

Ludlow College

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1997-98**

**THE
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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 according to a four-year cycle. It also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum, disseminates good practice and advises the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

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

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Grade Descriptors

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

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

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

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

Retention and Pass Rates

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

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

Summary

Ludlow College

West Midlands Region

Inspected March 1998

Ludlow College is a small designated sixth form college in South Shropshire. It is the major provider of post-16 education in this rural area, offering a wide range of courses in nine of the FEFC's 10 programme areas. In keeping with its mission to meet the needs of the local community, it provides many courses for adults. The self-assessment report was produced by a cross-college team, assisted by an external consultant. Inspectors agreed with the college's grades in two areas but considered that the college had been somewhat overgenerous in its judgements. Little progress had been made in rectifying some of the weaknesses identified during the previous inspection.

Overall, standards of teaching and learning are good and in English, psychology and sociology they are outstanding. Most students who complete their courses achieve good results. However, student retention rates have deteriorated over the past three years. Students receive good support and their progress is carefully monitored. They have opportunities to participate in a wide variety of additional activities. Accommodation is carefully maintained but there are weaknesses linked to the nature of the buildings, most of which are listed and subject to planning constraints. Access for students with restricted mobility is

poor. Resources to support learning are adequate. Governors are supportive and committed to the success of the college. The college has close relationships with partner schools, other local colleges and the community. The management information system is underdeveloped and the financial management of the college is weak. The college should address: weaker aspects of teaching and learning; poor retention and achievement rates on some courses; the lack of clear strategic direction; the absence of performance indicators for quality assurance and management; the uneconomic size of teaching groups; the poor availability and use of management information; and weaknesses in financial management.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Science	3	Support for students	2
English, psychology and sociology	1	General resources	3
Basic education and access to higher education	2	Quality assurance	3
		Governance	3
		Management	4

The College and its Mission

1 Ludlow College was established in 1977 as an open access sixth form college on the sites of a former boys' grammar school and girls' high school. The college is the main provider of post-16 education in South Shropshire and also serves adjoining areas of Powys and Hereford and Worcester. It offers a wide range of courses at general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level), some at general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) level and general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs) at intermediate and advanced level. Other vocational provision includes a National Nursery Examinations Board (NNEB) course, a BTEC national diploma in performing arts and courses in information technology (IT) and business administration. There is a substantial programme of daytime and evening community education. The college places a strong emphasis on enrichment activities for full-time students aged 16 to 19. These include an extensive sport and recreation programme, with many students taking part in team games. Students perform several theatrical productions every year in Ludlow and on tour in the neighbouring towns and villages. Annual exchange visits take place with France, Spain and Poland. Each year, the college organises a residential course at Durham University for students to experience working in an urban environment.

2 Shropshire is a large, mainly rural and sparsely-populated county. The average age of the population is rising, especially in the rural areas. In South Shropshire, 25 per cent of the population is aged over 65. Throughout the rural area, decisions about education are strongly influenced by the availability of transport. Students are having to pay increasing contributions to transport costs as a result of cuts in county council subsidies. The South Shropshire economy is still largely based on agriculture. There is a declining number of large firms and an increasing number of

relatively small firms. Unemployment is generally higher than in the rest of the county. Many jobs are in the leisure and tourism industries and in health care. Ludlow College is one of the main employers in the area.

3 The participation rate of students in education after the age of 16 fell slightly in Shropshire in 1997, and this was reflected in a decrease in full-time enrolments at the college. The college has three partner 11 to 16 schools in South Shropshire and two partner schools in Hereford and Worcester. The college also draws students from a wide range of other schools, including the independent sector. There are three other sixth form colleges and three general further education colleges within the wider geographical area served by the college.

4 During the last three years the college has increased its total enrolments, mainly by an increase in part-time adult students. At 31 July 1997, the college had 1,808 enrolments. There were 530 full-time students and 864 part-time students enrolled on courses funded by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). There were also 414 students on leisure and recreational courses. At the time of the inspection, the college employed 46 full-time equivalent staff, of whom 10 full-time equivalents were support staff. There were also 35 part-time teachers on the college's community education programme. The teaching of the college is organised into six faculties: science and mathematics; business and IT; creative arts; humanities; social sciences; and communications. Two senior tutors lead the pastoral teams in the college.

5 In its mission statement, the college makes a commitment to provide high-quality education and training in the Ludlow area to meet the needs of the whole community. Close liaison with partner schools enables the college to maintain a curriculum that responds to the needs of full-time students aged 16 to 19. Adults may also enrol on these programmes.

Context

The college's provision for adults includes a full-time course for access to higher education and a range of vocational and non-vocational courses. A significant part of the college's work is in basic skills for adult students, most of which takes place on college premises but with a growing proportion based at other centres in Ludlow, Craven Arms and Tenbury Wells. To fulfil its mission, the college is working closely with the other colleges in Shropshire to develop a more coherent pattern of further education for the county as a whole.

The Inspection

6 The college was inspected in the week beginning 16 March 1998. The inspection team had previously analysed the college's self-assessment report and considered information about the college provided by other divisions of the FEFC. The college submitted data on students' achievements for the three years from 1995 to 1997. These were checked by two inspectors against primary sources such as class registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies. The college had some

difficulty in providing computerised data relating to enrolments and achievements in the period 1993 to 1995. The inspection was carried out by eight inspectors, working for a total of 29 days, and an auditor for five days. They observed lessons and tutorials, examined students' work and college documents and met managers, governors, staff, students, parents and representatives of external agencies.

7 Of the 42 lessons inspected, 69 per cent were rated good or outstanding and 10 per cent less than satisfactory or poor. This profile compares with 61 per cent and 8 per cent, respectively, for all lessons observed during 1996-97, according to *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1996-97: Chief inspector's annual report*. The average level of attendance in the lessons inspected, 85 per cent, was similar to the average of 84 per cent for sixth form colleges in 1996-97. The average number of students present in the classes inspected was 8.7. This compares with a figure for all colleges in 1996-97 of 10.8, as recorded in the chief inspector's annual report. The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE AS/A level	6	6	5	3	0	20
GCSE	1	3	0	0	0	4
Basic education	3	4	3	0	1	11
Other*	3	3	1	0	0	7
Total	13	16	9	3	1	42

*includes access to higher education

Curriculum Areas

Science

Grade 3

8 Inspectors observed 12 lessons in biology, chemistry, physical education and physics. The college's self-assessment report included some, but not all, of the key strengths and weaknesses identified during the inspection of science. Although lesson observations contributed to the college's self-assessment process, the college did not identify significant weaknesses in the teaching of most science subjects.

Key strengths

- well-planned practical work with clear links to theory lessons
- students' achievements on most GCE A level courses
- good progression of students from science courses into higher education
- well-managed individual subject areas
- contribution of the physical education department to college enrichment activities

Weaknesses

- some uninspiring teaching
- failure to use teaching methods to take enough account of the wide range of students' abilities
- declining retention rates
- lack of a strategic direction for the curriculum area
- lack of industrial experience of teachers

9 Overall, the quality of teaching in science is satisfactory. Practical sessions are generally well planned and, as the self-assessment indicates, clearly linked to theory lessons. A few lessons were good or outstanding. This was particularly the case in physical education, and in biology as part of the access to higher

education programme. A lesson for second-year physical education students on comparative approaches to sport was lively and well resourced and had clear aims that encouraged students to work well together. However, in a significant number of lessons the teaching lacked flair and failed to inspire students. Some teachers did not address the wide range of ability and differing learning needs of students; some students were not sufficiently challenged by the work while others struggled to follow the lesson. Teachers mark students' work carefully and provide supportive and informative comments which help them to improve their performance.

10 Students' attendance is good. They work effectively in small groups and in more formal situations. Their written work is well presented and of an appropriate standard. Appropriate attention is paid to health and safety requirements in practical sessions. As the self-assessment report states, pass rates on GCE A level courses, including those at grades A to C, are good. Physical education pass rates at grades A to C are well above the national average for sixth form colleges. Retention rates on some courses are low and have declined over the past three years. While retention on the two-year GCE A level course in physical education was poor in 1997, on the one-year course to which some students transferred the pass rate was 100 per cent. The college has a good record of students progressing to higher education from science courses. Some subject areas maintain contact with these students and use the details of how they are progressing as part of their marketing. Students have gained some notable successes at regional and national level in science and sport, including two students selected to play for England in rounders and women's rugby in 1997.

11 Individual subject areas are well managed. The subject-specific induction programme for students is well planned. The science faculty is well run on a day-to-day basis but lacks clear

Curriculum Areas

strategic direction. The separate areas do not work closely together. The action plan accompanying the self-assessment report contained a number of proposals but lacked any performance indicators or timescales. The physical education department makes a substantial contribution to the college-wide programme of curriculum enrichment activities.

12 Most teachers have little or dated industrial experience, an issue signalled in the self-assessment report. This limits the vocational relevance that they can bring to the teaching of the up-to-date syllabuses carefully chosen to suit the needs and interests of their students. Technicians are effectively deployed. The laboratories are enlivened by students' work and subject-related information. All subjects have small but high-quality library areas in the laboratories and up-to-date careers literature. There is good text book provision. Specialist equipment to support practical work is appropriate but in the physical sciences some equipment is dated and there is no rolling programme for its replacement, a weakness identified in the self-assessment report. The physical education department lacks

data-logging equipment to enable it to make full use of its excellent fitness equipment. There is little evidence of use of computers in science lessons or of wordprocessing skills in students' work.

Examples of students' achievements in sciences, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GCE A level biology	Retention (%)	100	47	77
	Pass rate (%)	85	57	88
GCE A level chemistry	Retention (%)	94	57	47
	Pass rate (%)	65	86	86
GCE A level physical education	Retention (%)	67	71	33
	Pass rate (%)	100	100	100
GCE A level physics	Retention (%)	100	71	62
	Pass rate (%)	100	92	75
GCE A level social biology	Retention (%)	100	82	50
	Pass rate (%)	80	89	50

Source: college data

Note: all pass rates are two-year programmes

Curriculum Areas

English, Psychology and Sociology

Grade 1

13 Inspectors observed 12 lessons, covering English language and literature, psychology and sociology at GCE A level and GCSE. They agreed with most of the judgements reached in the two self-assessment reports produced for this area.

Key strengths

- outstanding teaching and learning
- good examination pass rates
- schemes of work and subject guides
- the quality of students' written and oral work
- appropriate marking of students' work
- the quality of specialist classrooms, including outstanding displays

Weaknesses

- retention in some subjects
- students' access to the IT centre

14 The quality of teaching and learning in this curriculum area is outstanding. As noted in the self-assessment report, there are well-devised schemes of work and lesson plans. Lessons have clear aims and objectives. They are well managed by teachers who use an appropriate mixture of teaching methods. These include teacher exposition, small group work, the effective use of audiovisual aids and many well-chosen handouts. Teachers take care to ensure that students understand the specialist language of each discipline. In English literature, students were alerted to the subtleties of poetic language by being asked to read aloud and to emphasise variations in the poet's voice. In most classes, students' oral skills are good. Many students can successfully develop their

ideas and arguments, support them with reference to evidence and test assumptions. The teaching of GCSE effectively meets the needs of students, many of whom are repeating the course. In a few lessons, teachers did not ensure that all students were actively involved. Teachers provide careful guidance for students on assessment requirements.

15 Students' written work is generally of a high standard. It shows a good understanding of the theories and applications of the disciplines studied. In psychology and sociology, students are able to support arguments with well-developed examples and relevant case studies. Answers to essay questions are often written in fluent and crisp prose and the best work shows imaginative insight. Students' achievements in external examinations are good, as noted in the self-assessment report. Pass rates in GCSE examinations have been consistently above national averages for sixth form colleges and retention has mostly been high. At GCE A level, pass rates, including those at grades A to C, have mainly been at or above national averages for sixth form colleges. Retention has been fairly good but fell in some subjects in 1997. Although the college's comparisons of GCSE scores at entry and achievements in GCE A level indicate that some students achieve results above those that could have been predicted, there has been no consistent analysis of added value. Information on students' destinations shows that many have proceeded to higher education courses related to the subjects they have taken at the college. Students and staff also take part in enrichment activities: for example, one member of the English staff is responsible for the production of a college play each year.

16 The management of these curriculum areas is based upon subject departments, some of which have very small numbers of staff. Some departmental plans are produced, based upon each subject's needs, but they do not clearly relate to the college's strategic plan. Students

Curriculum Areas

receive well-produced course handbooks with clear information about the subjects they are studying and the work expected of them. Brief departmental meetings record key decisions. There is some target-setting at departmental level in relation to matters such as recruitment, retention and examination achievements. Although most students aged 16 to 18 are full time, efforts have been made to meet the needs of mature students. The English department has productive subject liaison with partner schools. Conferences in psychology with visiting speakers have taken place in 1995 and 1998, organised by the college's staff. There are links between the English department and local authors and sociology students have attended external conferences.

17 Many teachers have training and development lead body awards. Books, journals, videos and CD-ROMs are adequate for students' needs. Each subject has attractive and well-furnished base rooms. Displays of posters and students' work are of outstanding quality and effectively convey positive messages about the subjects being studied. Students complained that they had difficulty in gaining ready access

to the 'drop-in' IT centre, a weakness identified in the self-assessment report. No action has yet been taken on this. Not all students had received induction in the use of the computers available in the library.

Examples of students' achievements in English, psychology and sociology, 1995 to 1997

Course grouping		1995	1996	1997
GCE A level English	Retention (%)	93	83	71
	Pass rate (%)	97	93	94
GCE A level psychology	Retention (%)	95	60	72
	Pass rate (%)	70	76	90
GCE A level sociology	Retention (%)	90	73	82
	Pass rate (%)	94	100	61
GCSE English	Retention (%)	100	82	83
	Pass rate (%)	81	63	70
GCSE psychology and sociology	Retention (%)	85	81	81
	Pass rate (%)	79	57	81

Source: college data

Curriculum Areas

Basic Education and Access to Higher Education

Grade 2

18 Inspectors observed 18 lessons, covering basic skills provision in literacy, numeracy, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), access to higher education; and courses for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. They agreed with most of the judgements in the college's self-assessment. They considered that the college had overstated some of its strengths and they identified a few additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- the high quality of most teaching
- the good progress made by students
- pass rates in access to higher education and the vocational foundation programme
- well-structured and effectively managed provision
- good-quality learning materials for most courses

Weaknesses

- insufficient account taken of individual learning needs in some lessons for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- low retention rates on access to higher education courses
- lack of a clear curriculum framework in provision for adults with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- inappropriate deployment of support staff in courses for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities

19 Inspectors agreed with the college that most teaching is well planned and that teachers use an appropriate variety of teaching methods.

Thirteen of the lessons observed were good or outstanding. The teaching of communications and literacy, and of English in access to higher education and basic skills, was of particularly high quality. In basic skills provision, students have useful learning plans that enable them to work at a pace which meets their individual needs. Teaching and assessment on the access to higher education course are of consistently good quality. Teachers provide students with an appropriate balance of support, encouragement and intellectual challenge. In courses for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, much teaching is good. However, some teachers do not take sufficient account of students' different learning needs. Schemes of work for these courses lack detail and a few teachers do not prepare lesson plans.

Inspection findings did not confirm that individual learning plans were fully effective. An appropriate range of accreditation is offered. Most teachers regularly review students' progress with them and keep detailed records of their achievements.

20 Students make good progress. Inspectors agreed with the college that students gain in confidence and self-esteem and that most achieve their primary learning goals. Pass rates for students who complete the access to higher education programme are high: in 1995-96 and 1996-97, 81 per cent and 100 per cent, respectively, gained the access certificate.

Increasing numbers of students in basic skills provision choose to enter for externally accredited awards and are successful: 21 per cent of students in 1995-96 and 32 per cent in 1996-97. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve well on the vocational foundation programme. An average of 77 per cent have achieved their full qualification aims over the last two years and the remaining 23 per cent have partially achieved them. The college is aware that some adults with complex learning difficulties have made little progress over several years. Staff have taken steps to

Curriculum Areas

address this issue but it is too early to assess their success. On most courses, retention rates are high but in access to higher education they are low, declining from 62 per cent in 1995-96 to 55 per cent in 1996-97. Most students who complete the access to higher education course progress to higher education. The college recognises students' broader achievements, for example, by displaying students' work and encouraging students to publish their writing.

21 Courses are well planned and effectively managed. Teachers meet regularly and communications are good. The provision is regularly reviewed and appropriate curriculum developments are introduced to make further improvements. The recently-established practical skills courses for adults with learning difficulties are beginning to offer students useful preparation for vocational study and a range of relevant practical skills. They do not offer structured tutorial support and planned progression routes. Programmes for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are developed and reviewed jointly through good links with appropriate agencies. Some courses include social events and residential visits to enrich the curriculum.

22 Inspection findings confirmed that trained volunteers are used effectively in basic skills. Few staff have specialist qualifications in teaching students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Some teachers do not plan the deployment of support staff for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and in a few cases, these staff do not effectively support students' learning. These issues were not identified in the self-assessment. There is a good range of learning materials for most subjects. Teachers make good use of authentic materials such as newspapers and job applications in literacy classes. As the action plan indicates, the college has recently improved resources for the teaching of ESOL. Most workshops and equipment for practical classes are adequate but there are few resources for

courses in independent living and cookery. Suitable protective clothing is not provided for students on these courses.

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Support for Students

Grade 2

23 Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report. They found a few additional weaknesses. The college has taken action to rectify some of the weaknesses it identified.

Key strengths

- well-established methods of recruitment
- high standard of publicity materials
- carefully-planned enrolment and induction
- effective additional learning support
- thorough monitoring of students' progress
- the range of information and services on careers

Weaknesses

- underdeveloped scheme of work for tutorials
- poor location of the careers and student services area
- lack of a professional counselling or student welfare service

24 There are well-established systems for informing potential students and their parents about the college's courses, including visits to local schools and agricultural shows, market stalls and advertising in the local press and on the radio. The college also mails college information directly to pupils at partner schools. As the self-assessment report states, publicity materials for the college are of a high standard. Students found the guidance that they received from the college before they started helpful. An important feature of the recruitment process is the 'taster' days, at which students have an opportunity to experience a variety of subjects and the college's enrichment programme.

25 Inspectors agreed with the college that there is careful planning for the enrolment and induction of students. Tutors receive briefings and detailed documentation for enrolment and induction. At enrolment, students have an appointment with their personal tutor to complete forms and to finalise their choice of course and subjects. There are established arrangements for transfer between courses. Most students who had changed courses had found staff helpful and supportive.

26 The college has an effective system for providing additional learning support. All students on vocational or academic programmes are assessed to establish whether they need assistance with communication or numeracy. Most students who are offered this support make use of the service. Learning materials are adapted to meet the requirements of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities; audio cassettes, specialist software and lesson notes in large print are available. Detailed written documentation is kept on each student receiving support and tutors and students are informed regularly of the progress they make.

27 Students have regular timetabled tutorials. Those inspected were of a satisfactory standard. Tutors meet frequently to co-ordinate and review the programme of tutorial activities but the overall scheme of work lacks detail, a weakness not identified in the self-assessment report. Students' progress is carefully monitored and regular profiles of achievement are used effectively to update records of achievement. Some students were not aware that profiles were building towards their records of achievement. Where appropriate, parents are kept informed about students' progress. Most students find tutors helpful and supportive.

28 The college provides a good range of information and services on careers and progression to higher education, a strength noted in the self-assessment and during the previous inspection. There are thorough

Cross-college Provision

records of students' destinations. Careers resources include CD-ROMs, videos, books and leaflets and help with letters of application. Local careers service advisers regularly provide students with individual guidance interviews and careers talks. Careers advice and guidance are also an important part of tutorials. Some students considered that the college did not give the same emphasis to progression to employment as to higher education. The college offers a service after examination results are published to provide guidance to students. The careers and student service area is poorly located, away from the main areas used by students.

29 The college does not have a personal counselling or student welfare service, a weakness identified in its self-assessment report. It provides students with lists of contacts and talks on how to obtain support on personal and welfare issues from agencies outside the college. However, a recent survey of students' perceptions indicated that only 50 per cent of those who responded had found out about these services from the college. There are sufficient childcare facilities available for those who require them.

General Resources

Grade 3

30 Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the college's self-assessment report, although they considered that some weaknesses had been understated.

Key strengths

- careful adaptation of listed buildings to provide a good working environment
- well-maintained accommodation and excellent displays of students' work
- good review of use of space
- good sports facilities

- appropriate provision of learning resources

Weaknesses

- poor student refectory and communal areas
- limited access for students with restricted mobility
- external and internal directional signposting
- lack of an equipment replacement programme
- weaknesses in the provision of IT and library resources

31 The college has a distinctive variety of accommodation, dating from fifteenth-century Grade II listed buildings to a modern sports centre. The two sites are in an attractive town centre location. The buildings have been sympathetically adapted within planning constraints to provide a good working environment. The college has an effective planned maintenance programme. The accommodation is well maintained and most rooms have been refurbished. There are some exceptions, especially the refectory block which is in a dilapidated condition, as noted in the previous inspection. Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that there are high-quality displays of students' work and other materials throughout the college. Signposting externally and internally is poor and reception areas are not clearly indicated. The college plans to address this issue. Governors have approved plans for a major new building project that is to include a new refectory, a central reception area and a resource centre.

32 The college has plans for making more effective use of its accommodation and reviews its space utilisation annually. The nature of the buildings and the related planning constraints limit scope for development. The college is aware that access for students with restricted

Cross-college Provision

mobility needs improvement. Some ramps and disabled toilets have been provided, but wheelchair users cannot, for example, reach the library. Further useful minor improvements suggested by staff and students have not yet been implemented. Students' sports facilities are good but their communal facilities are poor. There are sufficient staff rooms of adequate size and layout but few are equipped with computers.

33 Bids for capital expenditure are made annually by heads of faculty. The college has a rolling replacement programme for IT but not for other equipment. The equipment for IT is being improved through a three-year development plan. The ratio of computers to students of 1:7 is good, but about 25 per cent of the computers are of low specification. Arrangements for students to use computers in the 'drop-in' centre are inadequate. The college's self-assessment did not fully acknowledge this. Computers are networked at only one of the two sites and only one workstation has access to the internet. A new fault reporting system has brought about improvements in the technician support for IT.

34 The college's overall expenditure on learning resources is adequate but the library budget is low. However, the quantity and range of library books, periodicals, audiovisual aids and CD-ROMs is adequate to meet current demand. Students who met inspectors spoke highly of the library services provided. There is a useful student guide to the library and its facilities. The library is staffed by a qualified librarian and the opening hours meet students' needs. A library committee meets termly, but, as the college recognises in its self-assessment report, formal links with curriculum areas are underdeveloped. Private study places in the library are insufficient for the number of students in the college.

Quality Assurance

Grade 3

35 Inspectors agreed with a number of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report, although they considered that it offered no evidence to support some of the strengths, and at least one of the weaknesses, listed. They concluded that the college had overstated some strengths.

Key strengths

- well-established procedures for course review
- the annual review of teaching staff
- the formal system of lesson observation
- comprehensive students' perception reports
- a well-publicised college charter

Weaknesses

- lack of a formal college-wide structure for quality assurance
- little use of performance indicators in the assessment of quality
- no designated individual or group with oversight of quality assurance
- quality assurance procedures that do not cover all aspects of the college's work

36 The college claims in its self-assessment report that the importance of the quality assurance system is fully recognised and accepted by the college staff and its value appreciated. Inspectors found little evidence to support this statement. There is no cross-college structure for quality assurance with well-defined responsibilities and reporting procedures. No senior member of staff has responsibility for the development of a comprehensive quality assurance system. There is no cross-college group with oversight of

Cross-college Provision

quality assurance. Following the last inspection, the college established an academic board whose membership is drawn from senior and middle management. Its functions are to provide a forum for discussion of cross-college issues and to act as a link between senior management and other college groups. It meets regularly but its responsibilities are loosely defined and its agendas are not clearly focused. There is some overlap between its work and that of the college's curriculum group. It rarely advises the principal on quality, planning or curriculum developments.

37 The college has a well-established system of course review. At the end of each course, a review is completed by the course leader, using a common college-wide format. All GCE A level and GCSE courses, vocational courses and access programmes are reviewed. The reviews are well prepared, drawing upon consultation with staff and students and, where appropriate, outside bodies. They are compiled before the confirmation of students' achievements. A statistical analysis is added once examination results are known. The lack of formal discussion of the complete course reviews, including the data on students' achievements, does not promote a wide understanding of issues related to quality. Course reviews are used by the principal in discussions with heads of faculty but are not considered for the college as a whole.

38 Staff are generally unaware of college targets and there is little use of performance indicators as a method of improving quality. The strategic plan contains few performance indicators for students' achievements. These are rarely translated into performance indicators at course or programme level. Teachers are encouraged to compare students' achievements against national averages. A system for assessing the value added to students' achievements by comparing their GCE A level results with the grades they achieved earlier at GCSE, is being developed.

39 The college has a useful annual review system for teaching staff, introduced in 1997 to replace the previous appraisal system. Each member of the teaching staff evaluates their performance, then has a review meeting with their line manager. An agreed record of the meeting is produced, containing objectives for the following year and requests for training and staff development. The objectives are rarely quantified. The system is to be extended to support staff in 1998. Observations of teaching and learning are well organised. Every teacher has at least one lesson observed each year, usually by a line manager. Verbal and written feedback is provided to a standard format but the lessons are not graded. The strengths and weaknesses identified in a lesson observation contribute to the teacher's annual review.

40 There is an appropriate and adequate range of staff development. All full-time teachers receive a minimum of three days' development and training provided in the college each year. These activities are organised on a cross-college basis and designed, in part, to meet the training needs identified in annual staff reviews. Support staff are not usually involved. A budget is allocated to allow teachers to attend external training events but there is no record of the total amount that the college spends on staff development. The college liaises with other colleges in Shropshire and with sixth form colleges in the region in the identification and meeting of staff development needs.

41 The college's surveys of students' views provide a valuable contribution to the college's assessment of its courses and cross-college activities. Full-time students complete forms giving their perceptions of their experiences at induction and on the completion of a course. The forms are analysed by course teachers and staff responsible for cross-college activities. The findings contribute to course reviews and to future arrangements for induction.

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42 The college's charter, which outlines its commitment to students, employers and the community and the responsibilities of students, is circulated to all students and is available in reception areas. A weakness identified in the self-assessment report, that many students were unaware of the college charter and the complaints procedure, has now been addressed. Inspectors confirmed that students are now well informed about the charter and the complaints procedure.

43 Preparation of the college's self-assessment report was co-ordinated by a self-assessment group chaired by the vice-principal and assisted by an external consultant. All staff were involved. Most of the self-assessment reports for curriculum areas were thorough and comprehensive, drawing upon course reviews, lesson observations, surveys of students' perceptions and other sources of information. The self-assessment report was not formally approved by the governing body.

Governance

Grade 3

44 The inspection team agreed with many of the strengths outlined in the self-assessment report, but considered that there are a number of additional weaknesses to be addressed.

Key strengths

- broad range of governors' skill and experience
- highly-committed governors
- effective clerking arrangements
- appropriate committee structure

Weaknesses

- insufficient review of management accounts
- inadequate monitoring of progress against strategic objectives

- no formal procedure for the recruitment of governors
- lack of comprehensive standing orders

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

46 Under the college's unique instrument of government, the governing body has authority to appoint only one category of governors, a minority of the governing body. The authority to appoint the other categories of governors is with a number of external organisations and groups. Within these constraints, the governing body works to ensure that suitable appointments are made. For example, where a potential new governor has been identified by the governing body, a suggestion is made to the relevant external organisation. A search committee has also been established to consider proposals for new governors. Procedures for the appointment of governors have not been documented and published. When gaps in experience have been identified, for example, in marketing, they have been addressed by seeking a candidate who could bring those skills to the governing body. Governors come from a wide range of backgrounds and bring a broad range of skills and experience to the college. They have also completed skills profiles which state their particular areas of expertise. The results of this exercise, however, have not been incorporated into a formal skills audit report. As the college's self-assessment states, women are under-represented on the governing body.

47 The inspection confirmed that new governors are provided with appropriate guidance documentation on appointment. However, no continuous governor development

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and training programme has been established. Governors are kept informed of developments and issues affecting further education through presentations at committee meetings, the dissemination of documents, and occasional attendance at relevant seminars. A recently-adopted scheme aims to link governors on the staff and curriculum committee with appropriate programme areas in the college.

48 The high level of commitment by governors is reflected in the considerable amount of time they devote to the college. There is good attendance at governing body and committee meetings. The governing body has recently undertaken an evaluation of its own effectiveness, based on a questionnaire, which it intends to repeat annually.

49 As indicated in the self-assessment report, clerking arrangements are effective. The governing body has an appropriate committee structure, each committee having defined terms of reference agreed by the full governing body. Meetings are properly called in accordance with an annual timetable, and are recorded in appropriately-detailed minutes. Corporation papers, excepting confidential items, are available for public inspection in the office of the principal's secretary but no public statement has been made as to their availability. The clerk maintains a register of the financial and personal interests of governors. This does not include the principal and other senior members of staff with significant financial responsibilities and some specific areas of financial interest are not covered. The register is updated annually and is available for public inspection. The governing body has adopted a code of conduct, but it does not cover issues such as the college's approach to openness. The governing body's standing orders are not comprehensive and do not include important matters to guide its conduct and that of its committees.

50 Governors have been involved in developing the college's mission statement and strategic plan. Due to the timing of governing

body meetings, the 1997-2000 strategic plan and three-year financial forecast were not formally approved by the governing body before being sent to the FEFC. Instead, the final versions were discussed by the chairman and the principal. Governors' review of progress against strategic objectives is limited by the management information they receive. The strategic plan does not include an operating statement with specific quantified targets against which progress towards the achievement of strategic objectives could be monitored. The full governing body does not receive comprehensive and regular management information on student enrolments, retention and achievements and on the achievement of unit targets. Although governors are well aware of the college's financial position, they do not receive frequent and sufficiently detailed management accounts.

Management

Grade 4

51 The inspection team was unable to agree with the college's assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of management. Although the self-assessment covered all aspects of management, several strengths were claimed in areas where inspection evidence revealed weaknesses. Inspectors also identified some additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- staff understanding of the college's mission
- strong links with a range of external bodies
- the development of a wide curriculum and community programme

Weaknesses

- insufficient use of clear and coherent objectives and targets

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- lack of an operating statement
- inadequately defined management roles and responsibilities
- underdeveloped use of management information
- inadequate financial monitoring

52 The college's senior management team consists of the principal, the vice-principal, the assistant principal and the finance manager. It meets at least once a week. The role of the team has not been adequately defined and its meetings cover a wide range of issues, many of which are minor operational matters.

53 The construction of the college's strategic plan did not include a formal process for obtaining contributions from staff. The plan does not enable staff to have a clear understanding of the college's targets and to use these in planning curriculum and cross-college areas. The self-assessment report noted that target-setting was not sufficiently specific. The strategic plan contains six strategic objectives. Two key objectives are not broken down into the actions that the college will need to take to achieve them. Few of the objectives are costed. There is no annual operating statement to guide staff on the objectives and targets for the forthcoming year. The absence of an operating statement makes it difficult for the college to monitor its progress. There are no realistic and quantifiable financial targets. A significant shortfall in student enrolments in autumn 1997, together with its financial implications, was not identified until late in December 1997.

54 Staff understand the college's mission. The college has expanded from a base of GCE A level provision to offer a curriculum that gives a wide range of opportunities to full-time and part-time students. However, not all staff are fully convinced that there should be a widening of its provision. Communications in the college are promoted through a weekly newsletter. There are meetings of a number of groups on a regular

basis. Faculty groups meet every two weeks and there is a full staff meeting every five weeks.

55 The college has strong links with a range of organisations, including local schools, colleges and community groups. There is close liaison with partner schools, including some useful links at subject level. Local schools value the opportunities the college offers for their pupils. The college plays an important part in the work of the Shropshire Principals' Association. The local education authority (LEA) views the college as a valuable partner in extending post-16 provision and supporting students in the area. The local TEC values the college's broad and developing role in the community. The college is an active member of a number of community groups.

56 The self-assessment report acknowledged that there was a lack of clarity about expectations of some postholders. Since the report was written, the college has addressed the need to define the role and responsibilities of heads of faculty. However, the job description for these posts does not offer a comprehensive guide to the responsibilities involved. Most other job descriptions lack an adequate statement of their purpose and the requirements to be met. Senior managers do not have formal objectives to make clear the level of performance required of them. The college's management structure has changed several times in recent years. Responsibility for quality assurance has been assigned to three different managers in the past two years. The management structure at head of faculty level has been disrupted by the recent loss of middle managers. Nearly all the heads of faculty are in positions that are new to them. A further change in the structure was being planned at the time of the inspection.

57 The college has deployed staff flexibly in pursuit of its mission to maintain a wide range of courses that meet educational needs in the area. However, this has resulted in many small

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teaching groups. In February 1998, approximately 30 per cent of teaching groups had 10 or fewer students in them. This is similar to the amount of teaching taking place in small groups at the last inspection. Staffing costs, at 78 per cent of the college's income in 1996-97, remain high. The college has information on the costs of courses and is beginning to use them to help it decide which courses to run.

58 The college's self-assessment report included both strengths and weaknesses in management information. Inspectors considered that the college overestimated the strengths. There is no clear strategy for the development of management information. The system has limited ability to assist staff in day-to-day course management and to inform decision-making. Reports on students and courses are mostly accurate but not always timely. The service is over-stretched and there is insufficient time available to develop a system which is accessible and useful. The information requirements of managers have not been systematically identified.

59 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is weak. The finance team is suitably qualified and is well regarded by both budget holders and governors. However, the college is in poor financial health, with both historic and forecast deficits. The senior management team's consideration of college finances is insufficiently frequent. It is mainly undertaken through consideration of the management accounts produced for the policy and finance committee, which normally meets termly. While the content of management accounts has improved over the last 12 months, they are still not adequate. The management accounts do not include a cashflow forecast beyond the current year end. A balance sheet statement has been included in recent management accounts. The balance sheet could be improved by the inclusion of

comparative and forecasted figures.

Other important financial statistics, for example, solvency and staff cost ratios, and relevant non-financial information, such as enrolment levels, are not included. Comprehensive financial regulations and procedures exist and are to be reviewed in the immediate future in accordance with good practice.

Conclusions

60 The college's self-assessment report, which was produced for the inspection, contained some sections that were comprehensive and provided convincing evidence to support the college's judgements. Other sections did not follow the guidance in the relevant Council circulars and contained evidence that lacked detail, or was sometimes contradictory. Action plans arising from the self-assessment contained few clearly defined targets and timescales. Despite these weaknesses, inspectors found the report useful as a basis for planning and carrying out the inspection. In one curriculum area and one cross-college area inspectors agreed with the grades the college had awarded itself. In the other areas inspectors considered that the college had been somewhat overgenerous in its grading.

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

College Statistics

Student numbers by age (July 1997)

Age	%
Under 16	0
16-18 years	51
19-24 years	7
25+ years	42
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (July 1997)

Level of study	%
Foundation	30
Intermediate	10
Advanced	36
Higher education	1
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	23
Total	100

Source: college data

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

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	79	181	19
Agriculture	5	0	0
Engineering	5	25	2
Business	58	87	11
Hotel and catering	27	0	2
Health and community care	31	43	5
Art and design	74	43	8
Humanities	251	355	44
Basic education	0	130	9
Total	530	864	100

Source: college data

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (July 1997)

	Permanant	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	33	4	8	45
Supporting direct learning contact	0	1	2	3
Other support	14	0	1	15
Total	47	5	11	63

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
Income	£2,103,000	£2,073,000	£1,973,000
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1995-96; funded 1996-97	£20.98	£19.39	£20.23
Payroll as a proportion of income	80%	81%	78%
Achievement of funding target	91%	107%	*
Diversity of income	10%	7%	6%
Operating surplus	-£71,000	-£20,000	-£47,000

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

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

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

Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1995-96 (1994-95 and 1995-96)

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

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

*data not available

Performance data for students aged 16 to 18

Qualifications		1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
GCE A level	Number of candidates	194	177	171
	Average point score per entry	5.0	5.1	5.0
	Position in tables	top third	top third	top third
Advanced vocational	Number in final year	20	24	29
	Percentage achieving qualification	95%	63%	69%
	Position in tables	top 10%	bottom third	middle third
Intermediate vocational	Number in final year	*	11	14
	Percentage achieving qualification	*	64%	86%
	Position in tables	*	middle third	top 10%

Source: DfEE

Note: the achievements of students of 19 years of age or older are not covered in published DfEE performance tables

*1994-95 intermediate vocational results not available

College Statistics

Three-year Trends *continued*

Students' achievements

		1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
Advanced academic	Pass (%)	84	86	86
	Retention (%)	93	70	62
Intermediate academic	Pass (%)	*	50	62
	Retention (%)	*	72	72
Advanced vocational	Pass (%)	*	73	64
	Retention (%)	*	79	72
Intermediate vocational	Pass (%)	*	91	78
	Retention (%)	*	77	78

Source: college data

**complete and reliable figures not available*

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