Merton
Sixth Form
College

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 104/95

MERTON SIXTH FORM COLLEGE
GREATER LONDON REGION
Inspected April-May 1995

Summary

Merton Sixth Form College is a small college operating in the face of severe under recruitment and competition from other local colleges and schools. In 1994-95 it failed to meet its recruitment by 42 per cent. It offers good teaching in small groups and a supportive and caring environment. There is good provision for students whose first language is not English, and for students with learning difficulties and/or physical disabilities. The accommodation and learning resources are of a high standard, although the library is under resourced. Governors work hard for the college and their expertise is of value to its working groups and committees. The corporation and the principal are trying to address the current problems, although the reduction in teaching staff is having an adverse effect on planning, the curriculum offered, and staff morale. There are no opportunities for students to progress further on vocational courses within the college after completing intermediate GNVQs. Relations with partner high schools are generally good, but there are few productive links with other institutions of further or higher education. The present management structure is under review and some key responsibilities are being redefined. Staff have many opportunities to discuss issues facing the college, but necessary decisions are often avoided or postponed. Pass rates for GCE A level are at the national average for sixth form colleges, but the average points score per candidate is significantly lower. Students generally perform as well as would be expected from their prior achievements.

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

Aspects of cross-college provision	Grade
Responsiveness and range of provision	4
Governance and management	4
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	2
Quality assurance	3
Resources: staffing	2
equipment/learning resources	2
accommodation	1

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Science	3	Social sciences and humanities	2
Mathematics and computing	2	English and modern languages	2
Business studies	2		
Art and design and theatre studies	3	English for speakers of other languages, core skills and foundation	2

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INTRODUCTION

1   The inspection of enrolment and induction procedures at Merton Sixth Form College took place at the beginning of the autumn term 1994. Specialist subject areas were inspected in April 1995, and aspects of cross-college provision in May 1995. A team of six full-time and seven part-time inspectors spent a total of 43 days in the college. They visited 67 teaching and tutorial sessions, inspected students' work and examined many documents relating to courses and to the running of the college. Meetings were held with students, teaching staff and college managers, and inspectors attended a meeting of the corporation. There were discussions with the chairman and members of the corporation, parents, careers officers, representatives from the local community and schools, from the technical and vocational education initiative, the local education authority (LEA) and from the local training and enterprise council (TEC).

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2   Merton Sixth Form College was established in 1990 as part of a restructuring of post-16 education in the London Borough of Merton. Of the nine high schools in the borough, three retained their own sixth forms in the restructuring. Merton College of Further Education is less than a mile from the sixth form college. With so much alternative provision for 16-19 year olds, within and just beyond the borough, the college has faced a difficult task in establishing a role and reputation for itself. The problem has been compounded by falling numbers of school leavers. At the time of its incorporation in 1993, enrolments had grown from the initial 310 to 425, but by the time of the inspection they had fallen to 279.

3   The college is located on the site of a former borough high school in buildings dating from 1930. These were refurbished in 1990 when a new block was added. The buildings are set in pleasant grounds; there is ample parking space and good outdoor sports facilities. The site is on a council-built estate in the south of the London Borough of Merton, a borough which encompasses Mitcham, Wimbledon, Raynes Park and Morden. There are generally good links by bus but the college is difficult to reach by public transport from some parts of the borough. The London Transport Northern Line terminus of Morden is within 10 minutes walking distance of the college. The London Borough of Wandsworth lies to the north, the Royal Borough of Kingston-Upon-Thames to the west, and the London Borough of Sutton to the south. In all these boroughs most schools have sixth forms; a number of Merton pupils go to these schools. There is also competition from further education colleges in the surrounding boroughs, and the sixth form colleges in Surrey and Croydon. The proportion of pupils progressing to the college from Merton borough high schools has decreased in the last two years.

4   Relatively few young adults live in the vicinity of the college although the number is predicted to rise towards the end of this decade. The proportion of borough residents from minority ethnic groups, at 9 per

cent, is less than half the London average. However, college statistics show that 43 per cent of its 1994 intake is from minority ethnic groups; many of these students come from outside the borough.

5   Almost half of all employment in the college's catchment area is in the service sector. The proportion of skilled manual workers, at 15 per cent, is higher than in the borough as a whole. The proportion of managers and administrators, at 17 per cent, is slightly lower. Unemployment in the borough, at 8.7 per cent of the workforce, is considerably lower than the overall London rate of 10 per cent, according to figures for January 1995 provided by the Department for Employment.

6   The college aims to provide full-time courses for students in the 16-19 age range, and, to date, there has been no departure from this. Responsibilities for the curriculum are divided between five faculties: mathematics and science, languages and performing arts, world studies, business and information studies, and design. The college has an open-access recruitment policy. Enrolments by age and level of study are shown in figures 1 and 2. Full-time enrolments by curriculum area are shown in figure 3. The college has a full-time equivalent staff of 42. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4.

7   According to its mission statement, the college aims to provide an educational service of high quality to meet the needs of the community. The statement identifies four elements:

- for students: to provide a broad and appropriate curriculum which challenges each student, within a supportive framework, to develop the skills, understanding, values, sense of responsibility and self-confidence required for continued success

- for parents: to develop a responsible working partnership by providing parents with information about the college, the curriculum and student progress, whilst welcoming involvement in the student's education

- for staff: to promote job satisfaction, to value the work of colleagues, and to engender a climate of innovation through co-operation, consultation, participation in decision-making and opportunities for professional development

- for the community: to forge appropriate and wide-ranging links for the mutual benefit of students and the community, in order to enrich the curriculum, extend and secure progression routes for students and promote the college as a part of the local community.

8   At the time of the inspection, the college was falling far short of its recruitment targets (by 19 per cent in 1993-94 and 42 per cent in 1994-95).

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

9   A general staff meeting is held monthly. Information on government policy for further education, national targets for education and training, and the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), has been disseminated to staff. Policy documents such as the strategic plan are discussed in draft form at these meetings before being presented to the curriculum board and the corporation. Staff were aware of the FEFC funding methodology in outline and were familiar with the concept of national targets for education and training.

10   Marketing is the responsibility of the vice-principal for community and communications. The college gathers its local labour market intelligence from research reports produced by the local TEC, AZTEC, and the local authority. No marketing strategy or policy is set out in any college document. The team found no evidence that any systematic marketing analysis, surveys of demographic trends, or study of competitor institutions, had been undertaken as a means of providing a context for curriculum development and recruitment. Data acquired by course teams are not pooled to supplement the externally provided market information. The college has made no systematic analysis of its own strengths and weaknesses, or of the opportunities and threats that face it. Its strategy for responding to the problems threatening its very survival, therefore remains unclear. There is a clear need for a fundamental analysis and reappraisal of marketing if the college wishes to tackle effectively the problem of falling numbers.

11   A publicity working group was set up in September 1994 with the remit to develop and implement a marketing strategy and to organise college promotional and liaison activities. It comprises representatives from the faculties and two members of the corporation, and some of its members have experience of marketing. It is not, however, primarily a policy-making body. A marketing plan has not been developed and no training in marketing has been arranged.

12   There are some links with universities, including Surrey, Sussex, Brunel and Kingston; university staff participate in recruitment events. There is a good link with Wimbledon College of Art which enables the students from both institutions to work together on occasion. There are no established compacts with higher education institutions.

13   Contacts with other further education or sixth form colleges are not well developed; the consciousness of the competition presented by these institutions has held the college back from developing relationships with them. An unfortunate consequence is that the college has no more than a limited knowledge of developments in other colleges, which has further undermined its ability to respond to challenges and compete effectively.

14   The college works hard to maintain and improve links with local partner schools in the London Borough of Merton. It participates in a

number of recruitment activities organised by those schools which are not in competition for students. The college's co-ordinator for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities liaises with special schools, the borough advisory teacher for special needs, educational psychologists and the special educational needs co-ordinators in the high schools. Taster days are organised for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and pupils from a local special school attend classes in certain subjects which may lead to a General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) qualification. The principal attends the heads of high school meetings twice a term, a sixth form college forum for Surrey principals and another for London principals.

15   Links with AZTEC concern activities related to the work related further education development fund and briefing meetings in relation to new TEC initiatives. The college has responded to the forthcoming TEC initiatives on youth credits by hosting a launch at its premises. AZTEC has agreed the college's strategic plan and has provided support for the implementation of General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) and for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

16   Contacts with the London Borough of Merton centre around the technical and vocational education initiative, now in its last year, the support of provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and careers education. The technical and vocational education initiative allocation has been used to improve careers advice in the library and has facilitated the purchase of licences for the Education Counselling and Credit Transfer Information Service and Microdoors this year. The technical and vocational education initiative has also enabled some staff to participate in Training and Development Lead Body training. Merton Careers Office provides good support throughout the year in providing students with advice and in training staff to provide advice on careers opportunities.

17   The college has good links with employers who provide work placements for its diploma of vocational education course. There have been opportunities for students to visit the Industrial Society and participate in the 'women into management' event. The General Certificate of Education advanced level (GCE A level) students participate in a one-week enrichment course at the end of their first year which introduces them to the world of work. Activities include work placements and projects undertaken with representatives from local industry. With the help of technical and vocational education initiative funding, language students undertook work experience in France.

18   The vice-principal for community and communications is a member of the board of the Borough of Merton Education Business Partnership. This has provided assistance in the development of an intermediate GNVQ in business and is a valuable source of contacts with employers for work experience placements.

19   The college has a valuable link with the local Tamil community which helps it provide support for Tamil students who constitute about 7 per cent of the student population.

20   College policy is to recruit full-time students in the 16-19 age range, so it has not sought to attract adults, for example, by offering access or foundation courses. Nor does the college offer part-time or open-learning study opportunities.

21   A limited range of academic and vocational provision is offered. There are 20 GCSE subjects with a total enrolment of 68 students and 24 GCE A level subjects with an enrolment of 149 first-year and second-year students. The range of GCE A levels and the subject combinations open to students are more restricted than in other local further education and sixth form colleges. Recruitment for these courses has been falling over the last three years, and staff from local high schools consider that the limited provision has affected recruitment among their pupils. Vocational courses include a diploma of vocational education, a Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) first diploma in information technology, and intermediate GNVQs in art and design, business, health and social care, and science. Students on these courses are expected to combine them with mathematics or English at GCSE or, if they already have an A-C grade in these, with some other GCSE subject. In total, 51 students have been recruited to vocational courses this year. Students on the intermediate GNVQ courses cannot continue their vocational studies at the college; after completing the one-year courses they are obliged to leave and take up places in other local institutions. The lack of advanced GNVQ courses also restricts opportunities for students to combine vocational and non-vocational elements in their learning programmes.

22   A full-time foundation level course, named the 'key' course, has been developed in response to an increase in the number of students whose first language is not English. Eleven students are currently enrolled on this course; there are opportunities for their achievements in literacy to be accredited by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate and for achievements in numeracy to be accredited by the University of London Examinations and Assessment Council. There is an RSA Examinations Board (RSA) wordprocessing course with 33 students, and a foreign languages at work course in Spanish which has four students.

23   Staff are keen to develop advanced GNVQ courses to improve recruitment and to create opportunities for students to progress whilst studying at the college. However, college managers have not felt able to pursue such developments because of the lack of resources. Decisions have only recently been made to develop three foundation GNVQ courses in science, health and social care, and art and design, as a response to the phasing out of the diploma of vocational education. These new foundation courses will be offered for the first time in September 1995.

24   In order to meet its obligation under the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, to provide religious education for all students who wish to receive it, the college advertised weekly religious meetings for the first 10 weeks of the 1994 autumn term. No students attended any of the meetings.

25   Students are offered opportunities to take part in a range of activities designed to enrich their learning, many of which are related to their programmes of study. There are frequent trips to theatres, museums, exhibitions, lectures and conferences. Recent study visits have included a week in Prague for business studies students and day visits by different groups to a farm, an oil refinery, and a brewery. Some events, such as mock European elections organised in the run-up to the real elections, are held at the college and all students can be involved. The programme of additional studies, to broaden students' interests includes ceramics and rock climbing. There is also an Amnesty International group. An arrangement with Merton Music Foundation, a local charity set up to protect the provision of music education in the borough, enables instrumental lessons to be offered on college premises.

26   An attractive prospectus and a range of informative leaflets about individual courses are available. These are distributed widely around the borough and surrounding areas and are sent to all schools in the college's catchment area.

27   Policy for equal opportunities, and its practice, is the responsibility of the vice-principal for community and communications. Equal opportunities issues are largely dealt with informally through the tutorial system. Students are well informed about equal opportunities policy and procedures, and have chances to learn how the policy can work in practice; for example, during the enhancement week a group investigated access for people with disabilities to public buildings in Merton. The ethnic mix of the student population is monitored; this activity led to the development of the key course. The small number of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are successfully integrated within the college.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

28   The corporation of the college has 16 members, including the principal. Of the eight independent members, six have professional backgrounds in law, finance or surveying. The nominee from the TEC has business experience; one member has a background in industry. There are two vacancies including one for a person with a background in higher education. There are also two parent governors, two members of staff elected by their colleagues and a student member elected by the student body. The college bursar acts as clerk to the corporation. The two vice-principals attend all meetings as non-voting observers. There are subcommittees covering audit, finances and general purposes, and remuneration.

29   The members of the corporation attend meetings regularly and support college functions such as open evenings. Members are attached to specific faculties and this gives them the opportunity to gain a closer working understanding of the college. Governors receive annual reports from the faculties, and there are occasional presentations by college staff on major developments such as the measurement of added value, or the mentoring of students. The board also receives information on developments within the sector and regular reports from the principal and senior managers on matters related to running the college. The corporation plays its proper role in strategic planning and development. Governors have a clear understanding of the appropriate division of responsibility between senior managers and corporation.

30   In order to address the problems arising from the low recruitment of the last two years, the corporation has set up a working group which includes the vice-chairman of governors, three other governors and the principal. The chairman of governors attended when possible in an ex-officio capacity. The group drew up a number of alternative strategies with the common objective of protecting the breadth of curriculum currently offered. The option chosen by the corporation involved reductions in staff, including some redundancies, and some minor curricular restrictions. This is seen as a holding operation until recruitment improves. If the college does not succeed in bringing about an upturn in recruitment next year, further measures will be necessary.

31   The college receives 98 per cent of its funding from the FEFC. Its recruitment against its target was 81 per cent in 1993-94 and 58 per cent in 1994-95. The FEFC intends to allocate £1,288,730 of recurrent funding for 1995-96, a decrease of 9.1 per cent on the amounts for 1994-95. The imperative to make efficiency savings is clear, and within this context the strategic plan has been partly revised. A shadow staffing structure provides a guide to the staffing and management structure which will be in place from September 1995. This entails the loss of 5.5 full-time equivalent teachers and 0.2 support staff, including two compulsory redundancies. The number of vice-principals will be reduced from two to one. The college's estimated income and expenditure for the 12 months to July 1995 are shown in figures 5 and 6 respectively.

32   Present deployment makes inefficient use of teachers. The student-to-staff ratio is 8.3:1, and the average class size is between nine and ten. With staff tied down in teaching these small classes, the college has little scope for increasing its range of provision in vocational areas. The planned staffing reductions have affected the morale of staff and entailed a period of uncertainty, with the consequence that some of the strategic objectives for this year will not be met. Many staff, including members of the senior management team, find it difficult to decide between preserving the college's traditional and distinctive role as a sixth form college, or risking its present niche in the market by opening the college up to a broader range of courses and students.

33   Under the present management structure the principal is assisted by two vice-principals; one is responsible for resources and the other is responsible for community and communications. The principal took responsibility for drawing up the strategic plan and presenting it in draft form to the corporation for approval. The principal is accountable to the corporation for the budget, but some budgetary management is delegated to the vice-principal responsible for resources who works closely with the bursar. Financial reports are produced for governors and monthly reports are provided for faculties.

34   The co-ordinators of the five faculties and the director of student services report to the vice-principals. Individual subjects and courses within the faculties are co-ordinated by designated specialist staff. The co-ordinators of the two largest faculties have additional management responsibilities including the administration of the examinations and the control of the staff-development budget. They are also designated directors of study. Together with the principal and vice-principals, and the director of student services, these two co-ordinators comprise the senior management team of six which meets once a fortnight. Meetings are also held twice a week between the principal and vice-principals. The number of senior managers is large for such a small college, although all except the principal have teaching duties. The proposed new staffing structure reduces the size of the senior management team to four. Some key cross-college responsibilities will be reallocated, and a new post of quality manager created from among the existing staff. The present allocation of duties among senior managers is set out clearly in the staff handbook and understood by teachers.

35   A curriculum board, comprising the principal, the vice-principals, the five faculty co-ordinators, the director of student services, the special needs co-ordinator and the head of mathematics, meets two weeks out of every three. On the third week of the cycle there is a meeting of the faculty co-ordinators. The curriculum board is responsible principally for strategic policy issues relating to the curriculum and the mission and character of the college. Organisational matters affecting the curriculum are dealt with at the faculty co-ordinators' meetings, though there are no written terms of reference for the latter group. As the membership of the two forums is broadly similar, there is the flexibility to interchange the meetings in response to needs. However, the team found that some issues remained unresolved even after lengthy discussion, and there was a lack of impetus in driving forward necessary action.

36   There is a rota for regular meetings involving all levels of staff which is published in the staff handbook. Minutes of meetings are posted in the staff room. Staff meet as members of faculties, as tutors and as subject groups. A meeting for all staff is held every four weeks. In addition, groups with a specific brief, such as quality assurance or finance, meet at appropriate intervals. This collaborative approach to decision making leads to some duplication of effort. Some meetings lack a clear focus.

37   One advantage of the small size of the college is that all teachers have opportunities to become involved in whole-college developments. They may volunteer to serve on task groups set up to address specific issues, or be asked by such groups to contribute their expertise. Task groups report to the curriculum board, and matters often go subsequently to full-staff meetings. Some reports have led to new developments, such as the move to a sessional timetable. Others, for example, a report on marketing initiatives, have not stimulated significant results.

38   Management of the faculties by the faculty co-ordinators is generally effective. The faculty structure brings together single-subject teachers, who might otherwise feel isolated. Teachers meet as whole faculties every four weeks. The faculty co-ordinators work together well as a team, and communication within and between faculties is good. Within certain constraints, faculties exercise freedom to operate in ways which suit them, so that there is some diversity of practice, for example in the arrangements for the devolvement of the capitation budget to subject level. Some faculties show individual initiative in curriculum development and marketing. Greater clarity could be achieved by adopting more uniform procedures, for example in the production of faculty reports to the corporation. Some faculty co-ordinators are unclear about their management role in relation to teachers in their faculty whose specialisms differ from their own.

39   The management information system is the responsibility of the vice-principal for resources. The system provides information to meet the needs of management and the corporation, and the quality of the documentation presented to the corporation has improved over the last two years. The vice-principal for resources, in consultation with the curriculum board, has recently defined a range of performance indicators for inclusion in faculty reviews.

40   Data on retention rates are collected by the student services team and reported to the corporation. Retention is monitored by course and subject. The figures vary considerably. Last year, the completion rates, measured over two years, were above 80 per cent in nine GCE A level subjects and below in 15. Most of the withdrawals occurred during students' first year of study. Of those students who started the second year, 92 per cent completed it. In GCSE, 78 per cent of those who started the course completed it; retention was below 80 per cent in two-thirds of subjects. All the students on an English course for speakers of other languages completed their course but only 68 per cent of students completed the diploma of vocational education. Of the 268 students who left the college at the end of last year, 19 per cent left before completing their course. The college has followed up these withdrawals hoping to find the reasons, but no consistent pattern has emerged. Another cause for concern is the low number of students progressing from GCSE courses to advanced study at the college. Targets for retention and progression are not set by faculties.

41   The college monitors the intended destinations of students and carries out a survey after they have left the college. A high proportion, 82 per cent of the leavers, responded last year. This year a student mentoring scheme has been introduced with the aim of increasing the progression rate to higher education among students who might not normally consider this option.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

42   Recruitment procedures are well organised. Pupils from the six borough high schools receive information on college courses, facilities and services through regular visits by senior tutors and faculty representatives. Students and their parents are invited to visit departments and to attend open evenings held twice a year in November and March. There is also a pre-admission recruitment meeting which takes place during the summer term. Efforts are made to maintain contact with prospective students through invitations to college events such as the Arts Festival and Question Time, in which a panel of experts on a specified subject such as law and order discuss issues raised by the students.

43   Recruitment has not been effective. Numbers of prospective students applying for and accepting college places are low, and there has been a significant reduction in the number of pupils progressing from the partner schools. The college is undersubscribed, and faces strong local competition from colleges in Merton and neighbouring boroughs. The absence of targets for enrolment, other than a general aspiration that it should increase, is matched by the lack of strategic planning in relation to curriculum development.

44   The enrolment process is well ordered and provides a supportive introduction to the college for new students. Enrolment takes place over a two-day period; late enrolments are dealt with by a senior tutor during the following week. Most staff play a part in interviewing students and course choices are carefully monitored. A member of the borough careers service is present during enrolment and is made good use of by the students. Those students previously identified as having learning difficulties are interviewed by the learning support co-ordinator. Students have the chance to change their choice of courses. Tamil students are supported throughout the enrolment and induction process by a teacher of Sri Lankan origin, who is able to provide interpreting assistance.

45   Induction is thorough and carried out at both college and course levels. During the general college induction, students are assigned to a subject specialist tutor who familiarises them with college procedures. They are provided with a handbook and college charter and given guidance on financial and welfare issues. Students enrolling on the key course, the diploma of vocational education course and GNVQ business courses have their basic skills assessed. Screening for basic skills is being extended to GCSE and GCE A level students in 1995. Staff are supplied with a

comprehensive tutor handbook which contains guidance notes and the tutorial programme for the academic year. Activities during induction include: exercises designed to ensure that students get to know each other and the teachers; an explanation of the college's expectations and students' rights; a tour of the site; and an introduction to the timetable and extra-curricular activities. All students are provided with an identity card for security, examination entry and library membership. Students contribute £5.00 each, which is used to provide items for their common room and to supplement the hardship fund.

46 There is a well-planned subject induction programme which takes place over a two-week period. It provides an insight into the content and study skills required for each curriculum area and culminates in an informal assessment by the teacher and self-assessment by the student. Course choices are carefully monitored and language and learning problems identified for follow-up by learning support staff. Students can readily transfer between courses up to the autumn half term; after that, changes of course are discouraged. The college has an open-access policy, although the published requirement for entry to GCE A level courses is four GCSE subjects at grade C and above.

47 Learning support is good. Students with learning or language problems can obtain additional support, on a flexible basis, in the college's workshops. Students experiencing difficulties with their studies are referred by their tutors and subject teachers to the learning support co-ordinator and provided with whatever help they need.

48 The tutors are co-ordinated and supported by three senior tutors, and there are co-ordinators for learning support and leisure. The key objects of the tutorial programme are: to provide advice and guidance on courses; careers advice and education; advice on progression and continuing education; and personal guidance. Students are encouraged to maintain their personal records of achievement. The 20 tutors look after groups of between 4 to 18 students. The allocation to groups is based upon GCE A level, GCSE, subject-based GNVQ and diploma of vocational education courses, so that there is an academic focus to the tutorial work. There is one hour-long tutorial session each week and a daily 10-minute registration period. Although tutorial support is organised effectively at college level, tutorial periods are not always structured, or valued by students. The tutorial system is reviewed biennially.

49 Liaison between tutors and senior tutors is good. Senior tutors meet formally every fortnight. Tutor teams meet every five weeks. The organisation of the timetable into half-day sessions brings some benefits, but means that students sometimes have half or whole days free of lessons, and may leave the site rather than use the library and leisure facilities or participate in extra-curricular activities. There is a students' council made up of volunteers from tutor groups. It meets infrequently and is not well supported by the students, so that some tutor groups are left unrepresented.

50   Attendance is monitored both by subject teachers and by tutors. There is a system of 'pink slips' covering absence, lateness, non-submission of work, or other student behaviour causing concern. Staff send slips, as appropriate, to a student's tutor. If a student is the subject of a sequence of pink slips, a monthly monitoring system comes into effect, so that persistent offenders are brought to the attention of the senior tutor, interviewed, and their parents informed. There is no set target for attendance, and the degree with which the procedures are applied by staff is not consistent. In the 67 teaching sessions inspected, the average attendance level was 79 per cent. Staff were generally aware of reasons for absence.

51   Students' records are maintained in their individual files. The central file held in the main office includes copies of application forms for entry to higher education, references, correspondence with parents, medical information and subject reports. A tutor's file, containing records of individual interviews and personal information, is kept securely in each tutor's base room. Each student has their own personal file, which contains action plans, timetables, and course requirements.

52   Personal and social education is taught through the tutorial programme, and all students receive a handbook. The college has good links with the Sutton and Merton Health Authority, a representative of which visits tutors and students to advise on health issues and to provide links with other agencies. There is a 'health day' in the spring term when outside experts answer students' questions on subjects of interest to them such as drugs, HIV, stress, nutrition and exercise. This is a successful event which is of value to staff and students.

53   There are close links with the local careers service. Two of its staff, who are enthusiastic and committed, are attached to the college and participate in the enrolment days and parents' evenings. The main concentration of careers advice is during the summer term when there is an intensive tutorial and careers programme, and careers staff are available for interviews one morning a week. Careers staff also provide an introductory talk and accompany individual subject groups to careers conventions and trips to higher education institutions. Students have access to a well-resourced careers library.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

54   The GCE A level curriculum is offered in half-day sessions, with each subject allocated a whole morning and afternoon, on consecutive weekdays. Courses are carefully planned and thoroughly documented. Detailed schemes of work reflect the objectives of courses and ensure that syllabuses are covered. Students receive ample written information on topics to be studied, assessment timetables, and the criteria used for marking examination papers and assignments. They are provided with helpful guidance on study techniques, and the additional facilities available

in the college to support their learning. Students of mathematics, computing and modern languages are issued with record sheets for recording their experiences in tackling each topic on their course. These help students to identify systematically any parts of their course which are causing them difficulty, so that they can bring it to the attention of their teacher or tutor.

55   In 67 per cent of the 67 sessions inspected, the strengths outweighed the weaknesses. Weaknesses outweighed strengths in 7 per cent of lessons. The following table summarises the inspection grades which were awarded.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes Grade	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE AS/A level	6	21	6	2	0	35
GCSE	3	5	6	2	0	16
GNVQ	0	6	4	1	0	11
Basic education	0	4	1	0	0	5
Total	**9**	**36**	**17**	**5**	**0**	**67**

56   The teaching in modern languages had many strengths and very few weaknesses. Lessons were well planned by teachers who had a good command of their subject. Even though the teaching sessions were two or three hours long, the motivation of the students was maintained by skilful variation of the activities undertaken. In all of the sessions, a challenging but realistic pace of learning was established, assisted by the effective use of a good range of visual-teaching aids which were supported by printed notes and material recorded on video and audio tapes. A particularly effective feature of modern language lessons was the way that the language being learned was used not only in formal learning activities but also in informal exchanges within student groups.

57   Good teaching was the norm in mathematics, computing, information technology, business studies, history, economics, sociology, psychology, the diploma in vocational education and the course in English for speakers of other languages. Many teachers made excellent use of practical exercises to reinforce students' learning and understanding of key theories and techniques. For example, GCSE psychology students conducted an experiment in the local community to test the proposition that people will react significantly to any invasion of what they perceive to be their personal space. The experiment was conducted in a variety of locations, including public transport, a doctor's surgery, and a cafeteria. The students worked in pairs according to thoroughly-planned procedures and took care to ensure that they were not identified during the experiment. Through this challenging exercise the students were encouraged to adopt a sensitive and professional experimental style and were able to gain an important

insight into the difficulties inherent in testing social science theories. In contrast to this outstanding session, a few lessons in mathematics, computing and geography lacked a clear focus, so that students did not understand the rationale for the tasks they had been set.

58   Although there were strengths in the teaching of science, English, and art and design, these were offset by weaknesses. In science, English and performing arts, a variety of activities were planned to engage and sustain students' interest. In some lessons teachers failed to check adequately that students fully understood the material covered before moving on to another topic. In many lessons, there was a significant variation in the level of students' ability. Art and design teachers provided help on an individual basis but some science teachers did not take sufficient account of the benefits of this approach in their teaching with the result that the needs of the most able and least able students were not fully met.

59   Many of the lessons involved small numbers of students. This was a mixed blessing in terms of the opportunities presented to promote learning. In some subjects, it gave teachers the chance to give students individual attention but restricted their choice of other learning activities. In particular, the low number of students in some sessions made it difficult or even impossible to develop the skills necessary to work effectively as a member of a team.

60   Students in some subject areas, such as computing, business studies and modern languages, were encouraged to take responsibility for organising their own learning and to work independently. However, students on the diploma in vocational education did not receive adequate encouragement to become self-sufficient.

61   On most courses, there was appropriate attention to the development of effective communications, numeracy and information technology skills. In many cases, the development of these core skills takes place within the context of the students' chosen subject area. Students on the English course for speakers of other languages were given a valuable opportunity to develop their oral communications and numerical skills, as well as their knowledge of English, through a mini-enterprise project: to plan, cost, and introduce a catering service for college staff.

62   The inspection team found a number of instances of effective support for students with physical disabilities. For instance, in one lesson a student with a visual impairment was given notes in large text and his teacher checked at regular intervals to ensure that he had read and understood the material. In another lesson, a teacher showed great skill and sensitivity in providing appropriate assistance for a student needing additional support.

63   Assessed coursework and other assignments were of an appropriate standard and generally reflected course aims accurately, although the objectives underlying some art and design project work were not clear to the students. In general, the written work inspected was graded fairly and

consistently, and returned quickly to the students. Most teachers provided extensive and helpful guidance on how the work could be improved, although some English teachers adopted a somewhat uncritical stance and did not always identify significant shortcomings.

64   Staff in all subject areas keep satisfactory records of students' achievements. In many areas learning targets are set and progress towards them is monitored regularly and recorded in records of achievement.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

65   Relationships between teachers and students were good. Students were attentive in class and were making good progress with their studies. In most classes they were obviously enjoying their work.

66   In the sciences and computing, students were competent in their practical work. Psychology and sociology students carried out experimental work to a good professional standard. Students on an English course for speakers of other languages were seen working effectively in a well-organised home economics session. In the intermediate GNVQ in art and design students' original art work was imaginative and of a high standard.

67   The results of internal assessments indicate an appropriate level of achievement in most subjects. Some work of a very high standard has been produced by students in psychology, sociology, history, computing and theatre studies. The content of English students' written work was thoughtful and analytical but there were a large number of technical errors, including misspelling and poor grammar. In GCE A level history, students made well-informed presentations to the class on topics being covered as part of their coursework. They were developing an appreciation of their subject and a readiness to defend their conclusions or to reconsider points when challenged.

68   Last year, 86 students entered for GCE A level examinations in 26 subjects and for GCE advanced supplementary (AS) in six subjects. National performance tables published by the Department for Education indicate that for the 80 students aged 16-18 taking two or more GCE AS or A level subjects, the average points score per candidate was 10.7 (where A=10, E=2), an improvement over the previous year. The national average for 1993-94 was 15.3. The college's points score per entry was 4.1, which places the college in the middle third of colleges in the further education sector on this performance measure. The points score per candidate for the other three sixth form colleges in the outer part of south London lay between 10.7 and 14.1; the figures for the remaining eight colleges in the area lay between 6.9 and 13.7.

69   There were 212 examination entries for GCE A level in 1994. The overall pass rate at grades A-C was 39.2 per cent. At grades A-E it was 83 per cent. The pass rate at grades A-E is the same as the national figure of 83 per cent for students aged 16-18 in sixth form colleges. The national

pass rate at grades A-C is 48 per cent. The percentage of students achieving a pass at grades A-E in GCE A level has improved from a figure of 69.7 per cent in 1992.

70   The number of students entering individual GCE A level examinations was small, 10 or fewer in most subjects. Because of this, the use of percentage pass rates at subject level can give a misleading view. Last year, all the students who entered the examination achieved a pass at grades A-E in music, psychology, sociology, home economics, art and design, business subjects, languages, further mathematics, performing arts and theatre studies. Good pass rates of 90 per cent were achieved in English literature and mathematics. Pass rates close to, or above, national rates were obtained in a further five subjects. They were well below national rates in computing, design and technology, government and politics, English language, geography and physics.

71   The college does not offer GCE AS subjects as a separate course but a small number of students enter the examinations, having found one or more of their GCE A level subjects to be too demanding. Last year's pass rates in GCE AS subjects were poor, except in performing arts.

72   The college's entry requirement for students who wish to study three GCE A level subjects is four GCSE passes at grade C or above. The college has subscribed to the Advanced Level Information System for the past two years. The results indicate that the students are achieving the results which might be expected from their GCSE qualifications on entry.

73   In 1994, 156 students made 402 entries for GCSE examinations in 26 subjects. Of these, 47 per cent were awarded grades A-C: an improvement on the previous two years, and close to the national figure of 50 per cent for students aged 16-18 in sixth form colleges. Results were at or above the national figures in 14 subjects, including mathematics and English language. Students who wish to go on to higher education and who have not yet been awarded a grade C or better in English language and/or mathematics are encouraged to include these subjects in their studies. In mathematics, on average, such students improved their result by one grade.

74   Last year, about 150 students entered for a variety of vocational and other awards. Pass rates in intermediate GNVQ business and diploma of vocational education were good. Good achievements were also recorded in the English for speakers of other languages RSA profile certificate, the RSA Spanish certificate in business language competence, the Central Council for Physical Recreation community sports leader's award, RSA wordprocessing, and the University of London Examinations and Assessment Council level 1 numeracy examinations. Lower pass rates were achieved in the BTEC first diploma in art and design and numeracy at level 2.

75   The known destinations of students who left college in 1994 show that of the 53 students on BTEC and diploma of vocational education courses, 34 continued to study in further education, nine obtained employment and three entered youth training schemes. Of the 75 students who completed their GCSE course, six obtained employment and 54 continued to study in further education. However, only eight of the latter enrolled on courses at the college. Higher education was the destination of 49 of the 89 students completing their GCE A level course; four continued to study in further education, 20 obtained employment, and three entered youth training schemes. The percentage of students gaining a place in higher education has grown over the past three years.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

76   The college's policy for quality assurance is in the very early stages of implementation. A policy and framework for quality assurance was formally approved at the beginning of 1995. It was drawn up by a quality assurance committee chaired by the vice-principal for community and communications. This built on the work of an earlier group which recommended the introduction of a range of quality assurance initiatives in response to Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement* and the funding methodology. The quality assurance committee plans to continue to meet regularly to review progress in implementing the policy.

77   The college's quality system comprises three main aspects: the quality assurance framework, the faculty review system and the college charter.

78   The quality assurance framework identifies a wide range of activities and sets standards for these. For the majority of standards, no measurable targets are set: staff and student evaluation are the usual measure of effectiveness. The framework indicates the review and evaluation processes to be carried out, but the absence of measurable targets weakens its overall effectiveness. As part of the process, a self-review checklist for teachers has been developed. This identifies activities within the framework which are the responsibility of teachers and reinforces the contribution that individuals can make to the quality process.

79   A faculty review system has been in operation since the college was established in 1990. It has been subjected to a number of improvements and the latest version, which is part of the new quality assurance system, recommends a standard format for reviewing all faculties. Faculty reviews are informed by subject reviews undertaken by subject co-ordinators at the end of each year. Subject reviews are not systematically documented. Co-ordinators generally include students' evaluation of the subject or course as part of the review. Individual co-ordinators have developed a variety of ways for seeking students' perceptions of their subjects or courses, including questionnaires, structured oral questions, group discussion and written comments. No systematic evaluation has been undertaken of the effectiveness of the various methods and it is left to individual co-ordinators to make their own choice.

80   Each faculty is now required to undertake a review under the headings: staff development and appraisal; curriculum; students, including a commentary on examination results; resources; and quality assurance. Students' perceptions are not included as a separate subheading, and faculties are not asked to consider enrolment, attendance and retention statistics as part of the review. Each faculty is asked to set targets for the following year which are agreed with one of the vice-principals. These targets reflect areas of the faculties' work which have been identified as requiring improvement, such as examination rates in a particular subject.

81   All faculties and the student services team undertook a review of 1993-94 on the basis of the new framework document. Commentary under the headings was largely descriptive, general and uncritical. Targets for 1994-95 were often imprecise and did not identify any timescale or responsibility for action. Only one faculty attempted to use performance indicators. The student evaluations obtained at subject or course level were inadequately reflected in faculty reviews. The review of student services did, however, refer to student evaluation of activities such as the induction programme, and there were some links between the outcomes of evaluations and the targets set.

82   The faculty reviews were considered by the principal and the curriculum board, and a summary of the reviews was considered at a meeting of the corporation. On the present timetable, as set out in the policy document, the main faculty review is undertaken in October, and followed up with a review of Advanced Level Information System results in November/December. The college has realised that this is too late for reviews to have any impact on college or faculty planning processes to affect the academic year in which the reviews occur, and plans to bring forward to July those parts of the faculty review process which are not dependent on examination results being available.

83   One of the faculty co-ordinators acts as the college's staff-development co-ordinator. Each year in September, he asks each member of staff to carry out an evaluation of his or her staff-development needs. Staff are expected to draw on information from the faculty review process in identifying these and to use the outcomes of appraisal to inform the process when the scheme is fully operational. The co-ordinator uses the information gathered to identify priorities to be addressed during the five whole-college, staff-development days during the year. The senior management team considers the priorities, alongside those which they have themselves identified, and determines a programme accordingly.

84   The arrangements for internal funding of staff development are fragmented. The principal makes an allocation to the staff-development co-ordinator based on what the college might have expected to receive for this purpose had it still been part of the LEA. Each term the co-ordinator divides the allocation between three areas: development specific to an individual; development specific to a faculty; and whole-college

development. The principal funds management-related development activity from her own capitation allocation but does not set a budget for this activity. Although staff are aware that funding is available from the principal for some development activities, there are no published criteria for eligible activities. The application forms used for staff-development activities are the same, regardless of which budget is being used. In 1994-95, total spending on staff-development activities will constitute 0.54 per cent of the staffing budget.

85   Because funding for staff-development activities is so limited, much of the staff training is provided internally using the expertise of college staff and external specialists. Until 1996, the college will continue to receive technical and vocational education initiative funding through the LEA, which it has been able to use for most of the training and assessment for the Training and Development Lead Body assessor and verifier awards.

86   Staff applying to undertake a staff-development activity are asked to make a statement in support of their application. No guidance is given on how the application might be justified in relation to the college's strategic plan, the outcomes of the faculty review, or the outcomes of appraisal. The staff-development co-ordinator does not prepare a formal report on the evaluation of staff-development activities, but summarises for the benefit of the senior management team the evaluations of events carried out by individual teachers.

87   A staff-appraisal scheme for teaching staff, which includes classroom observation, was introduced in 1994. Training for appraisal was provided by the London Borough of Merton shortly before incorporation, and the college bought in some additional training before undertaking the first appraisals. The vice-principals and some of the faculty co-ordinators were appraised in the summer term 1994, but since then there has been a hiatus. No staff below the level of faculty co-ordinator have been appraised. There is no scheme for support staff. Although the strategic plan for 1994-97 identifies this, no action has yet been taken.

88   An induction scheme for new staff was introduced in 1994. This followed the introduction a year earlier of an induction programme for newly-qualified teachers. The induction programme is comprehensive and includes mentoring arrangements. It is intended to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme at the end of the year.

89   The college has not yet decided whether to make a commitment to gaining the Investors in People award. Although some of the requirements are already being met, the decision will depend on whether support is available from AZTEC to formulate an action plan and put the other necessary systems in place.

90   The college prepared a self-assessment review which was made available for inspectors. This is a useful document which offers realistic judgements of the college's strengths and weaknesses. The review is

accurate but does not address sufficiently the context in which the college is operating. It is intended that subsequent reviews will constitute a concise statement of the evolving quality assurance strategy.

91   The Charter for Further Education was widely distributed in the college. The director of student services produced a draft of the college charter, based on the national charter, for consultation with staff, students and a number of outside bodies before the final version was approved by the corporation and adopted in June 1994. The document is clear and concise. It contains statements which can be monitored, although no standards are expressed in quantitative terms. Performance is being monitored in terms of the number of queries arising from the charter, of which there have been two so far. A copy of the charter is included in the staff handbook and distributed to all students. It will be reviewed at the end of the academic year and a revised version will be produced for next year.

RESOURCES

Staffing

92   There are sufficient teachers to cover the subjects on offer. In addition to the principal and two vice-principals there are 33 full-time equivalent teachers, seven of whom have fractional full-time posts. The college does not employ any hourly-paid part-time teachers. Women make up 60 per cent of the full-time teaching staff and 9 per cent of full-time teachers are from minority ethnic backgrounds.

93   Teachers are well qualified for the subjects being taught. Over 90 per cent have a teaching qualification, 85 per cent have a first degree in a related area and 75 per cent have a higher degree. At the time of the inspection, seven teachers had completed the Training and Development Lead Body assessor qualifications and two were undertaking internal verifier accreditation. Although many teachers have responded positively to changes in the curriculum, very few teachers have experience of vocational education. The college is not ensuring that there is sufficient continuous professional development and updating for staff involved in GNVQ courses. A lack of professional expertise in marketing and in some specialist areas such as design, was evident during the inspection. The college makes up for its own lack of expertise in personnel and site management by buying in advice from the borough personnel department and a firm of surveyors.

94   Learning is supported by a small team of appropriately-qualified technical, administrative and premises staff. This includes the college bursar and her two assistant administrative officers, a clerical assistant, a caretaker and a groundsman. There are four technicians, one in design and three in science. Three of these are part-time staff. This level and range of expertise of technician support is inadequate for the curriculum offered. There is no information technology systems manager. The lack of technical support staff for information technology across the college is a

serious problem, placing an extra burden on teaching staff. The library is staffed by one qualified librarian, which means that the library cannot remain open throughout the day. This level of staffing is insufficient to meet the growing demands for independent learning, especially by students on vocational courses.

Equipment/learning resources

95   The college budget consists of 31 cost centres that are the responsibility of named individuals and controlled through the computer-based Schools Information Management System. Budget allocations are calculated on a formula based on student numbers and a weighting system that recognises the costs of different subject areas. Budget holders receive monthly cost-centre commitment reports which are also reviewed at a monthly meeting of the principal, vice-principal for resources, and the bursar. A threshold system, built into the Schools Information Management System, prevents a budget holder from carrying through a transaction which would overspend the budget.

96   When the college opened in 1990, about 80 per cent of its equipment and furniture was new. As a consequence, the quality of specialist equipment is good and is sufficient for the current needs of courses. There are excellent specialist resources for home economics and modern languages. Courses for basic education, English for speakers of other languages, and students with learning difficulties, also have excellent resources to support learning. Course textbooks are provided for the students. Inspectors saw effective use of visual aids and video recordings in many sessions.

97   The college has established good levels of equipment for information technology with an overall ratio of students to workstations of 3:1. There are 120 workstations, although this includes one group of machines which has reached the end of its working life. Generally, students have good access to computers in their specialist subject areas, and there are cross-college 'drop-in' facilities. These are heavily used and a booking system is operated to reduce congestion. The library has a compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) database facility, providing staff and students with data on careers, statistics and general education issues. A wide range of software is being used by students, but the variety of different hardware and software makes effective maintenance and support difficult.

98   A staff-resource room has two workstations available for teachers' use, and some faculties have information technology provision in their offices. The use of information technology by teachers and managers varies across the college. The faculty co-ordinators are not linked directly with the management information systems.

99   The library bookstock of 8,500 is inadequate. Funding for books in 1994-95 is £1,300, giving an expenditure per student of just over £4.00. The core of the bookstock inherited at the opening of the college in 1990 is

out of date and inappropriate to support the current curriculum. The library is not an effective college-wide learning-resource centre, and is unable to fulfil the needs of students on many of the specialist courses. Some faculties have established their own resource centres and have separate collections of books and learning-resource materials. This appears to be working effectively in some areas but could lead to duplication and limit access for some students. The college does not have a policy on this practice, nor any appropriate systems for monitoring, evaluating and controlling the use of learning resources.

Accommodation

100 The college is on a single site which was formerly a girls' high school. There are four main teaching buildings. Block 1 is a 1930s brick-built two-storey building; block 2, which houses the sciences, is a late 1960s two-storey steel-framed building; block 3, two storeys of brick, was built in 1990 when the site was prepared for its use as a sixth form college; and block 4 is a 1930s two-storey brick building. All four blocks are linked by covered walkways. In addition to the four teaching blocks there is a sports hall built during the 1960s. There are two houses which are used by the caretaker and groundsman.

101 The site covers approximately 6.20 hectares and the grounds consist of grassed areas and beds of shrubs surrounding the buildings, space for car parking, four tennis courts and a playing field. The site offers an attractive learning environment for students.

102 Accommodation is generous and there is plenty of scope for expansion without any adverse effects on the quality of education provided by the college. Teaching accommodation is generally good; classrooms and workshops are light and well decorated. A feature of the college is that rooms are visually stimulating and many specialist areas make effective use of displays of students' work, creating a bright and pleasant learning environment. An exception is the science block, which is in need of refurbishment. In some areas, such as art and design and business studies, classrooms and studios are too small for present demands. There is ample accommodation for staff, which comprises common rooms, resource rooms and offices. There is a student common room and a refectory for staff and students.

103 Access for students with restricted mobility is good. All ground floor areas are accessible to wheelchair users. The first floors of three blocks are accessible through the lift in block 3, with the exception of only three rooms. The top floor of block 1, housing computing, music and staff areas, is not accessible to wheelchair users.

104 Students have sufficient space for private study. The library has 36 study spaces and an adjoining reading room has seating for 16 people. There is an additional private-study room with space for 12 students. The library also has an area devoted to careers advice and guidance. This is staffed by the careers specialists from the LEA when they are in the college.

During the inspection some students expressed dissatisfaction with the poor quality of decoration and furnishing of their social/common rooms. Because of problems with damaged flooring and with a leaking roof, the sports hall is underused. This has an adverse effect on student recreation and is limiting potential developments in course provision.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

105 The strengths of the college are:

• highly-qualified staff who display high standards of professionalism

• comprehensive, well-designed induction programmes

• a supportive and caring environment for the students

• thoughtfully prepared, well-organised lessons

• good advice on careers and higher education

• effective support for students with specific language needs and for those with physical disabilities

• GCE A level results which show an improvement on previous years

• excellent accommodation and good equipment to support learning.

106 The college should address the following issues:

• recruitment which is well below projected levels

• the development and implementation of an effective marketing strategy

• the viability and appropriateness of the current range of provision

• progression within the college for students on one-year courses

• timescales and priorities within the strategic plan

• the lack of formalised arrangements for collaboration with other educational institutions

• examination results in some GCE A level subjects which are poor in comparison with those of other sixth form colleges

• the effectiveness of task groups in promoting change

• inconsistently applied tutorial arrangements

• fragmented and inconsistent arrangements for the funding of staff development

• insufficient industrial or commercial experience for those teaching on vocational courses
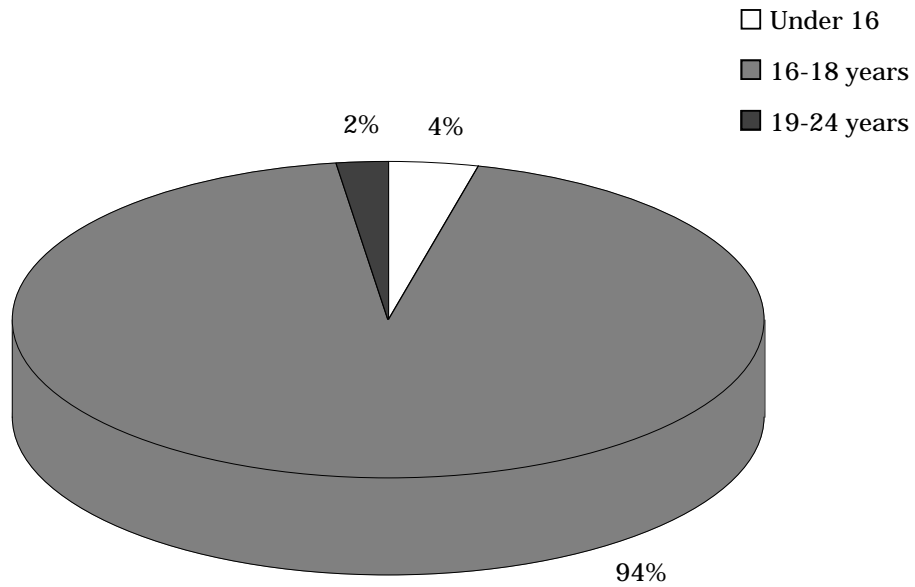
• inadequate library services.

FIGURES

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

Figure 1

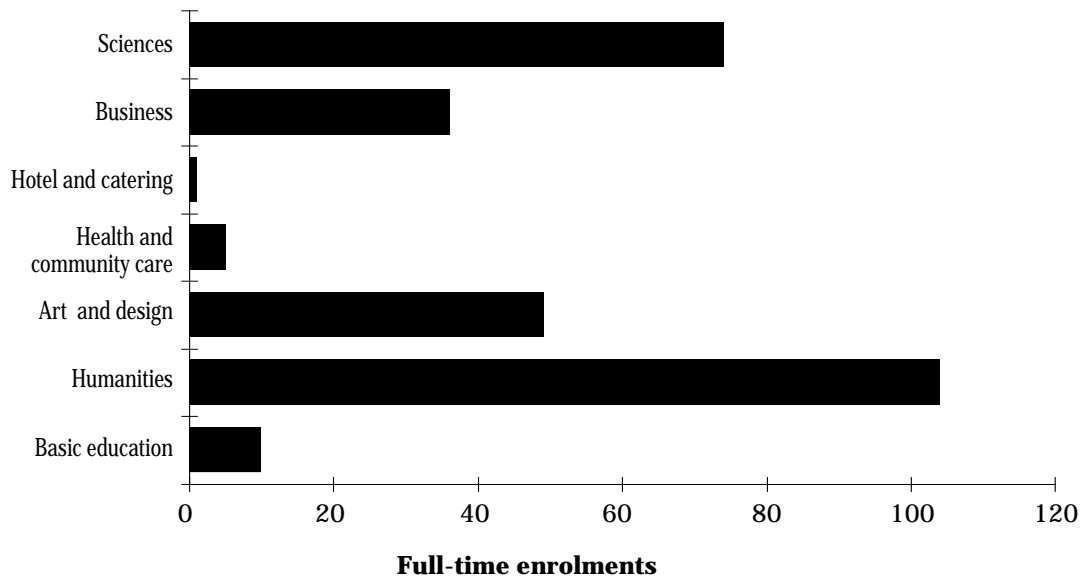**Merton Sixth Form College: percentage enrolments by age (as at November 1994)**

□ Under 16

■ 16-18 years

■ 19-24 years

2%   4%

94%

Enrolments: 279

Figure 2

**Merton Sixth Form College: percentage enrolments by level of study (as at November 1994)**

Foundation
4%

Intermediate
43%

Advanced
53%

Enrolments: 279

26
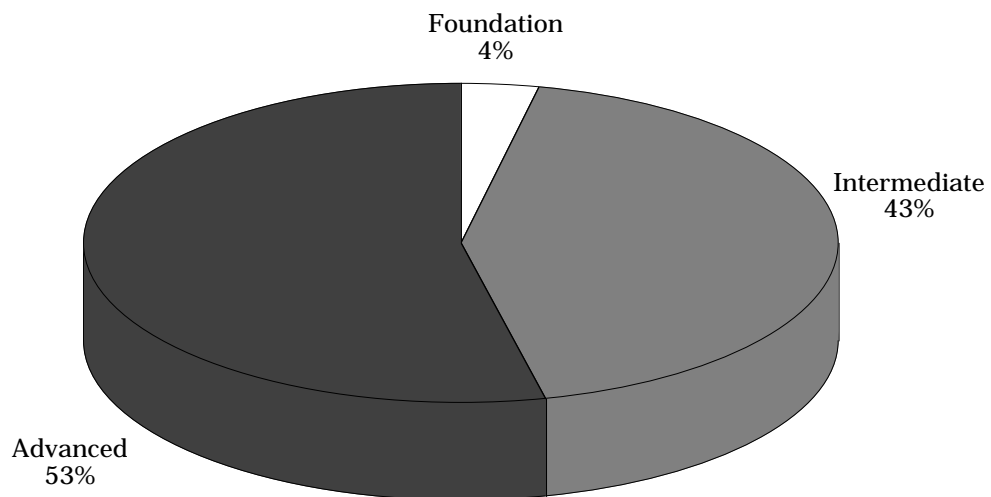
Figure 3

Merton Sixth Form College: enrolments by curriculum area (as at November 1994)
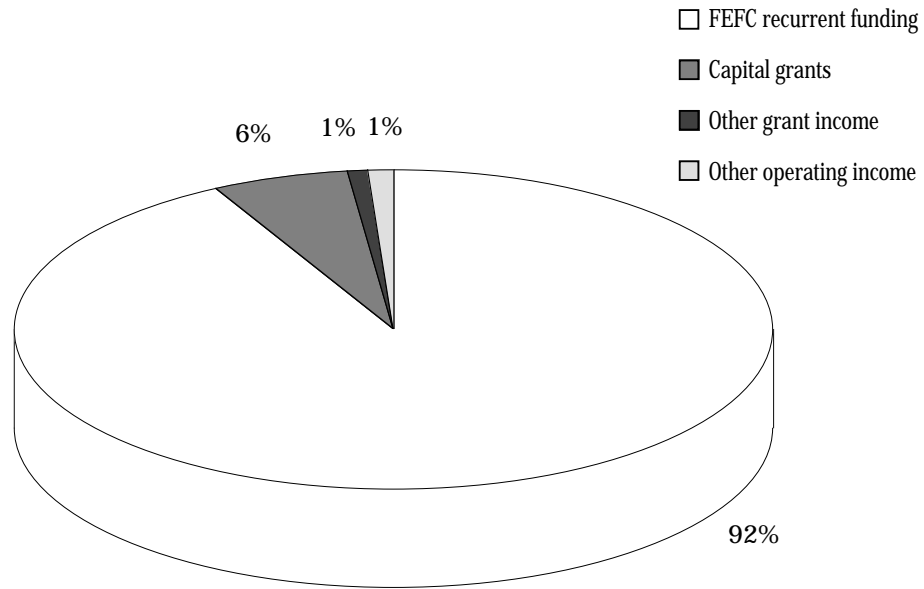

Full-time enrolments

Enrolments: 279

Figure 4

Merton Sixth Form College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (as at November 1994)
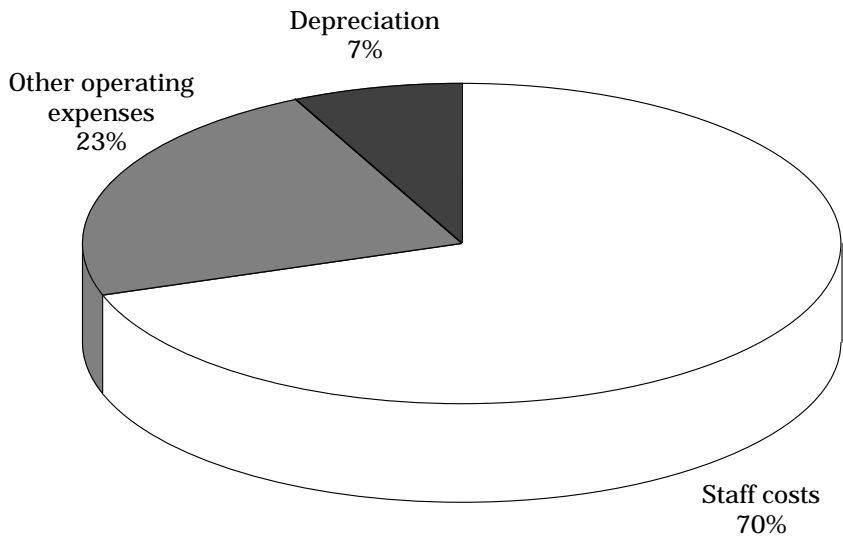

Full-time equivalent staff
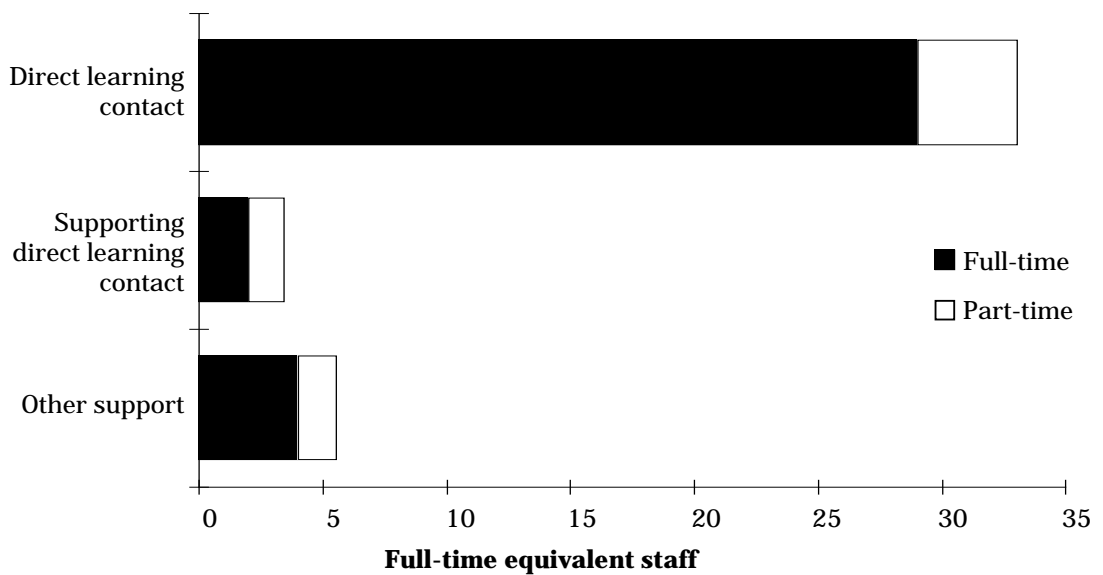
Full-time equivalent staff: 42

Figure 5

Merton Sixth Form College: estimated income (for 12 months to July 1995)

- ☐ FEFC recurrent funding
- ▨ Capital grants
- ■ Other grant income
- ☐ Other operating income

6%   1% 1%

92%

Estimated income: £1,537,745

Figure 6

Merton Sixth Form College: estimated expenditure (for 12 months to July 1995)

Depreciation
7%

Other operating
expenses
23%

Staff costs
70%

Estimated expenditure: £1,644,179