

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Reading College of Arts and Technology

June 1995

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

THE FURTHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL

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

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

GRADE DESCRIPTORS

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

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

*Cheylesmore House
Quinton Road
Coventry CV1 2WT
Telephone 01203 863000
Fax 01203 863100*

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 78/95

READING COLLEGE OF ARTS AND TECHNOLOGY

SOUTH EAST REGION

Inspected December 1994 - March 1995

Summary

Reading College of Arts and Technology offers a broad range of courses. It has an effective governing body and is undergoing substantial reorganisation under the leadership of a new principal. The new management style is open and encouraging. Morale is high and staff are committed to the organisational changes which are taking place. Teaching is sound and examination results on vocational courses are generally good. Lecturing and support staff are experienced and well qualified. Staff development is generously funded and there is an excellent induction programme for new staff. There is a strong commitment to student guidance and support and the college is taking steps to improve these aspects of its work. The tutorial system is inadequate. Basic skills are well taught but there are many more students who require additional help. The support of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is a high priority. Support for students with learning difficulties on mainstream courses is effective but the separate provision for these students is poor. Equipment is adequate for most courses and information technology is being improved by substantial investment. The college has adequate accommodation, especially in some of the specialist vocational areas, but many rooms and corridors have an uninviting appearance. The college should: improve its management information system; produce a better strategic plan based upon more accurate information; and continue to develop its quality assurance system.

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

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

| Curriculum area | Grade | Curriculum area | Grade |
|----------------------------|--------------|---|--------------|
| Science | 3 | Leisure, tourism and hospitality | 3 |
| Construction | 2 | Hair and beauty | 3 |
| | | Health and care | 2 |
| Technology and engineering | 2 | Academic studies, access and continuing education | 3 |
| Business and management | 3 | | |

CONTENTS

| | Paragraph |
|---|------------------|
| Summary | |
| Introduction | 1 |
| The college and its aims | 2 |
| Responsiveness and range of provision | 6 |
| Governance and management | 17 |
| Students' recruitment, guidance and support | 30 |
| Teaching and the promotion of learning | 39 |
| Students' achievements | 50 |
| Quality assurance | 62 |
| Resources | 75 |
| Conclusions and issues | 90 |
| Figures | |

INTRODUCTION

1 Reading College of Arts and Technology was inspected in three stages. The college's enrolment and induction procedures were inspected at the start of the autumn term 1994. Specialist inspections took place over two weeks in December 1994 followed by a cross-college inspection in March 1995. Fourteen inspectors took part in the inspection for a total of 76 inspector days. Inspectors visited 183 classes and examined a representative sample of students' work. Meetings were held with members of the corporation, the senior management team, teaching staff, support staff, past and present students, parents, local employers, careers officers and staff of local schools. Discussions took place with a representative of the local training and enterprise council (TEC). Inspectors examined college policy statements, minutes of committees, working papers and documents relating to aspects of college organisation.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

2 Reading College of Arts and Technology is a large general further education college serving Reading and central Berkshire. It was founded on the Kings Road site in 1946 and, due to continued expansion, opened a second campus in 1987 at Wokingham Road. The British headquarters of many advanced technology companies are located in Reading and the neighbouring towns of Wokingham and Newbury. Reading is known for its high levels of employment in the distribution and services sector, particularly in financial services. However, the town has one of the highest overall unemployment rates in the Thames Valley, with a forecast of 6.7 per cent for 1994-95. There is a particularly high unemployment rate among people of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Afro-Caribbean origins.

3 In the immediate locality of the college, there are four 11-16 schools, twenty 11-18 schools, five grant-maintained schools, two grammar schools, a local education authority (LEA) adult college, and a specialist college of art and design. Despite this acute competition for younger students, the college is achieving sustained expansion and continues to increase its portfolio of courses to meet local needs. Substantial developments have taken place over the last few years in new areas of work, including art and design, and access programmes, to prepare adults for courses in higher education.

4 At the time of inspection, the college had 2,143 full-time and 4,490 part-time enrolments; 41 per cent of these students are over 25 years of age. Enrolments by age and level of study are shown in figures 1 and 2. Enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figure 3. The work of the college is carried out by 413 full-time equivalent staff of whom 277 are teachers and 136 support staff. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 4. There are 11 teaching schools supported by cross-college staff with responsibilities for areas such as curriculum, finance, administration, personnel, estates and facilities, and corporate development.

5 The college aims to provide the breadth and quality of provision to attract students from all sectors of the community and to help them to progress. It seeks to provide opportunities through a wide range of modes of student attendance. Further expansion of work for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, for adults, and for those usually under represented in education is seen as the priority for development.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

6 Senior managers are committed to the national targets for education and training. The college offers a wide range of programmes, 80 per cent of which are vocational. There is a developing programme of General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs), seven of which are offered at both intermediate and advanced levels. They include art and design, business, construction, health and social care, hospitality and catering, leisure and tourism, and science. A foundation programme is also available in health and social care. Pilot programmes have begun in engineering and information technology at intermediate and advanced levels. The range of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and their equivalents is extensive, covering levels 1-4. Distinctive features of this provision are the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) national diploma in public services and the NVQ in selling residential property which will be delivered by flexible learning. These courses are not offered elsewhere in Berkshire. An assistant principal has been assigned to co-ordinate GNVQs and other modular programmes. The college has been slow to respond to a decline in demand for some advanced professional courses.

7 General Certificate of Education advanced level (GCE A level) courses and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) courses form 20 per cent of the college provision. Thirty subjects are offered at GCE A level and 13 at GCSE. For most GCE A levels there is the option of an intensive one-year course. This is mainly for adults or students wishing to improve their grades.

8 Special courses for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are underdeveloped. Appropriate teaching strategies and personal development are neglected for students on these discrete courses. Support for students who are integrated into mainstream courses is more effective. The college has recognised the need to co-ordinate this work better and to improve teaching of the core curriculum for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Two new teaching posts have been created for this purpose. The college has good connections with local special schools. At the time of the inspection, students from one special school were conducting a research project for the college on the accessibility of its buildings.

9 Links with schools, though improving, remain problematic because of increasing competition for potential GCE A level and GNVQ students. The college has a long-established relationship with many secondary schools with whom a number of partnership agreements and formal

compacts have been established. In addition, staff from the college attend schools' open evenings, careers conventions and arrange taster days for pupils.

10 The development of flexible learning, which allows students access to study in their own time, is at an early stage. Staff in curriculum areas are making plans for more flexible approaches but few of these have yet been translated into action. Notable exceptions are the BTEC higher national certificates and diplomas in electrical engineering which recently won a BT Beacon Award. The business studies school is running an open-learning programme in business administration whilst the school of communication and professional development has designed an NVQ in selling residential property to be run through a mixture of open learning and class contact.

11 The college has been innovative in developing a European policy. A European network group, at which all the college's teaching schools are represented, has been established to provide awareness of European issues. A 'European awareness week' consisting of events and displays with a European theme was organised recently. Staff exchanges with a university in Lisbon have been arranged and student exchanges to France and Germany are encouraged. These initiatives have met a degree of inertia in the college. The school of leisure, tourism and hospitality has had a long association with the Albrecht Durer Schule in Dusseldorf, Reading's twin town.

12 The strength of links with employers varies between schools. In some, like construction, science and engineering they are effective, with employers collaborating in curriculum provision. In others, the links are limited to work experience placements. The college has a growing relationship with Thames Valley Enterprise, the local TEC, but there is considerable scope for developing this further. The college was successful in its bid for funding to develop flexible learning for NVQs. The principal is a member of the TEC's liaison committee for education and employer representatives, and chairman of the Thames Valley Enterprise local action group.

13 There are good links between the college and Reading University. The principal is a member of the university court. A senior member of staff belongs to a group who are working to ensure parity of esteem for GNVQ applicants. The college runs a modular access to higher education course which is validated by Portsmouth University.

14 Until recently, the college was not active in marketing itself. Its promotional activities were not planned as part of a coherent strategy. A marketing team has now been appointed. It is working with external consultants to design a new corporate image. A promotional video has just been completed and was shown for the first time at an open evening during the inspection. The college has featured on local television and radio and is widely advertised in local newspapers, libraries and leisure

centres. An information stand in a shopping centre is sometimes set up at weekends during the year. Some promotional material is translated into other languages, but as the work with minority ethnic communities increases, consideration should be given to making all college literature more accessible. The needs of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have not yet been addressed by the marketing team. Little market research has been undertaken to identify areas for development and to shape the curriculum.

15 The college has a strong commitment to the provision of equal opportunities. A member of staff has been appointed with this responsibility. Some good liaison work has been carried out in local schools and community centres for people from minority ethnic groups. Currently, 17.5 per cent of the students are from ethnic communities, approximately twice the level of their representation in the local population. The new college adviser for equal opportunities will be assisted by two part-time information and guidance advisers, one an Afro-Caribbean man and the other an Asian woman. The latter will have a particular responsibility for supporting Asian female students. In addition, staff-development activities are organised to ensure an awareness of equal opportunities issues amongst all staff.

16 Student life outside the curriculum includes sports and recreational opportunities. Fifteen sports are available, including trampolining and seven-a-side rugby in which the college was the regional winner in a competition organised by the British Association for Sports in Colleges. Students participate in concerts and drama productions which take place periodically. Recreational activities include paintballing, laserquest, self-defence and the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

17 The college has an effective corporation board of 17 members, most of whom were governors before incorporation. Their length of service ranges from one to 15 years. The members include 10 from local business, two from education, two from the college staff, one student and the principal. There is also a representative from the TEC. At the time of the inspection, there was one vacancy for a business member which will not be filled until the college code of conduct for governors has been agreed. Members of the corporation come from a variety of backgrounds in the local community and bring a wide range of experience to the college. The chairman provides firm and prudent leadership and is effectively supported by the clerk to the corporation, who is the executive assistant to the principal.

18 Governors are aware of government policies for further education. This has served them well in establishing an appropriate framework for the college. Governors principally concern themselves with strategic matters and financial issues. Corporation members have few links with

the curriculum but are learning more about the college through training sessions with college managers.

19 The corporation has established an appropriate committee structure. All members serve on at least one committee. There is a calendar of meetings which allows committee reports to be presented to the corporation at its four main meetings during the academic year. Agendas are carefully prepared by the clerk to the corporation, the principal and the chairman. Concise supporting papers are provided well in advance. Minutes are accurate and decisions are crisply recorded. All corporation and committee minutes are publicly available from the clerk to the corporation and through the college libraries.

20 There is a growing partnership between the corporation board and the new principal, who has been in post since the beginning of this academic year. An understanding and mutual acceptance of the distinction between the roles of governor and chief executive has developed. The chairman of the corporation appraises the principal, establishes targets to be achieved and maintains close links with the college. The corporation is very supportive of the management team during a period of rapid change in the college's organisation.

21 The strategic plan is being revised because it was based on unreliable estimates of student numbers. It contains no quantified targets or performance indicators. Staff had very little involvement in the production of the original strategic plan and most are unaware of its implications. An overview has recently been distributed to them outlining the circumstances within which the college operates. It has been well received. Business plans for each school are being prepared by senior managers as part of the new strategic plan. There is no common format for these business plans, although heads of school have received training in their preparation. Delays in the transfer of the estate from Berkshire County Council are hampering some of the necessary accommodation planning.

22 New leadership and an open and consultative style of management have been welcomed by staff. The new principal has involved members of staff in over 20 working groups which are considering issues such as marketing, tutorial provision, course standards and measurement of added value in the curriculum. Because these groups have been set up so rapidly, some do not have formal terms of reference or objectives. Many of the recent decisions are not set in an overall framework, nor are they fully documented.

23 The principal is supported by two deputies and the assistant principal (administration and finance) who, together with the directors of educational services, information technology, estates and facilities, and the principal's executive assistant comprise the management team. Each member of the team has clear responsibilities and an appropriate job description. Key policy statements, including health and safety, equal opportunities and student support, are in place and responsibility for them

has been allocated. There is a sense of common purpose and direction. Liaison is good between managers and the heads of division or unit.

24 The full management team, comprising the members of the management team together with the assistant principal (curriculum) and the 11 heads of school, is an effective group. Minutes of its monthly meetings are very brief and lack context although decisions for action are well recorded. Heads of school meet weekly and divide into smaller groups to consider matters of common concern. They report to the full management team. Lines of communication and accountability are understood and most staff recognise that dramatic improvements in consultation have been achieved. The sizes of schools vary considerably and there are associated variations in management style and effectiveness. The college would benefit from further reduction of the historical barriers between schools and from sharing good practice.

25 There has been a period during which the academic board did not meet, whilst it was being reconstituted with a new role. It has 28 members, 20 of whom are elected to ensure that academic and support staff at all levels are appropriately represented. The main function of the board will be to monitor quality. The management team is also committed to take full account of the advice of the academic board in strategic planning.

26 There is a well-managed system for approving new or replacement posts, although managers have been allowed to know the costs of staff in their sections only recently. The true cost of teaching is only just becoming evident to the heads of schools. Most lecturers appear to be effectively deployed but there are obvious exceptions where the size of the teaching groups is small, particularly in academic studies. No reliance can be placed on the calculations of the student to staff ratio.

27 Accounts are available for each meeting of the finance and general purposes committee and the management team. The procedure for allocation of funds is under review, in order to move it from a historic basis to a bidding system based on the actual cost of delivery. Financial controls are being developed. Clear monthly accounts are now provided to all budget holders who have received training in financial management.

28 Collection of data has been unreliable and release of detailed information has only just begun. Recruitment statistics are being checked to establish a sound base on which to develop targets for the future. The existing computerised management information system is inadequate for its task and it is to be replaced progressively over the next year. Data which are held by schools on student enrolment, retention rates, achievement and progression conflict with those available centrally. The weakness of management information undermines sound decision making at all levels of the institution.

29 The college's income and expenditure for the 16 months to July 1994 are shown in figures 5 and 6. The college's average level of funding for 1994-95 is £18.17 per unit. The median for general further education and

tertiary colleges is £18.17 and the median for all the sector colleges is £19.01.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

30 The way the college dealt with enquiries was improved in 1994 but a more unified and consistent approach is now seen to be necessary to ensure that satisfactory service is received by all students. Some applicants are dealt with directly through teaching schools and some by the central student services unit. Whilst all schools provide advice and guidance about their own courses, interviewers need additional training to cope with the diversity of applicants for an increasingly complex portfolio of programmes across the college. Applications should be followed up more systematically. A more centralised enrolment system was approved by the senior management team in January 1995. The system will include an admissions policy which the college does not have at present.

31 The college succeeds in creating a welcoming and friendly environment during enrolment. Students in need of guidance on personal or financial matters are directed to trained staff. The accreditation of prior learning is underdeveloped but the imminent appointment of a co-ordinator for this activity should improve the situation. Four weeks after enrolment, tutors and full-time students review the appropriateness of their choice of course. Counselling is available at this stage and a change of course is possible. Recording of course changes has not been satisfactory and the college has to make a termly check of registers to validate centrally held records. Students sign a learning agreement which is based on the college charter and which clearly describes rights and responsibilities.

32 Induction is generally well planned and carried out. Staff are well briefed and there are good guidelines available to them. All appropriate issues are covered, including the college charter, equal opportunities, health and safety and course information. Four weeks after induction students' views on the process are sought through a questionnaire. Most students considered induction arrangements helpful but the college should respond more quickly to criticisms revealed by the questionnaire.

33 The Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit test is taken by all full-time students, but only by part-time students if their tutors request this assessment. Students identified as being in need of support are referred to the school of communication and professional development where individual diagnostic testing leads to a fuller analysis of the student's difficulties. Personal tutors are advised of the arrangements made for their tutees. During the current academic year, 70 students are receiving extra help.

34 Each full-time student has a personal tutor. Tutorial periods are timetabled. The student services unit provides guidelines for the conduct of tutorials. Students are encouraged to record their own achievements and to develop personal plans for improvement but practice varies from

school to school. The extent of communication between schools and student services also varies. Students' perceptions of tutorial support differ. Some welcome it and believe it helps their studies while others consider it a waste of time. In only half the schools is tutorial support for full-time students satisfactory. Part-time students rely on their course tutor but may also take advantage of the student services unit. The poor management of the tutorial system is a serious weakness. The college is addressing the issue through the recent appointment of a team of senior tutors, one in each school, to reorganise the system.

35 There are workshops to provide additional learning support in numeracy, literacy and information technology on only one of the college's two sites. By the time of inspection, 376 different students had used the service during the current academic year, some making only one visit but many returning regularly. A large proportion of users were students following access to higher education courses or students whose first language was not English. The workshops are open during the early evening on four nights a week but provision is inadequate for a college of this size and the quality and range of resource-based learning materials is limited. The workshops' effectiveness is not systematically monitored. The college plans to create a new unit to deliver core and basic skills more effectively.

36 Until recently, the college has had the services of a LEA careers adviser for three days each week. A full-time careers co-ordinator has been appointed to supplement this arrangement. The college has a good bank of information including the ECCTIS, Kudos, Microdoors and NVQ databases to support careers work but these facilities are not widely known in the college. There is no college-wide programme of careers education. The existing guidance policy has never been fully implemented. What is provided in tutorial sessions from time to time is of mixed quality. A central database of student destinations should be created as part of the new management information system. The college is aware of these present difficulties and is actively working on a new policy for careers education and guidance.

37 On the Wokingham Road site, there are two qualified counsellors who deal with a wide range of personal and financial problems. They have good contacts with outside agencies. A second unit is to be opened on the Kings Road site to address this issue.

38 There is a students' association which has become more active this year. The president of the association has established good relations with senior managers and represents student opinion to the academic board and the governors.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

39 Fifty per cent of the teaching sessions inspected clearly demonstrated strengths which outweighed the weaknesses, and a further 39 per cent

had a balance of strengths and weaknesses. In 11 per cent of sessions the weaknesses clearly outweighed the strengths. The following table summarises the grades given to the teaching sessions inspected.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

| Programmes | Grade | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Totals |
|-------------------|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|---------------|
| GCE AS/A level | | 1 | 6 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 12 |
| GCSE | | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 8 |
| GNVQ | | 2 | 12 | 12 | 6 | 1 | 33 |
| NVQ | | 3 | 21 | 25 | 5 | 0 | 54 |
| Other vocational | | 6 | 37 | 29 | 4 | 0 | 76 |
| Total | | 13 | 78 | 72 | 18 | 2 | 183 |

40 The majority of courses are well planned. There are clearly-expressed schemes of work that reflect the aims of the courses and, in the best examples particularly in engineering, these schemes include teaching strategies, assessment programmes and resource requirements. In many schools, the scheme of work was discussed with students at the start of their courses. Some planning is less thorough. Schemes of work which were merely a list of topics were seen in business studies and academic studies. Some GNVQ intermediate programmes, notably in leisure and tourism and in construction, have been hurriedly introduced resulting in a lack of co-ordination between the work of lecturers and poor scheduling of students' assignments and assessments.

41 Most lessons are thoroughly prepared. In the best examples, the aims and objectives were clearly stated at the start of each session. Usually there was logical development of a topic through a variety of activities which were changed regularly to maintain interest. A group of related health and care sessions included brainstorming for initial ideas, group discussion, pairwork, role play, written assignments, practical exercises, whole-class teaching and student presentations. In an engineering science class, students were working on assignment sheets on motion. They included notes to remind students of an introductory talk by the lecturer, worked examples, a practical task, guidance on the processing of data and a series of questions to prompt observations and conclusions. Students had the equipment they needed and could proceed at their own speed. The lecturer was able to spend time with each student to check progress. Students had their work assessed and their achievement recorded before going on to the next piece of work.

42 In some of the better sessions, notably in business studies and health and care, new topics were introduced in a way which built steadily on students' previous experience and developed their confidence. This was particularly well done with part-time employed students. In a higher national certificate business studies class on price elasticity, the lecturer

first identified the students' place of employment and then related questions to each company. In areas such as hair and beauty, programmes could have been improved if students' previous experience had been taken into account in a similar manner. In science, the lecturer of a GNVQ numeracy session completely ignored the fact that most students already had a reasonable GCSE qualification in mathematics and that the majority of the group was taking GCE A level mathematics as an additional study.

43 Classroom management was often informal, but lessons were generally disciplined and constructive with a good relationship between staff and students. Most lecturers were enthusiastic and had regard for the needs of individual students. A trusting learning environment was established. For example, in a second year National Nursery Examinations Board (NNEB) class on the likely causes of sudden infant death syndrome, sensitive handling of this difficult topic allowed students to explore their own anxieties while reinforcing the necessity for a carer to follow a professional code of practice. In a part-time evening GCSE class in Italian, the tutor insisted that every student maintain a file of work in chronological order. Using the file, the student's progress was assessed and problems were addressed while the rest of the class was busy with other work.

44 A few sessions were poorly managed and lecturers failed to set a context and clear goals. Often these lessons were pedestrian in pace, so that students were insufficiently stretched. Excessive reliance was sometimes placed on the contributions of confident and vocal students, while others were allowed to sit by passively. In a minority of classes, for example, in leisure and tourism and academic studies, late arrival and disruptive behaviour caused problems. It was common practice for students to bring canned drinks and food to consume during academic studies lessons. Some classes were disrupted by noise and ill-discipline in the corridors and surprisingly little action was taken to calm the situation.

45 A range of topical materials was used in many sessions, supported by carefully-prepared notes. There were a number of facilities to enable students to work at their own pace, including the appropriate use of learning packages in construction and electronic engineering. In other areas, including science and engineering, means to allow students of different abilities to learn at different paces were less well developed. For example, a mixed ability class in information technology was using a spreadsheet to analyse an electric circuit and some students completed the work well ahead of time while others were still struggling.

46 In many classes, audio-visual equipment was not used well to support teaching. Overhead projectors were either not used or used merely as a substitute for a chalkboard, with students spending lengthy periods copying out notes. Often projection transparencies were of poor quality and were difficult to read.

47 Most practical classes, particularly in science, engineering, construction, hair and beauty, and health and care, were well organised

and were carried out with due regard for safety. Good project work was seen in science and engineering, and students were encouraged to develop teamwork. In an electronics class, students were working in pairs to design and build a digitally-controlled attenuator. Reprints of an article suggesting electronic circuits that might be evaluated were provided and students had access to manuals to enable them to select the necessary components. The assignment was challenging, it encouraged team work and discussion, and it was closely related to realistic industrial practice. Some practical assignments, while adequate to test skills, were unimaginative and missed opportunities to develop wider interests. In mechanical engineering, for example, students cut, drilled and tapped a piece of steel but the object that resulted had no further use beyond the exercise. Realistic practical training for NVQ business studies students was inadequate because the training office lacked a telephone, a fax, postal equipment and sufficient filing cabinets. Working practices in the training restaurant and the kitchen were below the standard expected in good-quality catering.

48 Assignments and marking were usually at an appropriate level and students were well aware of the standards required. In art and design, for example, lecturers were using the performance criteria from the GNVQ scheme to work with students to analyse the merits of their projects. Whilst this approach could be restrictive, it was handled well by enthusiastic and communicative lecturers and served to reveal to students new aspects of their work that they had not previously appreciated. Written work was normally marked fairly, although there appeared to be inconsistencies in the grading criteria used in some assessments in construction. There was wide variation in the care with which lecturers corrected students' work. There were examples of good practice where lecturers' marking included clear guidance for improvement. Some work was marked only with ticks and crosses and an inconsequential comment added at the end. There were cases of thorough verbal feedback being given to emphasise the lessons contained in the returned work. Good practice should be made routine across the college.

49 Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities enrolling for mainstream courses are able to derive support from a variety of sources. Good examples were seen in engineering, science, hair and beauty. Dyslexia support and support for hearing impaired students was particularly noteworthy in science and engineering. Students with learning difficulties on discrete courses are less fortunate. Although staff acknowledge the importance of individualised programmes this is not evident in their teaching. Students are not stimulated to extend their skills. The college is aware of these weaknesses and is taking steps to improve matters.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

50 The majority of students enjoy the programme they have chosen and talk knowledgeably about their work. Students worked effectively in

groups. They were technically competent and worked safely on practical tasks. Students in catering and hair and beauty, developed good relationships with their clients. Work was of an appropriate standard and students showed ability to apply a range of vocational and academic skills acquired during their courses. The need for good organisational skills is apparent in the work of students following GNVQ programmes at both intermediate and advanced levels. Information technology is reasonably well developed in most courses, with the notable exception of GCE A level and GCSE. Students had to share computers in some health and care classes, and a number of engineering and science students on the Kings Road site had difficulty getting access to computers outside timetabled lessons. The college is about to launch a new open-access computer room at Kings Road in order to address this problem. Numeracy, literacy and study skills are limited in some students.

51 Results in the construction and built environment courses were particularly good at the higher levels. In 1994, between 88 per cent and 100 per cent of students taking higher national diplomas and certificates gained the full award. National diploma and national certificate results were very similar. Results were particularly good in carpentry and joinery, and plumbing, with most groups achieving 100 per cent pass rates for the complete qualification in 1994. The plumbing results were a marked improvement on those obtained the year before. Brickwork, and heating and ventilating results have been variable over the last two years, but employed students attending in the evenings did substantially better than the full-time students. Students on the college certificate in surveying have achieved high pass rates in both of the last two years. Retention rates in all these courses, based on the school's data, appear to be good.

52 In science last year, the higher national certificate results were generally good. In biology, 79 per cent of the students entered gained the full award, in food science the figures was 100 per cent and in physics 94 per cent. The national certificate results in physical science were equally good but those in biology were weak in both 1993 (60 per cent) and 1994 (67 per cent). The national diploma and first diploma results (20 per cent and 13 per cent, respectively) were particularly poor in 1994 and both courses had low retention rates. GCE A level results are good with a range of results for one-year intensive, two-year and evening class students. In the past two years, these groups achieved between 73 and 100 per cent passes in biology, between 53 and 71 per cent in chemistry, and between 50 and 79 per cent in physics. These compared favourably with the 1994 national averages for further education colleges of 64, 65 and 68 per cent respectively. Retention rates were poor with considerable numbers being lost between year one and year two of the two-year courses. Science GCSE results were uniformly poor.

53 Beauty and combined hair and beauty courses have produced varied results over a two-year period. In 1994, results were not as good as those in 1993 so that, for example, the combined hair and beauty NVQ level 2

dropped from 100 to 65 per cent pass rate. Hairdressing results were more consistent ranging from 71 per cent to 100 per cent pass rates.

54 Examination results for health and care in 1994 were almost uniformly good. Examples include the NNEB diploma with 80 per cent passes and the national diploma in health studies with 90 per cent. The only poor result was in family and community care, where only 56 per cent of students passed last year. Retention rates were high with the exception of family and community care. Seventy-three per cent of leavers were known to have secured employment or to have joined other further education programmes.

55 Results and retention rates were good in higher national certificates and higher national diplomas in communication, electrical, electronic, and computer engineering, and in combined computing and mathematical studies. The majority of pass rates were in excess of 85 per cent. In 1994, national certificate and national diploma courses mostly achieved pass rates in excess of 80 per cent. The majority of craft motor vehicle and engineering courses achieved pass rates in excess of 95 per cent. During the transition from first diploma to intermediate GNVQ, the results in both engineering and information technology have been poor, with only half the students being fully successful. Retention rates were above 90 per cent for most of the engineering and technology courses.

56 The national diplomas in hotel and catering, and leisure studies have produced good results over the past two years. In 1994, the intermediate GNVQ in leisure and tourism had difficulties which were reflected in a retention rate of only 42 per cent and a 64 per cent pass rate. Catering craft course results ranged widely from a pass rate of 40 to 100 per cent, with the requirement for good written communication skills being a common stumbling block.

57 In secretarial studies, results were generally good. Higher national certificate and national diploma results have been variable but, in 1994, results were good in the diploma in management studies (89 per cent), the Chartered Institute of Insurance (88 per cent) and the National Examination Board for Supervisory Studies (90 per cent). Other results on advanced professional courses in 1994 were in keeping with the national average of around 50 per cent: in banking, marketing, insurance, the legal executives course and management accounting. Again, in this curriculum area, the transition from BTEC first diploma to GNVQ intermediate was marked by poor results. Retention rates on one-year courses were low but they were substantially better on advanced courses.

58 In humanities and social studies, GCSE and GCE A level results were variable. For GCSE, the 1994 pass rates for full-time students in English language, English literature, history, sociology and geography all showed a marked decline on the previous year's results. All subjects except geography, French and German had pass rates below the national averages for GCSE results in further education colleges. GCE A level results for

full-time students on two-year courses all declined significantly between 1993 and 1994 and were generally modest. With the exception of the English combined paper and sociology, every other result was below the national average for further education colleges. One-year, retake students sometimes did substantially better than those enrolled on two-year course. Students on one-year courses achieved high pass rates in English literature (94 per cent) and history (91 per cent). Some evening class students also obtained very creditable results. Retention rates for full-time students varied widely from 100 per cent in GCE A level geography to only 38 per cent in GCSE history.

59 One hundred and sixty-six students aged 16-18 years entered for GCE AS/A level examinations in 1993-94 and scored an average of 3.7 points per entry. This places the college in the middle third of colleges in the further education sector on this performance measure, based on the data in the 1994 tables published by the Department for Education.

60 Seventy-two per cent of 16-18 year old students in the final year of study on the vocational courses included in the Department for Education's 1994 performance tables were successful. This places the college among the bottom third of colleges in the further education sector on this performance measure. It should be noted, however, that this statistic is of limited value for assessing the college's achievements because the majority of its students are over 18 years of age.

61 The college does not hold a central summary of students' destinations. Part of the information was available from some schools for some courses, but it was not possible to form a view of the effectiveness of the whole college in preparing its students for the future.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

62 College procedures for quality assurance have been based primarily on a system of course review and evaluation which has been in place, with some modification, since 1992. Each course team is required to carry out an annual review, incorporating statistical data on enrolment, retention rates and success rates, and addressing issues related to curriculum, staffing and resources. The better reviews were carefully written to reflect an analytical and self-critical approach. They made use of commentary from students and included plans for future action. These plans were carried out, with a clear trail of evidence in course team minutes and subsequent improvements.

63 Such good practice is not universal. Whilst many course teams made attempts at critical review, a significant number of course reviews were merely descriptive. They failed to set any targets or deadlines for improvement and they failed to revisit the conclusions from the previous year. Consequently, progress was difficult to detect. Where course teams have used statistical data on examination results, retention rates or destinations, this did not necessarily correspond with comparable

information held centrally by the school. In a number of instances, there is no evidence that heads of school have responded to the issues raised by course teams.

64 The college has recognised these shortcomings and is in the process of introducing a revised scheme for quality assurance and control. A senior lecturer, reporting to a deputy principal, was appointed in August 1994 with responsibility for the development, management and monitoring of college-wide quality assurance systems. A quality assurance team has been established with representatives drawn from all schools and from the support staff. The constitution and remit of the academic board were redefined in October 1994 and its central purpose is now described in terms of the development and monitoring of quality systems and standards. The board will receive summary quality reports in due course, and a subcommittee has been established with the authority to conduct quality audits on the basis of those reports.

65 The academic board approved the college policy for quality assurance at its first meeting under its new terms of reference in February 1995. The policy is linked to well-defined quality standards for the college. These college standards in turn set the context for quality standards which have been established for educational services, estates and facilities, the finance team, heads of schools, information technology, the registry and the management team. A set of generic course quality standards has been written by a working group of teaching and learning support staff. The quality assurance team has set an objective for course teams to adapt these for use in their reviews at the end of this academic year. All teams have to formulate an annual action plan which shows how each quality standard will be demonstrated and names the person responsible for monitoring progress.

66 The quality manager has instituted a system of review, after 4, 19 and 32 weeks of each college year, which uses student questionnaires and a summary review for each course. The week-four survey was distributed to all new students enrolled on programmes of more than six hours duration and a return rate of 63 per cent of the relevant cohort of over 3,000 students was achieved. These forms have been analysed by course teams, heads of schools and the quality manager. Action for improvement has already taken place. For example, higher national certificate students in electronics reported that a wordprocessing module had been replaced with additional opportunities for computer-aided design, and blackboards have been replaced in the school of health and care to improve the quality of the teaching environment. Other criticisms have been referred for action to support units such as estates and facilities, educational services and information technology. At the time of the inspection, the week-19 survey had been conducted with a sample of 2,000 students, but analysis was not complete. There are plans to introduce formal employers' surveys before the end of the academic year.

67 Staff have been well informed about the developments in quality assurance. While there was clearly a high level of disillusionment with the previous system, the new scheme and its associated procedures are being welcomed. Staff at all levels feel that their views are being heeded and there is a growing consciousness of the value of systematic quality assurance.

68 A new policy document connects staff development with the achievement of the college's objectives. Priorities derived from the strategic plan include the development of NVQs and GNVQs, customer care, information technology, learning support and professional updating. An in-house programme for both teaching and support staff has been planned to support each of these key objectives. Staff development is managed for all staff by a senior lecturer reporting to a deputy principal. With the recently-appointed personnel officer, they form a panel which meets weekly to consider staff-development requests. The procedure is clearly documented and understood by staff. It includes a requirement that line managers discuss the purpose of each activity with members of staff who apply for development assistance. Individuals are required to complete an evaluation report following a staff-development activity.

69 There is a programme of induction for new staff offered throughout the academic year. New staff spoke highly both of the quality of the initial half-day induction itself and of the helpful documentation they were given to support their continued integration within teams. Most new staff are allocated a mentor and this relationship is appreciated by the recent appointees.

70 A generous allocation of £200,000 for staff development has been made in this year's budget. A weakness is that expenditure and therefore cost effectiveness, is difficult to monitor. This is because the priority areas in the staff-development strategy are not linked with any financial allocation. The college's financial coding systems cannot integrate staff-replacement costs, course fees, and travel and subsistence under one expenditure heading. The result is that the true costs of staff development cannot be identified and evaluated against the college's priorities.

71 The college originally made a commitment to seek Investor in People status in 1992. Little progress was made towards this goal until this year. No action plan has yet been produced, although the college has now identified two areas in which it intends to pilot the scheme. Some residual scepticism about the award is apparent among college staff, although many now perceive the link between this quality system and the concurrent development of the college's quality assurance practice. The target date for accreditation of January 1996 may, however, prove over ambitious.

72 A scheme for staff appraisal has been introduced, based on review by line managers. To date, 49 appraisers have been identified and 42 of these have received training using the services of the Further Education Staff College. There is a link between appraisal and staff-development

planning. Classroom observation does not form part of the process. There are no plans for training appraisees. To date only 28 staff have been appraised and in some schools, no appraisal interviews have taken place. One difficulty which is already apparent is the unavailability of job descriptions, many of which are in the possession only of the members of staff to whom they apply.

73 The college charter is well produced and has a clear statement of service standards. It includes appropriate reference to equal opportunities and a detailed complaints procedure. The charter was highly commended in the Department for Education's national competition for college charters. Most students are aware of its existence and of where to obtain it but some, particularly part-time students, have not received a copy. The views of students were incorporated into the finished document.

74 The college has produced a self-assessment report which addresses aspects of its operation using the headings identified in the Council Circular 93/28, *Assessing Achievement*. It is acknowledged that the document was produced hurriedly and without the involvement of many staff. The report is insufficiently analytical. In many instances the self-assessment overstates the progress made by the college. This is particularly true of the claims of effective monitoring, for example of resources and student attendance, and of the effectiveness of procedures such as tutorial provision.

RESOURCES

Staffing

75 The college has well-qualified and experienced teaching staff who provide an adequate range of expertise for the courses offered. Of the 277 full-time equivalent teaching staff, 193 are full time and 206 (84 full-time equivalents) are part time. Eighty-eight per cent of lecturers have a teaching qualification. Fifty-nine per cent have a first or higher degree. A further 26 per cent have a higher national diploma or its equivalent. Forty-one per cent of the full-time and 67 per cent of the part-time teaching staff are female. No analysis is made of the proportion of course hours taught by part-time staff in different schools and no targets are set.

76 The college is making slow progress in training assessors and verifiers for its expanding programme of NVQs and GNVQs. At the time of the inspection, 54 staff had completed Training and Development Lead Body assessor awards, 32 were awaiting assessment and a further 56 were working towards a completion date of September 1995. Only six staff were qualified as internal verifiers, a low number for the college's size and range of vocational courses. There are no qualified assessors or verifiers in either computing or science.

77 There is an adequate number of well-qualified technical staff. Only in the school of engineering and computing was technician support judged to be inadequate. Where technician support is drawn from a central

service, for example, in information technology or audio-visual aids, assistance can sometimes be slow or difficult to obtain. The college is reorganising some of its support services to improve the situation. Teaching staff and technical support staff work well together, although in catering it was noted that demarcations between the roles of lecturer and instructor/assessor caused friction. There is a wide range of support staff. Numbers have grown since incorporation and their deployment is carefully monitored. Sixty-seven per cent of support staff are women. Over one-third have professional qualifications at degree or higher national diploma levels. All of those interviewed during the inspection were enthusiastic and dedicated to the college.

78 The personnel function has been strengthened recently by the appointment of a qualified personnel officer. At present a range of people have some responsibility for personnel matters including two deputy principals, the principal's executive assistant, the new personnel manager, the staff-development officer and the payroll administrator. Different staff records are held in three different areas for slightly different purposes. The situation will be rationalised when the personnel officer's function is fully developed and the new management information system is introduced.

79 Essential personnel policies are in place including those for equal opportunities, grievance, discipline, redundancy, recruitment and appointment, and sickness and absence. The college is developing a competency policy and is reviewing its maternity policy to meet the most recent legislation. The college intends gradually to harmonise the terms and conditions of support staff and lecturing staff. The ethnic origin of only about two-thirds of staff is known. Of these only 3 per cent are from minority ethnic backgrounds; below their 7 per cent representation in the local population and well below the proportion of Asian and Afro-Caribbean students at the college.

Equipment/learning resources

80 In most areas, there is sufficient equipment of at least a satisfactory quality. In hairdressing, the salon equipment is of a modern professional standard; in the building crafts area there are particularly good live heating and ventilation systems, and there is good instrumentation for chemistry. In contrast, there is limited information technology equipment in science and inadequate equipment to support the advanced curriculum in communication engineering. There is no programme for replacing major equipment.

81 The college has 290 personal computers and a minicomputer with 50 terminals for educational use. Less than half the personal computers can run industry-standard software. Individual schools have developed their own computer resources, including networks, and as a result there is considerable variation across the college. The college lacks a central inventory of the computers and programs in use. Open access to computing

facilities is available in the two libraries and in the learning centre at Crescent Road. There are plans to provide additional facilities, particularly at Kings Road, to cope with rising student demand. A director of information technology has been appointed recently and an information technology policy covering the curriculum and the management information system has been developed. It is proposed to establish an integrated college network by 1997 which will lead to standardisation of software and hardware. Planned expenditure on information technology for the curriculum up to 1997 is £270,000 out of a total information technology budget of £680,000.

82 There are 53,000 books in the library and 232 periodicals are taken regularly. There is a collection of nearly 2,000 audio-visual items which are available for loan. There are few resources to support assignment work. There are only two compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) database stations at Kings Road and one at Hamilton Road so that access to the 23 disks in the college is limited. Areas of good provision include the wide range of periodicals for humanities and the multiple texts for construction courses. Some law books are outdated and the health care stock needs rationalisation. The current library budget of £60,000 includes the costs of operating the college audio-visual service and it is therefore barely adequate. The effectiveness of links with teaching staff varies and book purchases are most often made on the initiative of library staff. Links between the two campus libraries should be improved. In particular, the Hamilton Road staff need to be aware of their budget allocation so that the purchase of books can be managed more efficiently. The libraries are open until 19.30 on four evenings each week but some evening class students find this restrictive.

Accommodation

83 The college has two major sites some three-quarters of a mile apart. The Kings Road campus is near the town centre. The main building was completed in 1955 and accommodates the technology-based schools and the engineering and building workshops. There is a good range of general and specialist accommodation but many classrooms are dull, without displays and in need of redecoration. Furniture is often old and some rooms are untidy. Corridors and circulation areas are spacious but also in need of redecoration and of wall displays which would give the various schools an identity. Most laboratories are big enough to meet the college's needs but in some cases their furnishings are outdated. Exceptions include the microbiology and food technology laboratories, and the information technology rooms. Workshops are generally satisfactory. The campus includes 12 huts which are over 20 years old. They are in a poor condition. Not all are in use and their removal is a priority.

84 The Wokingham Road campus occupies an eight-hectare site. There are three buildings, two of which were erected in 1965 and the third in 1970. They were formerly two secondary schools. The Crescent Road

building accommodates the school of hair, beauty, fashion and art, and the school of leisure, tourism and hospitality. It also contains conference facilities and student services. The accommodation is good, with a training restaurant and well-appointed kitchens and a spacious and well-furnished hairdressing salon. The Green Road building accommodates advanced business and management and business studies. Most of its classrooms are bright, carpeted and furnished to a good standard. The information technology centre is attractive and well furnished. The building also contains a gymnasium, a hall and kitchens. Hamilton Road is the smallest of the buildings and is occupied by the site library and the schools of access and continuing education, and academic studies. Most teaching rooms are adequate but they are dreary. In both the Hamilton Road and Green Road buildings, corridors are generally clean but monotonous.

85 Both the college libraries, at the Kings Road site and in the Hamilton building, have a dated appearance and are in need of refurbishment. Furniture is old and worn, there are limited facilities for audio and video material and they lack room for small group work. The total number of seats (116) is inadequate for the present student population.

86 Access for wheelchair users and other students with physical disabilities is unsatisfactory. At the Kings Road site, entrance is by a ramp at the goods entrance. Access to higher floors is by means of a small passenger lift or the goods lift. Most workshops have ramped access but movement between the workshop blocks is made difficult by the presence of kerbs. Entry to the refectory means using the kitchen goods entrance. There is no suitable access to the Green Road building owing to its construction on a sloping site but there is reasonably easy access to both floors of the Hamilton building. The Crescent Road building has wheelchair access to the ground floor only. Correction of these deficiencies should be a priority for this comprehensive, town-centre college.

87 The development of the sites has been complicated by shared occupancy with other institutions. The main Kings Road building has not been transferred from the local authority and agreement has not yet been reached with the Berkshire College of Art and Design which has use of part of it. Use of the Wokingham Road site is shared with the local authority youth and community activities centre and with Reading Adult College. Agreement between the parties is a prerequisite for serious consideration of the options in the college's accommodation strategy.

88 There has been no systematic monitoring of room use. A survey has recently been completed and the results are being analysed. Observations during the inspection suggest that there is significant under utilisation of much of the teaching accommodation. The college has calculated its space utilisation using FEFC guidelines and confirms that it has capacity for considerable expansion. There are no central timetabling arrangements. Teaching accommodation is allocated to schools at the beginning of each year on the basis of projected requirements and the balance is held in a pool.

89 Social facilities for students are limited. There is an attractive but small coffee shop in the Crescent Road building and utilitarian refectories in the Green Road building and at the Kings Road site. There is no common room on either site. There are excellent sports facilities on the Wokingham Road campus. In addition to hard tennis courts and grass pitches, students have access to the Berkshire County Council youth and community activities centre on the campus. This includes a fitness room and a good-quality sports hall. A member of the college staff is a sports instructor who organises a programme of events. There is no creche. The college is planning to provide 40 childcare places.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

90 The major strengths of Reading College are:

- effective governance
- open and encouraging senior management
- realistic self-appraisal of areas requiring improvement
- effective fostering of a culture able to accept and implement change
- a new quality assurance policy linked to defined standards
- a wide range of courses
- well-qualified and experienced staff
- a good induction programme for new staff.

91 If it is to succeed in achieving its aims, the college should address the following issues:

- the final transfer of buildings so that its accommodation strategy can be implemented
- continued improvement in strategic planning
- the collection of data and the poor management information system
- inconsistencies in course review
- the extension of learning support to more students
- the inadequacy of tutorial provision
- the quality of separate provision for students with learning difficulties
- the uninviting teaching accommodation.

FIGURES

-
- 1 Percentage enrolments by age (1994-95)

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

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

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

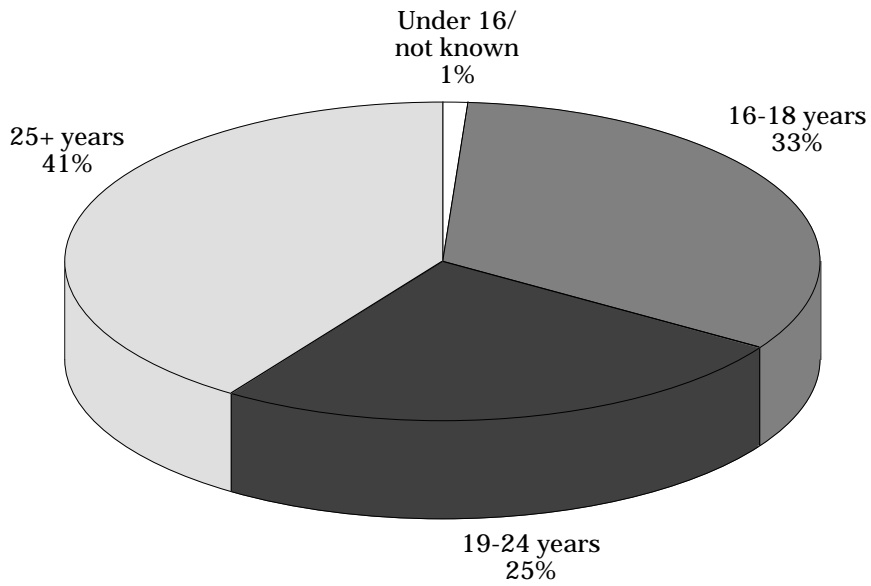
 - 5 Income (for 16 months to July 1994)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 16 months to July 1994)

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

Figure 1

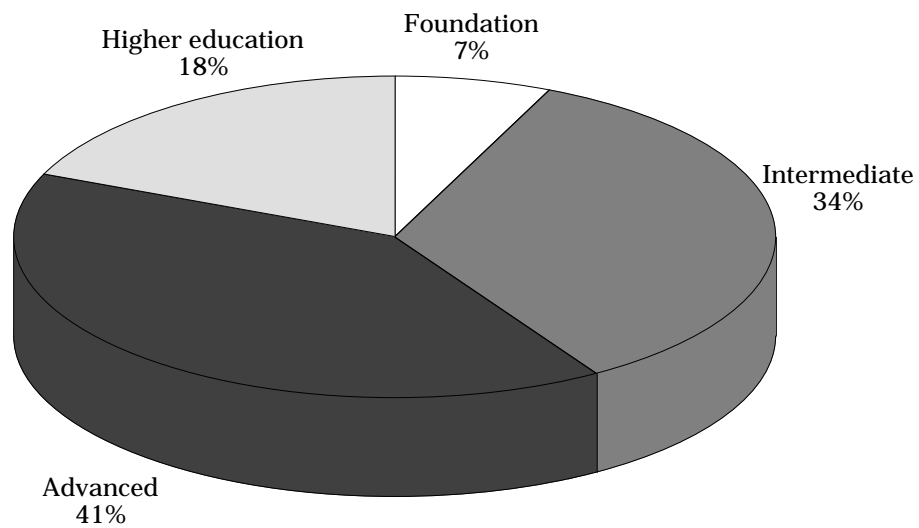
Reading College of Arts and Technology: percentage enrolments by age (1994-95)



Enrolments: 6,633

Figure 2

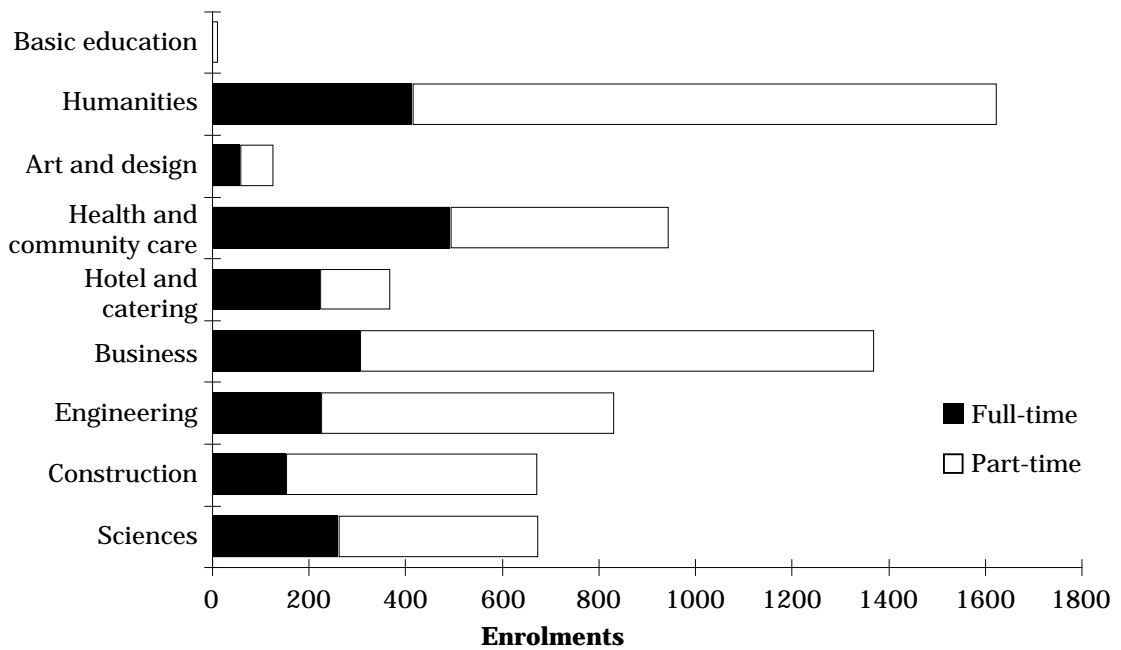
Reading College of Arts and Technology: percentage enrolments by level of study (1994-95)



Enrolments: 6,633

Figure 3

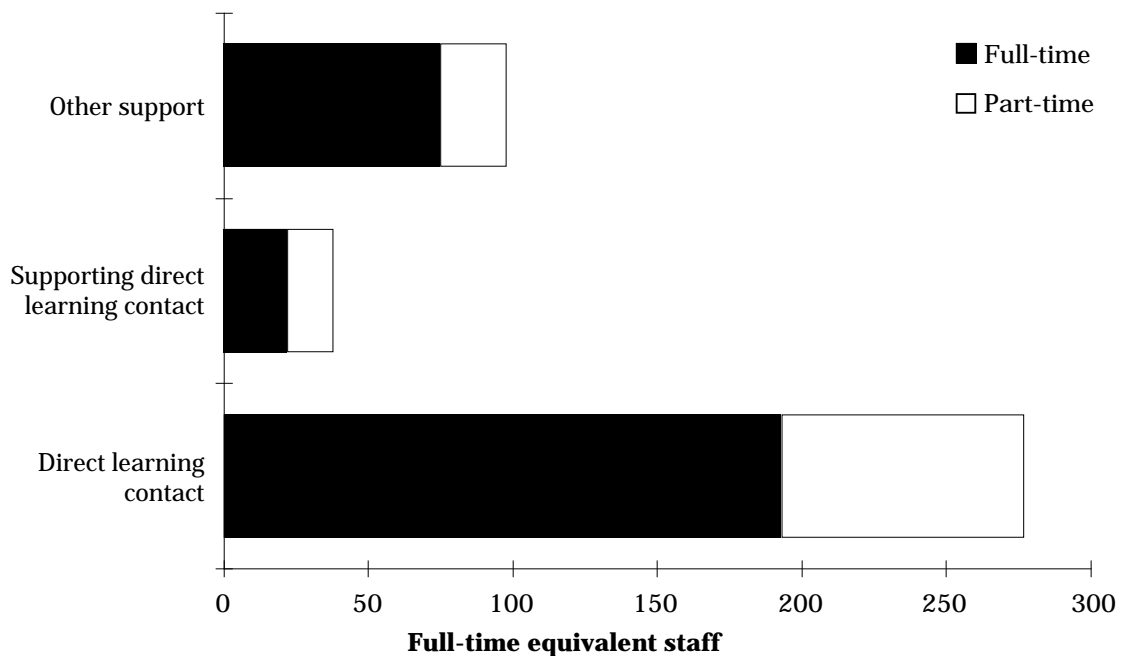
Reading College of Arts and Technology: enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1994-95)



Enrolments: 6,633

Figure 4

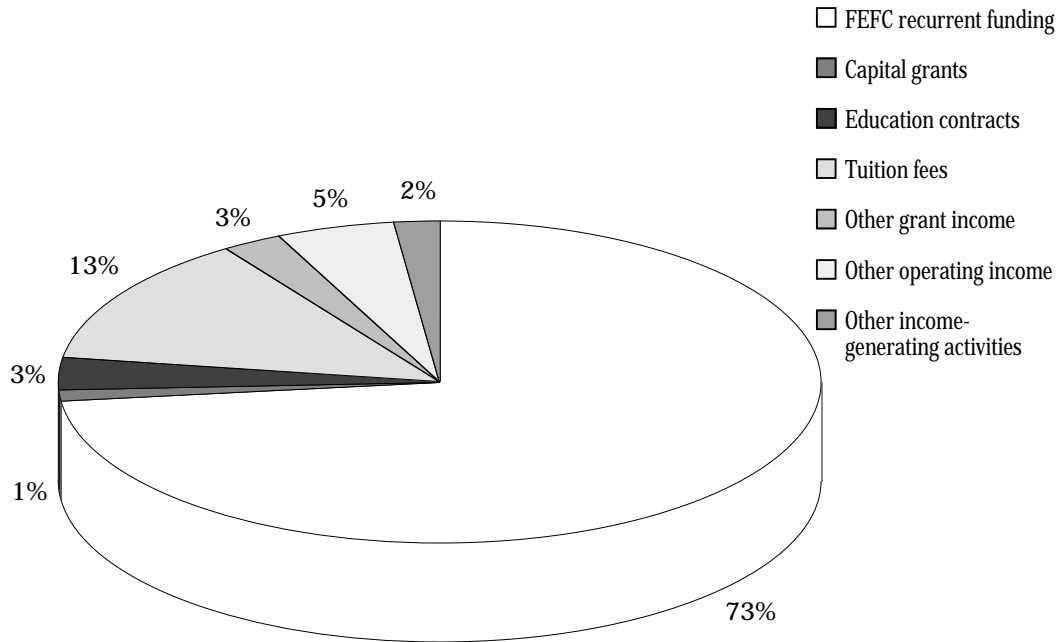
Reading College of Arts and Technology: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1994-95)



Full-time equivalent staff: 413

Figure 5

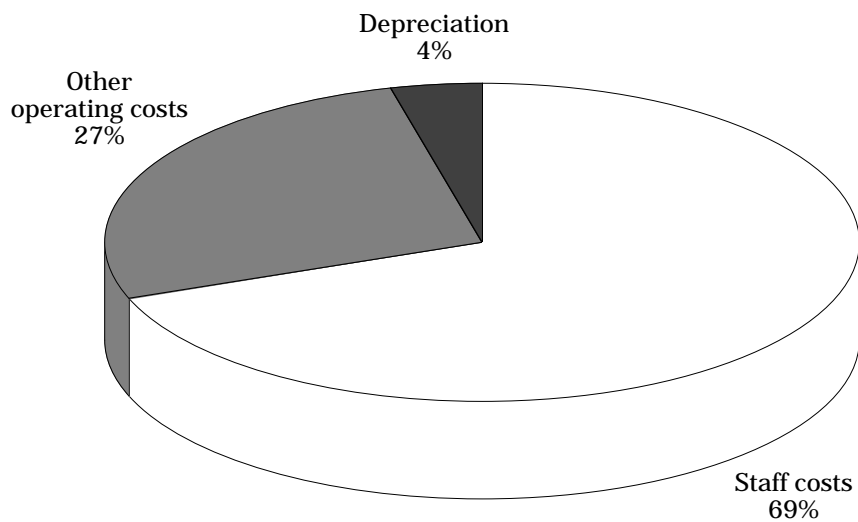
Reading College of Arts and Technology: income (for 16 months to July 1994)



Income: £14,967,000

Figure 6

Reading College of Arts and Technology: expenditure (for 16 months to July 1994)



Expenditure: £13,894,000

Published by the
Further Education Funding Council
June 1995