

Matthew Boulton College of Further and Higher Education

**REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1998-99**

**THE
FURTHER
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FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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FUNDING COUNCIL**

The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education according to a four-year cycle. It also inspects other further education provision funded by the FEFC. In fulfilling its work programme, the inspectorate assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum, disseminates good practice and advises the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

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

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Grade Descriptors

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

The descriptors for the grades are:

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

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision and curriculum areas, for colleges inspected during 1997-98, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum areas	9	60	29	2	–
Cross-college provision	18	54	24	4	–

Source: Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report
Sample size: 108 college inspections

Student Achievements

Where data on student achievements appear in tables, levels of achievement are shown in three ways:

- as expected completions, which is the number of initial enrolments on qualifications where the student expected to complete the qualification in a given year. For example, a student on a two-year programme who began their programme in October 1995, would appear in the results for 1996-97 because this is the year in which they expected to complete their qualification
- as a retention rate, which is the percentage of qualifications which the students have completed as expected (or are continuing with the prospect of late completion). For programmes of study of two years or more, retention is calculated across the whole programme, that is, from the start to the end of the qualification
- as an achievement rate, which is the number of qualifications students have fully achieved as a percentage of completed qualifications with a known outcome. Partial achievements are not shown.

Summary

Matthew Boulton College of Further and Higher Education West Midlands Region

Inspected November 1998

Matthew Boulton College of Further and Higher Education is a general further education college in central Birmingham. The college's financial position and poor enrolment numbers became known just after the new principal took over in April 1998. Major reorganisation and restructuring had to be undertaken by governors and managers during the summer months in order for the college to remain viable. This included a reduction in staffing of some 24% and the appointment of a new management team which was in place by September 1998. A recovery plan was presented to the FEFC just before the inspection began. In its self-assessment report, the college identified some of its strengths and weaknesses using the quality statements in Council Circulars 97/12, *Validating Self-assessment* and 97/22, *Joint Working: Audit and Inspection*. However, inspectors could not substantiate any of the grades awarded to curriculum areas and aspects of cross-college provision. They found many serious weaknesses that were not included in the self-assessment report. The absence, since 1995, of any ISR returns acceptable to the FEFC meant that the college was unable to arrive at accurate judgements using performance indicators for student retention and achievement.

The inspection covered aspects of cross-college provision and work in six of the nine programme areas offered by the college. The grades awarded to lessons were well below the national average for 1997-98. The quality of provision in science, engineering, business studies and art, design and printing is satisfactory. The provision in history, psychology and sociology and the provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was unsatisfactory. The strengths of the college include the relevant business background of governors, effective liaison with external bodies, and well-managed staff development. The college should address: the ineffective conduct of corporation business; the inaccuracy and inadequacy of financial information for governors; the failure to achieve funding unit targets for the past three years; an inadequate strategic plan and operating statement; poor value for money in respect of services and provision and the failure to account for public funds; ineffective management information systems and procedures; underdeveloped systems for setting and monitoring management targets; the inadequate involvement of governors in preparing and monitoring the strategic plan and in monitoring students' achievements and the quality of collaborative provision. The college should also address: low pass rates; the inaccuracy of information on students' achievements; poor levels of attendance, punctuality and retention; and the high proportion of unused accommodation.

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

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Science including dental technology and pharmaceutical science	3	Support for students	4
Engineering	3	General resources	4
Business studies and accounting	3	Quality assurance	4
Art, design and printing	3	Governance	5
History, psychology and sociology	4	Management	5
Provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities	4		

The College and its Mission

1 Matthew Boulton College of Further and Higher Education is an inner-city college providing education and training for residents of Birmingham and the West Midlands region. The college is located on four sites: two adjacent large tower blocks at the southern end of the city centre, and two smaller buildings a short distance away. In July 1998, there were 1,984 full-time and 4,317 part-time students at the college, of whom 60% were aged 19 or over. Approximately 44% of the college's students live within four miles of the college. This part of the city includes areas of serious socio-economic deprivation characterised by high unemployment, poor housing and low rates of participation in post-compulsory education and training. The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) has identified the college as one of a group of colleges which typically recruits a high percentage of students from disadvantaged areas. In the immediate community of Sparkbrook and Sparkhill, only 9.8% of year 11 pupils gained five or more general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) subjects at grades C or above, compared with a city average of around 35%. The post-16 education sector within the city is highly competitive. There are eight schools with sixth forms within a three-mile radius of the college and 10 further education sector colleges within seven miles of the college.

2 Current trends indicate a general fall in unemployment over the past two years to 4.8% in the region as a whole and 6% in Birmingham. Technical, managerial and professional sectors are projecting a rise in employment which will be offset by falls in the number of craft and unskilled positions. The manufacturing sector has shown a marked slow-down between 1996 and 1998. The percentage of those unemployed for more than one year in Birmingham (37%), is higher than for the region as a whole (29%).

3 The college is a centre for electronic, electrical and mechanical engineering training

including fabrication and welding. It is a major participant in the delivery of training to the printing and graphic arts sector. A strategic partnership with the sector has been built up through the Birmingham and West Midlands' Print Initiative and the college is a regional centre for the industry. This has been further enhanced by a capital grant from the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) to develop information technology (IT) training in the print industry. The college is working with community groups on urban regeneration. It is also working with education resource centres, the local learning partnership and others to generate greater opportunity of access to education and training. The college is engaged in the development of family literacy and other training, particularly in business, within the local community, as part of a programme of inclusiveness and widening participation. In addition to its provision funded by the FEFC, the college has a higher education programme, offered in collaboration with the universities of Sunderland, Birmingham, Central England, Wolverhampton and Aston. Courses include franchised degree level work. The college is a main provider of podiatric medicine and health care courses to which students are recruited from across the region. Specialised support for students with autism and dyslexia has been piloted within the college. Courses are offered for students with brain injuries. The college has well-established European links.

4 In September 1998, there were 217 full-time equivalent staff, 90 of whom were support staff. A new principal was appointed in April 1998. The current senior management structure of the college was created in September 1998. In addition to the principal the senior management team comprises the director of business resources, the director of finance and strategic planning and the four heads of faculty.

5 The college's mission is to promote a culture of lifelong learning and achievement by responding to the learning needs of individuals,

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employers and the community through an innovative and high-quality education and training service, which supports individuals in developing their full potential and in achieving general and vocational qualifications.

The Inspection

6 The college was inspected during the week beginning 2 November 1998. In preparation for the inspection, inspectors reviewed the self-assessment report and considered information from other directorates of the FEFC. The college provided data on students' achievements for 1998 for the curriculum areas being inspected. These were checked against primary sources of evidence such as registers and pass lists issued by examining bodies. At the time of the inspection the 1997 individualised student record (ISR) return was still with the college's external auditors. The 1996 and 1997 returns have yet to be accepted by the FEFC. Data from primary sources were compared with ISR data for 1996 and 1997. These revealed significant errors, which meant that specialist inspectors were unable to rely on these data. Wherever

possible, retention and achievement statistics were compared with the average for colleges of a similar type. At the time of the inspection, two senior postholders had been suspended and were on long-term sick leave. The inspection was carried out by 11 inspectors using a total of 48 working days and an auditor working for five days. Inspectors observed 81 lessons, evaluated students' work and examined college documents. Meetings were held with governors, managers, other college staff, students, representatives of local schools, employers and members of the community. Inspectors also received a response to a standard questionnaire from the local training and enterprise council (TEC).

7 The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1997-98. Of the lessons inspected, 43% were judged to be good or outstanding and 17% were judged to be less than satisfactory. This profile compares with the average of 65% and 6%, respectively, for all lessons observed during 1997-98.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level and GCSE	2	3	6	4	0	15
GNVQ	1	5	4	1	0	11
NVQ	1	2	1	1	0	5
Other vocational	3	11	12	0	0	26
Other	3	4	9	8	0	24
Total (No)	10	25	32	14	0	81
Total (%)	12	31	40	17	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98 (%)	19	46	29	6	0	100

Source for national average: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report*

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8 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1997-98.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
Matthew Boulton College of Further and Higher Education	10.8	67
National average, all inspected colleges 1997-98	10.4	77

Source for national average: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1997-98: Chief inspector's annual report*

Curriculum Areas

Science Including Dental Technology and Pharmaceutical Science

Grade 3

9 Inspectors observed 15 lessons. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report. However, the report overemphasised strengths in teaching and learning and gave insufficient attention to the weaknesses in students' achievements.

Key strengths

- high retention and achievement rates on many vocational courses
- a wide range of provision with good opportunities for progression
- extensive and productive external links
- good use of demonstrations and practical work

Weaknesses

- poor achievement on GCSE and general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) intermediate courses
- a failure to take account of the needs of the full range of students
- little use of IT in teaching and learning

10 The college provides a wide range of science courses. It is a regional centre for applied science courses including those in dental technology, pharmaceutical science, medical physics and physiological measurement and cleaning science. It also provides general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level), GCSE and GNVQ courses and courses which link directly to those in local universities. Enrolments on GCE A level science courses have declined substantially over the past three years. Enrolments on vocational courses are stable.

11 The quality of teaching is satisfactory. Most lessons start promptly, registers are checked, lateness is noted and reasons sought. Lessons are carefully planned and well documented using a standard college form which is filed with schemes of work for the course. Some schemes of work clearly indicate the range of activities to be undertaken; others give little information beyond the order in which topics are to be covered. Teachers make the objectives of lessons clear to students and draw appropriate links with earlier work. In most lessons, they demonstrate a thorough knowledge and understanding of the subject matter. This is particularly evident on vocational courses where teachers relate the course content to the students' experience of work. The best course handbooks are comprehensive and informative. Students are attentive and apply themselves well in lessons. In many lessons, teachers make good use of demonstrations and practical work to help stimulate interest and develop students' skills and understanding. They check students' learning by questions and discussions with individuals but often they do not give the same level of attention to all students. Inspectors agreed with the comment in the self-assessment report that the range of teaching strategies adopted is limited and seldom takes account of the range of experience and abilities of students in the class. Students' key skills are systematically developed and assessed on some of the vocational courses. Key skills are not included in GCSE and GCE A level programmes, although the self-assessment report claims the development of these as a strength.

12 Examination results on vocational courses for part-time students are very good. Retention rates and pass rates at or near 100% have been achieved on a number of courses, including the BTEC national certificates in medical physics and physiological measurement and in pharmacy, and the City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) course in cleaning science. Students' achievements on full-time courses are more variable; in several cases they are poor.

Curriculum Areas

On the one-year GCE A level courses, retention rates and pass rates are above national averages. Pass rates for students on two-year GCE A level courses were below national averages in 1996 and 1997, with pass rates below 50% in biology, chemistry and physics in at least one of these years. In 1998, however, overall retention rates and pass rates on these two-year courses improved. Pass rates of 63% to 76% were around the national pass rates. Pass rates on GNVQ courses are consistently below the national average although there has been a steady improvement in the intermediate course pass rate, from 14% to 63%, over the last three years. The percentage of students achieving grade C or above on GCSE courses is poor and often well below the national average. In most subjects, pass rates below 20% have been recorded in at least one of the past three years.

13 Resources and accommodation for science are generally satisfactory. There has been some

updating of equipment, although, as the self-assessment report identified, some of it is in need of replacement. Some of the accommodation for dental technology is unsatisfactory. Teaching staff are appropriately qualified and there is a staff development programme to ensure that teachers on vocational courses keep up to date. Technician staffing has been reduced substantially and the effectiveness of the new arrangements has yet to be fully tested. Technicians are supported in undertaking new roles. The science faculty has an extensive range of productive external links with employers, schools and higher education institutions and with a number of colleges in other European countries. These links have enabled the faculty to respond effectively to changing needs in developing new courses. They have also helped to broaden the educational experience of science students.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in science including dental technology and pharmaceutical science, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
BTEC first certificate	1	Expected completions	**	**	20
		Retention (%)	**	**	55
		Achievement (%)	**	**	55
GCSE/GNVQ intermediate	2	Expected completions	**	**	115
		Retention (%)	**	**	69
		Achievement (%)	**	**	27
GCE A level/GNVQ advanced	3	Expected completions	**	**	162
		Retention (%)	**	**	78
		Achievement (%)	**	**	64
BTEC national diploma and certificate	3	Expected completions	**	**	*
		Retention (%)	**	**	*
		Achievement (%)	**	**	94
BTEC higher national certificate	4	Expected completions	**	**	17
		Retention (%)	**	**	94
		Achievement (%)	**	**	94

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

*data not available

**data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Engineering

Grade 3

14 Inspectors observed 12 lessons. They agreed with a number of strengths in the self-assessment report but found several weaknesses in teaching and learning and in students' achievements which were not identified by the college. Some strengths had been overstated.

Key strengths

- good practical teaching
- the wide range of provision, well matched to the needs of industry
- productive links with industry
- clear progression routes from intermediate to higher levels

Weaknesses

- insufficient attention to meeting the needs of all students
- low pass rates
- insufficient attention to poor performance by students
- poor monitoring of students' attendance and retention

15 A strength recognised in the self-assessment report is the wide range of mechanical engineering, electronic engineering and welding courses designed to meet the needs of students and local industry. The college provides short courses tailored to the requirements of local companies and employers' representatives find the college highly responsive in arranging these. There are clear progression routes from intermediate to higher level courses. Students can choose attendance patterns which meet their study needs. There is no provision at foundation level, and some students are enrolled on intermediate level programmes without adequate skills to cope

with the demands of the course. Industry is used effectively as a resource for teaching and learning. Work experience for full-time students is well managed, using a wide range of placements provided by local employers. GNVQ students visit Italy as part of an exchange programme; their log books show that this provides good opportunities to gain an insight into the cultural and technical aspects of another European country.

16 In most practical lessons, clear demonstrations are followed by close supervision of students' work. In the best examples, graded exercises are used effectively to cater for the individual needs of students. In a few lessons, students are unclear how to proceed and time is lost while they wait for help. Many theory lessons are well structured. Teachers give clear explanations of new topics and make good reference to industrial practice. The strengths of the teaching, however, are overstated in the self-assessment report. Teachers make few checks to ensure that all students have understood the work and they sometimes appear unaware that students have lost interest in the lesson. In many lessons, learning activities are not varied enough. Class discussion is not always well managed; for example, teachers often allow a minority of students to dominate proceedings. Teachers, in their presentations, do not allow for students' varying ability to make effective notes and there is not enough use of visual aids to help students learn.

17 Teachers use a suitable variety of assessment methods, well matched to the objectives of the course. Assignment tasks are clearly stated and cross-referenced to course objectives. On most, but not all, full-time courses assessment includes the assessment of key skills. Some teachers write helpful comments on students' assignments. In most cases, however, they do not give detailed enough comments on weak pieces of work to show students how they can improve.

Curriculum Areas

18 The self-assessment report does not identify weaknesses in the monitoring of students' progress. Records of the reviews of students' progress are superficial; there is little or no identification of students' learning needs and setting of targets for improvement. Insufficient attention is given to assessing students' skills and knowledge at an early stage in their course. Attendance is not effectively monitored. There are some high absence rates. Class registers are poorly maintained. Many teachers are not sure how many students should be in their class.

19 The information on students' achievements and destinations held in the curriculum area is unreliable and incomplete. The self-assessment report overstated the strength of students' achievements. It was based on results for 1997 and pass rates declined in 1998. In 1998, pass rates on the two-year GNVQ advanced and BTEC national certificate courses in electronics were high. Pass rates on higher level courses and on the BTEC national certificate course in mechanical engineering, however, have declined

and are relatively low. The 1998 pass rate for part 3 of the electronic servicing course also shows a decline from the previous year and is low, although many of these students achieve the award after the completion of the course. Overall retention rates have been satisfactory for the last three years. They are high and improving on higher level courses and the national certificate in mechanical engineering but they have declined on GNVQ advanced courses.

20 Staff shortages have had an adverse effect on the students' experience. For example, some mechanical engineering classes have been cancelled. Since the production of the self-assessment report, the number of teachers and managers in the section has been significantly reduced. Many of the specialist facilities for electronic engineering are good and have been significantly enhanced by donations of equipment from companies. Poor facilities for mechanical engineering were identified in the self-assessment report and an action plan to address this is being implemented.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in engineering, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GNVQ intermediate	2	Expected completions	**	**	30
		Retention (%)	**	**	73
		Achievement (%)	**	**	73
C&G part 2 (part time)	2	Expected completions	**	**	109
		Retention (%)	**	**	73
		Achievement (%)	**	**	46
GNVQ advanced	3	Expected completions	**	**	37
		Retention (%)	**	**	60
		Achievement (%)	**	**	72
C&G part 3 (part time)	3	Expected completions	**	**	61
		Retention (%)	**	**	70
		Achievement (%)	**	**	40
BTEC national certificate	3	Expected completions	**	**	76
		Retention (%)	**	**	74
		Achievement (%)	**	**	62

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

**data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Business Studies and Accounting

Grade 3

21 Inspectors observed 14 lessons across a range of business studies and accountancy courses. They agreed that the self-assessment report had identified most of the strengths and weaknesses in this area but found that the report had overstated some strengths and understated some weaknesses.

Key strengths

- the generally good and sometimes outstanding quality of students' work
- effective and well-planned teaching on accountancy courses
- effective use of students' experience of work
- rigorous assessment procedures
- good progression routes
- effective tutorial support and monitoring of students' progress

Weaknesses

- little variety of teaching methods on business courses
- low retention and attendance rates and students' poor punctuality
- poor pass rates on GNVQ advanced and Association of Accounting Technicians foundation and intermediate courses
- a significant proportion of unsatisfactory accommodation

22 Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that it offers a comprehensive range of full-time, part-time and block-release business studies courses, together with an appropriate, though small, range of accountancy courses. Enrolment has fallen significantly over the last three years. There are clear progression routes and good rates of

progression from one course to another within the college. A number of students have entered the college at foundation level and progressed to higher education programmes. Course teams meet regularly to review practical details of course delivery. Unreliable achievement data prevented the inspection team from carrying out an effective analysis of students' performance.

23 Teaching in accountancy is well planned and of good quality. Teaching in business studies is satisfactory but planning is less effective. The difference between the two areas was not identified in the self-assessment report which claimed that the quality of teaching and learning was consistently high. Inspectors agreed with the judgements in the self-assessment report that the sharing of lesson aims and objectives with students, the quality of work experience and the good relations between staff and students are strengths in this curriculum area. The self-assessment report recognised that attendance and retention are poor; although action has taken place to address these weaknesses, they still remain a problem. Many students arrive late for lessons. Procedures designed to improve timekeeping are not being implemented by teachers.

24 The quality of students' work is generally good, and some of it is outstanding. Students work well on their own and can apply the knowledge and skills they have learned to analyse business issues and solve problems. Students' work is marked thoroughly and returned promptly. Marking is fair and accurate and supported by thorough internal verification, which has been improved since it was identified as a weakness during the previous inspection. Students' GNVQ portfolios and files are well organised. Pass rates in external examinations and assessments are mostly satisfactory. GNVQ foundation and intermediate results are good. Overall pass rates in GNVQ advanced business and the Association of Accounting Technicians examinations at foundation and intermediate level are poor. Two students on the GNVQ

Curriculum Areas

advanced course who began their studies at foundation level three years ago with little command of English have recently won awards for best student performance in their work experience placements.

25 Some attempts have been made to meet the requirements of students with childcare commitments or part-time jobs by offering 'late start' timetables. There are further opportunities to adjust timetables in this way, because unsuitable start times are still contributing to students' lateness for lessons.

26 Teachers are vocationally well qualified and experienced. Good progress has been made in

updating their commercial and industrial experience, meeting a concern raised in the previous inspection report. There has been slow progress in the development of vocational assessor awards and basic IT qualifications. Whilst some upgrading of teaching accommodation has recently taken place, a significant number of classrooms are unsatisfactory. This partially agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report. Limited access to the internet and specialist CD-ROMs impedes opportunities for learning.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in business studies and accounting, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GNVQ intermediate business	2	Expected completions	**	**	18
		Retention (%)	**	**	66
		Achievement (%)	**	**	69
Association of Accounting Technicians foundation	2	Expected completions	**	**	44
		Retention (%)	**	**	64
		Achievement (%)	**	**	30
Association of Accounting Technicians intermediate	3	Expected completions	**	**	49
		Retention (%)	**	**	65
		Achievement (%)	**	**	22
GNVQ advanced business	3	Expected completions	**	**	27
		Retention (%)	**	**	59
		Achievement (%)	**	**	52
GCE A level business studies and accounts	3	Expected completions	**	**	45
		Retention (%)	**	**	87
		Achievement (%)	**	**	58
BTEC national certificate	3	Expected completions	**	**	45
		Retention (%)	**	**	69
		Achievement (%)	**	**	60
BTEC higher national certificate	3	Expected completions	**	**	39
		Retention (%)	**	**	57
		Achievement (%)	**	**	79

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

**data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Art, Design and Printing

Grade 3

27 Inspectors observed 14 lessons. They agreed with some of the judgements in the college's self-assessment report but found that the report overstated some strengths. They identified a number of strengths and weaknesses that were not included in the report.

Key strengths

- sound, well-planned teaching
- opportunities for printing students to gain additional key skills qualifications
- improved retention on GNVQ courses
- good pass rates on level 3 part-time courses in printing
- partnership arrangements with the printing industry

Weaknesses

- the uneven availability and quality of learning materials
- poor attendance and punctuality
- shortfalls in key enrolment targets for three consecutive years
- underdeveloped use of targets and performance indicators
- poor support for some part-time teachers

28 The college is recognised as a centre for courses serving the printing industry in the West Midlands. Graphic design and GNVQ courses have been integrated with courses in printing. As a consequence, the overall provision is narrowly focused. The former division, which contained all these courses, has recently been split between two new faculties. Although the division met its overall enrolment targets, key targets for full-time, and part-time day and evening courses have not been reached for three consecutive years. The use of targets and

performance indicators is underdeveloped. For example, the divisional report on teaching and learning contains little analysis of trends in performance. This weakness was not recognised in the college's self-assessment report.

29 There are clear schemes of work. Teaching is sound and lessons are well planned. Teachers are responsive to the needs of students with different levels of ability. In a lesson on machine printing, for example, the teacher used projects with the same objectives but different levels of complexity to meet the needs of individual students. In many lessons, the range of teaching methods was too narrow. A photography lesson provided a good example of how to engage students' interest with varied activities: a review of students' work, using a seminar format to direct questions to students, was followed by a question-and-answer game for two competing teams that allowed the teacher to check students' understanding of the key terms they had used in their work.

Inspectors agreed with the college's finding that the availability and quality of learning materials are uneven. They also observed that good practice in the writing of the best project briefs has not been used to set a quality standard. The format of project briefs varies, with good and poor examples in most programmes. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment finding that internal verification procedures are well established. A significant development in printing is a pilot scheme for a proposed University of the Digital Printing Industry which will be used to provide learning opportunities through the internet. The college has recently developed some innovative distance learning materials for the national vocational qualifications (NVQs) in printing.

30 Retention rates are generally poor, averaging around 65% over a three-year period. Retention rates for GCE A level courses averaged 64% over three years, declining in 1997-98. The overall retention rate for GNVQ courses has risen over three years. Retention

Curriculum Areas

on the BTEC first diploma in printing course was particularly poor in 1996-97. There was a notable improvement in GCE A level pass rates in 1997-98, after poor results in the previous two years. Achievements on level 3 printing courses are generally good. The division has successfully developed key skills qualifications for all printing students. Inspectors agreed with the college's identification of this as a strength. Students' poor punctuality and poor attendance on the GNVQ intermediate course, and in the first year of the GNVQ advanced course, cause difficulties for teachers.

31 Teachers are vocationally well qualified and most have additional teaching qualifications.

Some part-time staff do not receive sufficient support. The area has specialist computer workstations that meet industry standards and software application programmes are up to date. In its self-assessment, the college recognised the inadequacy of the resources for three-dimensional work in art and design. It plans to enhance this facility by relocating the courses to the main site. Library resources are poor. The printing area has benefited from its partnership since 1995 with the Birmingham and West Midlands Print Initiative and has received significant gifts of equipment from leading companies in the industry.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in art, design and printing, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GNVQ precursor	2	Expected completions	**	**	10
		Retention (%)	**	**	90
		Achievement (%)	**	**	100
GNVQ intermediate	2	Expected completions	**	**	23
		Retention (%)	**	**	70
		Achievement (%)	**	**	50
GCE A level	3	Expected completions	**	**	35
		Retention (%)	**	**	57
		Achievement (%)	**	**	85
GNVQ advanced	3	Expected completions	**	**	25
		Retention (%)	**	**	76
		Achievement (%)	**	**	63
GNVQ precursor level 3	3	Expected completions	**	**	33
		Retention (%)	**	**	70
		Achievement (%)	**	**	83

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

**data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

History, Psychology and Sociology

Grade 4

32 Inspectors observed 11 lessons in history, psychology and sociology. The college's self-assessment report covered the whole humanities section and many of the judgements in it were not necessarily applicable to history, psychology and sociology. Individual subject self-assessment reports lacked rigour. Inspectors agreed with the weaknesses identified but considered that some important ones had been omitted. Inspectors concluded that the college's self-assessment report overstated a number of strengths.

Key strengths

- well-planned lessons with clear aims and objectives

Weaknesses

- weak teaching
- lack of differentiation and the slow pace of work in lessons
- lack of rigour in monitoring students' progress and attendance
- poor attendance and punctuality at lessons
- low GCE A level and GCSE pass rates
- weak course management and poor subject documentation
- insufficient guidance for students on how to improve their work

33 Staff teach mainly on full-time GCE A level and GCSE courses. In some classes, there are both 16 to 18 year olds and post-19 students. Some GCE A level classes consist of a mixture of first-year and second-year students as well as those doing an intensive one-year course. The management of the subjects concerned is spread

across two faculties. Subject teams meet infrequently. Following significant staff changes in the summer of 1998, the new management structure is at a formative stage. Quality assurance procedures are underdeveloped. There has been no clear and systematic analysis of data using performance indicators such as value-added measures and levels of student attendance.

34 The quality of teaching and learning varies widely. In the minority of good lessons, teachers have clear lesson plans and employ a variety of appropriate teaching methods. The self-assessment report failed to mention some of the weaknesses observed in teaching and learning. In the weakest lessons, teachers' expectations of students are too low; the pace at which work is covered is too slow and the subject matter is not challenging enough for the more able members of the class. A high proportion of the students simply sit and listen, making no active contribution to the lesson. Teachers do not ensure that students consolidate their learning; there is not enough checking on what students have learnt. Schemes of work pay insufficient attention to teaching methodology and, as identified in the self-assessment report, there is too little emphasis on addressing students' differing levels of ability. In the lessons observed, attendance and punctuality were poor. Lessons were frequently interrupted by latecomers and this significantly affected the learning of the other students present.

35 In 1998, examination pass rates in GCE A level and GCSE were well below average and the proportion of A to C grades at GCE A level was low. Before 1998, there had been a significant improvement in psychology results, with a pass rate of 69% in 1997. The weaknesses in students' achievements did not receive a detailed enough analysis in the self-assessment report. In 1998, retention rates in all GCSE and GCE A level subjects were above college targets and the average rate for the college. The absence of reliable data has made it difficult to

Curriculum Areas

provide detailed comparisons with previous years. However, a clear trend is emerging of a significant reduction in the numbers of students following courses in this area of the college's curriculum. For example, the numbers of students following GCE A level in the three subjects have more than halved over the last three years. This is only partially recognised in the self-assessment report. The section is diversifying its provision in order to compensate for the fall in student numbers.

36 Students are set appropriate amounts of written work. In some instances, however, teachers' assessment of assignments did not include enough written guidance on how students might improve their performance. Teachers do not examine students' files

thoroughly enough; the files are often poorly organised. There is incomplete information on the destinations of students. The inaccuracy of class registers, particularly in access to higher education lessons, makes it very difficult to monitor retention levels.

37 Teachers are well qualified and have appropriate degrees. Accommodation in the subject bases is satisfactory. However, the quality of displays is poor in most rooms and non-existent in others. The library holdings relevant to the three subjects are inadequate. There is partial compensation of this in the books and material being made available in the relocated learning resource centre for humanities.

A summary of achievement and retention rates in history, psychology and sociology, 1996 to 1998

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1996	1997	1998
GCSE psychology	2	Expected completions	**	**	19
		Retention (%)	**	**	83
		Achievement (%)	**	**	16
GCSE sociology	2	Expected completions	**	**	14
		Retention (%)	**	**	74
		Achievement (%)	**	**	29
GCE A level history	3	Expected completions	**	**	11
		Retention (%)	**	**	92
		Achievement (%)	**	**	36
GCE A level psychology	3	Expected completions	**	**	36
		Retention (%)	**	**	80
		Achievement (%)	**	**	39
GCE A level sociology	3	Expected completions	**	**	65
		Retention (%)	**	**	86
		Achievement (%)	**	**	48

Source: ISR (1996 and 1997), college (1998)

**data unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Provision for Students with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities

Grade 4

38 Inspectors observed 14 lessons. They found that the college's self-assessment report overemphasised strengths and did not recognise many serious weaknesses.

Key strengths

- some enthusiastic students who were developing new skills
- a high level of support, much valued by students
- effective collaborative provision in the community

Weaknesses

- no consideration of this provision in the strategic plan
- few opportunities for students to progress from discrete provision
- lack of opportunity for students to play a full part in college life
- poor assessment of learning needs and setting of goals
- much teaching that fails to extend students' skills or understanding
- little development of students' ability to work on their own

39 The college makes provision for students with a wide range of learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Most of this is located in a separate site from the main college buildings. In consequence, the students are isolated and unable to participate fully in college life. There are few specialist facilities and the range of learning opportunities is narrow. The college has recognised the weakness and has plans to relocate the students on the main college site.

Within the discrete programme there is a range of options accredited by the Open College Network. These motivate some students but are inappropriate to the needs of others. There are few opportunities for progression into other suitable programmes within the college.

Vocational options are particularly limited. There is no effective co-ordination of the college's vocational curriculum at foundation level to provide flexibility and access for these students. There is no strategic plan or policy statement for the area. Some effective relationships have been developed with agencies in the community to meet specialist needs. This is drawn attention to in the self-assessment report.

40 Inspectors agreed with the college's assessment that relationships between teachers and students are very good. Students value highly the personal support of teachers. Some teaching is carefully planned and enables students to develop new skills. In a number of lessons, however, there is little recognition of students' individual needs and interests. Students are often unclear about the objectives of the lesson. Most teachers undertake little monitoring or recording of the learning which has occurred. In most lessons, learning activities are not sufficiently varied.

41 Numeracy, literacy and IT form a substantial part of all students' programmes. Other options can be chosen to suit personal interests. Few links are made between the various parts of a student's programme. Key skills are not generally developed through the optional units. No attempt is made to combine options to create coherent pathways towards individual goals. New options are developed to meet students' needs. A new art course, for example, has produced work of high quality although the separation of the students from their counterparts at the main college site has limited the opportunities for development. In IT, well-furnished and well-equipped accommodation is provided, yet students do not

Curriculum Areas

have the opportunity to study alongside others on similar programmes.

42 The proportion of students receiving Open College Network accreditation is increasing, as indicated in the self-assessment report. Students value this as a recognition of their achievement and an incentive to make progress. However, it is not necessarily an appropriate measure of achievement for some students. The abilities and learning needs of students are not effectively assessed when they join the course. Realistic and demanding targets are, therefore, not established. Specific vocational interests or aspirations expressed by students, are not reflected adequately in their learning programmes. Few opportunities for real or simulated work experience are provided. The college was unable to provide satisfactory information on the destinations of students. Most students either continue in discrete provision or leave the college. Standards for retention and attendance are set and monitored. Attendance rates in the lessons observed were lower than those given in the self-assessment report.

43 There is good support for some students with specific learning difficulties. Particular expertise is available in relation to autism. Levels of support in lessons are inadequate. In some lessons, students not receiving the close individual help they need, quickly lose interest and obtain little benefit from the lesson. Accommodation is generally poor. Many classrooms are too small for group work and other activities. A range of specialist aids and equipment is available. The college recognises that facilities for those with profound or complex needs are poor and that their needs are not met.

44 The college has been a partner in the Association of Colleges quality initiative on inclusivity since September 1997. There is a college inclusive learning policy and a position paper has been produced. Managers and staff have been developing and leading initiatives.

However, little progress has yet been made in relevant curriculum development and there is little evidence of any consideration of the learning needs of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in most curriculum planning.

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Support for Students

Grade 4

45 Inspectors agreed with a few of the strengths and the weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report. They found a number of other major weaknesses and a few further strengths. The college has already started to take some action to address the weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- impartial advice and guidance
- a good range of careers materials
- effective induction

Weaknesses

- recruitment procedures unsuccessful in preventing the decline in enrolments
- the lack of success in addressing the issue of retention
- poor co-ordination of the provision of additional learning support for numeracy and literacy
- an ineffective system for identifying students' additional learning support requirements in numeracy and literacy
- unclear plans to improve students' performance
- underdeveloped schemes of work for tutorials

46 The college's recruitment methods have not been successful in preventing a decline in enrolments. Although several methods are used, for example visits to local schools, open and 'taster' days, local press, radio and bus advertising, and a home page on the internet, college statistics show that enrolments have fallen significantly since 1996. Recruitment materials are of a high standard but, as the self-assessment report recognised, they make

minimal use of community languages, a weakness identified in the previous inspection. Advice and guidance before enrolment are impartial. Most students said that they had found enrolment efficient and induction worthwhile. Guidance for induction is detailed and thorough. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that induction is clearly focused to meet the different requirements of full-time and part-time students.

47 The college has produced a comprehensive handbook for tutors. As the self-assessment report recognised, tutors do not consistently follow the guidelines in the handbook. Schemes of work for tutorials lack detail and lesson plans are not always available. Some tutors do not know which lessons are designated as tutorials. Some students are unclear who their tutors are and others have had their tutors allocated only recently. Most reviews of students' progress lack thoroughness. Individual plans for action to improve students' performance lack clear targets. Although the faculties have identified reasons for poor retention, there has been a lack of success in addressing the issue of retention. The college has identified retention as a weakness and has appointed a senior manager to co-ordinate action to raise retention rates.

48 The organisation of additional learning support for numeracy and literacy has been ineffective. There has been poor co-ordination between the different areas delivering this support and it has been unclear how many students receive support. The self-assessment report recognised this and the college has reorganised the provision. It is too early to judge the effectiveness of the reorganisation. There is little use of individual learning plans for additional support. Systems to identify those who need learning support in literacy and numeracy are not fully effective. There is no college-wide system for assessing the learning support needs of full-time students or part-time students who are following substantial

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programmes. Instead, the college relies on tutors referring students for support or on students themselves applying for support.

49 Inspectors agreed with statements made in the self-assessment report that there is a good range of careers materials in the information centre. These include software packages, university prospectuses and books on specific careers. The library also provides some information on careers. As part of a careers event, local and national employers visited the college to provide GCE A level and New Deal students with realistic simulated job interviews. There is a contract with the local careers service, whose advisers provide students with individual guidance interviews and career talks. The college offers a service of guidance and help for students immediately after examination results are published.

50 Good use is made of external agencies to support the work of the college's personal counselling service. Inspectors found that students were aware of the counselling service and considered that it met their needs. Helpful advice is available on accommodation and social security, a strength indicated in the self-assessment report. There are clear arrangements for the administration and allocation of monies from the college's access and hardship funds. Childcare facilities are available for 27 children between the ages of two and five.

General Resources

Grade 4

51 The college's self-assessment report included strengths and weaknesses that were unclear or were not appropriate to this area. Some strengths were overstated and some weaknesses understated.

Key strengths

- the good services and facilities provided by the learning resource centres

Weaknesses

- the high proportion of unused accommodation
- inadequacies in IT provision
- poor library provision
- inconvenient opening times of some resource areas and of the library

52 The college has two main sites, at Sherlock Street and Hope Street, and two smaller ones, Magnolia House and St Luke's, all within walking distance. Security staff are located in most of the accommodation and it is clean and tidy. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment report that the decorative order and basic amenities are in need of further improvement. Since the production of the self-assessment report, the learning resource centres and reception areas in both tower blocks have been refurbished to a good standard. Some teaching areas are well furnished but others are in need of redecoration. There is a mismatch between room size and class size. The college's space utilisation survey indicates that the college has much underused classroom and workshop space. The self-assessment report recognised that the college makes poor use of its accommodation. A recently introduced timetabling system has improved the use of space and identified surplus accommodation. There are now plans to correct the situation by

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closing some accommodation to teaching. The college's accommodation strategy, produced in 1998, identified options for the future management of the estate but did not recommend which should be adopted. Fuel economy measures are implemented whenever possible. Signposting is poor and often inaccurate and there are very few signs in languages other than English.

53 The main refectory at Sherlock Street has recently been redecorated to provide a pleasant environment. Magnolia House has an attractive dining room but opening times are limited. In line with falling student numbers, the dining facilities at Hope Street have been rationalised to make a much smaller, but sometimes overcrowded, area. Some areas of the college make good use of displays of students' work. Recreational facilities are available to students in the college but the subsidy available to students to make use of off-site recreational and sports facilities was removed in the summer. Teaching and support staff have appropriate work areas, with access to computers, either within their workrooms or in the recently established professional development resource centre. Most of the accommodation is accessible to wheelchair users but the first floor of St Luke's, the Sherlock Street main hall and prayer room are not accessible and access to the library is difficult. The college has recognised these difficulties and has plans to address them.

54 Staff in the three open access learning resource centres provide effective subject expertise and guidance for students. The centres are attractive and adequately equipped. There are also open access IT centres at all sites, though the opening times for centres are inconvenient for a significant number of students. Although students sign in on each visit to a centre, this information is not subsequently used to generate management information for future planning.

55 The ratio of students to computers is good at 5:1. However, 80% of these computers use

outdated versions of industry standard software. Each resource centre also has a mix of incompatible machines and software, which reduces the accessibility of computers for students. Students and staff can access the internet through 77 computers, eight of which are available on an open access basis in the library. These computers, however, are in high demand. Response times to internet requests are unacceptably slow as there is not enough line capacity to the service provider. Key skills materials are being developed for the new college intranet and there is limited access to CD-ROMs in the library. There is no college-wide network to provide wider access to these resources.

56 Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment report that the library bookstock is low. There are not enough books to meet the needs of all curriculum areas and the 1998-99 budget is low for a college of this size. Some books are in poor condition. The library study space is segregated into silent and group work areas. The latter are frequently very noisy and not conducive to learning. The library is not open in the evening or at weekends. The use of study spaces in the library is low, at 50%. The library's computerised catalogue and management system is dated. It records library holdings but cannot provide information on books held in curriculum areas.

Quality Assurance

Grade 4

57 The self-assessment report overstated a number of strengths; several rested on an overestimation of the importance of standard practice. Inspectors found a significant number of weaknesses that were not identified in the report.

Key strengths

- valuable surveys of students' perceptions

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- well-managed staff development
- a well-designed scheme for assessing teaching and learning

Weaknesses

- the low pass rates for many college courses
- inaccurate information on students' achievements
- underdeveloped and inconsistent analysis of the quality of courses
- inadequate monitoring of performance against the standards set for support services
- underdeveloped use of performance indicators relating to quality and standards
- an over-complicated staff appraisal system
- underdeveloped recording and reporting arrangements for collaborative provision
- overgenerous grading judgements in the self-assessment report

58 The standards the college sets are constrained by its current difficulties and its poor performance in a number of areas in recent years. For instance, standards set for improving students' achievements have to take account of the students' currently low level of success in gaining qualifications. According to the FEFC's publication *Performance Indicators 1996-97*, using data supplied by the college, 51% of qualification aims were achieved in that year by the college's students. This compares with a sector average of 71%, which places the college around the bottom 10% of colleges within the sector on this measure. The retention rate for full-time students for 1996-97 was 79% which places the college in the bottom third of colleges on this measure. However, it is one of a group of colleges which typically recruits a high percentage of students from

disadvantaged areas. The college was unable to provide information on qualification aims for the FEFC report in 1995-96.

59 Quality assurance arrangements cover all areas of the college but there are significant weaknesses in their implementation in some areas. The quality policy, which is regularly reviewed, is strongly focused on teaching and learning, customer care and the achievement of continuous improvement. Service level agreements have been written to include a specification of the standards set for many of the college's support services. These standards were formulated in consultation with the users of the service. Monitoring and reporting of performance against the stated standards in support areas are underdeveloped.

60 The self-assessment report did not recognise that there is a weakness in the college's analysis of its performance against targets. Course teams have set targets this year and have begun to comment on their performance in relation to these targets. Several, however, have not yet fully adopted the new system. College managers consider that there is a need to achieve greater consistency in this area. Performance indicators for achievement and retention have not been adequately used by all course teams. There has been a lack of coherent reporting of performance in relation to these performance indicators at higher levels. The college has taken action on this weakness and indicators of performance for students' achievements and retention have been provided recently for sector quality boards. No other performance indicators for assessing course standards are reported.

61 Reviews of the quality of curriculum provision have been hampered by a lack of adequate statistical data from the college's information system. Inspectors were unable to rely on the data on students' achievements. The self-assessment report acknowledged that the management information system has not

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provided timely and accurate data. It has not been able to provide adequate information on students' achievements, retention rates, attendance levels or students' destinations. This has limited the adequacy of the data that course teams use when assessing the quality of their courses. The self-assessment report noted that not all course teams had adopted a fully self-critical approach based on empirical evidence. Inspectors agreed with this judgement. Students' perceptions of the college and the quality of teaching are surveyed effectively. There are thorough reports of the findings of the surveys of teaching and learning; good use is made of these by course teams.

62 Inspectors were unable to support any of the grades that the college awarded itself in its self-assessment report. Staff from all areas of the college were involved in the self-assessment process. The report was comprehensive and covered most of the college's activities. In a number of curriculum areas there were clear references to student surveys and teaching observations. There was some use of national pass rates as benchmarks. Some judgements of strengths and weaknesses were clear and supported by evidence. However, the seriousness of the weaknesses in cross-college areas was not appreciated. Several weaknesses were not identified by the college.

63 The college charter is not adequately monitored. It contains statements of the services that the college provides for students and the standards it seeks to meet. The definition of these standards is variable. The college recognises the need to update the charter and improve its monitoring of performance against the charter standards.

64 The self-assessment report listed staff development as a strength. Inspectors agreed with this judgement. Requests for staff development are carefully evaluated to ensure that there is a close link between the training or staff development activity requested and the college's strategic priorities. The college gained

recognition as an Investor in People in 1996. Spending on staff development has been reduced substantially for 1998-99; a variety of internal events and training sessions are planned to make up for the reduction in the budget. The college's staff appraisal system is acknowledged as a weakness. Inspectors agreed that it was too complicated. Consideration is being given to using a simpler and more unified approach. The college has devised an especially thorough set of techniques for observing and assessing the quality of teaching. Lesson observations are supplemented by a self-assessment, carried out by the teacher who is being observed, and by the responses of the students present when the teaching is being assessed. The college's grading of lessons was overgenerous. Information summarising the outcomes of the assessment of the quality of teaching is not yet fully integrated with the college's quality assurance arrangements.

65 There is no mention of formal monitoring of the quality of collaborative provision in the college's self-assessment report. Inspectors judged the arrangements for monitoring the standards of the provision to be inadequate. The college has not adequately specified the standards which the provision should meet. There are monitoring checks but these are not properly planned in advance. The range of issues covered in these visits is not sufficiently comprehensive. There is no summary of findings relating to the observation of teaching in this provision.

Governance

Grade 5

66 Inspectors were unable to agree with the college's self-assessment of its governance. They could not agree with a number of areas that the college considered strengths and found many additional weaknesses.

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Key strengths

- the relevant business background of governors

Weaknesses

- the ineffective conduct of corporation and committee business
- governors' receipt of inadequate and inaccurate financial information on which to make decisions
- insufficient governor involvement in preparing and monitoring the college's strategic plan
- the absence of criteria for assessing college performance
- governors' lack of systematic oversight of student activities and achievements
- insufficient monitoring by governors of collaborative provision

67 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is weak. The corporation does not substantially conduct its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It does not substantially fulfil its responsibilities under its financial memorandum with the FEFC.

68 The corporation has a determined membership of 20. There are six vacancies, a high proportion of the membership. The principal and student member are currently the only women on the corporation. There has been no skills audit of corporation membership. Governors do, however, bring a broad range of skills to the corporation covering finance, legal, personnel, property and curriculum expertise. There are no written procedures for the appointment of governors. Public advertising to recruit governors has been used but with little success. There is no systematic training programme for governors, and governor training has been limited. No procedures have been established by the corporation board to ensure the continuing eligibility of governors.

69 The financial implications of some significant decisions have not been taken into consideration by the corporation. For example, the cost implications of the most recent pay award for college staff were not formally considered by governors. Governors receive the college's management accounts at meetings of both the corporation and the finance and resources committee. Substantial changes in the college's financial position became apparent in April 1998. Governors, in considering the college's financial position, relied on the accuracy of financial management information and on assurances of the state of internal control at the college. Governors had available to them significant indicators that problems with the college's internal control system existed, for example the lateness of auditors signing off financial statements and the internal auditors' annual report for 1996-97 which was critical of many internal systems. In this context of seriously inaccurate financial management information and internal control failings, the governors of the college have not been able to discharge their responsibility to ensure the solvency of the college. For the last two years the corporation has approved the college's budget after the start of the financial year. The budget for 1997-98 was approved as an element of a three-year financial forecast for 1997 to 2000. The budget for 1998-99 was approved as an element of a draft recovery plan for 1998 to 2001. Since April 1998, the corporation has been fully involved in addressing the financial situation and developing the draft recovery plan. This has involved six special meetings of the corporation.

70 The corporation has not developed criteria for assessing the performance of the college and has not systematically monitored students' achievements, retention or the range of provision. Governors' involvement in the development of the current strategic plan for 1997 to 2000 was limited. Progress against the achievement of strategic plan objectives was not adequately reported during 1997-98. Governors

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have insufficient oversight over collaborative provision. They have received occasional reports on only a restricted range of college activities. With the exception of recently introduced financial performance indicators, there are no targets against which to assess the quality of college management or the success of the college generally. Governors do not systematically consider students' achievements. There are few effective links between individual governors and areas of college activity. Although a number of governors sit on faculty advisory committees, they have been discouraged in the past from establishing more constructive links.

71 The clerk to the corporation has been suspended from his duties. The corporation has subsequently appointed a temporary clerk to the corporation. The corporation has not established standing orders to assist the conduct of its business, but draft standing orders have been considered. The corporation has recently reviewed its committee structure and a number of changes are being considered. On occasions the audit committee has not acted in accordance with its terms of reference. Agendas for governors' business do not identify which items are for discussion and which are for decision. The minutes of the corporation and committees have not always reflected the full extent of governors' discussions.

72 The corporation has a register of interests which is available at meetings, but it needs to be extended. The corporation has issued a policy on access to information. A code of conduct has been adopted but this needs to be updated. A 'whistleblowing' policy has been considered but not yet approved by the corporation.

73 After the college's financial position became apparent in April 1998, governors commissioned an independent review of corporate governance. They subsequently established an action plan working party to consider its findings and make recommendations to the corporation. The

working party has identified a number of corrective actions, many of which are to be implemented over the next year. As part of this activity governors were surveyed about their perceptions of governance at the college and their own performance.

Management

Grade 5

74 Inspectors agreed with one of the strengths identified in the self-assessment report but found that others had been overstated or were inadequately supported by evidence. Some of the weaknesses contained in the self-assessment report were not relevant or were not substantiated, whilst several additional weaknesses were identified.

Key strengths

- effective liaison with external bodies

Weaknesses

- a significant failure to achieve target funding units in the last two years
- an inadequate strategic plan and operating statement
- underdeveloped systems for setting and monitoring management targets
- ineffective management information systems and procedures
- poor value for money in the use of public funds
- failure to account for public funds

75 The FEFC audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is weak. The college has incurred significant operating deficits in every year from 1994-95 to 1997-98. The college's financial forecasting has been ineffective. Until March 1998 the college was forecasting modest

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surpluses for 1996-97 and for 1997-98. It now recognises that there were substantial deficits in these years. Management accounts have not represented the college's actual financial position. The college has prepared a recovery plan to allow it to move to an operating surplus by 2001-02. This draft recovery plan was approved by the corporation in September 1998 but has not yet been agreed by the FEFC.

76 The success of the recovery plan depends upon realistic assumptions about the college's future income. This income is generated mainly from funding units accounted for by the college's student records system. The college's internal auditors have twice reported adversely on the state of internal controls in the student record system. Their most recent report identified that controls in the system were not adequate to achieve the college's objectives for the system.

77 Since September 1997, the college's finance team has been adequately resourced. It is led by the director of finance and strategic planning, who is a qualified accountant and a member of the senior management team. He attends meetings of the full corporation and of the finance and resources committee. College managers review the college's monthly management accounts. The management accounts include income and expenditure and balance sheet information, but cashflow is only forecast in detail to the year end. There is no supporting information on student numbers or unit achievement within the management accounts. Budget holders receive monthly reports. The college's financial regulations have been approved by the corporation, but neither the financial regulations nor the college's financial procedures are comprehensive. Financial performance indicators have only recently been established.

78 The college has been ineffective over a prolonged period in making the required returns to the FEFC to demonstrate its proper use of public funds. Its submission of audited final funding claims and audited financial statements

has been seriously delayed. The most recent externally audited financial statements received by the FEFC in May 1998 are for 1995-96. The 1996-97 returns although completed by the college had, at the time of the inspection, not been released by the external auditors. The college has failed to achieve target funding units in each of the last two years. The total shortfall since 1996 has been over 20%. Full-time and part-time student numbers have declined considerably since 1996.

79 The college recognises the need for radical changes in management systems and procedures and is taking action to improve the quality of its provision. A new management team was introduced in September 1998. It was too soon for inspectors to be able to assess the effectiveness of most of these revised arrangements.

80 As part of the management restructuring, the organisation has been revised to give four faculties responsibility for the delivery of the curriculum and two divisions for providing business support services. The four faculties have been organised to be of equivalent size and this has resulted in changes in curriculum structure. There is considerable variation in the effectiveness of course teams. The senior management team comprises the principal, appointed in April 1998, four heads of faculty, and two directors of support services. They meet on a weekly basis and minutes are widely circulated. A college management group comprising senior and middle managers meets each month to consider cross-college issues. The recent changes in the management of the curriculum have resulted in a lack of clarity about some individual roles and responsibilities. A new committee structure has been introduced, although it is not fully operational. The academic board meets termly to advise the principal on curriculum matters. Staff generally welcome the revised organisation because of its clearer lines of responsibility and accountability, although there is still uncertainty about some of the detailed arrangements.

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81 The college's annual staff budget has been reduced by £1.7 million in response to the college's financial difficulties. This has resulted in a planned reduction of over 70 posts, equivalent to 24% of the workforce. The college's strategy has been to reduce the number of posts at management level but as far as practicable to retain teaching posts. Almost all staff have recently undertaken a comprehensive skills audit to identify their potential contribution to the future needs of the college. All staff now have job descriptions.

82 Communications within the college have improved since the appointment of the new principal. Staff have been kept well informed through regular meetings and a series of briefing bulletins. Lines of communication within faculties are of variable effectiveness.

83 The current strategic plan, prepared in 1997, is of very poor quality. This was not identified in the self-assessment report. Staff had insufficient involvement in the development of the plan and feel no sense of ownership for it. The plan fails to address adequately many of the challenges facing the college; the needs analysis is very limited, there are few strategic targets and there is no mention of timescales or methods of monitoring progress. There is no established strategic planning framework or calendar.

84 Although some areas of the college have developed annual business plans, these are not co-ordinated or collated and there is no adequate college operating statement. The current business plan for outward collaborative provision does not contain clear aims or an evaluative needs analysis. There are few meaningful targets and there has been no review of previous partnership arrangements.

85 The college makes variable use of market research in its planning processes. Information is gathered from a range of sources including the TEC, local authorities and employers. Primary research has been conducted to assist

the development of programmes to support the print industry. The college recognises that it makes insufficient use of this information, does not adequately assess the competition from other providers of further education and does not measure the cost-effectiveness of its marketing initiatives.

86 As it identified in the self-assessment report, the college has established effective liaison with a range of external bodies involved in education, training and industry. Staff represent the college on appropriate local, regional and national committees. Constructive links exist with local employers and the college is particularly well regarded in the areas of engineering, printing and medical services. There is successful liaison with local schools, particularly in the teaching of science and technology. Effective links have been formed with several higher education establishments, especially Aston University which uses its relationship with the college as a model for its contacts with other further education providers. The college takes an active part in an education business partnership. There is an active and successful partnership with the careers services. The Birmingham and Solihull TEC works with the college on a range of mutually beneficial initiatives and partly funds a business development post based at the college. The college has been successful in a number of external bids including a £2.9 million contract to manage educational provision in 10 prisons and a DfEE pilot project to create a centre of excellence for high technology.

87 Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that its management information systems and procedures are inadequate. This problem has been exacerbated by a rapid turnover in managers of the service since the last inspection. Returns to the FEFC have been late and inaccurate. Staff lack confidence in the quality of management information, which is inadequate to meet the needs of managers. The manual student registration system is unreliable.

Cross-college Provision

Information on course costing is limited. In recognition of these problems the college appointed a new management information systems manager in March 1998, with a remit to develop new systems and processes. A new system to collect student enrolment data was introduced in September 1998. The college has used this information to assess the viability of courses.

88 The college has a clear policy on equal opportunities that includes a code of practice and anti-harassment guidelines. There is regular monitoring of staff and student recruitment and a range of activities to promote equal opportunities, including awareness-raising of local issues. Staff development is provided to support these initiatives. The college has an equal opportunities monitoring committee but it has not met since January 1998 and the contents of that meeting were not recorded. A new equal opportunities co-ordinator has recently been appointed, although there is no job description for the post. There was no record of the corporation discussing matters relating to equal opportunities.

Conclusions

89 The self-assessment report was initiated before the appointment of the new principal, and before the extent of the financial position and student numbers were known in April 1998. The finalised report was submitted to the FEFC in May 1998. The problems of the college were not adequately reflected in the report or even in the revised self-assessment report submitted in October 1998. Some of the judgements of strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report were clear and supported by evidence but many were not. Many weaknesses were not identified. Insufficient and inaccurate performance indicators were used, which invalidated many of the judgements made. The low retention and achievement rates, and the significant fall in enrolments, were not given sufficient weighting by course

teams when making their judgements.

Inspectors were unable to support any of the grades that the college awarded itself in its self-assessment report.

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

College Statistics

Student numbers by age (July 1998)

Age	%
Under 16	1
16-18 years	39
19-24 years	22
25+ years	38
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (July 1998)

Level of study	%
Foundation	20
Intermediate	36
Advanced	35
Higher education	9
Leisure/recreation (non-schedule 2)	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (July 1998)

Programme area	Full time	Part time	Total provision %
Science	384	981	22
Construction	13	224	4
Engineering	280	815	17
Business	350	812	18
Hotel and catering	22	0	1
Health and community care	98	74	3
Art and design	165	342	8
Humanities	298	541	13
Basic education	374	528	14
Total	1,984	4,317	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 64% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (September 1998)

	Perm- anent	Fixed term	Casual	Total
Direct learning contact	124	0	3	127
Supporting direct learning contact	7	0	0	7
Other support	81	2	0	83
Total	212	2	3	217

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

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1996	1997	1998
Income	£10,961,000	£8,854,000	£10,568,000
Average level of funding (ALF)			
Out-turn to 1997; funded 1998	£17.76	£19.05	£16.67*
Payroll as a proportion of income	77%	72%	66%
Achievement of funding target	92%	79%	+
Diversity of income	18%	22%	19%
Operating surplus	-£593,000	-£1,141,000	-£460,000

Sources: Income – college (1996, 1997 and 1998)

ALF – Performance Indicators 1996-97 (1996 and 1997), Funding Allocations 1997-98 (1998)

Payroll – college (1996, 1997 and 1998)

Achievement of funding target – Performance Indicators 1996-97 (1996 and 1997)

Diversity of income – college (1996, 1997 and 1998)

Operating surplus – college (1996, 1997 and 1998)

+data not available

*provisional data

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