

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Palmer's College

July 1995

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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

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

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.*

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FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 75/95

PALMER'S COLLEGE

EASTERN REGION

Inspected September 1994 - March 1995

Summary

The college offers a wide range of GCE A level and GCSE courses supplemented by a small number of GNVQ programmes. Strong and effective contacts are maintained with partner schools and an increasing number of students are successfully recruited from outside the college's traditional catchment area. Good induction arrangements ensure a smooth transition from school to college. A notable strength of the college is the comprehensive and effective support for students, which includes a carefully-planned tutorial system. Students benefit from grants provided by the William Palmer College Educational Trust. Staff are well qualified and committed to the progress and achievement of students. There is a good system of professional review. Teaching is of a high standard in most areas. Course completion rates are high and students' examination results are generally good. The college is well managed and well governed. Accommodation and learning resources are generally good. The roles and functions of heads of faculty and heads of department should be clarified. The college should also: develop more open and flexible forms of provision to attract part-time and adult students; ensure that quality assurance procedures are implemented uniformly; refine procedures for critically reviewing the performance of the corporation and the college; and improve the quality and range of computer hardware and software in some subject areas.

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	2
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	1
Quality assurance	2
Resources: staffing	1
equipment/learning resources	2
accommodation	2

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Mathematics and computing	2	Art and design	2
Sciences	2		
Business studies	2	Modern languages	2
		English and communications	1
		Other humanities	2
Leisure and tourism	2		

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INTRODUCTION

1 Palmer's College was inspected during the period September 1994 to March 1995. Specialist curriculum subjects were inspected in the autumn and spring term and cross-college aspects from 27 February to 3 March 1995. Seventy-one inspector days were used for the inspection. Inspectors observed a total of 127 teaching sessions and examined a representative sample of students' work. Discussions took place with members of the corporation, the senior management team, heads of faculty and departments, teachers, support staff, students and parents. Meetings were also held with representatives from local schools, Thurrock College, industry, and the local training and enterprise council (TEC).

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 Palmer's College is located on a single, 11-hectare site, approximately one mile north of the town centre of Grays in Essex. The site, and the area immediately around it, is designated as green belt land. It was formed as a sixth form college in 1971 from the merger of two local grammar schools and Aveley Technical High School. The grammar schools from which the college derives its name were founded as a local charity in 1706. The buildings and land are still owned by the William Palmer College Educational Trust.

3 The trust plays an important role in college life. Its mission is 'to enhance the life chances of the students by facilitating their progression in education and towards rewarding careers'. The trust provides grants to the college, its students and to people under 25 years of age living in the ancient parish of Grays. The students also benefit from trust grants to support achievement, to counter hardship and to improve the teaching, recreation and social areas of the college.

4 Palmer's College is situated immediately adjacent to Thurrock College. There is a long-standing agreement between the two institutions under which Thurrock College is the main provider of vocational programmes and Palmer's College offers general education and a small range of vocational courses. The two colleges are collaborating to provide some General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs). They shared the same chairman of governors between 1985 and 1994, and they have continued to work closely together since incorporation in April 1993. The two principals are co-opted members of each other's board of governors.

5 Essex has the largest school population of any county in England and Wales. There are 103 secondary schools in the county, 21 of them in the south west, which includes Thurrock and Basildon. Five of these schools have sixth forms. Other further education providers are Thurrock College, Basildon College, South East Essex College of Arts and Technology, and South East Essex Sixth Form College, located in Benfleet. The post-16 participation rate in Essex increased significantly from 65 per cent in 1991 to 73 per cent in 1993 but fell slightly to 71 per cent in 1994. In 1994, the

comparative figures for the neighbouring counties of Kent and Cambridgeshire were 79 per cent and 74 per cent, respectively. There are wide variations in the participation rate within Essex. Basildon and Thurrock have the lowest participation rates at 62 per cent and 64 per cent, respectively. Brentwood, from which the college attracts some of its students, has one of the highest rates (81 per cent).

6 The 1991 census records the population of Essex as just over 1.5 million. There is a projected growth of 125,000 over the next 25 years, with an increase of 40 per cent expected amongst those under 20. The area served by the college has a 10.6 per cent unemployment rate, higher than the average for Essex which is 9.4 per cent. Over the 10-year period from 1981-91 there was a decrease in the number of people employed in the manufacturing sector from 26 per cent to 18.5 per cent. There has been a corresponding increase in service sector occupations, in line with national trends, which has taken the form of a 4 per cent increase in male employment and a growth of 23 per cent in female employment. The establishment of the Lakeside shopping and retail complex has encouraged a local growth in employment. Good communication links and ease of access to major motorway networks, the Dartford tunnel and the Queen Elizabeth bridge have led to growth in the distribution industries. In 1991, the minority ethnic population resident in Essex accounted for 1.9 per cent of the total population, the largest group being of Indian origin. The proportion of college students from minority ethnic backgrounds is 7.7 per cent.

7 At the time of the inspection, there were 1,321 enrolments at the college. Enrolment by age and level of study are shown in figures 1 and 2. Enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figure 3. Applications are regularly monitored and the college achieved its target numbers for 1994-95.

8 The college has a full-time equivalent staff of 116 comprising 88 full-time equivalent teachers and 28 full-time equivalent support staff. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4. The curriculum is organised and managed through subject-based heads of departments who are grouped into six faculties: arts; sports and technology; English; humanities; languages and business education; and mathematics and science.

9 The college's mission is to be a centre of excellence for academic and general education for post-16 students in Thurrock and, more generally, in south west Essex. The college aims to provide opportunities for intellectual, academic and personal development through a relevant and challenging curriculum within a supportive environment. Its purpose is to enhance the life chances of the students by equipping them with skills to cope with the changing world beyond college and by facilitating progress to higher education and rewarding careers.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

10 There is a formal memorandum of co-operation with Thurrock College which indicates the current and planned provision to be offered by each college. This arrangement ensures that there is no duplication of courses. The college provides a wide range of General Certificate of Education advanced level (GCE A level) and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) courses. Approximately 85 per cent of full-time students study on these programmes. The college has chosen to offer GCE advanced supplementary (AS) courses in French and music only. Staff are aware of the national policies and national targets for education and training and they are regularly briefed by management on key issues associated with these.

11 A limited number of GNVQs are offered at advanced, intermediate and foundation levels. Currently, there are GNVQs in art and design, science, business, health and social care, leisure and tourism, and manufacturing. Some of these are not available at all three levels. The GNVQ advanced and intermediate art and design and the GNVQ advanced leisure and tourism are offered jointly with Thurrock College. Palmer's College also offers a national diploma in performing arts.

12 The college, in partnership with Thurrock College and Grays Adult and Community College, is a member of the Thurrock Adult Education Curriculum Group. It is an objective of the college to develop learning strategies to attract part-time and adult students, especially to GCE A level and GCSE courses. Nevertheless, only 10 part-time adult students are enrolled, fewer than in 1993-94, and a willingness to accept adults as learners is not shared by staff in all programme areas. Currently, the college has no provision for flexible or open learning for such students.

13 Strong and effective links are maintained with partner schools. The principal is chairman of the Thurrock Association of Schools and Colleges. The college is also successfully developing links with schools outside its traditional catchment area. Students from the Basildon, Billericay and Brentwood areas are choosing to enrol at the college in increasing numbers. The proportion of these students has risen significantly, from 11 per cent in 1993-94 to 23 per cent in 1994-95. Many of the students are assisted by the provision of free college transport.

14 The college publishes an attractive and informative range of literature including a prospectus, subject leaflets and a course directory with a tear-off inquiry card. A college newspaper is widely distributed, and contact with parents is enhanced by a regular parents' newsletter. There is good coverage of the college in the local press.

15 There are developing links with higher education institutions. Through its membership of the Essex and Havering Sixth Form Colleges' Consortium, the college has established a compact agreement with 11 regional universities. The college is also a member of the North Thames Higher Education Consortium, which comprises four further education

sector colleges. Some progress has been made by the consortium in increasing the availability of higher education provision in the north Thames corridor. As an associate college of Anglia Polytechnic University, the college successfully offered a full-time, one-year foundation course in science during 1993-94. However, it failed to recruit a sufficient number of students to run the course in 1994-95. The college also offers English and sociology modules for the first year of a part-time degree, under a franchise from Anglia Polytechnic University. The college and Thurrock College are planning to offer joint access courses in humanities and science. These are due to start in September 1995.

16 The college is a member of Thurrock District Association of Industries and is responsive to approaches from business. For example, it is working closely with Thurrock Community Health Trust to provide secretarial courses which suit the Trust's particular needs. Market research is helping to identify the training needs of local employers. A useful database has been compiled of over 50 local companies with which the college has close contacts. These contacts include employers who accept students on visits and provide work placements.

17 There are good working relations with Essex TEC. The college is responsive to TEC initiatives; for example, it has successfully used work-related further education funding to equip rooms with learning resources for GNVQ students. The college is also a partner in a local consortium which has made a successful bid to the single regeneration budget. The project will involve working with employers in Tilbury to increase school leavers' employment prospects.

18 The college is developing links with the local community. A weekly music school for local orchestras and musicians has run successfully for many years and there is also a children's summer school. The local community make good use of the college's sports facilities. In partnership with local councils and the sports council, there are plans to extend and equip the sports hall for increased use by the local community.

19 Enrichment activities are a feature of the curriculum. There are 17 courses, accredited by the Essex Open College Federation, other awarding bodies or the college which include community service, learning languages and wordprocessing. There is also a range of sporting and musical activities. However, only 56 students are enrolled on the community service programme, fewer than in 1993-94 because of timetable constraints, and only 32 students are gaining work experience through the 'world of work' course.

20 The college is committed to equality of opportunity and has a well-publicised policy. The equal opportunities working group has begun to devise monitoring procedures but these are at an early stage of development. The college is responsive to the needs of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and liaises effectively with partner schools. However, the college site is not entirely suitable for people with impaired mobility.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

21 The corporation has 17 members including the principal. Eleven of them are from industry and commerce. They have a broad range of expertise including accountancy, law, personnel, marketing, and estates management. The principal of Thurrock college and a representative from higher education are co-opted members. Five members are nominees from the William Palmer College Educational Trust. A teacher from the college and a representative of the support staff are also members of the corporation. There are no student or parent representatives.

22 Palmer's College has an enthusiastic, experienced and committed corporation. They have a high regard for the capabilities of the senior staff of the college and view the management of the college as the responsibility of the principal and his senior management team. Monthly management reports of income and expenditure and cash flow are routinely received by the corporation. Plans are in hand to report quarterly on the financial balance sheet. The corporation is aware that there is a need for a more rigorous approach to the collection and evaluation of information to assess their performance and that of the college.

23 The corporation has appropriate committees with agreed terms of reference. These work effectively and keep the corporation informed of their activities. The chairmen of these committees are chosen to ensure that their expertise is matched to the task to be carried out. For example, the audit committee is chaired by the chief executive of Thameside Community Healthcare NHS Trust and the personnel committee by a Marks and Spencer manager. Considerable authority has been devolved by the corporation to both the finance and premises committee and to the personnel committee.

24 In addition to the principal and the vice-principal, the senior management team consists of four managers responsible for cross-college functions: finance and administration, student services, liaison and marketing, and curriculum development. There are 31 departments which are grouped into six faculties.

25 Heads of faculty are responsible for curriculum organisation, quality assurance, pastoral work and resources. They administer the faculty staff-development budget and oversee the budgetary arrangements within departments. They have a co-ordinating role rather than a full line-management responsibility for the heads of department within their faculty. With one exception, all heads of faculty also run a department. All deputy heads of faculty are also heads of department. The principal intends to develop the head of faculty role to include further responsibility for budgetary and resource management.

26 Heads of department lead teaching teams and have managerial responsibilities. They also have responsibility for the preparation and monitoring of departmental budgets. They are set tasks and objectives by

a number of other managers, including the principal, heads of faculty and their deputies, and cross-college functional managers. Their performance is reviewed by the head of faculty. The principal, in conjunction with heads of faculty, reviews departmental achievements such as examination results. The quality of the management of the departments is variable. Some departmental meetings lack agendas, minutes or recorded outcomes.

27 The college's strategic plan was produced after extensive consultation with staff, management and the corporation. The plan is updated following a cycle of events which includes reports from staff professional reviews and the production of departmental and faculty plans. However, not all of these reports and plans have objectives and targets which are stated sufficiently clearly for progress to be monitored effectively.

28 Management structures involve a large number of staff in managerial roles. There is a participative and consultative approach to the running of the college which ensures that staff feel well informed and valued. Communication channels within the college are effective. There are regular meetings of all college staff. The schedule of meetings is determined by the management and committee structure. There are a number of cross-college working parties which enable staff to influence policies. The principal holds a monthly meeting of all college staff.

29 The college has made effective use of computer-based information systems, for example, in support of student administration, finance and personnel. However, there is no schedule of dates for data collection and reporting. The information used in compiling some reports has not always been of high quality. For example, some student destination statistics were inaccurate. An outline information systems strategy has been produced which proposes a three-year programme of development. However, the college has not yet determined its information requirements with sufficient clarity.

30 Summaries of the college income and expenditure for the 16 months to July 1994 are shown in figures 5 and 6. In 1994-95 the average level of funding for the college is £18.43 per unit. The median for sixth form colleges is £19.81. The trust has provided funds of approximately £1 million over the last five years to improve college facilities and accelerate the development of the provision.

31 Careful control of resources has resulted in the college having a significant reserve. Bids to senior management from budget holders are supported by detailed analysis of requirements. It is intended to move to a more logical formula for allocating these bids which will replace the existing historical system. Some useful initial calculations have been made of the costs of individual courses.

STUDENT' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

32 The college has a successful schools liaison programme which is well regarded by careers staff and schools. College staff attend parents evenings and careers conventions. Positive efforts are made to ensure that prospective students, parents, school and careers staff are made aware of the college's provision. Some departments organise open days which give prospective students the opportunity to sample the courses available. In addition, there are subject workshops, held in the summer term, to give 14-15 year olds experience of the college.

33 Students' transition from school to college is carefully planned. Applicants are invited to attend the college at the end of the summer term for a pre-enrolment information session. Subject presentations are given and useful information booklets are provided. Prospective students have individual interviews with tutors to discuss their choice of subjects. They value the opportunity to be shown around the college and meet existing students.

34 Procedures for student enrolments are well managed. All full-time teaching staff are involved. They are trained and assisted by cross-college enrolment support groups. The college gives high priority to ensuring that students receive impartial advice and embark on appropriate programmes of study. There are well-defined criteria for admission to all courses. A detailed checklist is used to assess the suitability of a student's chosen course. Careers staff are on hand during enrolment to provide additional advice and guidance for students.

35 The induction programme is carefully planned. A series of activities is arranged to enable students to familiarise themselves with the college. A college diary provides a comprehensive guide to the range of student facilities and services. Subject inductions extend and support the college-wide programme. Students are appreciative of the help they are given in settling into college.

36 Tutorial activities are given a high priority and are included as a standing agenda item at faculty meetings. The work of tutors is co-ordinated by heads of faculty who are also the senior tutors. The tutorial system is effective. The tutors' handbook includes a year plan with extensive instructions and helpful information. All students are allocated to a tutor group comprising students from different years and different courses. Stability is maintained as students remain with the same tutor group for the duration of their time at the college. Daily registration sessions provide a useful means of informing students of college events, careers, and student council notices. The scheduled weekly tutorial hour provides support and guidance for students on an individual basis.

37 There is an efficient system to assist students who wish to change courses. Parents are consulted during the process. Procedures are clearly set out and students are advised by personal tutors, subject tutors and

careers staff. The college monitors and analyses all transfers between courses. The number of students involved in transfers is small.

38 Students receive considerable guidance and advice about careers. General careers support is supplied by tutors. Specialist careers staff contribute detailed information on higher education choices and employment opportunities. The guidance notes for writing student references are comprehensive and helpful. There are good contacts with the Essex careers and business partnership. The employment and training adviser visits the college weekly and provides information on job vacancies.

39 There are clear guidelines and procedures for disciplinary matters. All serious cases are referred through the senior tutors to the principal. Students are made aware of the grievance procedure which is outlined in the student diary.

40 An extensive range of support is available through student services for those encountering personal problems or difficulties. The trust provides financial support for students, when appropriate, and is quick to respond in an emergency. An effective system, centred on notes of concern, enables subject staff to alert personal tutors of emerging problems. Personal tutors direct students to student services for further advice as required. There is a college nurse and a number of staff with counselling expertise. Good contacts have been established for referral to specialist external agencies. An educational psychologist, specialising in the post-16 age group, is employed by the college in association with two other sixth form colleges. Students are positive in their comments about the help they receive.

41 There is no initial diagnostic assessment to identify students' need for additional learning support in numeracy, communication and information technology. GNVQ foundation students were given a diagnostic test devised by the college but it was given at an inappropriate time during the year and proved to be of little value. A review is currently taking place of the procedures to be adopted for identifying such needs. Some workshops are available to support students studying for GCE A level and GCSE. Part-time specialist support staff help students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those requiring language support.

42 A student executive council is elected annually by the whole student body. Members of the council consider that their views are given serious consideration by the staff, including the principal. The council is active in organising and promoting social activities. It publicises events in a weekly bulletin and through the college radio.

43 The college no longer offers a weekly act of worship and therefore does not meet its statutory requirements under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. An ecumenical service was offered weekly but the provision has recently lapsed as students chose not to attend. Religious studies has been retained at GCE A level despite the low number of students choosing to study the subject.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

44 The teaching observed during the inspection was of a consistently high standard. Of the 127 sessions inspected 72 per cent had strengths which outweighed the weaknesses. Weaknesses outweighed the strengths in only one session. The following table shows the grades awarded for the teaching sessions observed.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE AS/A level		14	37	23	0	0	74
GCSE		2	14	6	1	0	23
GNVQ		3	10	3	0	0	16
Other		4	7	3	0	0	14
Total		23	68	35	1	0	127

45 The college provides a supportive learning environment. There are good relations between staff and students and a strong sense of partnership in the learning process. Students are generally attentive, well motivated, and enthusiastic about their studies.

46 Students follow balanced programmes which combine subjects studied for public examinations, tutorials and career planning. Students may also take one or two courses selected from the accredited studies programme which enable them to gain additional qualifications. The 'into management' module provides a good opportunity for GCE A level students to develop initiative, decision-making and team-building skills by setting up and running a Young Enterprise company. Good examples also exist in sport and leisure where students from any course have the opportunity to gain qualifications in sports leadership and coaching.

47 The work placement scheme provides opportunities for students to gain valuable work experience by spending half a day a week in commerce, schools or hospitals. Students maintain a work log and an account of the placement is recorded in their record of achievement. Work placement is an integral part of GNVQ foundation courses but is not included in all GNVQ intermediate and advanced programmes.

48 Teaching schemes are carefully designed to meet the requirements of external examination syllabuses. The best provide details of content, teaching methods, equipment and materials. Business studies schemes include programmes of visits, external speakers and residential activities. A few schemes of work lack detail; for example, in mathematics the relative time to be allocated to topics is unclear. Most lessons are well planned and have clear objectives which are shared with students.

49 Teachers have a sound knowledge of their specialist subjects. They show a willingness to explore a variety of different teaching methods in order to develop students' learning. In English and communications, the

teaching was thorough and sensitive; students were encouraged to participate in discussion, role play and group work. In history and politics, group work provided good support for the weaker or less confident students. In geography lessons, teachers made good use of question and answer techniques and of group activities in which students researched topics and presented their findings using audio-visual equipment. Skilful teaching in the sciences provided students with clear explanations of theory and relevant practical work. There was some exemplary work in the language media centre for GCE A level students involved in French oral practice but other language sessions varied in their effectiveness.

50 In a small number of lessons, work was conducted at too slow a pace and was insufficiently demanding for the students. Some classroom-based activities lacked rigour and/or students spent too much of their time copying notes or taking dictation. In GCE A level and GCSE environmental studies lessons, teachers did not always take account of the full range of students' abilities. A few GCE A level sessions in economics and business studies were not sufficiently challenging for the most able students. In art and design lessons, students were enthusiastic and capable but occasionally the content of lesson did not stretch them to their full potential. A few GCE A level computing projects focused too much on programming at the expense of problem analysis and evaluation.

51 On the GNVQ foundation programme, the teaching was proficient and the work engaged students' interest. Teachers were enthusiastic and showed themselves to be skilful classroom managers. The double staffing of GNVQ foundation sessions, involving a vocational specialist and an English specialist, provided students with excellent opportunities to develop their core skills. The assignment-based approach on foundation and intermediate GNVQ programmes in business encouraged students to work independently. GNVQ students are encouraged to enrich their programme by taking additional courses, including GCE A levels, GCSEs or options from the college's accredited studies.

52 All students following GNVQ programmes receive good support in developing core skills, particularly on foundation and intermediate courses where they are an integral part of vocational studies. Core skills are not systematically developed on GCE A level and GCSE programmes. Information technology skills are not fully developed in business studies and economics courses, and there is little emphasis on applying information technology in the teaching of science. Some history students make good use of information technology in their research projects.

53 In most subjects, students' communication and presentation skills are effectively developed. Geography students demonstrated their ability to speak effectively when presenting reports from the group. In some modern foreign language classes students' self-confidence in spoken expression is underdeveloped because there are too few opportunities to work in pairs or small groups. In computing and mathematics, students require more support in developing their investigative skills.

54 Students are issued with helpful course guides covering course content, assignments and assessment. Frequent homework, tests and assessments are a feature of all courses and students are made fully aware of work schedules and deadlines for submitting assignments. Written work is normally returned to students within the stated time and is usually thoroughly marked. However, the quality of teachers' comments varied. Geology teachers provided helpful and encouraging advice. The marking of mathematics and computing homework was less thorough; teachers often failed to provide a summary statement or to offer guidance on how the work could be improved. Some of the marking in geography was superficial and in environmental science the written comments on several assignments were entirely negative.

55 Assignment work for GNVQ students is well structured and assessment criteria are made clear. Activities are carried out at the correct level and contain relevant tasks. Core skills are appropriately assessed as an integral part of assignments. On GNVQ business courses, students successfully assessed their own work as part of their overall assessment. Some of the graded work for the GNVQ in leisure and tourism contains minimal written feedback from tutors.

56 The progress of students is carefully monitored and recorded. Students have regular interviews with subject teachers to discuss their progress in achieving set learning targets. In addition, students have scheduled meetings at least once a term with a personal tutor to discuss and complete action plans and review sheets. This is a collaborative process which gives students an opportunity to record comments on their progress and achievements alongside those of the tutor. Each student's progress is also recorded on a record of achievement.

57 Registers are accurately maintained and students' attendance is recorded at all lessons and during daily registration sessions. Overall, levels of attendance are high, averaging approximately 90 per cent for the sessions observed. There is an established procedure to follow up students' absences and there are formal attendance checks twice a term. Parents are notified if there is cause for concern. There are parents' consultation evenings to discuss students' progress and the college sends written reports to parents twice a year.

58 The college offers an impressive range of visits and exchanges, many of which are an integral part of students' studies. They constitute an important part of college life, enhancing academic studies and broadening students' experience. Financial support for these is provided by the trust. GCE A level biology students combine fieldwork research in Pembrokeshire with laboratory work. GCE A level economics and business studies students participate in an educational visit to Paris. GCSE geography students spend a productive weekend in Wales studying human and physical geography, and geology students investigate coastal erosion on the Isle of Wight. A student exchange with Liege has been running successfully for

13 years, and government and politics students have been involved in a number of visits to the former Soviet Union.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

59 The majority of students display a positive attitude and commitment to their studies. Students work purposefully and demonstrate an appropriate level of understanding in their subjects. They speak positively about their work. Practical work is carried out competently with effective regard to safety.

60 On GCE and GCSE courses, students achieve appropriate levels in their written assignment work. GCE A level English literature students are confident and their written work reveals original thinking and detailed knowledge of course texts. Geography students generally produce good written work although the discussion and analysis in some of their essays lacked depth. At GNVQ foundation and intermediate levels, students' portfolios are well organised and show evidence of substantial achievement. At GNVQ advanced level standards are more variable.

61 In 1994, 410 candidates were entered for two or more GCE AS/A level examinations and 51 for one. The average point score per examination entry was 4.6 (where A=10, E=2). This places the college in the top third of colleges in the further education sector on this performance measure based on the tables published by the Department for Education. Students aged 16-18 entered for GCE AS/A level examinations in 1994 scored, on average, 12.3 points. This compares with a national average of 15.3.

62 Overall, GCE A level examination results indicate a high level of achievement in relation to students' entry qualifications. Pass rates compare favourably with the national average for sixth form colleges. In 1994, GCE A level students achieved a pass rate of 87 per cent compared with a provisional average of 83 per cent for 18 year olds in sixth form colleges. Fifty per cent of students obtained grades A-C compared with the provisional average of 48 per cent for sixth form colleges.

63 The percentage of students achieving the higher grades, A-C, is uneven across the range of subjects. Exceptionally good results were achieved in geology, Spanish and theatre studies with, on average, 70 per cent of students achieving the higher grades. Fifty-five per cent of media studies students and 65 per cent of art and design students gained the higher grades. The largest number of students were entered for English literature: 95 per cent passed at grades A-E and 60 per cent achieved the higher grades. There was a 79 per cent pass rate at grades A-E in English language but only 34 per cent gained the higher grades. Pass rates in some subjects have fluctuated significantly over the past two years. For example, in government and politics, a pass rate of 90 per cent in 1993 fell to 70 per cent in 1994. In psychology pass rates fell from 96 per cent in 1993 to 64 per cent in 1994. The percentage of students gaining a pass

grade in economics has fallen over the last three years from 94 per cent to 85 per cent. The 80 per cent pass rate in business studies was close to the provisional average for sixth form colleges but the percentage of students gaining the higher grades (32 per cent) was below average. There has been a significant rise in the pass rate in human biology, from 47 per cent in 1993 to 73 per cent in 1994.

64 In 1994, the overall GCSE pass rate at grades A-C was 70 per cent. This is well above the provisional average of 50 per cent for sixth form colleges. There were excellent results in geology and photography where all the students entered gained grades A-C. Good results were also achieved in environmental sciences with 88 per cent of the 43 students gaining grades A-C. In the two subjects which have the largest numbers of students, the results were better than the provisional national averages: 58 per cent of the 266 mathematics students achieved grades A-C, as did 79 per cent of the 177 English language students. Achievements were also good in English literature, with 78 per cent of students achieving grades A-C. Results in modern foreign languages were mixed. Ninety-two per cent of students in Spanish achieved grades A-C, 73 per cent in German and 48 per cent in French. Results in art and design have fallen from 89 per cent of students gaining grades A-C in 1993 to 59 per cent in 1994. The percentage of students gaining grades A-C in drama increased from 69 per cent in 1993 to 91 per cent in 1994.

65 The results on GNVQ programmes were mixed. Fifty-five per cent of all students on GNVQ foundation programmes achieved a full award and 65 per cent on intermediate programmes. The nine students on the GNVQ intermediate health and social care course all achieved the full award. However, the results on GNVQ foundation and intermediate manufacturing courses were poor; none of the nine students gained a full award. Results were better on the GNVQ intermediate business course, 75 per cent gaining full certification. On the foundation and intermediate GNVQs students achieved pass rates of 50 per cent and 60 per cent respectively.

66 A high percentage of students complete their course. In 1993-94, the figure was approximately 92 per cent for the college as a whole. However, the completion rate is not consistent for all courses. Completion rates on all GNVQ foundation and intermediate courses are good but the rate for the advanced leisure and tourism course fell to 70 per cent. In 1993-94, completion rates were poor on GCE A level biology, environmental studies and geology courses. Completion rates on GCE A level theatre studies and art and design courses were very high at 97 per cent and 100 per cent, respectively.

67 The college records the destinations of students and is developing systems to analyse them. On average, 37 per cent of all leavers and about 49 per cent of GCE A level students enter higher education. Approximately 12 per cent continue with additional further education. In 1994, roughly 30 per cent of students entered employment directly from the college.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

68 College managers are committed to continuous quality improvement and are supported in this by the college staff. A comprehensive staff manual contains college policies and quality procedures encompassing all college activities. The manual builds upon existing good practice and was produced in its present form in September 1994. The loose leaf presentation allows the contents to be revised easily although there is a need for documents to be clearly marked with an issue number.

69 The college uses a wide range of questionnaires to seek the views of staff, students, parents and employers about a variety of activities and facilities. The information obtained from these questionnaires is analysed promptly and, where possible, appropriate action is taken. Recent examples of action include improvements made to the refectory and counselling services. Development of the college's quality system is being assisted by the newly-constituted quality audit group. It has a cross-college remit to monitor the effectiveness of the quality programme and reports to the vice-principal. The group has completed a useful preliminary audit and interim report. An important feature of the quality procedures is the requirement for an annual report to the principal.

70 Quality procedures are not uniformly implemented across the college. In particular, there is variable practice in the formal review of teaching and learning. More generally, there is limited monitoring of the progress made towards achieving targets at specified times during the year.

71 The college has developed a wide range of performance indicators for use in course reviews, including its own value-added measure of students' achievement. A detailed analysis of examination results involves the comparison of students' qualifications at entry with their achievements at the end of their course. In some cases, the performance indicators used during course review require further development.

72 The college has recently received a favourable report on its quality assurance procedures from the Essex TEC, following a successful bid for a work-related further education contract associated with the development of GNVQs. The report indicates that the college is close to achieving stage 1 of Essex TEC's supplier quality standard. The external verifier report on GNVQ foundation and intermediate programmes is complimentary and indicates that quality procedures on these programmes are well co-ordinated. However, quality procedures for the GNVQ advanced programmes are at an early stage of development.

73 The college management has fostered a professional ethos which is highly valued by staff. A system of professional review of staff is in its second year of operation. It covers all full-time staff and those part-time staff whose commitment to the college is 50 per cent or more of a full-time post. The opportunity exists for other part-time staff to participate in the scheme and many have opted to be included. The system is well regarded

by those it involves. Outcomes of reviews are used to inform staff-development plans which reflect both individual and college needs. The college is committed to staff development and has allocated an adequate budget to support it. A positive aspect of the staff-development programme is the extensive and increasing involvement of support staff.

74 There is a well-planned induction programme for teaching staff who start at the beginning of an academic year. It continues during the first year of employment and is much appreciated by participants. However, the induction arrangements for staff who are recruited during the course of the academic year are inadequate. The induction scheme for support staff lacks co-ordination on a college-wide basis and discussions are currently taking place to rectify this.

75 The college charter is attractively and clearly presented. It was developed after extensive consultation across the college and has been distributed to all students and is widely available within the local community. Procedures for monitoring the charter form part of the quality audit procedures. The charter contains no commitment to provide employers with information on students' achievements although employers' requests for information are met fully.

76 A self-assessment report was provided using the same headings as the inspection framework described in Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. The report was comprehensive in its description of activities but lacked critical evaluation in some areas. Many of the conclusions in the report are similar to the findings of the inspection.

RESOURCES

Staffing

77 Teachers are well qualified to teach the curriculum. The majority have substantial teaching experience and about two-thirds have a teaching qualification. Almost 90 per cent of teachers are graduates and nearly 30 per cent have a post-graduate qualification. Staff are committed to the progress and achievement of their students. In some curriculum areas, for example, English and communications, teachers have a particularly wide variety of experience of work in fields other than education. In a few curriculum areas, particularly those offering vocational qualifications, there is a need to extend teachers' experience of industry and commerce. College managers are aware of this when they appoint new staff and when planning staff development. There has been slow progress in the training of staff involved with GNVQ programmes to enable them to gain assessor and verifier qualifications.

78 The non-teaching staff offer a good level of support to teachers and students. Their contribution to the learning process is widely recognised and valued. The increasing involvement of support staff in the development of the college has helped to raise their self-esteem and motivation.

Equipment/learning resources

79 The college is well equipped in most areas. The trust provides substantial financial assistance. For example, it has recently helped to fund the multi-media language centre. It has also funded the acquisition of radio equipment which has proved a valuable asset to media courses. There is a good range of equipment in physics, electronics and geology. However, although the equipment is well maintained, some of it is becoming dated. The college is in the process of developing a more formal strategy for the replacement of equipment than has operated in the past.

80 The library and resource centre has a wide range of books, periodicals, information software and cassette tapes, which provide a good level of support for most subjects. There are 28 computers in the centre available for students' use. In recent years there has been a very significant improvement in the stock of books. Almost 40 per cent of the books have been withdrawn and replaced, partly with the aid of grants from the trust. Departments loan recommended text books to students and, as a consequence, much of the library stock is chosen to provide additional material which will broaden students' knowledge of their chosen subjects or provide them with research material for use on projects. The use made of the resources available in the centre is carefully monitored to ensure that any additional expenditure is justified.

81 The college has a comprehensive information technology development plan which has led to a substantial improvement in provision over the last three years. Over this period the ratio of computers to students has improved from 1:20 to 1:11. Adherence to the development plan has meant that almost 90 per cent of the computers available for students are of one standardised type. This has done much to increase the use made of computers throughout the college. However, there are only 10 IBM-compatible computers which are available for students' use. Although five of these are located in secretarial studies the number of personal computers in secretarial studies is inadequate. The range of hardware and software available to students in computer studies, GCE A level economics, business studies and for GNVQ leisure and tourism is also restricted. The college is aware of the need to review its information technology policy.

Accommodation

82 The majority of the college's main buildings date from the 1930s. There were some additions in the 1970s. Many of the buildings present problems of access for wheelchair users. A feasibility study is currently being carried out to examine the possibility of installing a lift. Overall, the accommodation is in good condition and well maintained. There have been a significant number of improvements to the general quality of the accommodation in recent years, many financed by the trust. These have helped to create a pleasant environment which is conducive to study. The foyer and reception areas have recently been remodelled and there has

been a significant increase in both the quantity and quality of the social areas available to students. About 18 per cent of the existing space provides specialist facilities, including a theatre, swimming pool and sports hall. Both the pool and the sports hall will be significantly improved if the proposed community sports project goes ahead.

83 In specialist subject areas, there is generally a good match of accommodation to requirements for teaching and learning. In several subject areas, rooms are grouped together in suites. In humanities, each language is allocated its own room and these are well set out to encourage interaction between students. Rooms for economics and business studies are well furnished. The learning-resource base room for geography is well used and display material helps to create an appropriate subject ambience. Not all accommodation is well suited to its use. The provision for art is inconveniently split between the attic area of the main building and a number of temporary buildings. The space allocated to secretarial studies is too small for the number of students. The computer studies room is often overcrowded and existing space is poorly organised.

84 The college has been thorough in its approach to developing an accommodation strategy. There is a comprehensive five-year programme of estate management for which appropriate funding has been allocated. Professional property consultants have been engaged by the college to review its existing accommodation and its future use. One result has been that the college has set itself a target of improving room use by almost 10 per cent. There are proposals for a small number of self-funded accommodation changes, such as improvements to the area used for careers guidance and modifications to the library which are intended to make more effective use of space.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

85 The college provides good opportunities for academic and personal development within a supportive environment. The strengths of the college are:

- the strong and effective links with partner schools
- its effective marketing of courses to schools outside its traditional catchment area
- comprehensive and effective support for students
- a well-qualified and committed staff
- the high standards of teaching in most areas
- high-completion rates and examination results which are generally good
- the commitment and experience of members of the corporation board
- a consultative management style

-
- the support provided by the William Palmer Educational Trust
 - a wide range of quality assurance procedures
 - a successful system of professional review
 - good-quality accommodation and equipment.

86 If the college is to build upon existing strengths it should address the following:

- the development of open learning and flexible learning for part-time and adult students
- the formulation of procedures to review critically its own performance
- clarification of the managerial roles and responsibilities of heads of faculty and heads of department
- inconsistency in the implementation and monitoring of quality assurance procedures
- the limited range of computer hardware and software in some subject areas.

FIGURES

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- 1 Percentage enrolments by age (1994-95)

 - 2 Percentage enrolments by level of study (1994-95)

 - 3 Enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1994-95)

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

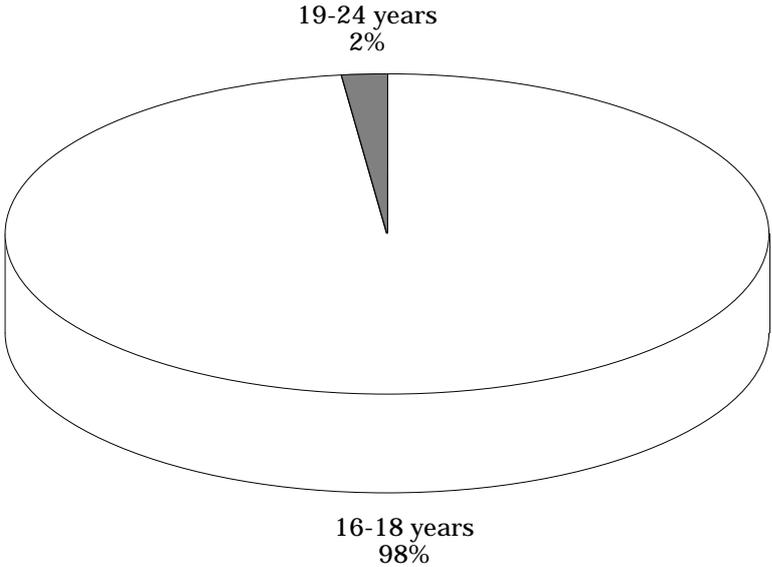
 - 5 Income (for 16 months to July 1994)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 16 months to July 1994)

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

Figure 1

Palmer's College: percentage enrolments by age (1994-95)

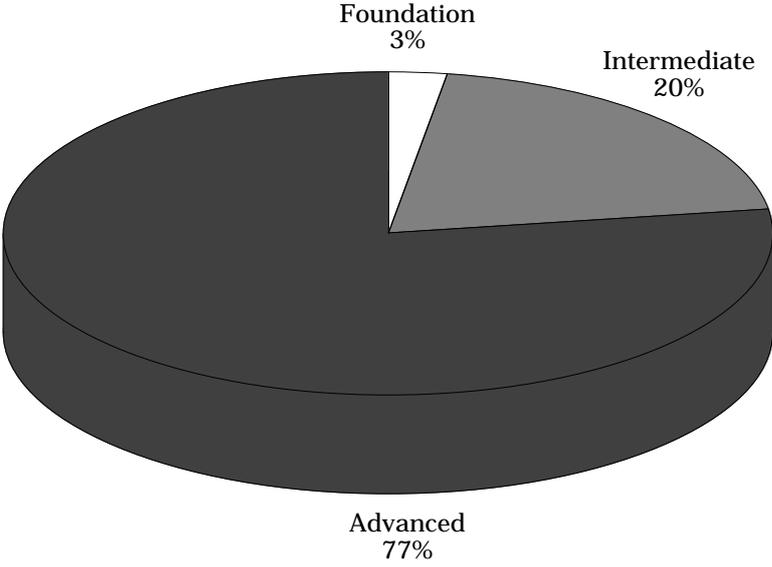


Enrolments: 1,321

Note: this chart excludes three enrolments aged 25 years and over.

Figure 2

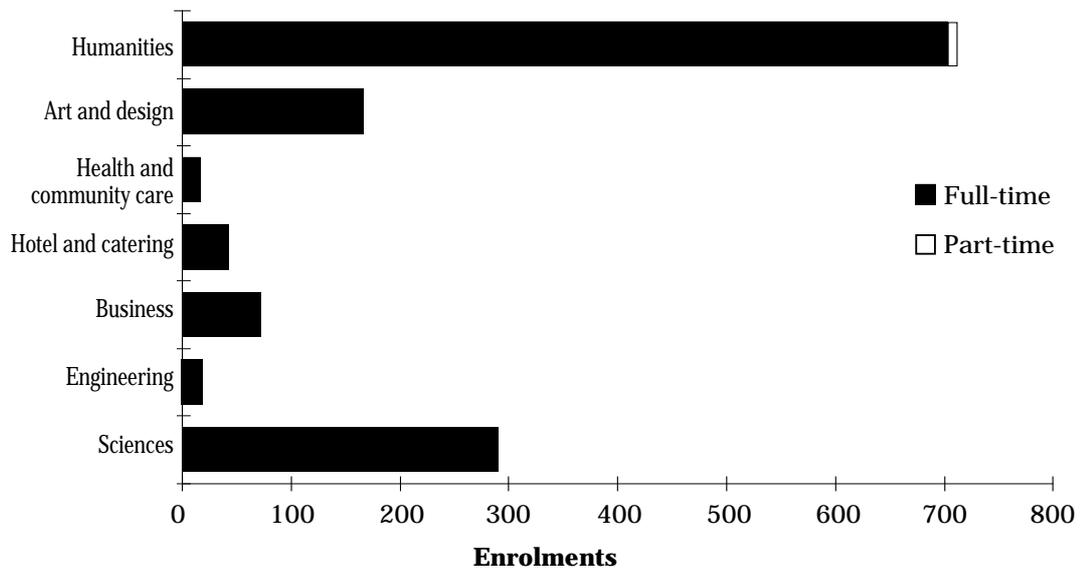
Palmer's College: percentage enrolments by level of study (1994-95)



Enrolments: 1,321

Figure 3

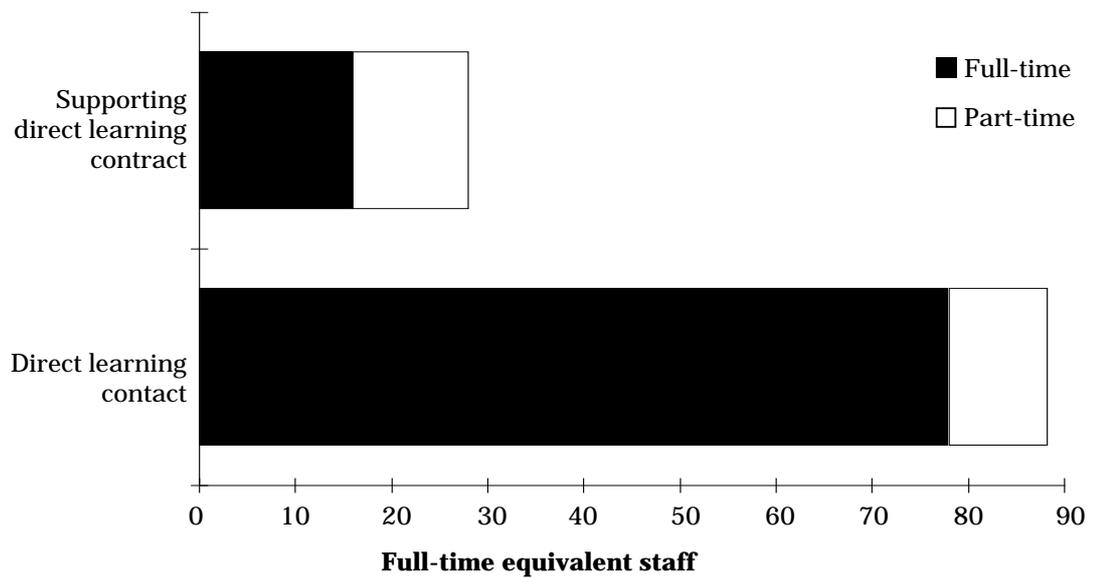
Palmer's College: enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1994-95)



Enrolments: 1,321

Figure 4

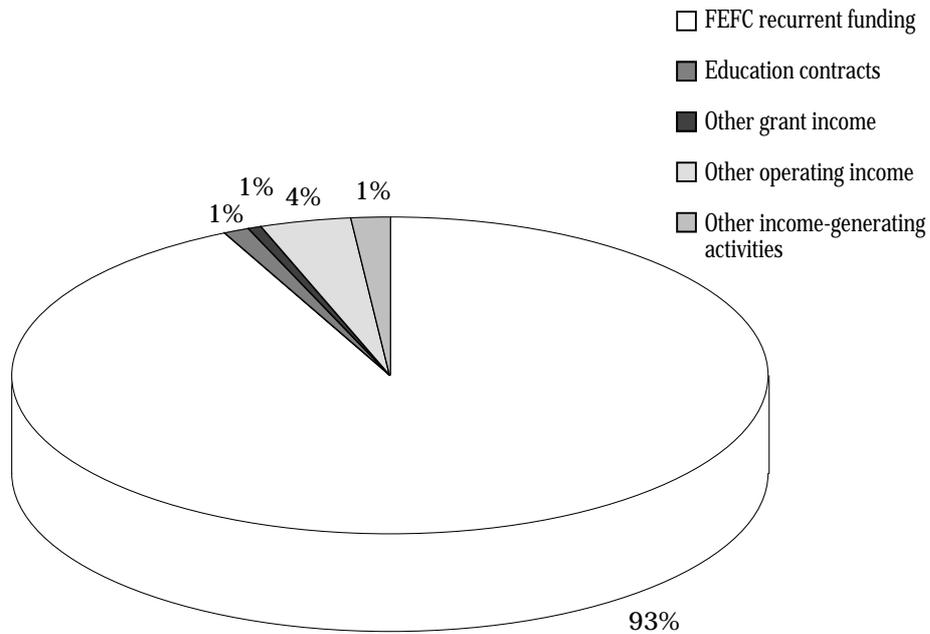
Palmer's College: staff profile - staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1994-95)



Full-time equivalent staff: 116

Figure 5

Palmer's College: income (for 16 months to July 1994)

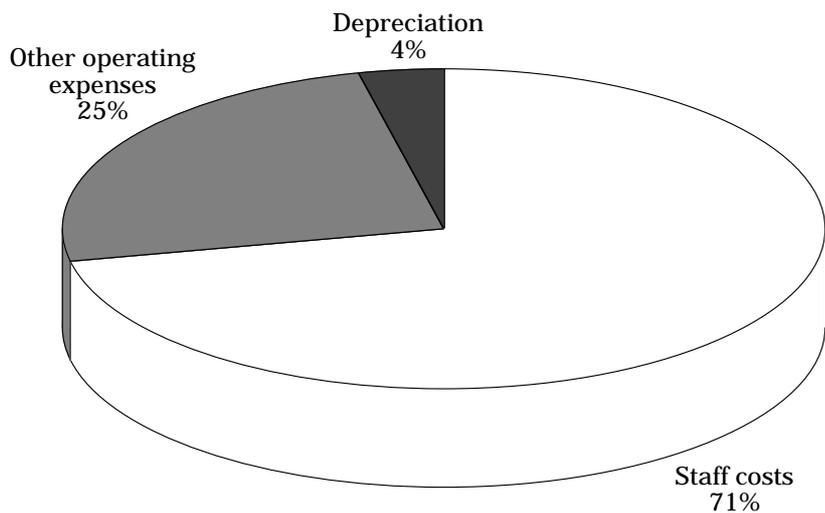


Income: £4,942,000

Note: this chart excludes £4,000 tuition fees.

Figure 6

Palmer's College: expenditure (for 16 months to July 1994)



Expenditure: £4,637,000

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