfactory notes on their work, and some had poor experimental techniques.

46 Over the last three years the performance of students on horticulture courses has been inconsistent. There are many examples of low completion and/or pass rates. On the full-time programmes, in 1995-96, only 66 per cent of the students who enrolled on the course completed it, but of those who completed 80 per cent passed. On the part-time programmes, only 56 per cent completed the course and of these 66 per cent achieved the award. The national certificate in horticulture, the NVQ level 2 amenity horticulture, and the phase 3 amenity horticulture courses retained all their students. The pass rates for these courses in 1996 were 75 per cent, 63 per cent and 50 per cent, respectively. Fewer than one-third of the students enrolled on the Royal Horticultural Society general course in 1995-96 finished the programme; many, however, had joined for personal interest and did not want to take any examinations. Achievements in floristry were generally good. On the NVQ levels 2 and 3 part-time programmes in 1995-96, 82 per cent of the students completed the course and of these 94 per cent achieved their qualification.

47 In 1995-96, 89 per cent of the 19 students aged 16 to 18 in their final year of advanced vocational courses included in the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) performance tables were successful. This places the college in the top third of colleges in the sector on this performance measure.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

48 The college has a quality assurance policy which aims to provide high-quality education, training and services for students and clients in all aspects of land use, the environment and related areas. The college's mission does not refer to the quality of service it wishes to offer. The strategic plan suggests a range of quality measures to be given high priority over the period 1996-99 though it does not make clear how these will be achieved. The college does not have a framework to assure quality across its operations, nor a regular cycle of activities aimed at promoting improvement. Staff across the college have different perceptions of what quality assurance entails. For example, some course tutors were not aware of the deteriorating performance trends in students' achievements until these were identified by inspectors. Non-teaching areas do not have clear policies relating to the standards of service offered.

49 The deputy principal (curriculum) has overall responsibility for quality assurance. The quality assurance roles of other staff are less clear:

job descriptions do not emphasise that all staff have a responsibility for quality assurance. The staff handbook does not outline any features of a quality assurance system or identify staff responsibilities relating to quality.

50 The most effective quality assurance procedure operated by the college relates to training and consultancy services provided for employers. This provision was accredited by the International Standards Organisation (ISO) 9001 in November 1995. It achieves high standards but the college has made little progress in drawing other elements of college provision into the ISO 9001 framework. In a few areas, for example in the audit work of the health and safety committee, documentation and procedures have been designed to match the framework. The college has not yet achieved the County Durham and Darlington TEC's Quality System for Enterprise Education and Training kitemark which is required for its youth training and modern apprenticeship contracts. It has yet to decide the most appropriate framework for its quality assurance.

51 The college's course validation, monitoring and review procedure is intended to ensure that courses are relevant and of sufficiently high quality, and that they are being continuously improved. The documentation describes procedures which are generally sound and which satisfy the requirements of external awarding bodies. The validation of new courses is systematic although the planning arrangements for new courses leading up to validation are less well organised. Some course reviews lack objectivity and rigorous analysis. They fail to develop useful action points, to identify who is responsible for ensuring improvement, to set timescales within which action is to be taken, or to identify whether previously-stated objectives have been achieved. The standard report form used in the review does not call for targets for, or analysis of, students' achievements. Students evaluate aspects of course provision by completing a standard questionnaire at regular intervals, but the results are not effectively analysed and appropriate action is not always taken in response. The views of employers linked to courses accredited through ISO 9001 are systematically analysed, but there are no procedures for determining the views of other employers.

52 The academic board does not effectively fulfil one of its stated functions, which is to monitor course team reviews. The college recognises this. It has recently increased the number of meetings of the board from three to six a year in an effort to make it more effective. In an attempt to underline the importance of quality assurance, the senior management team has introduced 'quality management review' as a standard agenda item at senior management team meetings. It is too early to judge the effect of these changes. The college charter is extensive. It contains wide ranging commitments relating to the quality of services on offer. There is some analysis of performance in relation to these commitments, but many aspects of charter performance are not effectively monitored or reported to governors.

53 A staff development, training and appraisal statement has been in place for many years. A staff appraisal scheme came into effect in 1993, before incorporation, but there has been little progress on it since that time. Only one teacher and seven support staff have been appraised. Those staff who have participated have found it useful and supportive. All appraisers have received training, but appraisees have not. The staff-development budget, at 0.5 per cent of the payroll, is low. Many training activities are undertaken within the college at low cost. There is no overall staff-development plan related to the budget nor an effective process for assessing the cost benefit of training activities. Aspects of staff development are monitored by different people and this makes it difficult for the college to assess its effectiveness. Course reviews are expected to identify training needs related to the curriculum, but this does not always happen. Processes for disseminating knowledge gained during a development activity are informal. No training was provided for staff undertaking new roles after the recent restructuring.

54 The college's self-assessment report was produced before the inspection of aspects of cross-college provision in June 1997. It followed the framework outlined in the Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. It was not effectively shared across the college; many staff did not contribute to it or know of its content. The final document was more descriptive than evaluative though it indicated weaknesses previously identified in the specialist inspections. Some of the areas identified in the report as having strengths also had appreciable weaknesses. The judgements contained in the report did not fully accord with those of inspectors.

RESOURCES

Staffing

55 Most full-time teachers are appropriately qualified for the courses they teach. However, few of those teaching on the higher national diploma in arboriculture have direct experience of higher education. Recent appointments, contact with the commercial units on the estate, work placements, and practical sessions which take place in off-site industrial facilities enable staff to keep up to date professionally. Three teachers are external verifiers for vocational courses, and three are national examiners or moderators. Teachers on NVQ courses have the necessary awards to enable them to assess or verify on these courses. However, the proportion of teachers who hold these qualifications is lower than in many other colleges inspected. Some subject areas are highly dependent on part-time teachers. In floristry, for example, the only full-time teacher is also the course manager. She has responsibility for the resources and purchase of flowers, and also co-ordinates the work of five part-time teachers.

56 The number of technician and administrative staff is sufficient to support the teaching and learning. Staff are well qualified and experienced.

Most areas benefit from close technical support. Some technicians have additional contracts as part-time teachers. The two roles are occasionally in conflict. For example, during the inspection, delays had occurred in servicing or repairing some of the horticultural machinery, partly because of a technician's teaching commitments on courses for Houghall Enterprise, and this had adversely affected work in some practical sessions.

Equipment/learning resources

57 Arboriculture students have the benefit of a good range of equipment. There is enough safety equipment to ensure that part-time students can undertake practical tasks if they do not have their own gear. Students have access to some advanced equipment used by a consultant employed by Houghall Enterprises. Generally, there are sufficient horticultural handtools and small equipment, though there has been an increase in equipment losses recently. Most of the horticultural equipment is heavily used; some of it is old and its condition and availability causes difficulties for the teachers. The college's collections of *Meconopsis* and *Sorbus* (sections: *aria*; *micromeles*) are recognised as the prime national resource for these species by the National Council for the Conservation of Garden Plants.

58 The equipment and tack used by equine students is varied and of good quality. Students also have access to a good range of horses. A riding area has been resurfaced to enable it to be used in frost and after wet weather. A bid has been made for external funding to develop a covered riding area. Estate-skills workshops are well equipped and well maintained, and environment courses have an adequate supply of tools and equipment. Much of the agricultural machinery used for teaching purposes is outdated and no longer represents current professional practice. Students have access to better machinery at Houghall Farm, and sometimes at other local farms. Some science laboratory equipment is up to date, but much of it is nearing the end of its useful life.

59 The college library has enough suitable books and journals to support most courses. It also holds a growing collection of compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) databases which can be accessed through the college's computer network. The library is open on weekdays, four evenings a week and Saturday mornings. Two adjacent seminar rooms are suitable for small group work. Planned alterations will go some way to alleviate the library's crowded accommodation and shortage of study spaces. Two information technology rooms are located close to the library and have similar opening hours. One room contains recently-purchased networked computers. It is mainly used for class teaching. Individual students can use it at other times or during lessons with the class teacher's agreement. The other room holds computers which are freely accessible to students. A small information technology facility is being developed in another building for learner support. Despite the recent acquisitions, the number of computers is still below that normally expected for the number

of students in the college. Most classrooms are equipped with basic teaching aids. Other equipment, such as videotape players, are readily available by prior arrangement. Some of the overhead projector transparencies used by teachers were of poor quality and screens were dirty or in an unsatisfactory condition.

60 Agriculture students make frequent and effective use of Houghall Farm for a wide variety of practical tasks, including routine stock-keeping duties. Effective arrangements are made to make the farm's recent production and financial data available to students so that they can use realistic material in their assignments. A cross-country eventing track is under construction across the farm's land. It will be available to equine students and will also be open for commercial use.

61 The woodland, pond and river areas on the estate provide good resources for environment students. The estate includes one of the earliest documented examples of reclaimed industrial land, dating from 1928. The college gardens and sports turf areas are used effectively to provide a good range of amenity horticulture environments to support teaching. The horticulture and floristry sales area provides students with valuable retail experience. Arboriculture students use the college estate and arboretum as a prime resource. Students are also often involved in work in woodlands away from the estate on maintenance or conservation tasks. An imaginative collaborative arrangement with a local animal care centre provides students on the small animal care course with a real work environment in which to learn. The range of animals in the centre, however, is sometimes limited. At present there are no small animal resources on the estate. Plans for this are under consideration.

Accommodation

62 The main college buildings, comprising teaching and recreational accommodation are set among well-maintained formal gardens. Some buildings are linked by a covered way. The original buildings date from 1938 and there were later additions including a workshop block constructed in the 1980s. Most of the buildings are in reasonable condition. The horticultural and floristry unit lies a few hundred metres from the main college. It includes a number of glasshouses, mostly of good quality, a workshop, setting out areas and a small row of cottages which have been converted into offices and small teaching rooms. There is a retail area in one of the glasshouses and a recently opened coffee shop is nearby. The college's farm is run as a commercial enterprise. The farm buildings are situated about a mile from the main college. They include the schools centre, the estate skills workshops and the equine unit. All of these have been converted from other uses to form attractive and effective teaching environments. The estate includes 19 residential houses and another isolated farm building which is currently unused. The college owns 40 acres of summer pasture about four miles away from its main site.

63 Teaching rooms vary in quality. Some are awkwardly shaped or too small for the classes using them. Those in the floristry area are sometimes uncomfortably hot; others, for example in the converted farm buildings, are difficult to heat in the winter. The quality of the furnishing ranges from adequate to poor. Most of the students' living accommodation has been redecorated and refurbished but some remains basic. The junior common room has recently been entirely refurbished and now provides an attractive social area. All the main facilities and communal areas, and most of the classrooms, are accessible to students with restricted mobility.

64 The college buildings are close to a main road into Durham and large signs at the entrance to the college and its gardens give the college a strong local presence. Otherwise, directional signs to the college are poor. Confusingly, the entrance signs refer to Houghall College yet 'Durham College of Agriculture and Horticulture' is prominently displayed on the first building. The imposing entrance to the building immediately at the front of the site does not contain the reception area but leads into an uninviting hall and a stairway to teaching rooms, meeting rooms and the canteen. The college's reception area is within a building in the centre of the site. Rights of way across the estate are clearly marked and well maintained. A discovery trail was laid out in the estate by the local authority, prior to incorporation. At the time of the inspection, however, public information about the estate was poor. Maps were not available for visitors to the coffee shop or retail area. A visitor centre is under development close to the coffee shop.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

65 The college's strengths are:

- the high regard in which it is held in some sectors of the industry it serves
- expanding short courses, contract and consultancy work for industry
- the successful promotion and organisation of NVQs and modern apprenticeships
- strong and productive links with primary, secondary and special schools
- the commitment and expertise of the members of the board of corporation
- its success in achieving and exceeding funding targets and in reducing costs
- effective pre-entry and entry procedures which include the early identification of students who need additional learning support
- good teaching in most practical sessions
- some courses which have good completion and pass rates

-
- appropriately qualified and experienced full-time staff
 - varied resources on the estate and off-site which benefit both students and staff
 - some good, attractive teaching environments.
- 66 To further its development, the college should:
- explore further diversification of its traditional provision
 - complete the development of an effective management structure
 - clarify staff responsibilities and improve leadership in relation to academic matters
 - improve the quality of financial and other information supplied to governors
 - place more emphasis on financial planning and forecasting
 - improve internal communication and staff relationships
 - involve staff more in the planning process and encourage the setting of performance targets
 - establish greater consistency in the arrangements for tutorial and learning support
 - improve the quality of teaching in classroom-based sessions
 - take steps to improve completion and pass rates on some courses
 - develop a common framework for quality assurance across the college and clearly allocate responsibilities for quality assurance
 - speed the implementation of the staff appraisal scheme
 - ensure that staff-development activities are aligned to both the needs of the college and the individual
 - reduce the college's dependence on part-time teachers in some areas of work, and the lack of technicians due to their part-time teaching commitments on short courses for industry.

FIGURES

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- 1 Percentage FEFC-funded student numbers by age
(as at November 1996)

 - 2 Percentage FEFC-funded student numbers by level of study
(as at November 1996)

 - 3 FEFC-funded student numbers by mode of attendance and
curriculum area (as at November 1996)

 - 4 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents
(as at November 1996)

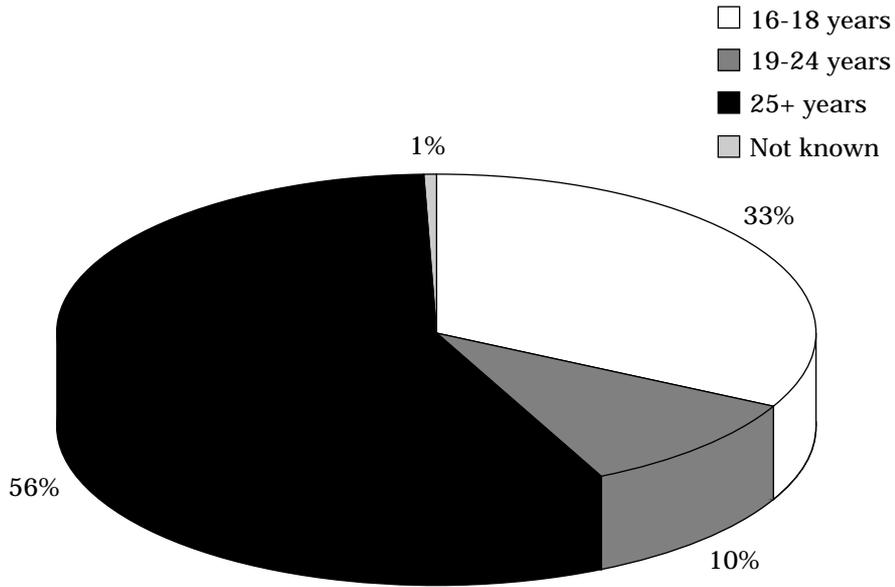
 - 5 Income (for 12 months to July 1996)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)

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

Figure 1

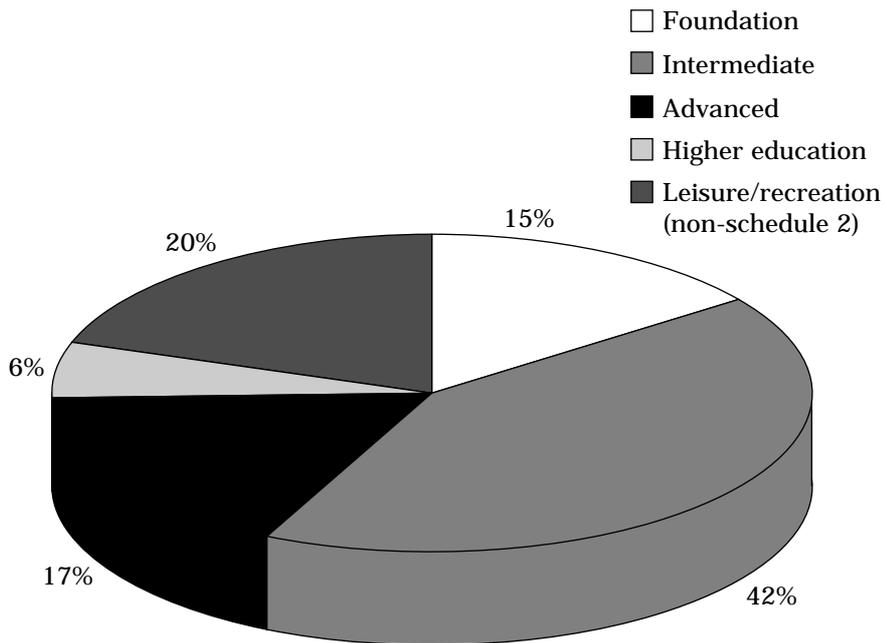
Durham College of Agriculture and Horticulture: FEFC-funded student numbers by age (as at November 1996)



Student numbers: 742

Figure 2

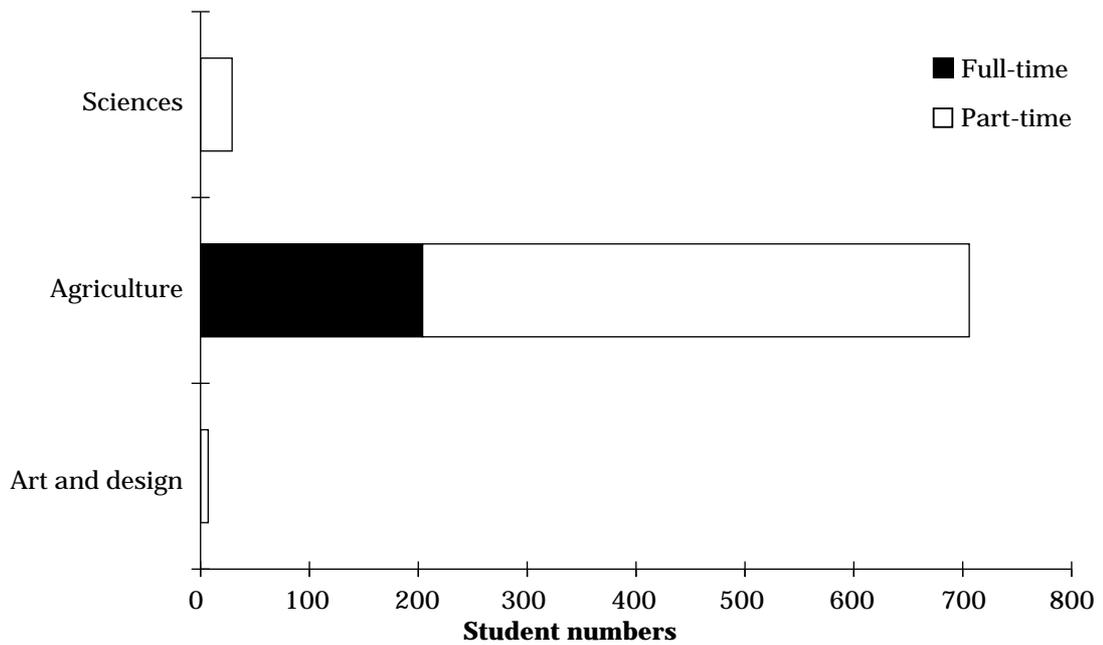
Durham College of Agriculture and Horticulture: FEFC-funded student numbers by level of study (as at November 1996)



Student numbers: 742

Figure 3

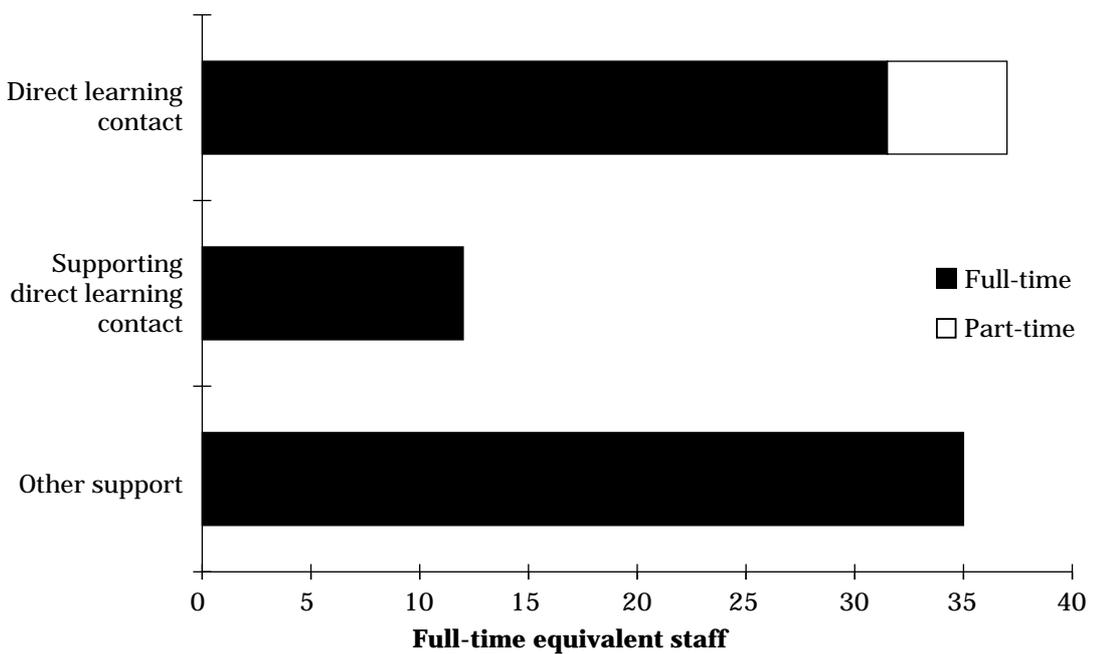
Durham College of Agriculture and Horticulture: FEFC-funded student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (as at November 1996)



Student numbers: 742

Figure 4

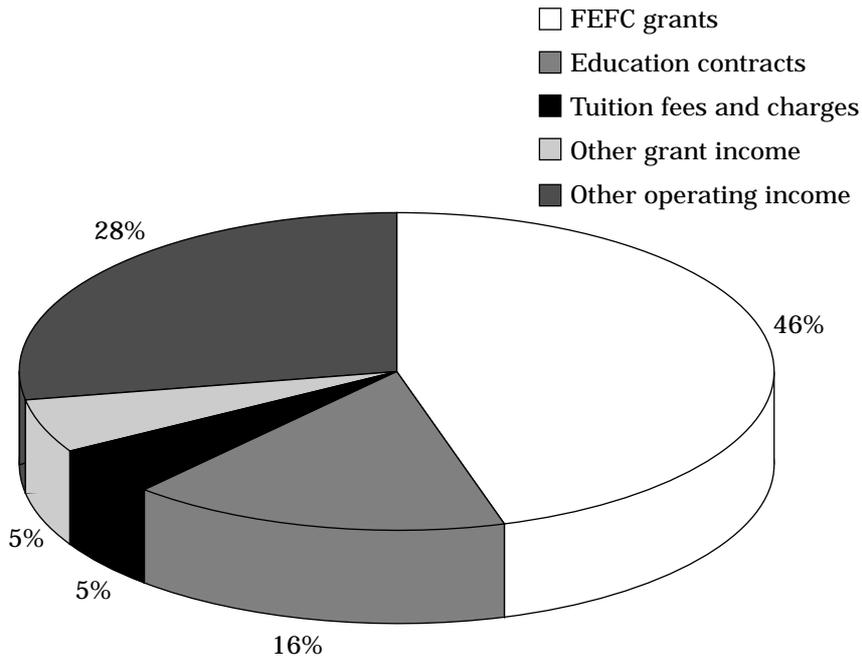
Durham College of Agriculture and Horticulture: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at November 1996)



Full-time equivalent staff: 84

Figure 5

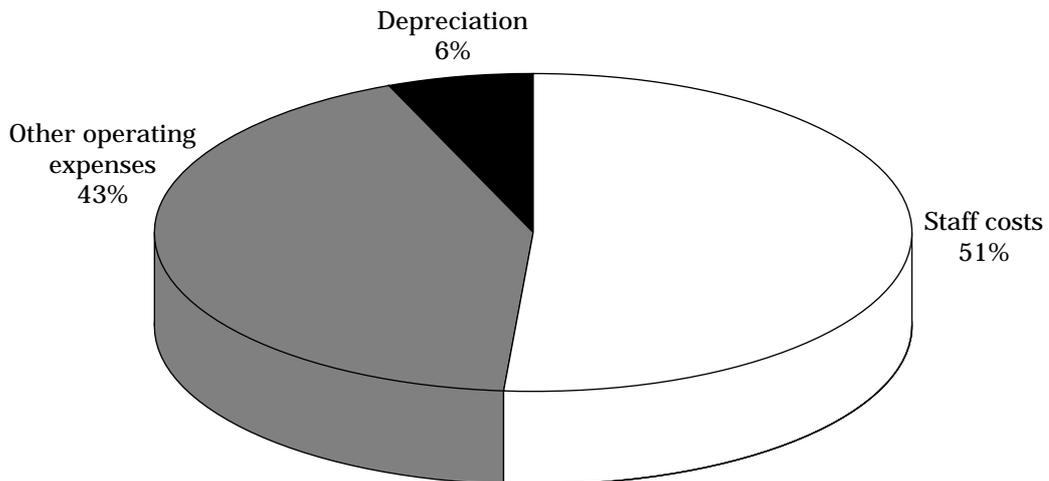
Durham College of Agriculture and Horticulture: income (for 12 months to July 1996)



Income: £3,223,000

Figure 6

Durham College of Agriculture and Horticulture: expenditure (for 12 months to July 1996)



Expenditure: £3,223,000

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